

Transcript of KMYR series on The Public Affair: “The Dean Tapes”

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This radio program is a five-part series of excerpts from a speech made by John Dean at University of New Mexico’s Popejoy Hall.

Keywords and topics: Watergate scandal, President Richard Nixon, resignation, counsel, lawyer, testimony, John Dean, John N. Mitchell, E. Howard Hunt, H.R. Haldeman, John Erlichman, Robert Mardian, Jeb Magruder, Republican Party, prison, indictment, grand jury, perjury, White House, Central Intelligence Agency

[John Dean saying the words: “Yes, Mr. President” on a loop]

ZANE BLANEY: Next on “The Public Affair”: highlights from the John Dean Popejoy Hall speech.

JOHN DEAN: And he said, “John, I would like you to be my counsel.” And I said, “Yes, Mr. President”.

RICHARD NIXON: I shall resign the presidency effective at noon tomorrow.

BLANEY: The Public Affair this week is a Watergate conversation with John Dean. Highlights of the Dean speech presented recently at Popejoy Hall. John Dean graduated from the Georgetown University Law School in 1965. In 1967, he was appointed Minority Republican Counsel for the House Judiciary Committee. In 1969, Attorney General John Mitchell named Dean Associate Deputy Attorney General. He was then appointed as Counsel to President Nixon and in this position he became involved in the events which led to the first resignation of an American president.

[applause]

DEAN: I guess I should say that, uh, I am John Dean and not [cough] excuse me, Howard Hunt [E. Howard Hunt] in a John Dean disguise.

[laughter]

DEAN: I think before I begin I’d like to talk about something that seems to have arisen on a number of the campuses I’ve spoken on. That’s this question of fees for my speaking. Only on one campus that I recall did the issue of my fees seem to dominate the evening. And I felt it was a waste of – of my time and of those who’d come to talk about Watergate. I indeed am sensitive to the issue of commercializing on Watergate. It’s not a new issue. It’s one that came

up for me very shortly after my less-than-ceremonious departure from the White House back in April of 1973, when I was canned on public network television. A few days after that a publishing company came to me and said that they would buy my story at any price. They wanted a Watergate-Nixon Years exposé. Well, I dismissed that out of hand and said that there was just no way that I could do that. I remember shortly after my testimony for the Senate Watergate Committee, a foreign publication wrote me and said, "We'll pay you a rather handsome sum if you'll just write a brief introduction to your testimony so we can get the copyright on it for foreign distribution." I wrote them and told them that they could get that in the public record. There have been countless offers to write magazine articles and the offers have gotten absurd, up to a hundred dollars a word for what I would write. I remember when I came out of prison just a few months ago, I was telling some people that I wanted to go to the campuses and visit. And they said, "John, that's – that's not what you want to do, really." And they said, "Those are tough audiences." And I said, "Well, that may be true, but it wasn't too long ago that I was sitting out there in anonymity and believe you me, I couldn't have predicted then what would happen to me did happen." So I was telling this person that there may be some way if I go out there and share – and I certainly have no credentials to teach or preach or moralize – but just to share what I went through, what I was thinking about, my bad judgements, my mistakes. That somebody else might not have a Watergate, because I think everybody is – could have their own Watergate in their own way.

[clears throat]

Well, I – this person said, "That's a pretty good reason". And the first night I went out on the lecture tour and the fee issue was then really flurrying. I decided that there was no way that I could continue the tour. The lecture tour I'd planned is to end at the end of this week. But now the campuses are offering me five, six, seven thousand dollars to continue the tour. Well, the tour is not going to continue because I think it does get to a point where it is pure commercialization. So having said that, and that's my feeling about the fee issue, let's talk about Watergate, okay?

BLANEY: The Watergate conversation with John Dean continues tomorrow. I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[05:23]

BLANEY: On "The Public Affair" this week, a Watergate conversation with John Dean.

DEAN: I think I can say that Watergate undoubtedly has been the worst experience of my life, but maybe also the best. The worst certainly because of the personal grief I caused my family, the unpleasantness of it all for myself. It wasn't, uh—it wasn't pleasant spending sixteen months with all of the various investigative bodies and investigators that were trying to unravel Watergate. It wasn't pleasant testifying. I hear a tape squeaking down here.

[laughter]

Nixon's never did that.

[laughter]

At least I never heard it.

