

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

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Colson's Watergate Confessions: Adding to the Chaos

Just as the Watergate prosecutors expected, Charles W. Colson's testimony since his guilty plea has provided more confusion than important new information without removing doubts about how valuable a witness he will prove in the long run.

His revelations of giving early Watergate warnings to President Nixon in January 1973 only slightly expand what he was saying publicly a year ago. His courtroom accusation that he committed his crime at Mr. Nixon's personal initiation is considered mainly an unsuccessful ploy for a reduced sentence and of no great impact on impeachment proceedings. Colson's bizarre charges tying the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to Watergate dust off old and almost entirely discredited accusations.

The confessions of Colson will provide some helpful new information to both special prosecutor Leon Jaworski and the House Judiciary Committee. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether that information is significant enough to warrant the committee, which is falling dangerously behind schedule in its impeachment proceedings, summoning Colson for protracted testimony as it now plans. Thus, even as he awaits federal prison, Chuck Colson remains controversial, disruptive and ambiguous, just as he was in the White House.

Indeed, public relations gimmickry by Colson and his lawyer, David Shapiro, prior to his sentencing last Fri-

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day are strikingly similar to Colson's White House operations. Although there is no reason to question the sincerity of Colson's religious conversion, there is reason to question how much it has changed the way he approaches a problem.

Shapiro contacted the Special Prosecutor to negotiate Colson's guilty plea before, not after, the widely publicized meeting of Colson's prayer group that allegedly led him to confess. Contrary to what Colson told the prayer group, he was never offered the option of pleading guilty to a single misdemeanor.

The outraged prosecutors blamed the crafty Shapiro for planting the misdemeanor story in the press, attempting to generate public opposition to a prison sentence on grounds that Colson had “voluntarily” pleaded guilty to a felony instead of a misdemeanor. The prosecutors came to regard Shapiro as the most annoyingly troublesome defense lawyer they have encountered.

Nor has Colson faintly resembled the prototype of the thoroughly cooperative prosecution witness, John W.

Dean III. Nor has he even approached the less knowledgeable Herbert Kalmbach, Mr. Nixon's former personal attorney, who has proved most helpful to the prosecutors.

The prosecutors have always viewed any possible information gleaned from Colson as an unexpected bonus. Expecting no great dividends, they have received none. That is particularly true of Colson's widely-publicized statement to the prosecutors and the House Committee that he warned President Nixon in January 1973 that John Mitchell and other re-election campaign officials probably were implicated in Watergate.

The stir caused by these statements underscores Washington's collective short memory. In June 1973, long before his religious conversion and while enthusiastically defending the President, Colson told essentially the same story publicly. Just as he tells investigators now, Colson then declared the President replied he would not challenge Mitchell's sworn testimony just because Colson suspected him. Net gain in information over one year: about zero.

Nor do lawyers put much value on Colson's courtroom charge that Mr. Nixon had “urged me to disseminate damaging information about Daniel Ellsberg,” causing Colson's obstruction of justice felony. To some lawyers, this was a ploy for the sympathy of Judge Gerhard Gesell, infuriated by the President's cavalier attitude toward court subpoenas. Unless bolstered by future testimony, it scarcely seems to affect the impeachment case.

Colson's accusations of sinister CIA participation in Watergate duplicate what he has privately told Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee, charges long since written off as groundless by a House investigation. But Colson's picture of the President as a terrified captive of the CIA could lead the impeachment proceedings into a trackless and time-consuming wasteland.

On balance, Colson's new portrait of Richard M. Nixon contrasts sharply with his former sycophancy toward the President. But unflattering portraits of Mr. Nixon abound, thanks to his own secret tape recordings, and are not grounds for impeachment.

Beyond the President, Colson is further confusing the chaotic Watergate picture by describing the CIA as an outlaw band of conspirators and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as a demonic evil influence on the President. Colson's new religiosity seems so deep that this quite probably is his sincere vision of the truth. But Colson's vision of the truth as Mr. Nixon's fanatically loyal lieutenant was uniquely distorted. What he says now should be judged accordingly.