

Exclusive Argosy Interview

CHARLES COLSON

Charles Colson's explosive views on who set up Nixon for the Watergate fall, why J. Edgar Hoover blackmailed JFK, and how Howard Hughes controls the CIA



ILLUSTRATIONS: ROBERT GROSSMAN

By Dick Russell

He allegedly was known as the master of "dirty tricks," keeper of the White House "Enemies List" and toastmaster of the morning "Attack Group." John Dean nailed him, the CIA assailed him. Reviled by his foes and eventually by many of his alleged friends, Charles Colson—Special Counsel to the President—has seemingly claimed the dubious historical distinction of hatchet man for the Nixon Administration.

This interview, his first extensive on-the-record talk since gaining release from Federal prison on January 31, 1975, offers a vastly different perspective on Watergate—and a more frightening one. It probes Colson's analysis of the spidery relationship between the CIA and invisible billionaire Howard Hughes, a relationship which Colson and others have speculated may have been part of a plot to drive Richard Nixon from office. Specifically, it is Colson's look back at his true role in Watergate—what he actually did compared to what certain forces wanted the world to believe he did.

The Charles Colson of 1976 bears little resemblance to the political fighter who once was said to have vowed to "walk over my grandmother, if necessary," to get Nixon re-elected. Today, a cartoon about that famed remark hangs on the wall in his old Washington law office of Dickstein, Shapiro & Morin, where Colson occasionally still meets visitors. Today, the majority of his time is occupied with his prison ministry, where he is an associate of a non-denominational religious center called Fellowship House, and with his just-published autobiography, *Born Again*—an account for Chosen Books and Fleming H. Revell Publishers of his conversion to Christianity in the aftermath of Watergate.

At forty-four, the newly soft-spoken, almost gentle Chuck Colson looks upon the past as another lifetime. That lifetime began at twenty-two, when he became the youngest Company Commander in the Marine Corps. It also found him the youngest administrative aide in the Senate at twenty-seven, then a brilliant Boston lawyer and that city's "Outstanding Young Man" of 1960. It was during those formative years that Colson met the man who would wield the strongest influence on his life—Richard M. Nixon.

Long a Nixon admirer, after working to get him elected in 1968, Colson left his law practice to join the White House staff on November 1, 1969 as Special Counsel in charge of liaison with outside groups (which included everyone from hard hats to the League of Women Voters), a seemingly straightforward task. But by the time the 1972 campaign rolled around, Colson's responsibilities had broadened considerably. Considerably, and dangerously.

"Chuck finally became like the old gun-fighter," one associate says. "In the end, the killings 250 miles away got charged to him."

According to his accusers, these were some of the new roles assumed by Colson in

the days of tricks and poses:

- Ordering E. Howard Hunt, whom he brought to the White House as a consultant, to break into Arthur Bremer's apartment after the Wallace shooting; to forge State Department cables implicating John Kennedy in the murder of Vietnamese President Diem in 1963; to rush in disguise to the bedside of Dita Beard and silence her mutterings about the ITT scandal; to go to Chappaquiddick for some damaging new information about Ted Kennedy's 1969 accident.

- Organizer of paid public rallies in support of Nixon's mining of Haiphong harbor, of an attack on network news correspondents, of a proposed burglary and firebombing of the Brookings Institute office of ex-Kissinger aide Morton Halperin; receiver of information from Secret Service agents who were assigned to Edmund Muskie and George McGovern, and who secretly reported those candidates' activities to the White House.

- Labeled by some as the paymaster for Hunt and Gordon Liddy in the Ellsberg psychiatrist break-in, and by witnesses at the Watergate hearings as the mastermind of over thirty "dirty tricks" missions.

Ultimately, Colson pleaded guilty to a single charge: one count of obstruction of justice in connection with the Pentagon Papers trial of Daniel Ellsberg. Admitting he'd been "an arrogant, self-assured man in the ruthless exercise of power," Colson added: "My plea acknowledges that I endeavored to disseminate derogatory information about Dr. Ellsberg and his attorney . . . while he was under indictment."

On June 21, 1974, Colson received a one-to-three-year prison sentence and a \$5,000 fine; all other charges were dropped. Two days later, a conversation with Colson surreptitiously taped by Washington private detective Richard Bast appeared in the Washington Post. It contained the first hint that Colson believed Watergate could have been set up by forces beyond White House control.

At the time, many major media branded Colson's remarks as ridiculous. But since his parole after serving seven months in prison, he has continued to search for answers to the greatest political puzzle in American history. And most of Colson's allegations have proved incredible, but true.

It is now public record that the CIA not only destroyed some of its material about Watergate, but it sent a contract employee named Lee Pennington, Jr. to wipe out evidence in the home of Watergate burglar James McCord. Then, last summer, a source for the House Select Committee on Intelligence revealed that classified CIA documents show an agency "infiltration" into Nixon's Oval Office, using someone who ranked just below Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. At the same time, the White House aide who first revealed the existence of the Nixon taping system to Senate investigators—Alexander Butterfield—was identified by retired colonel Fletcher Prouty

as a "contact man" for the CIA in the White House.

