

Colson Says He Thought He and

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 6 — Charles W. Colson, in a reflective interview about his days as a White House tough guy, has declared that he and other high-level aides were convinced that they were "above the law" while working for President Nixon.

Despite this, he insisted in a four-hour tape-recorded interview last week, "On balance, he's [President Nixon] done a tremendous job as President." And Mr. Colson said he had no "bombshells" in his files that would provide the House Judiciary Committee with more evidence in the current impeachment proceedings.

Mr. Colson, who has been ordered to begin a minimum one-year prison term on Monday, did characterize the President's release of the edited White House transcripts last May as "one of the poorest exercises of political judgment I've seen." Again he insisted, however, that contrary to many published reports, he was not distressed by the President's seemingly harsh appraisal of his character that emerged from those transcripts.

Mr. Colson also discussed his negative public and press image at length, and characterized himself as a victim of what he termed an "almost irreversible" set of mind among the press corps. If he did serve as a "hatchet man," he said, it was at the specific direction of the President.

At Ease

Mr. Colson, who was sentenced last month for his admitted involvement in obstruction of justice against Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, smoked constantly during the interview and shared a drink or two, but otherwise seemed relatively at ease.

He talked animatedly about what he called the misconception of authority and power among aides serving in the White House, and urged, as he has in other recent interviews, that consideration be given to setting up a permanent special prosecutor's office to avoid White House control of due process.

"Inside the White House," Mr. Colson said, "you had the feeling that well, the Congress, they can't get at us because this is a tug of war between Congress and the Presidency."

"The Justice Department, they work for us," he added, "so really you know that as long as you don't do something blatantly stupid nobody really is looking over your shoulder."

Ironically, the former Presidential aide said, the one internal source for ethical guidance inside the White House



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Charles W. Colson

was the former counsel, John W. Dean 3d, who emerged as the President's chief attacker.

"I think Dean tried very hard during the pre-Watergate period to see that everybody in the White House did toe the line," Mr. Colson said.

He recalled that Mr. Dean had written a stream of memos outlining the implications of Federal regulations on personal conduct. These concerned, for example, determination of whether White House aides should accept honorariums for speeches or articles.

But Mr. Dean's concern, he added, extended only to personal ethics.

"Keeping yourself personally clean is a fine idea," he said, "but you have a public trust in terms of what you do with the Government."

Following are excerpts from the questions and answers in the interview:

Q. There were an awful lot of stories in '71 about Colson, the hatchet man, saying he doesn't mind that it gets out that he's a tough guy, he's going to do things.

A. Did I mind it? No. The real answer to it, I think, is that I did not want to see the press.

So there was a practical reason in terms of the internal White House politics. I mean, if I started getting good press, I'd be suspect. Anybody in the White House staff—and this was a grave mistake that we, I think we made—anybody on the White House staff who got good press had to automatically be suspect because, a fortiori, you must have been cultivating the press, and to cultivate the press meant you had to give them something, and the whole attitude was don't give them a damned thing.

Now, once the hatchet man

story started to develop, there wasn't anything I could do to turn it off. I mean, I did make a couple of efforts at turning it off and didn't succeed. I asked Bill Safire, your colleague [at The New York Times] if he would help me once or twice in talking to reporters and say, "Yeah, this guy isn't the evil guy you think he is," and it did no good.

One of my beliefs is that once a mind sets in among the press corps, it's — you know, almost irreversible. It takes something, you know, cataclysmic to change it.

Q. What is the President talking about when he says in the White House tapes that Chuck would do anything. What does he mean? Is he saying that in fear of what you know?

A. No. The "Chuck would do anything remark" I heard him make dozens of times.

I had a very good relationship with him, but he used me in a way that he found effective, but it didn't enhance my popularity standing in the White House. When something was bogged down, he would always get me into it and say, "Now Chuck, I don't care"—one of his favorite expressions to me: "Break all the china in this place. I don't give a damn. I'll back you up. Just this get this done." And then bravely I would get it done.

Rivalry in Staff

And he would goad the other members of the staff with that. And that's why there were times of bitter and intense rivalry between me and John Ehrlichman and times of bitter feelings between Henry Kissinger and myself because the President would kind of set me up in the sense that he would give me something to do, I would get it done, and then he'd turn around and say, "See, Colson can do it, why can't the rest of you guys get off your duff?"

Q. Why did the President feel threatened by you on the transcripts? That is, do you have information that can impeach the President? Is there any great dark secret you know? Any great single crime that should make him impeachable? A. No.

Q. You've said that before.

A. The answer is, no. I consider him a personal friend. He's a man who has qualities that I enormously admire. He has deficiencies like you have and like I have. I think on balance, he's done a tremendous job as President.

Q. Let me ask you a basic question. Were you hurt by the tapes? There's been a lot

Colleagues Were 'Above the Law'

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JULY 7, 1974

of reports saying that you were hurt, your feelings were hurt.

