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# Honk if You Love Nixon

**BORN AGAIN.** By Charles W. Colson. Chosen Books. 352 pp. \$8.95

By COLMAN McCARTHY

TO HEAR CHUCK COLSON tell it, the period leading to the fall of the Nixon regime saw Washington all but transfigured into the New Jerusalem. In the White House basement, a prayer group met biweekly. The Pentagon had a "meditation room," regularly filled with military men sharing the Word. Praying senators, congressmen and judges had their crash pads of fellowship. As for Richard Nixon, he was shouting Hallelujah, too. During a midnight phone call to discuss such worldly and passing matters as how impeachment would wipe him out financially, and ways of handling the Ervin committee's demand for 600 tapes, Nixon told Colson: "You know, Chuck, I get on my knees every night and pray to God."

Edified beyond belief by what he calls this "underground movement," Colson by January 1974 had already come out of the catacombs with his new faith in Jesus. Legal procedures were already in motion that would send him to prison for seven months, but by now Colson was serene, dependent on the Lord because he was "a baby Christian."

Out of the mouth of this particular babe has come a narrative of his conversion. However much he may have turned from being the mean-minded underling that endeared him so much to the prayerful Nixon, Colson was blocked from the beginning from writing anything but a book of candlestick prose dripping with the wax of piety.

In this century, three of the greatest converts—Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Raissa Maritain—waited long periods before daring to share their interior struggles and beliefs with the public. Their stories were powerful accounts of spiritual odysseys, meaning that a long journey had been made. But here is Colson, announc-

ing that he is a baby Christian; but instead of learning how to crawl, he is marching along to a seasoned strut of belief.

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It is too much to take. The conversion of just yesterday assures today's bad book. This is true here, because the text doesn't meet the major requirement of a book: to inform the reader of what he doesn't know. The public has already been told by Colson—in newspaper and television interviews—that he was knocked off his White House horse. The problem with this book is not whether the conversion is authentic but whether it will stick. Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* is a masterpiece of spirituality because it was published after a decade of intense commitment to religion. Dorothy Day spent 20 years living among the poor before she wrote *The Long Loneliness*. These accounts won respect because the original theatricality of finding the faith was followed by the long and painful drama of keeping it.

Colson excuses himself from the traditional silence of other Christian apologists explaining that "I felt God's hands on my shoulder. 'Put aside all their theories for now,' I seemed to hear. 'Tell the story of one life — yours.'" Colson is comfortable rushing up to the front of the tent—there to find Jesus, and a publisher, too—because he appears to think that any book spreading the Message has automatic value. After Colson's indictment, a chum at a place called the "Fellowship House," told him to cheer up: "Brother look at it this way. It's good. We've got a Christian in the news."

It isn't that he has turned from Nixon, the friend who justified the means. In recalling that his president celebrated Christmas by bombing Hanoi for 12 days, Colson hails it as "a gritty stand." If Colson can praise Nixon's Christian ways with the civilians of Hanoi, he is moved also by Nixon's manner around the Oval Office. The president "could never bring himself to point out to a secretary her misspellings. I once saw him redictate a letter to eliminate a troublesome word, rather than embarrass the secretary."

Colson is intent on letting the skeptics know that his conversion is not hoked up. "The old ego and pride die hard," he says. But after coming back from the scene of his conversion—Boothbay Harbor, Maine—Colson begins noting the new man taking over. He was being chauffeured into town one morning: "When the traffic closed in, bumper to bumper, I managed to get all the way through the Washington Post without a single profane outburst. If en-

joying the green trees and the skyline was unusual for me, not crumpling the Post in an angrily clenched fist at least once really was a change."

If Colson's prose style had any pulse to it, or if his work in government had any social value, the account of his conversion might have had some minor memoir value. As an author presuming to write personally about the spiritual life, Colson has wasted his time. He needs to spend time living his beliefs rather than talking of them. The public is patient and has other things to do—such as getting over Watergate—while Colson keeps his jumper cables attached to his new battery.