Curious links between the CIA, Howard Hughes, and the White House have continued to surface, too. It's been acknowledged that Hughes' firms are the largest contractors for the CIA, and that dozens of federal employees have moved easily from the government onto the Hughes payroll, which for the last ten years has maintained an average take from U.S. taxpayers of nearly \$1.7 million a day. What is not so widely known is the use of the Hughes organization as a "paymaster-type front" for CIA undercover agents around the world, as revealed by the recent publication of documents stolen from Hughes' Summa Corporation offices.

The fact that the CIA awarded a \$350 million contract to Hughes to recover a sunken Soviet submarine, and that the CIA used Hughes' right-hand man, Robert Maheu, as a liaison with the Mob in attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, may yet prove to be but the tip of the iceberg of the Hughes-CIA marriage contract. Or so Charles Colson believes.

Consider, for example, a mysterious and since-disbanded "public relations" outfit called the Mullen Company, which maintained offices right across the street from the White House throughout the Nixon years. Even Howard Hunt admits in his memoirs that the Mullen Company's overseas branches were long maintained as CIA fronts. It was former CIA Director Richard Helms, in fact, who got Hunt a job with the Mullen Company upon Hunt's "retirement" from the agency in 1970. Hunt's boss was Robert Bennett, who brought a Hughes public relations account with him upon assuming the Mullen presidency. And Bennett, who, like Hunt, had close ties to the White House, was a curious fellow indeed.

The son of former Utah Senator Wallace Bennett, the Mullen president was known around Washington as an active Nixon fund-raiser. With regard to Watergate, however, Senate investigators saw him assuming a different role. In the Senate's Minority Report on CIA Involvement, Bennett is named as the party who relayed secret messages between Hunt and Liddy after the break-in, and who leaked sensitive information to both the press and the CIA about Watergate events, while concealing any links to the Mullen Company.

Listen now to the musings of Charles Colson, who observed this bizarre sequence of events from the inside. Listen and wonder, as he does, about what really happened with the downfall of a president.

Larry O'Brien worked for Hughes even after he became Democratic National Chairman."

ARGOSY: In a long interview published in the *Washington Post* in the summer of 1974, you speculated to Richard Bast that Richard Nixon might well have been "set up" on Watergate by the CIA. How do you feel about that possibility now?

COLSON: Clearly *something* was set up at the Watergate break-in. Not only was the tape placed on the door twice, but a lot of guys in prison who'd done "bag jobs" told me that the first lesson in break-ins is to place the tape vertically, not horizontally like the Watergate guys did. Horizontally, it can be seen; it was almost like a signal. Then there's the fact that the police on duty were working overtime without instructions to do so. They just *happened* to be at the scene of the break-in.

We do know that a man named A.J. Woolston-Smythe was working hand in glove with the CIA in New York. He's the fellow who first alerted William Haddad, a minor functionary in Democratic politics in New York, that he suspected there was going to be a break-in or electronic surveillance of the Democrats. Haddad communicated that to Larry O'Brien [the Democratic National Committee chairman whose office was supposedly the Watergate burglars' target], and it was also leaked to Jack Anderson [syndicated columnist]. This leaves the unanswered mystery of why, if they really knew about it in advance, nobody did anything about it.

ARGOSY: A.J. Woolston-Smythe works directly for the CIA?

COLSON: Contract employee.

ARGOSY: So, even beyond the CIA connections of the break-in team, there were more CIA ties elsewhere?

COLSON: Well, it's common knowledge that Helms [Richard Helms, then direc-

tor of the CIA] received a phone call from the duty officer of the CIA the night of the break-in. Helms is reported to have said, "Now they've finally done it." By that offhand remark, the assumption is he knew *something* was happening. Then you have the CIA's very curious conduct after the break-in—sending this guy Pennington [Lee Pennington, Jr., a CIA contract employee] to burn all the files in [James] McCord's home, and having someone clean out the car of [Felipe] de Diego or [Eugenio] Martinez, I forget which one. Also, there's the money that was left in McCord's possession after the break-in. McCord, in his testimony to the Ervin committee, accounted for every penny he ever received and spent. But it doesn't jive with [Watergate prosecutor Earl] Silbert's testimony of what they found in McCord's bank account records—\$40,000 deposited in the last few weeks before the break-in, which saved McCord Associates from bankruptcy.

ARGOSY: Do you think that money came from the CIA?

COLSON: I have no idea. All I can tell you is that when you really study the flow of money, you can't help seeing that more was involved than was ever admitted. Maybe CIA, or maybe there was money coming from other sources. Maybe Howard Hughes.

