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Colson Revisited

By Douglas Hallett

WASHINGTON—Charles W. Colson, with his faultless ear for the bombastic, is an inevitable focus for popular demonology in the Watergate scandal. But we have a right to expect more than witch-hunting from skilled journalists. In their current coverage of Mr. Colson, many in the news media have missed the mark.

Part of what bothers me is simple sloppiness. Take the allegation that Mr. Colson ordered Howard Hunt to burglarize the apartment of Governor Wallace's assailant, Arthur Bremer, immediately after the assassination attempt last year.

Mr. Colson says he was charged by the President with assuring F.B.I. protection for Bremer and his apartment; that, in fact, he had the apartment cordoned off right after the shooting. The former assistant director of the Bureau, Mark Felt, can back up these claims. Yet the first had been only belatedly mentioned and the second not at all in the news reports I have seen.

Consider Mr. Colson's denial of even an awareness of the twenty-name "enemies" list John Dean presented to the Ervin committee along with a longer "opponents" list Mr. Colson says was used to exclude some of the Administration's most vociferous critics from White House dinners and other honorariums. Whatever the truth about these matters, many articles and editorials have not even acknowledged they were in dispute.

More thorough reporting might have revealed that the twenty-name list, the one with the comments raising the spectre of Government intimidation, was not typed on a typewriter or in a style used by Mr. Colson or his secretaries—but, rather, in a typestyle and in an organizational format used on many documents produced by the Committee to Re-elect the President.

But what bothers me most are not the factual assumptions made so confidently. What bothers me most is the general impression of Mr. Colson with which the public will be left long after each individual rumor, innuendo and falsehood have passed from its consciousness.

Is it not important to a real understanding of alleged dirty-trick-master Chuck Colson's role in the Nixon Administration that merely a fraction of his time was spent on purely public relations matters? Would it not give the public a more balanced perspective on the nature of the President's chief aides if it knew that Mr. Colson is, in large part, responsible for the fact

that more Federal money and more executive-level Government jobs have been directed to Spanish-speaking Americans by three and four times than ever before?

Could the public not weigh Mr. Colson's credibility and character better if it knew that he, alone except for former Assistant Secretary of Labor Jerome Rosow, could understand the economic and social importance of doing something about blue-collar frustration on the job? Would not the public be interested in the fact that Mr. Colson consistently pushed for the tax reform policies so steadfastly belittled by more powerful men like John Ehrlichman and John Connally?

The Chuck Colson I know is no St. Francis. He adapted too readily and too self-servingly to the President's desire to be shut off from face-to-face confrontations with staff, press, Congress and public. He helped feed some of the most debilitating White House paranoias. He has played distressing roles in some of the saddest hours of the Nixon Administration, including the Supreme Court nomination of G. Harrold Carswell, the 1970 "law and order" campaign, and the Administration's continuing narrow view of the First Amendment.

And, while, on the basis of conversations I have had with Mr. Colson about Watergate and its cover-up, I am satisfied that he had nothing to do with either, he himself admits various shadowy, though not illegal and perhaps not totally unhelpful, activities, such as commissioning Howard Hunt to investigate Senator Edward Kennedy and transmitting charges about an anti-Nixon Teamster official's tax returns.

Yet the White House, I believe, is much the poorer for his absence. The public has seen too much of Mr. Colson's hostility to what he considers to be the vapid philosophizing of various media potentates; he should have let it see more of his equally biting in-house scorn for the Administration's tendency to substitute cosmetic game-plans for bread-and-butter interest-group politics.

Likewise, Mr. Colson has done himself no favor this past year by disguising his own doubts about Watergate with overwrought attacks on those who kept reminding him of them. He was wrong. But that error can never make him responsible for a sickness he was first in the White House to see, and first in the White House to try to stop.

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