

Jack Anderson's Washington Merry-go-round

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—With Les Whiten

WASHINGTON — The first member of Richard Nixon's tight inner circle to reach print, Charles "Chuck" Colson, has described what it was like inside the oval office during the Watergate years.

He has completed a compelling book called "Born Again," which is loaded with inside stories about Nixon, Spiro Agnew, Henry Kissinger, and other headline figures from the incredible Nixon era. We have obtained a bootleg copy of the book, which hasn't yet hit the bookstands.

Colson portrays Nixon as a shy, haunted man who got down on his knees at night to pray, yet a vicious, vindictive man who was eager to stomp on his enemies. Colson also traces his own astonishing transformation from a ruthless political hatchet man to a zealous Christian.

Here are a few of the book's most startling revelations:

—As the specter of impeachment began to haunt Nixon, he became paranoid and suspected a conspiracy against him. He feared the special prosecutors were wiretapping the White House. He even came to believe his own aides and secretaries might be conspiring to bug him.

Once he took Colson to the Lincoln sitting room on the second floor of the

White House to thwart the suspected eavesdroppers. "The problem, Chuck," he confided, "is that I don't think I can trust anybody. Not even the secretaries."

The thought so preyed on Nixon that he called Colson at 11:30 that night. "Let me ask you one more time..." the President pleaded, "do you have some information (about the White House being bugged) that you didn't tell me?"

It turned out, ironically, that Nixon bugged himself and provided the prosecutors with the damning transcripts that brought his own downfall. But the President blamed his major domo, H. R. "Bob" Haldeman, for this. Speaking to Colson later about the White House recording system, Nixon said: "They were all Haldeman's idea. Stupid, just stupid. I told Bob twice to have the system removed, but you know Bob. I forgot all about them."

—The beleaguered Nixon once told Colson he had considered becoming a Roman Catholic. But he added: "If I converted, everyone would say it was some political gimmick — Tricky Dick making a pitch for the Catholic vote."

But Nixon told Colson earnestly: "You know, Chuck, I get on my knees every night and just pray to God." When Colson spoke to then Senator Harold

Hughes, D-Iowa, the Senator asked Colson to invite Nixon to join them in their prayer circle. But Nixon, partly out of shyness, declined.

—After Colson had served seven months in prison, he had a trauma in his family. Senator Hughes, Rep. Al Quie, R-Minn., and two other prayer group members offered to serve out Colson's term under an antiquated statute.

Quie was ready to go to the White House with the substitution plan when Colson was unexpectedly released by Judge Gerhard Gesell.

—The ugly side of Nixon's nature showed itself on the presidential yacht Sequoia one balmy spring night. The President's staff began to talk about his enemies.

"One day we will get them," he vowed, "we'll get them on the ground where we want them. And we'll stick our heels in, step on them hard and twist — right, Chuck, right?"

Listening solemnly to this Presidential diatribe were Kissinger, Haldeman, and John Ehrlichman. Only Ehrlichman looked away in apparent disagreement, Colson reports.

—This vengeful side of Nixon came out again when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers. "I want him exposed, Chuck," said Nixon. "I don't care how you do it ... do you understand me?"

That's an order." Colson eagerly worked to discredit Ellsberg.

—Perhaps the most important news story in the book is Colson's confirmation that Nixon planned to pardon every one of his aides caught in the Watergate web.

Colson recalls he was helping Nixon with his coat one day when the President, obviously referring to his embattled aides, promised: "There'll come a time when we wipe the slate clean. Not yet but it will come."

Instead, only Nixon wound up with a pardon.

—Another promise that Nixon was unable to keep, according to Colson, was given to ex-Treasury Secretary John Connally when he switched to the Republican party. Nixon offered to support him for President. Nixon's intention was, first, to replace Agnew with Connally on the 1972 ticket, then to back Connally for the 1976 presidential nomination.

But Agnew had too strong a following to be dislodged in 1972. And by the time Agnew was forced out a year later, Connally was under investigation in the

famous milk bribery case.

As the noose tightened on Agnew in 1973, his aides sought to engineer impeachment actions against him in the House. The strategy was to short-circuit and possibly avert criminal prosecution. But Nixon undercut his own Vice President telling Colson: "Both Jerry Ford (then House Republican leader (and Carl Albert (House Speaker) are in line. They will oppose any impeachment resolution." Colson had to tell Agnew that the President had scuttled him.

—A section of the Watergate tapes, which apparently hasn't appeared until now, is quoted by Colson. He is on the record a few days after the Watergate break-in urging Nixon to have all the White House personnel testify freely.

"This is once when you'd like for people to testify," Colson contended. Nixon refused to heed his advice, and the Watergate coverup began.

Footnote: We have made repeated calls to San Clemente for Nixon's comments. But he has offered no response.