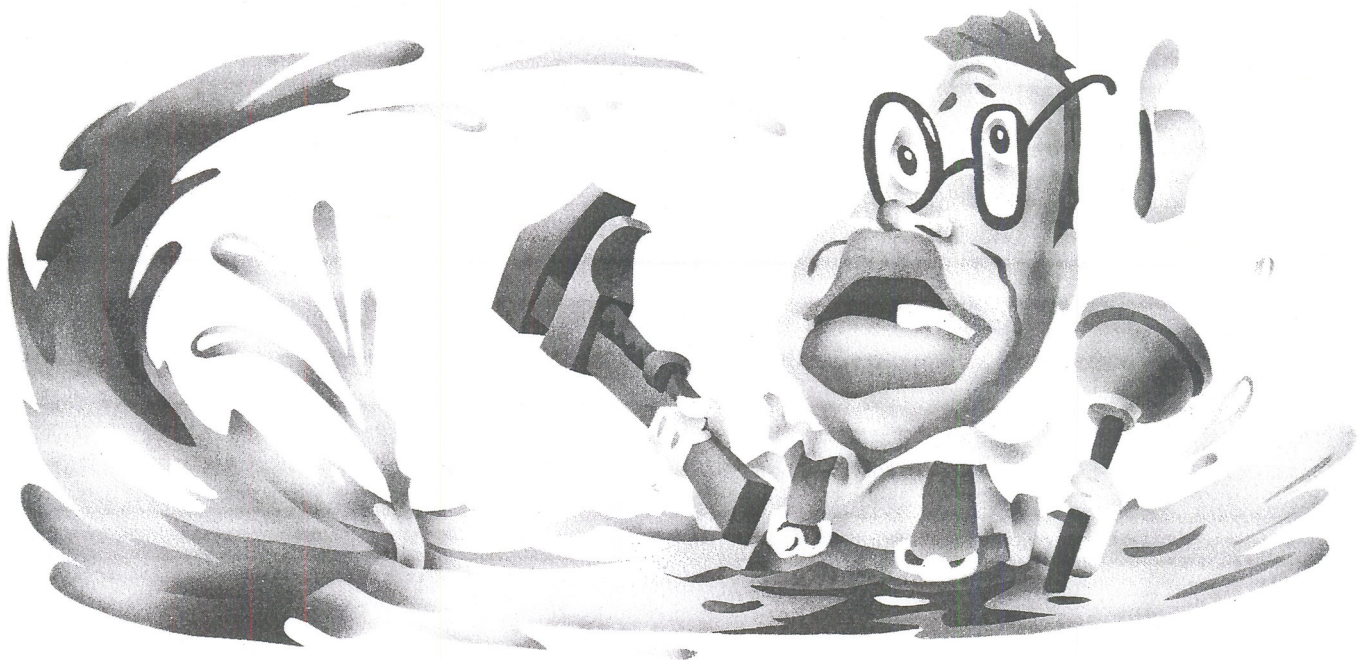
ARGOSY: How does Howard Hughes fit into this scenario?

COLSON: You start with the fact that Larry O'Brien was on a \$100,000-a-year retainer with Hughes through 1970. Then the account was taken over by Bob Bennett of the Mullen Company, and testimony shows that the Hughes-Bennett relationship was set up by the CIA. I surmised, back when I was probing for

answers to all this, that there was a rivalry between Larry O'Brien and Bob Bennett. I've heard from other sources, and I have no reason to doubt it, that O'Brien *remained* on a Hughes retainer through 1972. That means he was being retained by Hughes while [he was] Democratic National Chairman. O'Brien had been Robert Maheu's guy in Washington when Maheu was still Hughes' right-hand man. After the power struggle inside of Hughes' organization, the old Maheu crowd goes, but it's still fighting the new crowd. So maybe Bennett would be interested in spying on O'Brien, because the new Hughes crowd wants to find out what O'Brien knows. And maybe the CIA is interested, too, to see how much O'Brien knew about the old Maheu faction. The real motive, it seems to me, comes back to Hughes and the CIA. It just doesn't make sense that we [the White House] would go to all that extreme to find out what was going on in O'Brien's office in the first place.

ARGOSY: We'd like to pursue that, but first, can you go a little further on the Hughes-CIA relationship?

COLSON: Remember that Robert Maheu was suing Hughes after his fall from grace in the Hughes empire. And the suit is all about documents that are in the safe of Hank Greenspun [publisher of the *Las Vegas Sun* and closely tied to Hughes interests]. Remember also, from Watergate testimony and Howard Hunt's book, that there was an aborted plan to break *into* Greenspun's safe. Originally this was labeled as another operation by the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP). Later, it was established that it *wasn't*, but that Hughes and the CIA *did* have an interest in it. That plan for a break-in was to be conducted by Hunt





I think that Nixon picked Gerald Ford as impeachment insurance.”

Mitchell when he says he didn't give Magruder the go-ahead. I can see them sitting around after a few drinks, Mitchell shrugging it off, and Magruder, being eager, goes ahead. I don't know how much Mitchell knew of the details, although I know he knew there was a wire tap capability. Magruder's kind of flaky in his testimony. He might have been doing it for the wrong reasons. But the real question remains—why?

ARGOSY: Do you think that Magruder could have been working for somebody besides the White House?

COLSON: I don't really want to speculate on that, because I wouldn't want to impugn Jeb's motives. But there are a lot of people who have considered that as a possibility.

ARGOSY: Do you believe that the CIA might actually have had a spy inside the Nixon White House?

COLSON: Oh, absolutely, I'm convinced they did. It could've been any number of people. I was always suspicious of Alexander Butterfield when I was in the White House. For a lot of reasons. So I wasn't surprised when that Daniel Schorr story came out about him last summer, although I think it's been pretty well discredited.

ARGOSY: What were some of your reasons to suspect Butterfield's role?

COLSON: He was never really a team player. He kept to himself. And it's curious that he was the one man who sat just outside the president's office, had control of the tapes and tape recording system, and had the ability to see every single piece of paper that crossed Nixon's desk. He was the guy in charge of security. Remember, he was recommended to the White House by Joe Califano of the prior administration. If you knew Alex, he wasn't the brightest guy in the world. But he was methodical. Just the way he operated, I always wondered if he was a plant of the military, which was his background. Then there was the way he turned on Nixon as he did [telling the Senate about the taping system]. It was just out of character for the loyal, heel-clicking aide. But I'm not persuaded that he was a CIA contact man. I mean, I would have to accept Alex's denial at face value.

