

Nixon Hatchet Man Charles Colson's

by Jack Anderson

WASHINGTON, D.C.

In the moral swamp that existed under Richard Nixon, Charles Colson was the head hatchet man, chief character assassin and the major instigator of "dirty tricks." He once called himself a "flag-waving, anti-press, antiliberal Nixon fanatic." He boasted that he'd walk over his own grandmother if it would help Nixon.

The Watergate President kept Colson in an office next to his in the Executive Office Building. They exchanged ugly thoughts and hatched dark plots, bringing out one another's baser nature. Nixon worked through Colson, who aped him and—in the manner of ambitious young subordinates—tended to out-Nixon Nixon.

Friends and foes alike were startled, therefore, to learn that Colson in late 1973 had turned to God. For many who had watched him in action, it was too much to swallow. Those who had felt his political sting snorted in derision. Newsmen jibed and joked; cartoonists lampooned the "new Colson." Some of his closest friends and even participants in his prayer fellowship had doubts about him.

Now, more than four years later, Chuck Colson is still a circuit rider for the Lord. The same zeal that he once devoted to Nixon's dirty works is now dedicated to God's good works.

But some skeptics refuse to believe Colson is sincere. They suspect he is still the same old Colson hiding behind a pious mask, a modern-day Elmer Gantry more concerned about worldly rewards than saving souls.

So PARADE put the question to me: Did I believe in the born-again spiritual conversion of the man who for years was hellbent on destroying me? The Bible enjoins us to forgive our enemies. It says nothing, however, about trusting them.

Any report from me should be put in context. In his best-selling book *Born Again*, Colson described me as the "arch nemesis" of the Nixon White House. Six years ago, Colson was orchestrating a White House campaign, as he himself put it, to cut me down. He later confessed to the Senate that Nixon had asked him "many times" to take action "to discredit Jack Anderson." Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt, who participated in these plots, said Colson wanted to "discredit Mr. Anderson personally and professionally."



Colson makes an evangelical visit to prison. His devotion and large donations to a religious fellowship convince some critics he's sincere.

In one such plot, Colson dispatched Hunt to the hospital bed of Dita Beard, lobbyist for International Telephone and Telegraph, Inc. (ITT), to persuade her to disown an incriminating memo she had written. I had published the memo as evidence of an ITT payoff to the Nixon campaign.

Not a forgery

Nixon himself sent John Dean to ask the late J. Edgar Hoover to slip him my FBI file and to conduct a forgery test of the Dita Beard memo. Hoover turned over the file but refused to call the memo a forgery.

In his book *Blind Ambition*, Dean described Colson as the moving force behind this plot to discredit me. Colson "threw himself into the campaign night and day, oblivious to unfavorable developments and undaunted by failure. He kept coming back again like a battering ram," wrote Dean.

According to Hunt's testimony, he was directed by Colson to make me appear "drunk or incoherent" on my radio or TV show. Hunt and his Water-

gate companion, G. Gordon Liddy, approached a CIA doctor about the use of a drug that would render me babbling. They thought about applying it to my steering wheel, which could have caused a fatal accident. Colson denied issuing these instructions but acknowledged he could not "discount the possibility of having said something in jest."

It is against this history that I am asked to evaluate Colson's claim that he is a changed man, converted from a ruthless political hatchet man to a humble evangelical crusader. Rather than rely on personal feelings, my staff and I have held intimate talks with the people who know him best, pro and con. We have also questioned Colson himself about his experiences since he fell from power and found spiritual grace.

He has not entirely lost the sharp edge that made him the youngest company commander in the Marine Corps in 1954 and the meanest man in the Nixon inner circle 13 years later. Once tough, at 46 he is still brisk; once abrasive, still brusque; once

combative, still assertive. He is also a compelling talker.

By his account, he turned to God on an August night in 1973, about five months after he left the Nixon staff. He did not announce his conversion or seek to capitalize on it. He just quietly joined a nondenominational prayer group drawn from prominent people. The press and public didn't learn about it until December, when he was spotted entering the White House for a private prayer breakfast.

It took a while even for his wife, Patty, to adjust to the reformed Colson. She recalled: "People would come up to me and say, 'We're so happy for Chuck; when did you accept Christ?' I got befuddled. I would just sit down and cry sometimes."

Having made his peace with God, Colson confessed his legal guilt and faced the ordeal of prison. A convicted White House colleague, Egil "Bud" Krogh, cautioned him to mind his own business behind prison walls. Indeed, Colson had a few frightening early experiences there that almost convinced him to become a loner. But his garrulous nature prevailed. He began joining in the prison bull sessions and helping other inmates with legal and moral counseling.

The imprisonment of Colson, meanwhile, took its toll on his family. "I can still feel the judge's gavel," said Patty Colson. "I never thought prison would happen in a million years. It was the worst moment of the whole ordeal."

She talked about the impact on the children. "It was a real jolt for Wendell, the oldest child, when his father was sentenced to prison. The other two, Chris and Emily, seemed to accept it." The effect on Chris, it turned out, was merely less visible. While his father was behind bars, he was arrested in South Carolina on a drug possession charge. "Now you've got us both," Chris told his arresting officer bitterly.

