

Colson Ends Bogus-Cable Denial

By CHRISTOPHER LYDON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 9—For more than 10 months, investigators and reporters have been searching for a connection between Charles W. Colson and the Watergate affair through his friendship with E. Howard Hunt Jr., one of the Watergate conspirators, who pleaded guilty.

This week, for the first time, Mr. Colson, who was special counsel until he left the White House staff in March, opened a small crack in his solid wall of denials.

Responding to Hunt's grand jury testimony, Mr. Colson suggested that a misunderstanding of something he said might have prompted Hunt to fabricate a diplomatic cable implicating President Kennedy in the murder of Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of South Vietnam, in 1963.

Mr. Colson said he never "ordered" Hunt to forge the document. But he no longer denied, as he had privately, that he had seen the bogus message or that he had been Hunt's supervisor on a project to establish official American complicity in Mr. Diem's assassination.

Well Connected Lawyer

Mr. Colson is an astute and well connected lawyer, who is expected to attract \$1-million a year in gross billings when he returns to private practice. Thus, he may have much to lose from any taint of the Watergate scandal.

Unlike many others loosely linked to the case, Mr. Colson has been categorical, both on and off the record, in denying all involvement.

And he is believed to be the only individual ever mentioned in connection with the matter who voluntarily underwent and passed a lie-detector test that asked about foreknowledge and even indirect participation in the Watergate raid.

Nonetheless, a sequence of earlier ventures indicates that Mr. Colson was well aware of Hunt's aptitude for clandestine and illegal activities when, early in 1972, he recommended to Jeb Stuart Magruder, the deputy manager of the Nixon reelection campaign, that Hunt's plans for intelligence and counter intelligence be given a hearing.

Mr. Colson, who made two appearances before the Watergate grand jury today, told Federal prosecutors earlier than in February, 1972, about the time the Watergate bugging plans were being hatched, he telephoned Mr. Magruder and urged him to listen to Hunt's deas.

In one published account of Mr. Magruder's version of the conversation, Mr. Colson said, "When are we going to get this bugging plan approved?"

Mr. Colson has insisted that he never mentioned bugging and never knew it was part of the plan. Mr. Magruder's lawyer has said that the quoted version of the call may not be accurate, but the call itself is not disputed.

Nor is Mr. Colson's personal endorsement of Hunt to Mr. Magruder disputed. Two incidents before the call, and a third shortly afterward, indicate that Mr. Colson knew—long before the Watergate raid in June—that the wide range of Hunt's services included forgery, burglary and impersonation.

Hunt recently told the grand jury that in September, 1971, he directed a break-in at the Los Angeles offices of Dr. Lewis Fielding, a psychiatrist who had treated Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, whom the Government suspected of disclosing the Pentagon papers.

At that time and until Hunt left the White House staff in early April, 1972, his \$100-a-day consulting fees were being approved by Mr. Colson's signature on bi-weekly pay vouchers.

Testimony by Krogh

Egil Krogh Jr., a former White House aide who has taken responsibility for approving the Ellsberg burglary, has testified that \$2,000 in extra expense money for flights back and forth to Los Angeles was approved by Mr. Colson, but that Mr. Colson did not know how the funds were to be used.

Later, Hunt has testified, when he tried to recount the burglary story, Mr. Colson told him: "I don't want to hear anything about it." But about the same time, Mr. Colson confirmed in new grand jury testimony released today, he learned of the burglary from John D. Ehrlichman, then the chief domestic adviser to President Nixon.

According to documents released at Dr. Ellsberg's trial in Los Angeles, it was also about September, 1971, that Hunt forged the cable dealing with the Diem assassination.

Mr. Colson has not yet given his account of that project, but he has told William C. Lambert, a former investigative reporter for Life magazine, that he knew as early as February, 1972, that Hunt's cable was a fraud.