ARGOSY: Do you think we can rule out John Dean as a CIA employee?

COLSON: Yes, I do. I can't tell you definitely who it was, or how many different people they had as sources of intelligence, but I'm convinced, from

and [Gordon] Liddy, and clearly for the Hughes corporate interests, just a few months *before* the Watergate break-in. When the aborted Greenspun plan is eventually exposed, the first cover story is a connection with CREEP. I was implicated as being involved, but I'd never heard of it. So couldn't the Watergate have had a Hughes' plan behind it, too? You have to wonder, was Watergate just an aberration? Or part of a pattern?

ARGOSY: But you mentioned [Hughes' and] the CIA's common interest in the contents of Greenspun's safe. Why would they have been concerned?

COLSON: Well, if there were documents in there that could have been embarrassing to Hughes and/or Maheu, who's to say that they just dealt with Hughes' corporate enterprises? They may well have dealt with Hughes-CIA operations, and particularly Maheu and his involvement in CIA attempts to assassinate Castro.

ARGOSY: Are there other CIA-Hughes links to Watergate besides the Greenspun thing and Larry O'Brien?

COLSON: Yes, there's one other dimension. There were *two* phones tapped by the Watergate break-in team in the Democratic National Committee offices, those of O'Brien and Spencer Oliver, Jr. I think it's noteworthy that Spencer

Oliver's father worked for Hughes, and that Spencer Oliver, Jr. had once been under contract to the CIA. [Oliver, Jr. was also executive director of the Association of State Democratic Chairmen.] What you have to wonder is which of the two warring factions in the Hughes empire was plugged into the CIA—or were both of them? In prison one night, I asked Jeb Magruder why the Watergate break-in was undertaken, and he almost had a stroke. He said bugging Spencer Oliver's phone was a mistake. I said, well then, why did they go in and rewire it? And leave it bugged? He then stuttered all over the place and said, well, their offices [O'Brien's and Oliver, Jr.'s] were right next to each other, they worked together. Of course, that's not true. So, both men who were bugged had connections to the CIA and to Hughes.

ARGOSY: From what you've said so far, though, we might be led to assume that the White House had absolutely *nothing* to do with the Watergate break-in. We know, of course, that it *did*—and that the cover-up eventually led to the resignation of a president. So who in the White House *was* directly involved?

COLSON: I believe Jeb Magruder when he says that [John] Mitchell gave him a go-ahead, at the March 30 [1972] meeting in Key Biscayne. But I also believe

studying all the evidence, that [E. Howard] Hunt was one. But he may have been duped into it.

ARGOSY: What's the strongest evidence that links Hunt, other than his long career ties, with the Agency?

COLSON: If you read the affidavit filed by a "Mr. X" in the impeachment hearings, [the CIA deleted the name and inserted "Mr. X"] you find him talking about material we sent directly to Helms at the CIA. Now "Mr. X" is the guy who is the CIA liaison to the White House and sits on the National Security Council staff. Hunt has acknowledged, and there's an affidavit, that he [Hunt] was sending packages and materials regularly through that channel while he was still on the White House staff.

Then there are the CIA memorandums that were exhibits at the Ervin hearings from General [Vernon] Walters and Helms to [Patrick] Grey at the FBI, including one of July 28, 1972, which talks about having installed electronic equipment for Hunt and Mr. "Creo"—a code name for Sidney Gottlieb, head of the CIA's Technical Services Division. This is another of those little facts that went by largely unnoticed. In one file there's a complete report of how Hunt asked for and obtained a recording capacity—I understand now it was inside a briefcase—so he could record conversations. I don't know whether it was overt or covert. The CIA memo says it was overt, but then why was it concealed in a briefcase? Apparently Hunt made lots of tapes. The CIA says they never recovered the recorder. What about the tapes? The only conclusion a reasonable man can draw is that Hunt was obviously taping for the CIA, and obviously delivering them. Where that leads you, what kind of tapes and for what purpose, I have no way of knowing. None of these things did I know about at the time, and I was supposed to be Hunt's patron saint.

According to [Bernard] Barker's testimony, Hunt recruited the break-in team four months before I employed him at the White House. Hunt went to Miami in April, 1971 and left a note for Barker saying, "If you're the same Barker I worked with before [on anti-Castro operations for the CIA], call me. Eduardo." I didn't recommend Hunt to the White House staff until July. So why was Hunt recruiting the Watergate break-in team before he even knew he was going to be in the White House?

ARGOSY: The fact remains that you did

hire Hunt as a White House consultant. Since both of you attended Brown University, did you know of him when you were in school there?

COLSON: No. I met him at a Brown University alumni party many years

ARGOSY: Were you close friends during the late 1960s?

COLSON: No, that's another one of the myths of Watergate. We were invited to dinner at his home many times, and we went twice. He's an engaging fellow, witty, a great conversationalist. And his wife was a charming woman.

ARGOSY: So how did you happen to bring him into the White House?

COLSON: Well, he was available. I believed his political loyalties were very solidly with us. We were interested in someone who would do all the research into the Pentagon Papers, and he had the perfect qualifications. Plus he had several times offered his services to me. He was actually sixth on a list of names I submit-

ted to [Bob] Haldeman. The other five, for one reason or another, just didn't work out.

