

Reputed Dirty Tricks Man

By Jules Witcover

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At the White House on the day in July when Sen. J. Ervin Jr. received the phony call saying President Nixon would release the Oval Office tapes on Watergate, a wag put a facetious label on the caper.

He called it "Colson's Hoax."

There was, of course, no evidence whatever to link the incident to Charles W. Colson, the former White House counsel who, E. Howard Hunt Jr. testified yesterday, had approved the general 1972 Nixon campaign intelligence plan. But the gag reflected the reputation Colson has gained as the "dirty tricks" man par excellence of the Nixon years.

"Charlie's reputation," said the author of the comic label, "is merited as a fairly mean character. But he's like the old gunfighter. Killings 250 miles away are charged to him."

Colson had been expected until recent weeks to make exactly that defense himself publicly before the Senate Watergate committee—that, while he's been no saint in politics, he's like the boy who cried wolf. The one critical time he's clean, nobody will believe him.

But when Colson learned that he, too, was under federal investigation, he instead invoked his Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination in a private appearance before the committee last Wednesday. He's now not expected to be called in public session.

The dropping of Colson from the public list of witnesses will deprive the committee—and the nationwide television audience—of a rare look at a man who through the Nixon years has been among the most feared and disliked by Nixon foes, and the most influential politically within the administration.

Until Watergate began closing in on him, Colson was flying high in the lucrative world of Washington lawyering, cashing in on two things: his reputation as a tough guy who got things done, and on his reputed continuing access to the President.

"Sure, Chuck's doing all right," one of his inside admirers said then. "He's a can-do guy. And all those stories about him still meeting with the President and talking to him. Whether they're true or not, they help. Hard-headed businessmen say to themselves, 'By God, he's still in there.'"

Those were the days, before the feds put Colson on their list, when he was still on the town, one of the few old White House hands who still showed his face at Sans Souci, the old lunch-

Colson Finds Career on the Line

eon hangout of administration bigwigs; the days when insiders were saying he would not be touched "because Chuck's too smart."

But now, suddenly, both Colson's personal and his business careers are on the line. Even in the event he escapes indictment in the Watergate and associated matters, his law practice appears to be in ruins. His partner, David Shapiro, candidly acknowledges that the firm, renamed Colson and Shapiro when Colson joined it last spring, has been shaken and diverted by preoccupation with Watergate.

When Colson entered the firm, he brought the Teamsters union's legal business with him (a year after having successfully recommended that President Nixon commute the prison sentence of former Teamster president James R. Hoffa). But his recent troubles almost certainly will take much of the power out of his magnet as an attractor of clients.

Hunt's testimony yesterday that Colson was in on the general 1972 campaign intelligence plan was the most specific, but not the first, allegation before the Watergate committee that he was involved in campaign hanky-panky.

Colson's name came up teasingly in July when Gordon Strachan, the young loyalist lieutenant of former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, mentioned Colson's "Office of Dirty Tricks."

Sen. Joseph M. Montoya (D-N.M.) inquired whether Haldeman knew of the Colson operation in 1972, and Strachan said:

"Well, that was a subject of some concern. Every once in a while Mr. Haldeman would ask me, 'Well, what do you know about what Mr. Colson is doing?' and I would tell him, 'I am sorry, I really don't know very much about what Mr. Colson is doing.'

"And he would turn to Mr. (Lawrence) Higby (another Haldeman aide) and say, 'Do you know anything about what Mr. Colson was doing?' And it was sort of a joke. Nobody really knew what Mr. Colson was doing."

The caucus room audience laughed. But the dialogue in a sense supported the picture that Colson obviously has hoped to paint of himself in the Nixon White House of 1972—a loner, out of communication with those hatching hare-brained schemes or trying to cover them up.

On the basis of others' testimony, there appear to be at least three basic questions involving Colson that beg for the first-person testimony.

The first is, did Colson know in advance about the plan of G. Gordon Liddy for political espionage including illegal break-ins, wiretapping and burglary? Hunt now says he did.

Dean testified he had been told that Colson phoned Jeb Magruder, deputy director of the Committee for the Re-election of the President, prior to approval of the Liddy plan urging that it be expedited.

Magruder himself told the committee that Colson in the same call asked "would we get off the stick and get the budget approved for Mr. Liddy's plans." But Magruder added that Colson "did not mention, I want to make clear, anything relating to wiretapping or espionage at that time."

Because Colson had referred Hunt, his friend and eventually one of the convicted Watergate conspirators, to Magruder for employment, Magruder said, he "did make the assumption" Colson knew what was in the plan.