[laughter]

When I say the worst experience also I can certainly say that the anticipation of the fact that I was going to jail and the uncertainty of what that sentence would be and incarceration itself was very unpleasant and I – I certainly was the most surprised individual of all when a little over, not quite two months ago, I was released from prison after serving only a little over four months of a [clears throat] excuse me, a one to four year sentence. I'd fully expected I would be [clears throat] excuse me, in jail at least one year. I think also that I can say it's not very pleasant to have experienced disgrace nor the thought of wearing the scarlet letter of Watergate the rest of my life. It's something I certainly don't look forward to, but it's going to happen. But I said also maybe the best experience. The best because for some reason my eyes got opened to things that I should have thought about but didn't. I remember that, uh, I once was a person who was rather quick to jump to judgement on other people. I could read about people in the newspaper or see them on television or meet them in brief encounters and I'd pretty well form my opinion. And I recall that the first night on the lecture tour, a young girl came to the microphone and she asked me, said, "Weren't you happy when you learned that Haldeman [H.R. Haldeman], Erlichman [John Erlichman], Mitchell [John N. Mitchell], and Mardian [Robert Mardian] had been convicted by that jury?" I think she was expecting, in her question, that I was going to bad-mouth those who'd spent so much time bad-mouthing me. And I said to her, I said, "No, I couldn't say I was happy. I couldn't wish any man to go to jail." I said, "Yes, it's right that the system worked. That they were brought to the bar of justice. But not to be happy for it." I said that I, of course, was pleased in the sense that the jury had accepted my testimony because certainly it wasn't the tapes alone that would convict men, but I said it certainly wasn't pleasant having to testify knowing that you had – your testimony would result in men you'd worked with going to jail. I said that not only those men, but the others are now being judged very much through the lens of Watergate. But any good they have done is certainly lost in all the bad that people perceive. And I said that this was particularly true not only of those men, but of the former President. And that until those men: Haldeman, Erlichman, Mitchell, Mardian, and Richard Nixon – decided that it might be better to come forward and tell what really did happen that I didn't think they would ever be fairly judged and that was unfortunate.

I said also that prison was an unpleasant experience and I said it was a bad experience but maybe in a way prison was a good experience, also. Learning about some of the injustices that, as a lawyer I should well have known about. I should have been appreciative of the experience I had and the positions I had and the areas I worked in in government. But I wasn't. Another

thing I certainly became acutely aware of is the incredible injustices in sentencing. And I can think of one that's very glaring. I know of a – of a young person who was arrested and convicted for possession of one ounce of marijuana and got ten years. Now I think that that young person getting ten years and my getting four months is not justice.

[applause]

BLANEY: Tomorrow, John Dean talks about his criminal behavior. I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[11:27]

BLANEY: Today on "The Public Affair", John Dean talks about his own criminal activities.

DEAN: I'm a lawyer, I should know what a crime is when I see it. For example, when Jeb Magruder came to me and said, "I'm going down before the grand jury and I'm going to give them this song-and-dance, will you help me and –you be the devil's advocate and test my story?" And I, for some reason, I was able to satisfy my own feelings about the whole thing by saying, "Jud, if you want to do that, that's alright. I can't recommend you do it." Thinking I had protected myself by saying that and I sat down and coached him for an hour on how to perjure himself.

[audience murmurs]

But I think maybe it was – in a sense, I lived in the illusion of the safety of the company I was keeping. These were men of enormous power. A former Attorney General who was close to a President. Haldeman, who was the chief of staff. Erlichman and the President himself, talking to him about these things. So I, for some reason, felt – and I just didn't think about this in terms of being criminal behavior. In December, I had some conversations with Haldeman about it. He said, "We've got to get out a new public relations scenario so we don't have this thing hanging over our heads in the second administration. Why don't you just write a report and lay some of these facts out? That'll handle it." And I said, "Bob, if I lay the facts out," I said, "Mitchell will be indicted. Magruder will be indicted. The grand jury will be opened. You'll be indicted and I'll be indicted."

[laughter]

And he said, "That doesn't sound like a very good public relations scenario."

[laughter]

In January and February, I think I – when I was really getting troubled with what was going on. Money was flying, promises were flying, promises of executive clemency and the like. And I wanted out. But I couldn't get out. I was stuck. And by the time I was talking to the President and he had said to me, "John, I want you to take charge of this thing. Don't bother Haldeman

and Erlichman with it anymore.” This is now the end of February. And I told him, initially, I told him of my troubles with the whole thing. But he turned me right around. It was awesome dealing with the President. When he walks out in front of you, for some reason, it’s in the tradition of this country and the feeling that just – you spontaneously jump to your feet and you’re applauding and you can feel the awe of that man being in front of you. Well, I felt it at close range and it’s awesome, believe me. I think if there’s any triggering event that really started heading me around the other way it was on the nineteenth of March when Howard Hunt sent a demand – a blackmail demand directly to me. Saying that he wanted a hundred and twenty thousand dollars -- fifty thousand dollars for his personal expenses and seventy thousand dollars for his lawyer – or he was going to talk. Well, my reaction when that message came directly to me was: that’s the end. This fella here is not going to have any more dealing with this. I’m just getting deeper and deeper and deeper. I’m getting more and more uncomfortable with what I’m doing. So, then on the night of the twentieth when the President called me for his nightly chat, I said something and asked something I’d never done before. I told him I wanted to meet with him the next day. And that’s when I went in and I tried to tell him that there was a cancer growing on the Presidency and – but I was like Casper Milquetoast. I went to the brink and, by God, he turned me right around and sent me out and we were back in the cover-up business again. I couldn’t sell him on the seriousness of it all. Told him I was going to prison, told him everybody else was going to be indicted in the place. And he couldn’t accept that.

