

Crime and Contrition

*Or, How Do You Prove You're Sincerely Sorry
When the Liberals Now Thirst for Revenge?*

By William Greider

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Drawings by John Twohey—The Washington Post

ONE BY ONE, as they come to justice, the President's men offer their own confessions of the spirit. Some awkward, some eloquent, together their voices form a litany of contrition which deepens the Watergate drama and enriches its lessons.

"I was wrong. I'm sorry." Those are the hardest words of all, especially for the proud and powerful, and yet we are hearing them now from the very men who valued their own toughness so much in the White House, who let political righteousness lead them into crime.

Contemporary Washington, let it be said, does not seem much impressed. In another season, a gentler time when politics was less hostile and suspicious, the general reaction might have been more sympathetic.

But these are the folks who brought us burglary and perjury, obstruction of justice and illegal wiretapping. They are so closely associated with White House deceit and manipulation that many people are conditioned to disbelieve, to see malign motives in the simplest expressions of *mea culpa*. Perhaps future generations will be able to read these testimonials less skeptically and see what an extraordinary collection it is becoming.

DWIGHT CHAPIN is appealing his perjury conviction. Nonetheless, he felt the need to write a letter of apology to Sen. Hubert Humphrey for the "dirty tricks" which his operatives played on the senator's 1972 campaign. "It is recognized," he wrote, "how very wrong I was and that my action jeopardized a system I love and respect." Chapin's chief saboteur, Donald Segretti, stopped by to apologize in person.

Bart Porter, whose prejury helped insulate the Watergate conspiracy from exposure, decided belatedly to tell the truth.

"It sounds corny," Porter said after telling all to the prosecutors, "but I think it was the right thing to do. I think we should let the truth come out and let the American people judge. It would be the greatest therapy for the country. Lord knows, we preach it to our children, we should practice it."

Egil Krogh, a devout Christian Scientist who let his idea of "national security" serve as an excuse for a burglary, told the judge how wrong that was.

"As official government action, as I have come to see it, it struck at the heart of what this government was established to protect, which is the individual rights of each individual," Krogh said. "It was never my intention, while serving in the White House or while serving as the director of the Special Investigations Unit, for that to take place. But it did."

Krogh felt, as other defendants evidently have, that the dread and fear dropped away when he entered his plea of guilty, replaced by a sense of peace and calm.

"The reason I pleaded guilty," he concluded, "was that I no longer wanted to be associated with that basic violation of a principle of individual rights. In addition to that, I pled guilty because that conduct deserved to be convicted—it needed to be convicted!"

Jeb Magruder, the wheeler-dealer campaign manager who authorized the Watergate bugging, explained the causes of that epic scandal with great clarity in his new book, "An American Life." It was a combination of the overwhelming power accumulated in the White House,

the personal insecurities of Richard Nixon, and the warped judgment of the men who served him.

"Finally, Watergate happened because some of us who served the President served him poorly," Magruder wrote. "It is not enough to blame the atmosphere he created. No one forced me or the others to break the law. Instead, as I have tried to show, we ignored our better judgment out of a combination of ambition, loyalty and partisan passion. We could have objected to what was happening or resigned in protest. Instead, we convinced ourselves that wrong was right and plunged ahead."

And, most recently there was Charles W. Colson, the ultimate tough guy in Richard Nixon's White House, the political schemer who professed a new relationship with Christ. Colson came forward last week to speak of civil liberties and plead guilty to violating the rights of Daniel Ellsberg.

"I regret what I attempted to do to Dr. Ellsberg," Colson said. "It is wrong whether it is done to him, to me or to others. Not only is it morally right therefore that I plead to this charge but I fervently hope that this case will serve to prevent similar abuses in the future. Government officials must know that under our system of government, every individual—whether a potential or actual criminal defendant—is entitled to a fair trial and that anyone who attempts to interfere with that right must suffer the consequences."

Colson's formal statement avoided any allusions to the Divinity, but his decision to accept legal guilt without a trial—which means prison and probably disbarment as a lawyer—related directly to the turmoil of his spirit. After months of insisting on innocence, Colson first raised the idea of a guilty plea with his prayer group—Sen. Harold Hughes, Rep. Albert Quie and the other "Christian brothers" who have prayed with him in his travail. Seven days later, to the consternation of lawyers and reporters, Chuck Colson was in court surrendering.

WHAT ARE WE to make of it? Around Washington, the common reaction to these personal testaments of guilt could probably be summed up in the offhand remark attributed to White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler when someone was urging President Nixon to come forward, back in the summer of 1973, and accept full blame for Watergate.