An ugly dream

His mother looks back on those lonely months as an ugly dream. "I'm still being treated every three weeks for hypertension, which I probably wouldn't have if it hadn't been for all that has happened," she said.

Yet her face lit up as she continued. "Our marriage is stronger now, and the children are closer to their father. They have a great deal of respect for

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN

'Born Again' Life

him. He always sat down and talked things over with them, even during the height of Watergate."

Colson used his idle prison time to write *Born Again*. "He'd dictate it to me during visiting hours," said Mrs. Colson, "and then I would go home and type." After his release, he spent months drifting and groping. He refused to peddle his confessions, a tactic which kept other Watergate figures solvent. He preferred to tell of his religious conversion and to assign most of the proceeds to worthy causes.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life," Colson told us. But he was nagged by a desire to help "those human beings in prison." His own spiritual counselor, ex-Sen. Harold Hughes, a reformed alcoholic, finally told him to "stop talking about it and do something."

Bring religion to inmates

Colson then got the idea to bring selected prisoners to the Washington area for two-week religious retreats. Then, he hoped, they would take the word of God back to other inmates.

Colson also began making evangelical visits to the nation's prisons, which attracted news coverage. "I suddenly found myself more of a public figure than I had planned," he said. "My wife and I had long talks about it. In August of 1976, I made the decision to stay with the prison ministry. Incredibly, the moment I made the decision, things started falling into place. We received a report from a psychologist who said our visits to the prisons made a tremendous difference to inmates."

Colson is now instantly recognized in the prison community. "Word gets around through the prison grapevine," he explained. Patty Colson, after an initial reticence and uneasiness, now travels with her husband to prisons and fellowship meetings. The children, for their part, endure some ridicule over their father's new prayer-and-pulpit career. But Colson claims he has no misgivings about the change.

Many who knew Colson as the scourge of the Nixon White House scoff at his claim of religious redemption. One prominent politician snapped: "Colson's completely opportunistic. He's got a good thing going, but I don't buy it. I think he's still blackmailing Nixon."

Those who have prayed at Colson's side and shared his religious testimony,

however, have a different opinion. "In the beginning," Hughes told us, "you couldn't find a greater doubter than me. But Chuck's track record speaks for itself." Rep. Albert Quie (R., Minn.) also felt at first that the prayer group was being "hoodwinked" by Colson. But Quie became so convinced of Colson's religious integrity that he volunteered to serve part of his penitentiary time. Sen. Mark Hatfield (R., Ore.) admitted that now he is ashamed of his original doubts. "It gave me cause for introspection about my own self-righteousness," he said.

Colson intimates have described him as a fighter who always plunged into a cause all the way. His father once called him "viciously loyal"; there was nothing he wouldn't do for his superior—be it his Marine commander, Lt. Gen. Lewis "Chesty" Puller; his President, Richard Nixon, or, now, the Lord. Such unrestrained devotion can backfire if it is belittled, which is precisely what Nixon did, and Colson found out when the secret White House tapes were released.

But perhaps the best evidence of Colson's devotion lies in the finances of his new crusade. More than one evangelist has reaped a personal bonanza from the Lord's work—but not Colson. The Prison Fellowship opened its books to me. In 1975, Colson provided almost 90 percent of the society's funding. The following year, his contributions from lecture fees and personal donations accounted for \$77,000 of the fellowship's \$85,000 budget. Last year, the society's income shot up to \$440,162. More than half that amount, \$240,500, came from Colson in the form of lecture fees, royalties and private donations.

His contribution to the cause may soon soar into the millions. For Colson has pledged to turn over to the organization the entire proceeds from a forthcoming movie based on *Born Again*. Veteran Hollywood actor Dean Jones confided that he was averse to portraying Colson. But after getting to know him, the actor proclaimed: "I'd trust him with my life." Producer Bob Munger said many associated with the film felt the same preliminary hostility to the former Nixon hitman but wound up impressed with his sincerity.

Slowly, Colson is convincing other Watergate figures. John Dean, who blew the whistle on the San Clemente gang, was one of the nonbelievers.



Colson and wife Patty study the Bible at home. She recalls the ordeal of his six months in prison, says their marriage "is stronger now."

But now, said Dean, "I see in Chuck a sincerity in his beliefs and his mission." Another former political patriot, conservative columnist Pat Buchanan, agreed that Colson's new missionary work is for real. "There's no doubt that he's been sincere from the beginning," he said.

Am I persuaded that Colson's conversion was genuine? In 1974, he was judged and sentenced to prison for his acts. Today, he should be judged by his acts. And his acts, according to

available witnesses, have been good.

But there are some who will never be convinced, like the young tormentor who threw a pie in Colson's face at a lecture. The man who once used political brass knuckles on his antagonists responded with a tolerant smile. But he confessed: "It's sometimes hard to live the Christian life." **D**

Jack Anderson's associate Jack Mitchell assisted with the preparation of this article.