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Colson Reportedly Felt Out Hunt on 'Nailing' Ellsberg

The Washington Star-News
 WASHINGTON, Sept. 7—A day after the Supreme Court gave the go-ahead for publication of the Pentagon papers in 1971, a former White House aide, Charles W. Colson, sounded out E. Howard Hunt Jr. on "nailing" Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, according to documents in the hands of Senate investigators.

A transcript of a Colson-Hunt telephone call July 1, 1971, a day after the high court's ruling, shows that Mr. Colson asked whether "we should go down the line to nail the guy (Dr. Ellsberg) cold," and Hunt replied affirmatively.

On Mr. Colson's recommendation, Hunt was hired as a White House consultant less than a week later, and a former Presidential adviser, John D. Ehrlichman, asked the C.I.A. to help him. Two months later, Hunt participated in the break-in at the office of Dr. Ellsberg's former psychiatrist in California.

Mr. Colson admitted yesterday that he had tape-recorded his conversation with Hunt and sent a transcript to the former White House chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman.

"The more I think about Howard Hunt's background, politics, disposition and experience, the more I think it would be worth your time to meet him," Mr. Colson said in a cover memo to Mr. Haldeman on July 2.

Conversation Transcribed

"If you want to get a feel of his attitude, I transcribed a conversation with him yesterday on it. Needless to say, I did not even approach what we had been talking about, but merely sounded out his own ideas."

Mr. Colson said yesterday that what he and Mr. Haldeman had been "talking about" was the possibility of hiring Hunt "to come on to the White House staff to coordinate research on the Pentagon papers and serve as liaison with the Hill."

Mr. Colson repeated earlier denials that he had had any advance knowledge of plans for a break-in at the office of Dr. Ellsberg's former psychiatrist, saying that he had learned of that burglary "sometime after it occurred—I can't pin down the date."

In his July 1 call to Hunt, Mr. Colson said, "we were trying to figure out how to recoup lost political ground" in regard to the Pentagon papers case.

'One of Two Ways'

In the phone conversation with Hunt, Mr. Colson suggested that the Pentagon papers affair "could go one of two ways."

"Ellsberg could be turned into a martyr of the New Left—he probably will be anyway

—or it could become another Alger Hiss case, were the guy exposed other people were operating with him, and this may be the way to really carry it out," he said. "We might be able to put this bastard into a hell of a situation and discredit the New Left."

Mr. Colson asked Hunt whether "you think that with the right resources, employed that this thing could be turned into a major public case against Ellsberg and co-conspirators," the transcript shows.

Hunt responded that he thought this was possible "with the proper resources." Mr. Colson said, "I think the resources are there" and asked Hunt whether "your answer would be we should go down the line to nail the guy cold."

"Go down the line to nail the guy cold, yes," Hunt replied. Mr. Colson went on to suggest there was "profit to us in nailing any son of a bitch who would steal a secret document of the Government and publish it or would conspire to steal it"

'Resourceful Engineering'

He told Hunt the case "won't be tried in the court" but "in the newspapers" and added, "So it's going to take some resourceful engineering . . ."

Hunt said, "I want to see the guy hung, if it can be done to the advantage of the Administration."

"I think it can be done," Mr. Colson replied. "I think there are ways to do it, and I don't think this guy is operating alone."

HUNT: Well, of course, he isn't operating alone. He's got a congeries of people who are supporting him, aiding and abetting him, there's no question about it.

COLSON: But I'm not so sure it doesn't go deeper than that.

HUNT: Oh, really? You're thinking of like [Democratic Chairman Lawrence] O'Brien or . . .

COLSON: Oh, no, I'm thinking of the enemy . . .

HUNT: The real enemy. Well, of course, they stand to profit more, the most, no question about it. You've got codes and policymaking apparatus stripped bare for public examination, all that sort of thing.

Mr. Colson said yesterday that he had tape-recorded the telephone call with Hunt "for the benefit of Bob Haldeman . . . I thought it would give a good measure of the man [Hunt]."

Mr. Colson said that on the basis of the transcript, Mr. Haldeman told him to put Hunt in touch with Mr. Ehrlichman,

and "if Ehrlichman likes him, go ahead and hire him."

He said that Mr. Ehrlichman interviewed Hunt on July 7, 1971, the same day on which Gen. Robert E. Cushman, former deputy director of the C.I.A., has testified that he received a call from Mr. Ehrlichman asking the C.I.A. to help Hunt in his work for the White House.

Ehrlichman, in testimony before Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Intelligence Operations, 31 May 73, says Hunt was hired by Colson 6 Jul 71. — NYT 1 Jun 73