

MARY MCGROBY

Colson Did It the Hard Way

By Mary McGroby

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The White House insiders always said he was too smart to get caught. But Chuck Colson fooled them all. He turned himself in and got the heaviest Watergate sentence of anybody since the burglars.

Colson is perhaps the ablest and certainly the most complex of the President's men to go off to prison.

He was born of a good Yankee family, brought up in the puritan ethic, educated at the best schools. But his ambition was, it seems, to be the White House gargoye, turning an ugly grimace to the outside world.

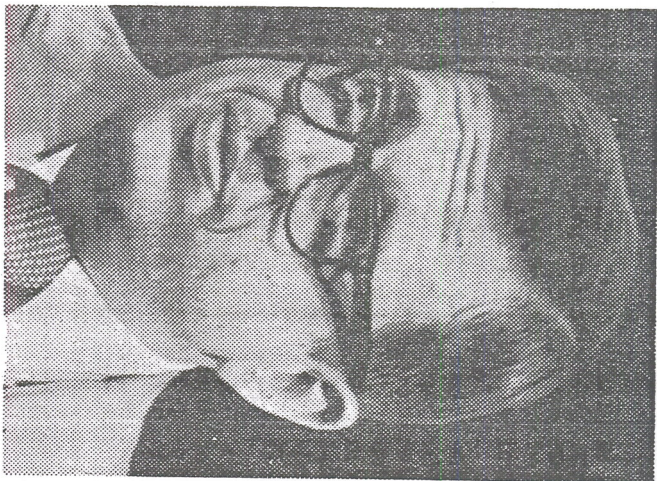
HE NURTURED his reputation as the meanest, most unscrupulous of Richard Nixon's loyalists. It was a fast league, but he was No. 1. Whenever anything especially repulsive turned up, he was automatically suspect as the source.

"Colson would do anything," an admiring leader said of him on Sept. 15, 1973.

His behavior at his sentencing had the dignity and restraint that his White House career lacked. He justified his crimes by his concern for the men in Vietnam. He had felt self-pity for his sacrifice and self-importance. He had, he said, lost his "perspective." The evidence is that he never had much. When he served Sen. Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts, he was into ethnic mischief and dirty tricks. Somebody up there always intervened. At the White House he was urged on.

When he left the seat of power and pollution, he sought other gods and found Christ. His prayer group, led by Sen. Harold Hughes, D-Iowa, sat in the front row in the courtroom to look on with tearful pride at a penitent brother. Special Watergate Prosecutor Leon Jaworski may think he brought Colson to his knees. The prayer group members believe they did it.

ALMOST CASUALLY, Colson observed that the President had put him up to doing what he tried to do to Daniel Ellsberg. He was not shifting the responsibility to his



CHARLES W. COLSON

former idol. He thought he was doing right. So did Richard Nixon.

David Shapiro, Colson's old friend and counsel, gave what obviously would have been his closing argument to the jury had Colson chosen to go to trial. Colson, he said, had been the victim of press smears, charged unfairly with evil he had never done.

"Let us make no mistake here," he said, and indeed there was little chance of it except among the prayer group, "Colson is no St. Francis." But he begged the judge to "stand between the defendant and the mob."

Judge Gerhard Gesell was not moved. He noted that Colson is a lawyer, who had admitted guilt in obstruction of justice — an offense "of uttermost seriousness" by one holding "a position of high public trust."

The judge observed the discrepancy

between the public Colson and the private one. Many letters had come to the probation officer and they spoke of "instances of useful public service, and often compassion for others in trouble, and qualities that their prayers for a six-month sentence, his close friends . . ."

ONE WRITER was former Atty. Gen. Elliot Richardson, who years ago worked with Colson in Saltonstall's office and was so impressed with his drive and intelligence that he tried in 1969 to hire him as congressional liaison for the State Department. Richardson noted that Colson is a "total immersion" type whose conversion is believable.

When the ceremony was over, some of Colson's new colleagues in Christ mourned that their prayers for a six-month sentence, such as Egil Krogh's, had not been answered. "But," one of them added hastily after making an uncharitable comparison with Richard Kleindienst's walk, "it is the Lord's will."

Colson left with his wife and Hughes. He left a mystery behind him. Why had he done the most bizarre thing of all and confessed? One explanation is that what the prayer group had begun was advanced by the transcripts. Colson learned in the President's own words that despite his dangerous and even fatal exertions, he had not been accepted in the inner circle. The President called him "a trigger man" and a "name-dropper."

He was the outsider, his fanatical loyalty repaid with disdain — and dread.

But he's going off to jail and if he shows half the zeal in God's service that he did in Richard Nixon's, the forces of the light have acquired a real flame-thrower. And if, as a witness before the House Judiciary Committee, he is forthcoming and as knowledgeable as he always pretended to be, he may realize his new ambition to fulfill "some larger purpose," as he called it.

Chuck Colson did it the hard way, but now he has convinced many skeptics that after the long scramble towards other heights, he is finally really climbing Jacob's ladder.