ARGOSY: What was the relationship between Hunt and Richard Helms?

COLSON: Hunt had worked in Helms' office at the CIA. And Helms helped him when he was in financial difficulty, gave him \$20,000 at the time of his separation from the agency. Yet when Helms was first asked about his relationship with Hunt, he said he had barely heard of him. Later, he confessed to the fact that he had. Helms is really one of the more fascinating characters to emerge. He contradicted himself in testimony over and over again, denying things he later admitted. He lives under an amazing protective shroud. No one has ever gone after him for perjury, or for his demonstrated role in some of the "dirty tricks" of the CIA. [Helms is now U.S. Ambassador to Iran.] It was also Helms, according to the CIA's

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The CIA's been covering up a lot more than the White House ever did."

own file, who arranged Hunt's employment with the Mullen Company.

ARGOSY: That brings us back to the CIA-Hughes connection, since Mullen's president, Robert Bennett, took over the Hughes account from O'Brien. What else can you tell us about the Mullen Company?

COLSON: It doesn't exist anymore. It was a CIA cover firm formed back in the late 1950s by Robert Mullen, who was a speechwriter for Eisenhower. He set himself up in the "public relations" business with CIA backing. He represented something called the Free Cuba Committee originally, and the Rotarians, which was an excellent source of international intelligence, and General Foods, with offices around the world where it would be good industrial cover. Its primary function was CIA, and that's not disputable. It's documented in the CIA's own files. Then, when its cover was blown, they folded it up [in 1973].

But there's no question Hunt was put there by Helms. In one CIA report, Mullen is telling a CIA man named Martin Lukoskie, "I was pressured into taking Hunt, by Helms personally." There is also a letter from Helms to Mullen in the file, in which they discuss how Hunt's salary was going to be arranged.

And the Mullen company's biggest account was Hughes, which we now know was the biggest contractor for the CIA and handled things like the Glomar Explorer. Now the question is, who was Bob Bennett serving?

ARGOSY: Senate documents show that Bennett was in fact reporting regularly to this Lukoskie, a CIA case officer. It's also been speculated that Bennett might have been the source for the *Washington Post's* exposes on Watergate—the "Deep Throat" that Woodward and Bernstein refer to.

COLSON: Well, I know one bit of information that Woodward and Bernstein attribute to "Deep Throat," which I learned by reading a CIA file—it definitely came from Bennett. I also know other information attributed to "Deep Throat" that I'm sure came from other people. From the style of one person's speaking, I know who it came from in the White House. I don't think there is a "Deep Throat." I think "Deep Throat" was a clever device by which Woodward and Bernstein could create suspense in their book. I think he's a fictitious amalgam—made up of a whole lot of people.

ARGOSY: You keep referring to material you found in the CIA's own files. May I ask how you got access to them?

COLSON: I can't tell you.

ARGOSY: But you read all the CIA files on Watergate?

COLSON: Well, all the ones I was able

to read. There were others, obviously. But I saw what purported to be the Watergate files, which eventually went to the people up on Capitol Hill.

ARGOSY: All right, let's recapitulate for a moment. We have, just prior to the Watergate break-in, Hunt serving both the White House and the Mullen Company. We have the Mullen Company serving as a CIA front and, through its new president, Bennett, as the public relations firm for Howard Hughes.

COLSON: Yes, and one of the facts uncovered by Congress concerned a Hunt trip in 1972 to Nicaragua. That, of course, is where Howard Hughes was living at the time. It was a secret trip never before disclosed. Now why did Hunt go to Nicaragua?

ARGOSY: An equally good question is why Hunt did a lot of the things he's supposed to have been ordered by you to do.

COLSON: I didn't order many.

ARGOSY: What about his trip to see Dita Beard to find out what she was saying about the ITT scandal in 1972?

COLSON: That was proposed by Bob Bennett. He didn't represent ITT or anybody involved. Yet he provides a lawyer named Robin Fleming to be Dita Beard's lawyer. He then suggests Hunt go out and interview her. Hunt comes to me and I say, "Great idea." Now what was the CIA's interest in the Dita Beard episode? Well, remember that not only was her memo about ITT leaked in the spring, but so were all of the memos about ITT's involvement with the CIA in Chile. And suddenly, Bob Bennett has an intense interest in Dita Beard.

ARGOSY: So, we're back to the Mullen Company.

COLSON: Yep. Same thing with Hunt's trip to Chappaquiddick. Hunt called me and said, "Bob Bennett has received a mysterious call about what really happened with [Ted] Kennedy at Chappaquiddick, and I'm going to investigate it. Do you want the information?" I said sure. I'd have said that about any Democrat to anybody who offered information to us. Hunt said, "I'll have to get disguise equipment from the CIA." I said fine. It turns out that the guy he interviewed was Clifton DeMott, who had worked for Bennett at the Department of Transportation. This is another thing that makes no sense. Why should Hunt go through all the pains of calling me, then going to the CIA and getting disguise equipment, when DeMott is obviously going to know that his old employer is sending Hunt up to see him? Yet Hunt used that as a pretext to go out and get all his disguise equipment from the CIA (including that used in future covert operations). And DeMott didn't really know anything new about Chappaquiddick.