"... But he did not say that he did know, he did not say that he was aware of the specifics and never did say that to me at any time," Magruder said.

Colson himself has acknowledged

that he made the call when Hunt and Liddy came to his office and expressed concern that their political intelligence and security plan had not been approved. But he has said he did not know what it included, and urged only that they be given a hearing on it.

The second question, and the one that touches most closely on whether President Nixon was involved in the Watergate coverup, is whether he ever sought or discussed executive clemency for Hunt with Mr. Nixon. Hunt said yesterday he never requested clemency.

Dean has testified that Colson told him he had personally discussed the matter with the President last Jan. 5, and then on March 13 and again on April 15 Mr. Nixon referred to such discussions with Colson.

In a meeting with the President in his Executive Office Building suite on April 15, Dean said, Mr. Nixon moved to a corner and said in a "barely audible tone (that) he was probably foolish to have discussed" the Hunt matter with Colson.

The third question is whether Colson knew in advance that the office of Dr. Daniel J. Ellsberg's psychiatrist was to be broken into and whether he had any role in that incident.

Documents submitted to the committee by David R. Young, formerly of the White House staff, indicated a concerted effort was planned to discredit Ellsberg, and that Colson was asked by White House aide John D. Ehrlichman to develop "a game plan as to how and when" material from the psychiatrist's office should be used.

There are other questions in which Colson figures prominently:

- Did he ever ask White House agent-investigator John J. Caulfield to burglarize and then firebomb the Brookings Institution in pursuit of information on Dr. Ellsberg? The allegation has been made to Watergate investigators and Colson has called it "ludicrous... a flight of fantasy."

- Did he order Hunt to Milwaukee shortly after the 1972 assassination attempt on Gov. George C. Wallace (D-Ala.) to break into the apartment of the suspect, Arthur H. Bremer, in search of left-wing political material? Hunt has so informed Senate investigators, but Colson has called the

charge "absolutely untrue" and "utterly preposterous."

- Did he order a group headed by convicted Watergate conspirator Bernard L. Barker to attack demonstrators and Ellsberg, a speaker at the protest, outside the Capitol on May 4, 1972, when the body of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was lying in state? Colson has denied it.

- Did he order Hunt to forge a State Department cable to link the late President John F. Kennedy with the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963? Colson has denied it, but has admitted he ordered Hunt to read some bona fide cables to a reporter.

- Did he draw up a list of political enemies of the Nixon administration, as supplied to the committee by Dean? Colson has said the list was not his, and was merely one of persons who should be excluded from social events at the White House.

- What was his role in the writing and publication of an apparently illegal newspaper advertisement on May 17, 1972 purporting to reflect independent public support for Mr. Nixon's decision to mine Haiphong harbor? Officials of The November Group, the Nixon campaign in-house advertising agency, have said it was done at Colson's insistence.