Ziegler rejected the suggestion, "Contrition is bullshit," he said. That White House cynicism, it seems, has become the prevailing sentiment on the other side. When Colson's new-found religious light was first revealed, skeptical wisecracks flourished. "I'd Walk Over My Grandmother for Christ," an apocryphal bumper sticker proclaimed, parodying Colson's own statement of ruthless devotion to Richard Nixon.

The spectacle of contrition has, in fact, created a bizarre sort of self-parody in Washington, a reversal of roles which seems to mock both sides. The White House men, feared and hated because they trampled on the Bill of Rights, are now espousing the very values which they once despised, humane conceptions of law and individual liberty, notions of crime and punishment and the decent limits of political power, ideas which some would call liberal. The reaction is ho-hum.

A lot of liberals, meanwhile, have become law-and-order zealots, imitating unconsciously the hard-nosed ethos which they once thought so frightening in Mr. Nixon's Department of Justice. People who once argued that conspiracy indict-



ments are dangerous to civil rights now spin webs for the Watergate conspiracy case. Reformers who wanted to empty the prisons now grumble about short sentences for the Watergate gang.

Sen. Hughes, who got a lot of troubled questions from his liberal friends when he put an arm around Colson, is bothered by the feelings directed toward these men.

"There was a great threat to our country," Hughes says, "maybe the greatest threat we have ever known, and these men were involved. It's ongoing and unresolved and, as a result, there's a lot of bitterness and fear. But there's also a lot of revenge in people's hearts. Some of these people want to see 100-year prison sentences for these men. They've forgotten the ethical values they espoused."

STILL, PEOPLE WILL ASK: Are they sincere? After all, they came to their truth-telling and self-realization only after they were in legal trouble, none before. And it all sounds so self-serving. I learned my lesson, your honor, just let me go home to my wife and children.

The question of sincerity, however, is impossible to answer and maybe it is the wrong question. It is a little like asking whether the leaves are sincere when they change to red and gold in the autumn. The crucible of Watergate changed these men in powerful ways, which does not make them saintly, but does provide an extraordinary public drama.

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They were all super-doers, remember, bright and ambitious and aggressive, persuaded by their own successes, by the milestones of their lives, that they could do just about anything—and some of them did. So the question has to be asked in their terms: What did they think of themselves 18 months ago and how do they see themselves today? What is Jeb Magruder saying now about his own limitations and blind spots, compared to the sunny ambitions which guided him into deep trouble?

In that perspective, the contrast is staggering. I'm not Superman, after all. They are all saying that, in one way or another. I'm fallible and vulnerable and, yes, sometimes wicked, no less than those "enemies" I once despised. It is a homely lesson, as old as mankind, but remarkably relevant to the American spirit in 1974.

It is not a change of political values, but of one's own sense of self. Nobody illustrated this more dramatically than Colson, whose mean-spirited politics was legendary. Before leaving the White House, Colson offered an interviewer this immodest appraisal of himself:

"I've always known all my life exactly what I wanted to accomplish—just about everything I've ever set out to do, I've done."

After his conversion, Colson explained himself in these terms:

"Arrogance was the great sin of Watergate, the great sin of a lot of us . . . I think the great sin all of us are guilty of, and it's the hardest one to recognize, is admiring our own ego, our own selves, really believing that we as individuals have capacities that we somehow develop in ourselves.

"We really are children of God in the sense that we can really do only what God gives us the capacity to do. It is His power, not ours, that determines our destiny.

That is a long trip for any man to take, especially in such a short time, especially a man like Colson. Even skeptics who dismiss Colson's spiritual professions can appreciate how hard it must be for the old Colson to say such things, even if they still believe the new Colson is a sham.

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THE PROBLEM IS that, once you begin to look upon these players as smaller creatures of a human scale rather than larger-than-life figures of evil, it becomes a little harder to summon up righteous zeal for their scalps. It also introduces more complicated questions about why they did what they did.

Patrick Anderson, the novelist and liberal journalist who helped Jeb Magruder write his book, described how his own feelings changed as he began to look at Watergate from Magruder's perspective.

"Last spring, he was just a guy on the TV screen and my feeling was—let them get theirs," Anderson recalled. "Then I came to know the guy and his family and it was impossible not to feel sorry for him."

Magruder's book, for instance, conveys an insider's account of the arrogance and moral insensitivity which prevailed among the Nixon men. But it also explains convincingly how a young scambler like Magruder could be oblivious to those things, convinced that he was fulfilling all of the goals and values which America holds dear.

