At a recent cocktail party in Manhattan, John Dean and Salman Rushdie were sitting on a zebra-print bench. Wherever Mr. Dean goes, talk of Watergate is never far behind, and Mr. Rushdie mentioned that he knew Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the reporters whose investigative work at The Washington Post in the 1970s helped run President Richard M. Nixon out of office and get Mr. Dean sentenced to a jail term.

“We shared the same agent, David Obst,” Mr. Dean told Mr. Rushdie, recalling Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein. “We had lunch together once. We went to a Chinese restaurant. Obst speaks Chinese and he wanted to order for us in Chinese. I don’t know if the waiter understood him.”

They laughed, and Mr. Rushdie asked Mr. Dean, a hotshot lawyer in his 30s when he worked in the Nixon White House, if he had known Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein back in those days.
“No,” Mr. Dean said. “I was never a source.”

At 78, Mr. Dean no longer wears the signature horn rims that set him apart from the crowd of nervous staff members testifying on live television before a Senate committee in 1973. Since then, he has written four books about the Nixon administration and made himself a regular on the lecture circuit. As if in expiation for his role during the Nixon years, the main theme in his books and speeches is to sound the alarm about abuses of presidential power. He was in New York at the invitation of the Ethics Center of Australia, at a cocktail party at the Library Hotel; the next morning he would give a talk on his views of President Trump, and how his actions may wind up intersecting with those of his old boss.

While Mr. Dean was in town, the news of the day — with its talk of investigations and wiretaps — seemed an echo of the Watergate era. Amid investigations into the Trump administration’s ties to Russia, the president had accused his predecessor, President Barack Obama, of wiretapping the phones at Trump Tower. Surreptitious recording is something Mr. Dean knows all too well: Mr. Nixon taped 37 of their conversations in the White House.

“That’s the silliness of Trump’s tweet saying Obama tapped him,” Mr. Dean said. “He could find that out within one phone call.”

Cobb Salad and Coke Zero

The day after the party, Mr. Dean arrived at the heavily guarded Trump Tower at 2:30 p.m., taking the stairs to a table at the Trump Grill, near the kitchen, where cooks and back waiters were bantering in Spanish. The restaurant was mostly empty.
Tourists dressed in sneakers and T-shirts occupied a booth in the back. Faux 19th-century gilt-framed portraits hung on the walls. Mr. Dean studied the menu.

“The Mar-a-Lago Club,” he said, mulling over a sandwich named after Mr. Trump’s Palm Beach estate. “That looks good.”

He settled on a Cobb salad and a bottle of Coke Zero.

John Wesley Dean III grew up in Ohio and attended high school at the Staunton Military Academy in Staunton, Va. There, he befriended Barry Goldwater Jr., a son of the five-term Republican senator from Arizona who would suffer a landslide loss to Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1964 presidential bid. Mr. Dean and Barry Jr. would visit the senator in Washington, and Mr. Dean was captivated.

“He was a very striking man,” Mr. Dean said. “He would take us around to the Senate. And you’d see all the people, the guards, make a wake for these two young guys following behind him.” He was also impressed by the senator’s car. “He had a Thunderbird when they were first out. It was rigged like the cockpit of an airplane. He had all kinds of meters and gadgets that didn’t come with the car. He had a two-way radio. He had a ham radio. He could talk to airplanes.”

Mr. Dean attended law school at Georgetown University and in July 1970, at age 32, was recruited to become White House counsel to the president. It didn’t take long for him to witness the underside of power. He told the story, after his Cobb salad arrived, of Scanlan’s, an upstart magazine that printed an article linking Vice President Spiro T. Agnew to a scheme to repeal the Bill of Rights and cancel the 1972 election. Just days after Mr. Agnew had condemned the story as fraudulent, Mr. Dean received an order instructing him to have Scanlan’s audited by the Internal Revenue Service. The assignment came from Mr. Nixon himself, Mr. Dean said.

“I thought, O.K., I don’t know much about Agnew, but I do know that this is so off the wall, and unlikely, that this is almost a joke,” Mr. Dean said. “I really wasn’t sure how to handle it.”

He sought the advice of a Nixon political adviser, Murray Chotiner. “He said, ‘John, this is a place that operates on need-to-know, and I don’t need to know this,’”
Mr. Dean recalled. Mr. Chotiner made this argument, according to Mr. Dean: “Well, why can’t the president, who is the head of the executive branch, start an audit of any taxpayer he decides he wants audited?” Mr. Dean was dumbfounded, believing such an audit would be illegal. Mr. Chotiner persisted, Mr. Dean said. “He said: ‘I don’t want to get in a debate with you, but let me just give you some advice. If you don’t do it, he will find somebody who will do it.’”

Mr. Dean said that in the end he asked a colleague to take care of the matter.

“As I recall, the magazine was so new it had never filed a tax return, so nothing could be done,” he said.