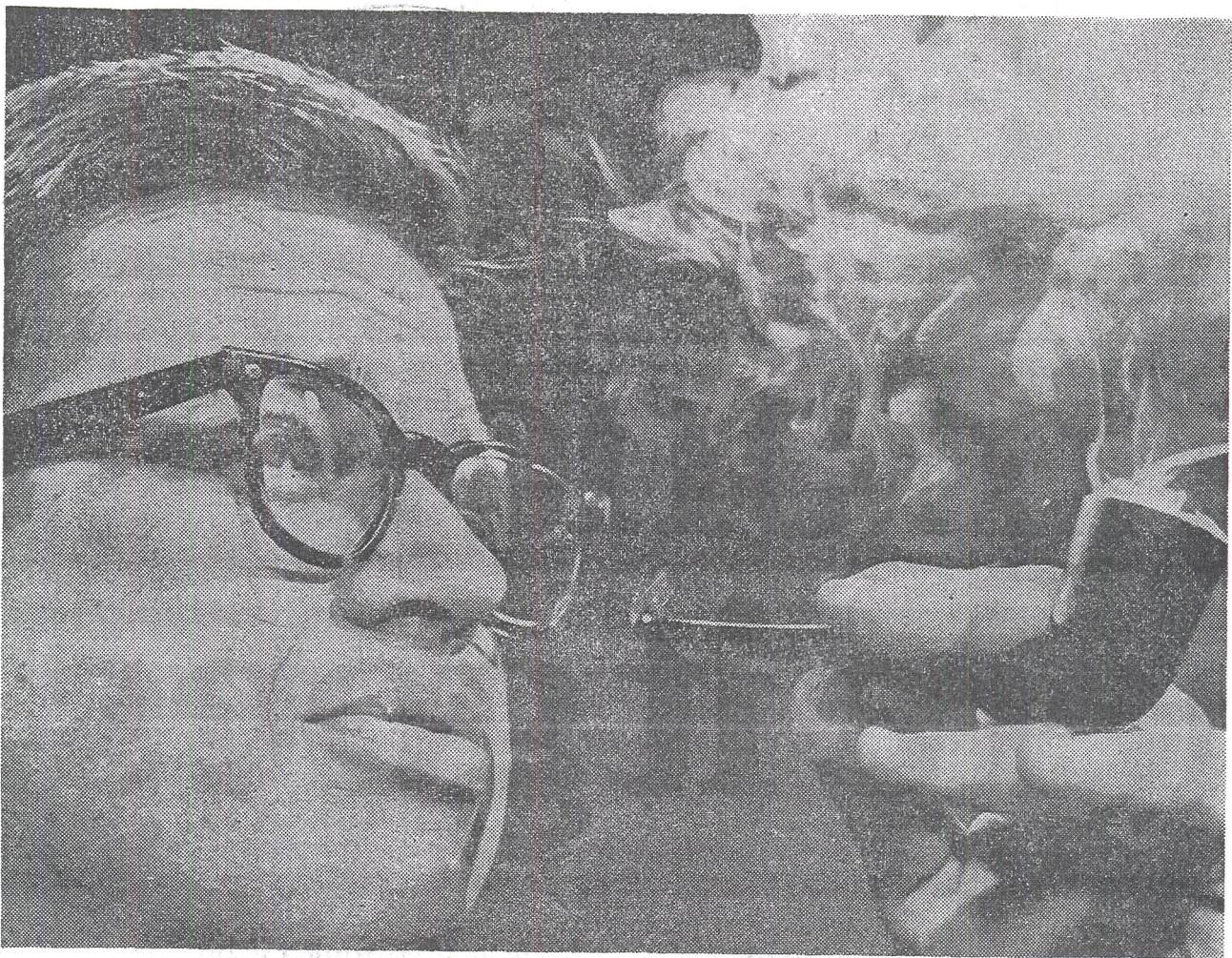
- Was there really an "Office of Dirty Tricks" as Strachan testified, and if so what did it do?

- What were the "black" projects Watergate witness Frederick C. LaRue said Colson was involved in?

- Did he pressure the Internal Revenue Service to undertake audits of income tax returns filed by "enemies" of the Nixon administration?

- How did the "attack group" under Colson's direction function in the 1972 campaign, and did it receive political intelligence from spies in the opposition Democratic camp? The "attack group" met almost daily at 9:15 a.m. in Colson's office and considered ways to keep the opposition candidate, Sen. George S. McGovern, on the defensive.

The list of questions could go on, with the only limitation being how far back the senators want to go into Colson's political career. That career has been marked at nearly every step by controversy and tales of tough practical politics by Colson.



Associated Press

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In mobilizing the White House troops for Mr. Nixon's re-election home stretch drive last year, Colson wrote a staff memo saying he wanted it known it was absolutely true that he once had said, "I would walk over my grandmother if necessary" to win. Few who have had anything to do with him in politics, friend or foe, doubt it, and in one sense he is carrying that cross now.

Since joining the White House in November, 1969, where he arrived by way of the staff of Sen. Leverett P. Saltonstall (R-Mass.), the Nixon campaign of 1968 and private law practice here, Colson has "played hard ball," in the words of a friendly associate.

It is a game he apparently started playing long before he entered the White House. After graduating from Brown (he says he turned down a full scholarship to Harvard) in 1953, he was commissioned in the Marine Corps and at 22 years of age was its youngest company commander. After a short stint in the Navy Department he joined Saltonstall's staff and at 27 was the youngest administrative assistant on the Senate side, attending Georgetown Law School at night and graduat-

ing in 1958.

In 1960, he ran Saltonstall's re-election campaign and in the process provided a preview of things to come. He got eight prominent Irish supporters of John F. Kennedy to send a letter to 400,000 Irish Democrats in Massachusetts urging them to vote a split Kennedy-Saltonstall ballot. In the face of a Kennedy landslide, Saltonstall won by 300,000 votes.

Right after that election, Colson started a law firm with Charles Morin, a firm that later became Gadsby and Hannah. It was Morin who recruited Colson into his present firm—and caused both Colson and the firm some recent embarrassment.

Morin was the author of the memo that suggested to Colson that White House pressure be applied to gain a seat on the Securities and Exchange Commission for a friend of the firm. In testimony before a House subcommittee, Colson denied any pressure ever was applied.