All these things Hunt did for me were things he proposed, and the impetus

came from Bennett, who all through this period was reporting every two weeks to CIA case officer Martin J. Lukoskie. I'm sure the CIA knew more about it than we did. The question again, why?

ARGOSY: What about the allegation that you ordered Hunt to break into Arthur Bremer's apartment after the George Wallace shooting?

COLSON: I didn't. I called Hunt that night after I got home. We were curious to know why Bremer, from everything we knew, was doing what he was doing. Was he a right-wing fanatic and were we going to get blamed? Was he a left-wing nut and would it come back from that end? Hunt said, "You'll be able to tell by the stuff you find in his apartment." I might have said to him, maybe I should send you out there to check and find out what's really in the guy's apartment. Legitimately. The press were all out there already. But I don't think I did. All I know is, I was talking to Hunt on one line when the president called me on another. I said to Howard, I'll call you back, but I didn't. The next day my secretary says, "Howard Hunt waited up all night for your call." And I said to myself, the stupid idiot, I didn't want him to do anything, I wanted to find out his opinion of what was motivating Bremer. I never ordered him to go out there, and obviously never ordered him to break into Bremer's house—because at seven p.m. I had already issued the orders to Mark Felt [Associate Director of the FBI] that no one was to be allowed in or out of that apartment. Felt said in his affidavit that the only reason Colson could've wanted to send Hunt into that apartment was to get Hunt killed. Which, in hindsight, a lot of people probably would have thought was a good idea.

ARGOSY: But Nixon was really concerned about the Wallace shooting, wasn't he?

COLSON: Oh, he sure was. He was really concerned about who was responsible, trying to get the FBI to investigate that, and to protect Bremer's life because of the historic parallel when Lee Harvey Oswald was shot.

ARGOSY: He thought the blame might be laid to the White House?

COLSON: Exactly. Or the right wing—people, political parties that wanted to help Nixon.

ARGOSY: Several times in the transcripts of the White House tapes, there's discussion about Hunt's seeming attempt to blackmail Nixon. And Nixon talks often about the "can of worms" he's afraid Hunt could open. What was that can of worms?

COLSON: That's another thing that just absolutely fascinates me. I don't know.

ARGOSY: The president never told you?

COLSON: No. He also never explained what it was that he did to save Helms.

Remember in the June 23 [1972] tape with Haldeman, the tape that was the smoking gun, he says, "You got ahold of Helms, we saved him. Boy, what we've done for him." No, [I knew nothing about it]; on February 13, 1974, in a tape that's never been introduced, I'm saying I don't think Hunt has anything that could cause us any problem at all.

ARGOSY: Yet Nixon says on the tapes that it goes back to the Bay of Pigs and many things that would be harmful to the White House, the CIA, and the nation to see opened up.

COLSON: My guess is that Nixon knows there's a lot in the files that's a source of *great* embarrassment to the CIA. And that was his way of subtly saying, the CIA better cooperate or else we're going to unload all the Bay of Pigs stuff publicly. Or it could go back to the fact that Nixon was the Eisenhower Administration's Action Officer for the Bay of Pigs invasion.

ARGOSY: Could it have had something to do with the Kennedy assassination?

COLSON: I doubt it. I really do. I don't think Hunt had anything to do with that. A lot of people who know Hunt well, myself included, believe that while he talked a great game, he would be scared to actually drug Jack Anderson or kill anybody or do anything like that.

I've read his newspaper interviews of late on this Jack Anderson thing and I've seen three different versions. He backs away from his allegations that I ordered him to do anything. But I see a strain of the novelist as you read the interviews. The story gets more colorful and more dramatic all the time. His *Providence Journal* interviews bear no resemblance to what he told *Time* Magazine. I think the guy's written so many novels, I'm not sure that he can always sort it out.

ARGOSY: What about the break-in of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist? Does that fit into this web?

COLSON: Sure. I think that was bungled just the same way they bungled the Watergate break-in. And it was equally phony. Ellsberg's psychiatrist said the burglars did, *in fact*, examine Ellsberg's psychiatric records. They were in an envelope outside the file case when the doctor came in. He never told Ellsberg because he didn't want to increase his anxieties. Yet the Plumbers reported that they found nothing. It makes no sense.

ARGOSY: One last thing about Hunt. He was quoted recently as admitting that the CIA once had an entire team trained to carry out, among other things, assassinations. Did you know anything while in the White House about CIA foreign assassination plots?

COLSON: I did not know that there were foreign assassinations. But I also wouldn't have been surprised to learn there had been. I guess I knew about

Castro, come to think of it. Hunt told me about that. It came up very casually. It was mentioned there had been efforts to do that, and that they'd done a psychological profile of Castro. He was just kind of regaling me with romantic spy tales, and I don't remember the circumstances.

ARGOSY: All right, let's assume that in 1972 Bob Bennett of the Mullen Company was indeed using Hunt, through you, for his own purposes. Yet in one of your old memos, you describe Bennett as "a trusted loyalist and a good friend" of the White House.

COLSON: Yeah. That's the way a good double agent works.

ARGOSY: Had you known Bennett personally?

COLSON: I had met him several times. He was always coming around volunteering to help, which I realize now was an attempt to ingratiate himself. Which he succeeded in doing. He also succeeded in a very calculated plan to disseminate smear stuff about me in the press.

ARGOSY: You mean Bennett consciously set out to portray you as the instigator of all Hunt's deeds? When did that happen?