Mr. Dean included the Scanlan’s episode in his 1976 book “Blind Ambition,” which became the basis for a 1979 CBS mini-series starring Martin Sheen as Mr. Dean and Rip Torn as Mr. Nixon.

The president fell not as a result of such small-bore abuses of power but because of the June 1972 break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate hotel and office complex. John D. Ehrlichman, a Nixon adviser, had approved the break-in by five burglars, who were called “plumbers.” When they were caught, the administration tried to cover it up by destroying records, committing perjury and paying hush money.

Mr. Dean was caught up in the Watergate plot, and the White House called him the cover-up’s “mastermind.” He maintains that his colleagues sought to make him a scapegoat. He said that he warned them: “The jig is up. It’s over.” In a taped conversation, he said to Mr. Nixon, “We have a cancer within, close to, the presidency, that is growing.” As the investigation intensified, Mr. Dean cooperated with the Senate committee and was fired in April 1973.

As part of a deal, Mr. Dean pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice and was disbarred from legal practice in Virginia and the District of Columbia. “It is not what you expect, to go from the White House to the big house, so to speak,” he said. He helped prosecutors with their case and did not go to prison, serving four months at Fort Holabird, a former Army base in Baltimore. Mr. Nixon resigned on Aug. 9, 1974; the scope of presidential authority became more limited.
That changed again after Sept. 11, 2001, Mr. Dean said, when President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney reclaimed many of those powers in the wake of terrorist attacks. Mr. Dean, who is not registered with any political party, was not a fan of the Bush presidency, as he made clear in a 2006 book, “Worse Than Watergate: The Secret Presidency of George W. Bush.”

Mr. Obama continued the strengthening of the executive branch that occurred under Mr. Bush and took the fight to government leakers more frequently than any previous president during his two terms.

“Presidents don’t give up powers once they get in there,” Mr. Dean said.

That is what troubles him about Mr. Trump and his political advisers, among them his chief political strategist, the media executive Stephen K. Bannon. “I’m not sure Trump, or Bannon, or whoever is guiding that place, has figured out all their powers,” he said. “The incompetence is the only thing giving me comfort at the moment.”

Do the Walls Have Ears?

Mr. Dean, who lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Maureen, has never met Mr. Trump, nor has he watched “The Apprentice” or its spinoffs. But he had an impression of the real-estate-mogul-turned-reality-TV-star long before Mr. Trump ran for office. “A little showy for my style,” he said. “Obviously, he was an egomaniac way back when.”

He noted the similarities and differences between the new president and the chief executive he knew so well, and said that Mr. Nixon, unlike Mr. Trump, “was not an extemporaneous person.”

“If you listen to the Nixon tapes like I have, hour after hour, over and over, you realize that Nixon is barely articulate in private,” he said. “He doesn’t complete sentences. He doesn’t complete thoughts.”

“The private Nixon and public Trump are very similar,” Mr. Dean added. “The difference is Nixon, who was so highly disciplined, prepared ad nauseam for press
conferences. He had huge briefing books, which he used as a management tool, because he got the departments and the agencies to get answers to all the questions he would be asked.”

Mr. Trump seems more taken with the adulation of cheering crowds than the 37th president was. “You keep pouring stuff into him and he’ll go with it, adopt it as his own, without the same sophistication,” Mr. Dean said. “I mean, Trump isn’t stupid. He’s street smart. He’s shrewd. But he’s not an original thinker.”

A woman brushed past Mr. Dean and spoke in what sounded like a Russian accent. Mr. Dean chuckled and looked at the ceiling. “We are miked and it is going right to Oval Office,” he said.

Of the Trump administration’s alleged ties to Russia, Mr. Dean said: “It is clear that something serious is going on. They are just throwing out every signal. If this was nothing but the witch hunt that Trump claims, you could make it go away in a week.”

By now, Mr. Dean had finished lunch. “It was O.K.,” he said. “A Cobb salad is pretty hard to mess up, actually.” He said he had never had a meal at the Watergate. “I used to go there because it had the best pool,” he said, “long before I went to the White House.”

In 2012, The Post held a party there for the 40th anniversary of the burglary. “That was the only time I was ever in the office complex,” he said. “So I actually went down to look at the floor where they did it, the stairwell.”

Mr. Dean sighed.

“The whole thing is just so stupid,” he said. “Five guys. That is not a cat burglar. That’s a small army.”

Continue following our fashion and lifestyle coverage on Facebook (Styles and Modern Love), Twitter (Styles, Fashion and Weddings) and Instagram.
Home Delivery
+ All Access
$6.93/week
Billed as $360 every year*
Get Home Delivery
Includes everything in All Access, plus:
Customized delivery options such as Sunday only, Fri.-Sun.,
weekday delivery, or daily delivery

The weekly Sunday magazine and monthly T Magazine

2 complimentary digital subscriptions to give anyone you'd like

Learn more ►

*Home delivery price based on Sunday delivery.
Prices vary based on delivery location and frequency.

© 2017 The New York Times Company