"I never doubted Colson's sincerity," Magruder wrote. "It would be difficult to pass through something like Watergate without experiencing basic changes in your values. In my own case, I found I had lost the ambition that once drove me to push myself so hard in the corporate and political worlds. I no longer care about being the president of a corporation or making \$100,000 a year. For 15 years I fought to reach the pinnacle of our society, I got very close to the top and I found that it wasn't all it was supposed to be."

Among other things, Magruder relates candidly how he did not really feel the wrongness of wiretapping until that moment when he discovered that his former White House friends were secretly recording his conversations. "People are deluding themselves," Patrick Anderson remarked, "if they want to think Jeb is an evil guy or that Chapin is an evil guy. I think they're very average people who reflect the norms of our culture and very few can afford to be self-righteous about what they did."

With bittersweet reflection, Magruder concludes that he might never have learned those lessons about himself with-

out Watergate. Chuck Colson, it seems, is still learning about himself.

When news of his religious conversion first surfaced last December, Colson spoke contritely of his past egotism, but he insisted on his own legal innocence. If he is sincere, skeptics asked, why doesn't he repent by pleading guilty? Now that he has done that, their test of sincerity has changed: Will he testify against the President?

Sen. Mark Hatfield, the Oregon Republican who is also a lay religious leader, was among the skeptical, though he is now convinced Colson's conversion is genuine. "My first reaction was, well, how's it going to help him in his present dilemma?" Hatfield explained. "Make God an ally in a time of need. It kind of turned me off."

Sen. Hughes, fending off critical questions, insisted that Colson's spiritual grace was real, but that he must still work his way through the tough legal and ethical questions which surrounded his past behavior, the conflicting loyalties to family and self, old friends and criminal charges. "A baby in Christ," Hughes called him. The phrase jarred anyone who associates Colson's cherubic grin with political dirty tricks, but it may have accurately portrayed Colson's state of mind.

"If a person comes to Christ," Hughes said, "it doesn't mean he suddenly has omniscience about everything in human existence. It means he sees that Christ is the way and the Holy Spirit can lead him to a Christ-like life, but that doesn't mean that every fault and sin falls away. Usually, it means a long struggle of reading and praying."

In addition to prayer, perhaps two events helped propel Colson toward his *mea culpa*. One was his appearance on CBS television two weeks ago when he faced Mike Wallace's sharp questioning. "It forced Chuck to focus in on his inability to be completely open with himself," Hughes said. "It told him that he had to do something to be completely open." The other was the release of the White House transcripts which may have shown Colson that President Nixon and his aides talked about the old Colson with the same mixture of suspicion and fear that his outside critics used. It must have shaken him.

In any case, what seems clear is that the truth did not dawn instantly on this man in trouble. It rarely does. Instead, it unfolds slowly and painfully, a step at a time, as the individual tries to adjust his own notion of reality, his own self-image, with the evil which others see in his behavior. For Colson, the struggle is far from over.

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BUT PEOPLE SELDOM deal comfortably with their own misdeeds, whether it is scandalous law-breaking or minor indiscretions. By coincidence, there is a reverse example of this in the story told by two major figures on the other side of the Watergate story—Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward.

In their new book, "All the President's Men," the two investigative reporters describe their own small dilemma of conscience. In the fall of 1972, desperate to develop new leads, the two reporters attempted to interview members of the Watergate grand jury. They thought it was technically legal—but down deep they knew it was wrong. With remarkable candor and rich irony, the two reporters describe their own queasy feeling as they sat in Judge Sirica's courtroom, hoping their deed would not be disclosed by the judge:

"They felt lousy. They had not broken the law when they visited the grand jurors, that much seemed certain. But they had sailed around it and exposed others to danger. They had chosen expediency over principle and, caught in the act, their role had been covered up."

In the human dimension, those Watergate defendants may perhaps create their own peculiar legacy as actors in the morality play called Watergate. "I hope that we can find love in all this, instead of hatred," said Harold Hughes, "that we can see the hope in what we're going through."

Mark Hatfield, who was once skeptical, sees the personal tragedies as dramatic statements on human and spiritual values, powerful enough to affect millions of lives.

"Out of the lives of some of these men, out of a Colson or a Magruder, there might be more impact than a Pope Paul or a Billy Graham, as strange as that seems," Hatfield mused.

Strange indeed—but then Watergate has been a strange moment for America.