Well, then they sent me off to Camp David because the Gray hearings [Senate testimony of Acting Federal Bureau of Investigation Director L. Patrick Gray] were getting very intense. Mo [Maureen Dean] and I went up there and I spent five days up there and I walked around in the woods a lot and while I was up there they asked me to write another scenario. Another Dean report. One that would exonerate everybody and no one would have any problem with. As I started writing that I realized that this was a document that would – I couldn’t write. And that’s where I really made the decision and we can go on with this. Before I came out, was despite everything I had done, despite the activities I had been engaged in I decided that there was one thing I was not going to do and that was I wasn’t going to lie for them. So, when it came my turn to be asked I was going to tell it just the way it was. Now I’ve been accused of – and not surprisingly so – that I went out and talked to the prosecutors to save my own ass. Well, indeed I did have that in consideration.

[laughter and applause]

BLANEY: Tomorrow John Dean takes questions from the audience. I’m Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[17:34]

BLANEY: Today on “The Public Affair”, John Dean opens himself up for questions from the audience.

DEAN: Question over here, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Yes. First of all I want you to understand this is a very serious question. I'm not kidding. I'm curious to know – I've waited a long time to ask anyone who ever worked for Richard Nixon – How, knowing the political history of this country and the political history of that man, could you ever go to work for him?

[applause]

DEAN: The best that I can answer that is that, um, Crow [?] pursued it and said, "Well, you know, the job that they're going to offer you, John, is Erlichman's old job. Counsel to the President." Well, that was pretty impressive, you know? I was kind of interested in that and I said, "Yeah, I'll talk to them about that." So they, uh, they flew me out to San Clemente [California] and I got the royal treatment, uh. Met by a helicopter in Los Angeles [California] airport, LAX, flown to San Clemente in this presidential helicopter and the whole thing. And it's not a bad way to travel.

[laughter]

And I finally was, after talking to Haldeman, I was ushered into the President's office and he said, "John, I would like you to be my counsel." And I said, "Yes, Mr. President."

[laughter]

And I saw at that time that, uh, for a man who was as ambitious as I that title was fantastic, the opportunity to see what was going on was fantastic, and I can't say I really knew what was going on until I got there, but I was – I can only explain it in the fact that I was getting ahead. I was really climbing the ladder fast and I'm not so sure that I knew that much about Nixon. Never really had been a Nixon-watcher. Um, as such.

Question over here, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: Yes, with regards to the issue of the abuse of power, what's your thinking about the role of the C.I.A. [Central Intelligence Agency] and the domestic operations of this country?

DEAN: Um, I suspect, uh, while there was never any bonfire on the south lawn of the White House with the tapes, if there has been a bonfire, it's been in Langley, Virginia, and that's where the C.I.A. is located and I don't think they're going to find anything there that, uh, is going to be terribly damaging, for one thing. So, what's gonna -- the, the -- what's going to happen on those investigations, very frankly in my opinion, is going to be whether former agents and operatives decide to come forward and discuss openly and candidly about the affairs of the C.I.A. Now there's a school of thought saying that the American people shouldn't be told these things or they might be damaging to our country. Well, I think that's bullshit.

[applause]

Question over here, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Um, you were saying that you thought that the fee issue was, uh, old hat. Well, I suppose that you think it's old hat, but I think it's rather ironic. Well, let me say, do you think it's rather ironic that, uh, we are now paying for your defense when just two years ago, you decided with rather, um, elementary, I'd say fascist techniques that uh --

DEAN: Thank you.

[laughter]

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: You decided what we, as the people of the United States, wanted. You just took it into your own head. You and your cronies. I mean, you're telling me that you used to -- You're telling me that you didn't know any of this was going on before you joined the administration? You're telling me that Watergate is -- there's nothing dirtier that's going on in the government besides Watergate? I mean, there's nothing? No [undecipherable]?

DEAN: Is that—Is that your question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Alright, well, thank you.

[laughter]

DEAN: Let me close with just this thought, if I might. You only owe your own integrity to yourself. That's a loyalty you don't have to give up to anybody. We talked a little bit ago -- or I did about ambition. Ambition is indeed one of the things that gets things done. And I hope there are a lot of people here that want to get a lot of things done. Ambition isn't a bad word. Makes the world go 'round. But I just hope that you all keep your head better than I did and good luck to you. Thank you for being a very nice audience.

[applause]

BLANEY: The John Dean tapes were edited for broadcast purposes. I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[23:16]

[end]