COLSON: This is all in the CIA files. It was begun right after the Watergate break-in and went on for over a year. A memo in the files dated March 1, 1973, and signed by agent Eric W. Eisenstadt, lays out in great detail all the articles that Bennett was successfully planting on me. It goes on to say that this course of conduct was approved by the then director of Central Intelligence, James Schlesinger. And attached to this top-secret file were some of the clippings. It never was explained to me why.

ARGOSY: You have no idea why this was done?

COLSON: Well, ostensibly to divert attention from the Mullen Company relationship with the CIA. On the surface, I guess you can look at it and say, "Colson is the patsy. Set him up, then everybody will be satisfied—because they've got to get someone and then they won't look at us." There's a suggestion in there that Bennett had made a deal with a lot of newspapers. If he fed them information about Colson, they would not investigate the CIA's relationship with the Mullen Company—and therefore [its relationship] with Watergate.

ARGOSY: Did the Mullen Company have a Hughes tie before Bennett came to them?

COLSON: Apparently not. Apparently that was arranged when he came. I use "arranged" advisedly, because the CIA files show they talked about increasing the Hughes retainer to pay for more CIA covert activities.

ARGOSY: What can you tell us about Hughes' interest in satellite communica-

COLSON: That was all CIA intelligence stuff. Also, the communications revolution of the future is in satellites. He who controls satellites will control the flow of all ideas in twenty years. Cable TV is all by satellite now. Whoever is in the driver's seat will have tremendous power.

ARGOSY: How big a role do you think the Hughes organization already plays in the government?

COLSON: I think it is much more extensive than anyone knows. What we're seeing are scattered bits and pieces. I would love to know the whole story. I doubt that anyone ever really will. I've heard one theory that there is no Howard Hughes, that it's really a headquarters of the Mafia's operation; that they owned Bebe Rebozo, they got their hooks into Nixon early, and, of course, that ties into the overlap of the CIA and the Mob.

ARGOSY: Wouldn't that mean, in effect, that the Mob, perhaps in alliance with the CIA, is the big ruling force in this country?

COLSON: Don't say that's my theory, but I've heard it expounded as a possibility and, of course, it is. Sure, in one of the Mob books recently, there's a prediction that they would control the president elected in 1976. Or by 1976. And don't forget that the Mob had a tremendous interest in the gambling casinos in Cuba. There was a real identity of interests between the CIA and the Mob in knocking off Castro. But they've had *lots* of common interests. You also see efforts by the Mob to get close to the government, like Kennedy and his gal, with Sam Giancana. I don't want to make serious charges lightly, there's been too much of that lately, but there *are* things that are just unanswered. You have to wonder where the Mob begins, the Agency ends, and Hughes picks up.

ARGOSY: All the revelations come out about the CIA from the Church Committee. How much of that was known to you in the White House?

COLSON: A lot of it. Everything I said in that 1974 interview with Dick Bast has come true—including the Glomar Explorer and Psychological Assessments Incorporated being a CIA cover firm.

ARGOSY: Do you think there's still a lot more to come out about what the CIA's really been doing?

COLSON: Sure do, but I'm afraid they may not get it. The CIA's done a very good job of throwing people off on tangents. Like the original expose story about domestic spying by Seymour Hersh of the *New York Times*. It was just a throwaway. Hersh had access to stuff that was a lot more dynamite than that, which he didn't use. I always figured that was a sop—throw that out, then get Rockefeller to head a commission of people who were apologists for the CIA, give the Agency a nice clean bill of health and put an end to all the rumors going around.

ARGOSY: It's been alleged that there was CIA infiltration of other government departments—Transportation, Commerce, Office of Management and Budget.

COLSON: That's a fact. I knew something about it. I knew they were staffing, for example, the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. All the international operations were being monitored through the CIA.

ARGOSY: Let's digress for a moment to the FBI. Are their abuses as flagrant?

COLSON: That's a whole other tangent. The abuse of the FBI was the way in which Hoover compiled information on U.S. citizens and used it for his own purposes. I had seen some of the things Hoover had squirreled away in his little office. I lost a lot of respect for Hoover when I discovered the way he used them.

ARGOSY: *Newsweek* magazine mentions a file Hoover kept on John Kennedy, which includes the charge that Kennedy had an affair during World War Two with a German spy. What did Hoover try to do with that material?

COLSON: Keep himself as director of the FBI.

ARGOSY: He actually used it that way?

COLSON: Sure. He had something on everybody. I don't know that he ever had to come right out and say, "If you don't continue me as director, I'm going to do this or that." I don't think he had to. Everybody was acutely aware of the way he kept things, and you had to assume he had stuff on you. There's no one who gets to be president that the FBI couldn't have accumulated something about, somewhere along the line.

ARGOSY: Did he make anything else available to you at the White House about the Kennedys?

COLSON: Not about the Kennedys. At least not to me. He didn't make *that* report available to me, he gave it to other people at the White House. That stuff would be shown to me normally, as political adviser to the president.

ARGOSY: Would you go so far as to call what Hoover was doing blackmail?

COLSON: I don't like to characterize people's actions that way. But it certainly had elements of that in it. It was very offensive to me.

ARGOSY: Getting back to the CIA, were you aware that the law partner of James St. Clair, Nixon's Watergate lawyer, was a former CIA employee?