A. No. Everybody who read those tapes came to me and said, "Gee, isn't that awful, those terrible things that were said about you." I wasn't hurt by them the way people think I should have been hurt by them, because I didn't look at them as being derogatory about me. What Haldeman said about me to the President is exactly what Haldeman said to my face.

Face to Face

The one thing about Bob Haldeman—and I think it's a very commendable characteristic—he never says anything behind your back he won't also say to your face.

The problem with those tapes—first of all, it was an asinine thing to ever make all the tapes. I mean put the equipment in place if you ever needed it and then activate it if you need it, maybe is defensive. To have it running continuously is wrong.

Secondly, once they were made and he had them, then to preserve them in the hope that they would somehow exonerate him, when obviously most of them were made without his ever being conscious of the fact they were being made. It was just bad judgment.

And, thirdly, once you had them — and then to make them all public the way they were made public, to me, was one of the poorest exercises of political judgment I've ever seen. I mean, it may have been necessary from the standpoint of showing that he technically wasn't involved in obstruction, as far as the lawyers would argue to the impeachment committee, but in terms of the impact on being able to rally public support, showing a man—any man, you, me, Nixon, De Gaulle—in his inner councils when he's beset with a problem and he's under pressure, is just to me the worst exercise of political judgment I've ever seen, to release them. I mean it had to have a bad impact. It's just incredible.

Q. Do you have any qualms about the morality, your morality in the White House?

A. Yes.

Q. In what sense?

A. Well, I think if I had, I think on many occasions when I put my own better instincts, thought that my own better instincts, to do things that I thought were expedient because they helped the President get re-elected.

Time and again I can re-

call thinking to myself, well, I'm not sure this is the right thing to do but we got to do it because this, you know, we'll get the election behind us. You lose sight of that, and you know I don't think I served the President well in the sense that in just the respect you're talking about, there were a lot of times when I should have stepped up and said, Well, we're not going to do this, this just isn't the right thing to do. It's very hard to account for the specifics but there were plenty of times when that happened.

You tend to become ethically insensitive when your goal—I don't want to use the old cliché that the ends justify the means, but when a goal becomes so important to you . . . You know, I was really totally convinced that the most important thing in this country was to get President Nixon re-elected. I would not run over my grandmother to do it except to the extent that that became a fun catch phrase, but there wasn't much else I wouldn't have done to get him re-elected and that obviously is not a healthy attitude.

No Checking on It

That you're above the law. I can say this in total conscience, I don't think I ever did anything at the time I thought was breaking the law. On the other hand, I knew no one was going to be checking on it.

Q. Did anybody ever write a memo once in a while saying Hey, you know, we better watch out about this, this could possibly be illegal?

A. Yes, John Dean was one guy that used to do that.

Q. That's a funny sentence.

A. It's true.

From time to time there would be memos from Dean saying that this is a new statute which precludes the following, everyone in the White House should be very careful to observe it. Most of those—I saw a lot of memos like that from Dean—and I think Dean tried very hard during the pre-Watergate period to see that everybody in the White House did toe the line and now I—there's a contradiction here, in the sense that I had a tremendous sensitivity to personal ethics.

In other words, I was invited on a boat trip one time and took it and then sent the guy a check for it. And I would get bottles of liquor at Christmas, I'd carry them over to the drivers in the White House garage. I took every penny I had and put it in a blind trust in the First National Bank of Washing-

ton. I wouldn't accept gifts; I'd return them if they were returnable or I'd give them to charity.

Remembering the Sherman Adams case, I figured as long as you keep yourself personally clean then you know you can't get in any trouble. That's a very naive viewpoint because keeping yourself personally clean is a fine idea but you have a public trust, and in terms of what you do with the Government that can be, as we now know, a greater disservice to the public than taking gratuities from time to time.

Problems of Press

Q. What do you think about the press? And don't be charitable.

A. I've never been charitable about the press. There's no sense beginning now. I think the press has a lot of problems. One of them being that the first 20 stories written about a public figure set the tone for the next 2,000 stories and it is almost impossible to reverse it. That's one problem.

The second point, I think that the press ought to have a healthy skepticism. But there is such a thing as an unhealthy skepticism and I think the press is a little too skeptical at times to accept things that maybe they ought to accept.

Q. What about investigative reporting?

A. I'm, as a matter of fact, pretty impressed by it. Good investigative reporting, I think it's great. I mean, I think it's kind of on a parallel with one of the only deterrents that you could have to guys in the White House who have unchecked power. You need a special prosecutor, but the other thing is the investigative reporter because . . . coming out may be the way that you expose wrongdoing. You know, if you are sure of your facts and you really check it out, I think investigative reporting is very good.

I'm not as upset about investigative reporting as I am by—and I'm not sure I'm really so upset about the bias in the press, which there is, obviously—everybody acknowledges that—as I am by two things: the mind set, which once it sets in you just can't change it and it becomes kind of unfashionable for a guy who was 'in' with the Washington press corps to write a nice thing about a guy who is perceived to be a bad guy.

You've got to live with your colleagues. And it's the same—it's exactly the same phenomena in the White House.