Mr. Colson had originally referred Mr. Lambert to Hunt for what was described as an explosive disclosure on the murder of Mr. Diem. Later, Mr. Colson and Mr. Lambert now say, Mr. Colson tried to discourage the reporter from pursuing the matter.

The third incident confirmed Mr. Colson's knowledge of Hunt's unorthodox work occurred in March, 1972—roughly a month after the call to Mr. Magruder, and three months before the Watergate arrests—

when Mr. Colson dispatched Hunt, disguised by a red wig and heavy make-up, to the Denver hospital room of Dita Beard.

Mrs. Beard, a lobbyist for the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation, had been quoted as the author of a memorandum linking the settlement of an antitrust suit against I.T.T. to a large I.T.T. contribution to the Nixon campaign. Shortly after Hunt's visit, Mrs. Beard denounced the memo as a fraud.

In Hunt's grand jury testimony last month, made available in Los Angeles Monday, Hunt says that Mr. Colson was "directing my researches" into the early stages of the war in Vietnam.

At one point, Mr. Colson asked him, Hunt said, "Well, what kind of material have you dug up on the files that would indicate Kennedy complicity?"

Hunt recalled that he showed Mr. Colson three or four legitimate cables "that indicated that they had pretty close to pulled the trigger against Premier Diem's head, but it didn't say so in so many words."

Mr. Colson then asked, "Do you think you could improve on them?" And Hunt "set about creating two cables which bore on this particular period."

When he showed them to Mr. Colson, Hunt said, "He seemed to like them" and shortly thereafter sent Mr. Lambert over to see them.

Mr. Colson responded to the published testimony by saying that he had not ordered Hunt at any time to falsify any documents.

He added: "From what I have read of Mr. Hunt's statements, it is entirely possible that Mr. Hunt misunderstood something I said to him at the time he was reviewing Pentagon papers cables with me."

Within hours after the Watergate raid on June 17, 1972, according to sworn depositions in the case, John D. Ehrlichman, then President Nixon's domestic counselor, called Mr. Colson to ask about Hunt's whereabouts. Mr. Colson responded that he had not been in touch with Hunt for months.

Sources close to Mr. Colson have said that rather than checking on Hunt's recent activities, Mr. Colson took immediate precautions against any further communications with Hunt that might entangle him in the affair.

Mr. Colson's name came up early and often, however, in the early speculation about Watergate conspirators. Quite apart from the Hunt connection, he was well known to the press and to many on the Nixon political staff as the source of many secret and controversial campaign stratagems.

Even after the Watergate arrests, he continued to foster

that reputation. In a staff memorandum published in The Washington Post, Mr. Colson eagerly confirmed late in August last year that "I would walk over my grandmother if necessary" to re-elect the President.

'Dirty Tricks'

It was already widely known that in 1970 he had helped Mr. Lambert research a Life magazine article that charged Senator Joseph D. Tydings, Democrat of Maryland, with conflict of interest and apparently contributed to Mr. Tydings's defeat.

More recently, mingled among the Watergate revelations, there have been numerous fresh reports of Mr. Colson's 1972 campaign of "dirty tricks." Lyn Nofziger, formerly an official of the Republican National Committee, said last week that he had rejected a number of Colson campaign ideas that ranged, he said, from "dangerous" to "idiotic," but were not illegal.

Mr. Colson himself has boasted to friends that he had spies reporting to the Nixon campaign from each of the major contenders for the Democratic Presidential nomination last year. He has always added, however, that he was sure the Democrats had their spies in the Republican organization, too.

Last month, when it was first reported that the Nixon campaign had paid \$4,400 for an advertisement in The New York Times purporting to represent "citizens" in support of the President's decision to mine Haiphong harbor last May, the head of the Nixon advertising staff said that Mr. Colson had conceived and written the ad. Mr. Colson did not bother to deny the statement.

See note on Dita Beard memo, filed attached to SFChronicle 15 Jun 73, "A report of Hunt visit to Dita Beard."