Colson had met Richard Nixon on Capitol Hill when Mr. Nixon was vice president, and was a fan from the start. He urged him to seek the Presidency in 1964 and worked for him in 1968.

At the White House, Colson's job

was to look after the concerns of various special-interest groups, including labor, business, religious, ethnic groups, veterans and the like. The job had politics coursing through it, and Colson used the mandate to range wide and free through the Nixon administration.

On the testimony of many former associates, Colson was a blur of initiative, pushing and shoving with proposals and ideas both inside the White House and around the federal bureaucracy, often without invitation.

Officials in any department or agency were likely as not to receive a phone call or a memo from Colson asking or telling them to do something. He once called United Nations Ambassador George Bush suggesting he make some political remarks, which Bush declined to do.

At the Republican National Committee, the phone often rang with Colson on the other end, to the infuriation of Chairman Rogers C. B. Morton, now Secretary of Interior, and then of Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.), who replaced Morton at the committee after the 1970 elections.

In those elections, Colson nailed down his growing reputation as the administration's hatchet man by zeroing

in, successfully, on then Sen. Joseph D. Tydings (D-Md.).

Colson put reporter William Lambert of Life magazine in contact with a State Department official who had met with Tydings about a \$7 million government loan benefitting a firm in which Tydings had a financial interest. In addition, Tydings was one of eight targets of newspaper ads traced to Col-

son's office accusing Democrats seeking re-election with encouraging violence and radicalism.

According to James Allison, former deputy chairman to Morton, Tydings' Republican opponent Glenn Beall called Morton expressing concern that the anti-Tydings' ad was too strong.

Allison got a copy, agreed, and called Colson to have it stopped. Colson, Allison says, said he would talk to Beall and then called back to say he had Beall's approval, when in fact he had not talked to Beall. Beall says now he never approved the ad.

At the committee at that time, John Lofton, editor of the weekly RNC publication Monday, noted for rough attacks on Democrats, was considered a Colson man. Between Lofton and unwanted suggestions from Colson, Allison says, he and Morton had their hands full.

Dole, himself known as a hard-ball player, says of Colson: "Politics is a tough business, but he got a little too rough. He'd send stuff to the RNC where people knew I wouldn't stand for it. I'd look at it and ignore it. With him, everything was always a bombshell."

Within the White House, according to one key figure of the first Nixon term, Colson "worked his way up getting brownie points at others' expense—a self-starter who had no hesitation moving in on others' areas of responsibility."

From his special-interests domain, for example, he took over the communications division originally run by former Nixon press secretary Herbert G. Klein, functioning in one insider's words as "the political propagandist" while Klein occupied himself huckstering Nixon and his programs around the country.

"He had the reputation," this old colleague says, "that if Chuck sent you an idea, look at it twice." Even Murray Chotiner, the old Nixon political ad-

viser who himself had a hatchet-man reputation, "felt Chuck came on too strong," this source says.

Such comments are easily unearthed wherever the rangy, pipe-smoking Colson ventured in his White House days. Yet along with them are tributes, sometimes grudging, to Colson's dedication, determination and imagination.

Those close to Colson insist, beyond that, that the man is, deep down, a softie. Shapiro, his law partner, received a letter from a relative after Colson joined the firm, inquiring how Shapiro could work with a man of Colson's reputation.

Colson shortly before had taken a lie-detector test on whether he was telling the truth when he said he was not involved in the Watergate break-in and had no prior knowledge of it. The results then had been released to the press. Of that episode, Shapiro wrote back:

"Picture the following scene: 57th Street and Sixth Avenue (in New York) on April 4 in the middle of a blinding rainstorm. Colson had just finished taking his lie-detector examination and had to rush off to catch a train to make a meeting in Washington. I waited behind for the results.

"When I got them, I rushed to the elevator, rode downstairs and managed to catch him as he was getting into a cab. I hollered, 'Chuck, Chuck, you've passed, you've passed!'

"He looked at me for a moment and started to cry. 'After listening to all those lies about myself for these past eight months,' he said, 'I was beginning to believe I could never prove my innocence. Now I know what those poor bastards must have felt during the McCarthy days.

"So help me, if I can ever help some poor son of a bitch who finds himself in the same spot I'm in, I'm going to devote my life to it.' I put my arms around him in the rain."

That is a portrait that does not square with the stereotype of the man, which casts him more as a political Attila the Hun. But from all accounts, the image of Chuck Colson is the least of his problems now.