2. John Dean's memory: a case study

John Dean was a principal witness at the Senate Watergate Investigating Committee's hearings in 1973 as to whether or not the then President of the United States of America, Richard Nixon, to whom Dean had formerly acted as a counsel, was aware of and involved in a cover-up of a burglary in the Watergate building that was 'politically' motivated. These hearings were clearly a 'real life' event of the sort Neisser had urged psychologists to study. But in addition, conversations held in the President's Oval Office had been 'secretly' tape-recorded, and transcriptions of these conversations had been made public. Thus, not only was Dean's testimony a 'real life' event, but his recollection of those events could be checked against the conversations themselves. This makes it a bit like a the traditional set-up of a laboratory experiment: 'output' (what was remembered) can be checked against 'input' (what happened) so that the intervening cognitive processes at work could be revealed.

One of the first things Neisser reports about the material is that:

‘truth’, ‘accuracy’, and ‘memory’ are not simple notions. Dean's testimony was by no means always accurate. Yet even when he was wrong, there was a sense in which he was telling the truth; even when he was right, it was not necessarily because he remembered a particular conversation well (1981: 3).

One of the standard distinctions made in work on memory is the contrast between verbatim recall and a memory for the gist of what was said, when we recall the ‘sense’ of a conversation in different words to the original. Neisser notes that:

Analysis of Dean's testimony does indeed reveal some instances of memory for the gist of what was said on a particular occasion. Elsewhere in his testimony, however, there is surprisingly little correspondence between the course of a conversation and his account of it. Even in those cases, however, there is usually a deeper level at which he is right. He gave an accurate portrayal of the real situation, of the actual characters and commitments of the people he knew, and of the events that lay behind the conversations he was trying to remember (ibid: 4).
Neisser's aim is to elucidate how this is the case, and sees the situation as one in which it is possible to go beyond the laboratory situation to deal with a level of memory that psychology is thus unaccustomed to analyzing. Neisser comes, in the end, to characterize this level of memory by a new term, as repisodic memory, in which Dean 'extracted the common themes that remained invariant across many conversations and many experiences, and then incorporated those themes in his testimony' (ibid: 20). An example might be the kinds of judgements we make of people in the light of what we have experienced of them in the past: we may not recall details of individual events and conversations at all clearly, but we have a kind of 'meta-gist' of them that hangs coherently together as a 'story' about them. We remember not 'the gist of a single episode, but the common characteristics of a whole series of events' (ibid). Dean extracted the common themes that remained invariant across many conversations and experiences, and then incorporated those themes into his testimony (ibid). Thus we can see how Neisser sets his 'cognitive agenda', for this is the way perception, concept acquisition and pattern-learning are generally conceived in this approach: can we specify the cognitive mechanisms whereby these 'invariances' are 'extracted'.

Having established this 'repisodic' category of the memory process, Neisser can ask questions about those instances where Dean was clearly in error, as he was over a meeting he had with President Nixon on September 15, 1972. His testimony to the Investigatory Committee opens thus:

On September 15 the Justice Department announced the handing down of the seven indictments by the Federal Grand Jury investigating the Watergate. Late that afternoon I received a call requesting me to come to the President's Oval Office. When I arrived at the Oval Office I found Haldeman and the President. The President asked me to sit down. Both men appeared to be in very good spirits and my reception was very warm and cordial. The President then told me that Bob - referring to Haldeman - had kept him posted on my handling of the Watergate case. The President told me I had done a good job and he appreciated how difficult a task it had been and the President was pleased that the case had stopped with Liddy. I responded that I could not take credit because others had done much more difficult things than I had done. As the President discussed the present status of the situation I told him that all I had been able to do was to contain the case and assist in keeping it out of the White House. I also told him there was a long way to go before this matter would end and that I certainly could make no assurances that the day would not come when this matter would start to unravel (Hearings, p957: cited by Neisser, 1982: 9).

Now, as Neisser points out, the transcripts of the tape of this conversation shows that hardly anything that Dean says about this meeting is true: 'His account is plausible, but entirely incorrect' (ibid). Was he just lying, then? Neisser doesn't think so:
The transcript makes it quite clear that Nixon is fully aware of the cover-up: Haldeman and Dean discuss it freely in front of him, and while he occasionally asks questions he never seems surprised. ... Because the real conversation is just as incriminating as the one Dean described, it seems unlikely that he was remembering one thing and saying another (ibid: 9-10).

So what accounts for the differences? Part of it might be attributable to what have been described as *scripts*. An 'entering-the-room script' might contain the 'expectation' that Dean would have been asked to sit down, for example, and this 'overwrites' what actually didn't happen. But Neisser thinks there is more to it than this. The errors follow, he believes, from:

Dean's own character and especially from his self-centred assessment of events at the White House. What his testimony really describes is not the September 15 meeting itself but his fantasy of it: the meeting as it should have been, so to speak. In his mind, Nixon should have been glad that the indictments stopped with Liddy, Haldeman should have been telling Nixon what a great job Dean was doing; most of all, praising him should have been the first order of business. In addition, Dean should have told Nixon that the cover-up might unravel, as it eventually did, instead of telling him it was a great success. By June, this fantasy had become the way Dean remembered the meeting (ibid: 10).