COLSON: I learned about that when I was in prison. I discovered that he [St. Clair] was also counsel to a CIA firm.

ARGOSY: Did that make you suspicious?

COLSON: A little bit. But look at Paul O'Brien, counsel for CREEP during this period. His law firm was maintaining a CIA agent abroad and had an undercover contact through the CIA during Watergate. It's in the [Howard] Baker report.

ARGOSY: So the CIA connection just keeps coming and coming.

COLSON: Almost everywhere you look in Watergate, you'll find a CIA connection. That's what scares me.

ARGOSY: How far into it have you delved? Or have you wanted to delve in that far?

COLSON: Oh, I've wanted to delve, but you just keep going down different roads. I'll give you a perfect example of what you could get paranoid about. My lawyers called me on Monday, December 8th, and said, "The Pike Committee staff wants to interview you. They want to know if you have a list of newsmen who were also on the payroll of the CIA." I said I'd check my files. That Wednesday I was in New York. In Washington my wife went out to dinner with a friend, and came home to find our house broken into—just silver and jewelry taken. I checked my files and couldn't find the list. But I don't know that I *ever* had that list. Anyway, it was a perfect burglary. The police said there were things about it that made them suspicious as to whether it was a legitimate break-in. So if you want to be paranoid, you could be paranoid. I'm not paranoid, I hope.

ARGOSY: If indeed there were a plot to oust Nixon, what still remains murky is the motive. Could you venture to guess why the CIA and/or Hughes would have wanted to get rid of him?

COLSON: I can think of lots of motives. Let me preface this by saying, all this is wild speculation. I don't have a theory that would stand any kind of test. But Nixon was a guy who operated in utter seclusion and privacy, cutting out the normal foreign policy-making apparatus, the normal channels of State and Defense and Intelligence. Why is it, for example, that the Joint Chiefs had a couple of guys on the National Security Council staff pilfering documents from Kissinger's briefcase and taking stuff out of wastebaskets? If the Joint Chiefs would spy on Nixon, why couldn't the CIA? They would have the same motives.

You've got to remember that the whole top management of the CIA—Bissell, Colby, Helms—are what you'd call cold-war liberals. Very liberal on domestic politics, hard-line on foreign affairs. Nixon was exactly the opposite. Moreover, he didn't have much use for the CIA. You had a president disregarding and ignoring the old-line bureaucracy. He's cutting them out of the action. He's doing things they considered absolutely heretical—going to the Soviet Union and China, arms agreements, detente. I think it was very logical for the CIA to want to penetrate the White House and try to establish their own means of intelligence, since they were being cut out of the normal chain of command. If you want my most plausible theory, they planted their people and then suddenly someone—

their own people, maybe Hughes, maybe Bennett—leads those people into illegal, bizarre adventures. How's the CIA going to cover it? The record of its cover-up is much more thorough than the White House ever did on Watergate. In the process of covering themselves, they undercut Nixon.

ARGOSY: You once remarked that Nixon was "out of his mind" over the CIA and Pentagon roles in Watergate.

COLSON: I think when he discovered the extent of the CIA's involvement in January of 1974—and the extent to which Bennett had been programming Hunt—he was justifiably outraged and wanted to do something about it.

ARGOSY: How did Nixon find out?

COLSON: He found out a lot of it from me, when I told him what I'd discovered in the CIA files.

ARGOSY: What did Nixon want?

COLSON: He wanted to expose it. In fact, in several conversations I thought he was on the verge of doing it. Then he backed away from it. And about a month later, he didn't even want to talk about it with me. But one day after I talked to Nixon about what I'd learned, [Alexander] Haig called me five minutes after I'd left the White House [Haig was Nixon's Chief of Staff]. This was January 20, 1974. Haig wanted me to come down to the office. I didn't want to, so I went to his house. He spent four hours pumping me for what I knew. Then at the end, he said, "Well, we can't do anything with this, Chuck, because if the president's going to be impeached, better he go down himself than take the whole intelligence apparatus with him." I was led to conclude that Nixon was finally talked out of it by Haig.

ARGOSY: Haig was also the military's contact man for the CIA in 1962 and 1963. Did you become suspicious about who Haig might really be working for?

COLSON: Yeah, I suppose I was. But I have to say now that I really believe Haig was acting honorably and serving only one master. I don't believe he was ever part of a CIA plot to harm Nixon. I think his problem was having been part of that [CIA] establishment, so he had those loyalties and didn't want to rock the boat, which I believed was necessary to do to get to the truth. Long before, and this is on the tapes, I was urging Nixon in every conversation to tell the truth and dispose of Watergate.

ARGOSY: In a novel soon to be published by John Ehrlichman, it's been reported that someone who very much resembles Henry Kissinger was put close to the president by the CIA. You yourself have said that Kissinger, along with Haig, was instrumental in stopping Nixon from lifting the veil off the intelligence community.

COLSON: Yes, and also in encouraging

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him to resign from the presidency.

ARGOSY: What do you think of Ehrlichman's novelistic license as it relates to the truth?

COLSON: I think that John probably comes as close to the truth as anybody. He and I had long talks about this, and John has told me that much of what he's writing is my speculation.

ARGOSY: You have also been quoted as saying that Nixon once wondered out loud if Gerald Ford could control Kissinger. Does Kissinger need to be controlled?

COLSON: Well, I haven't had any personal contact with Henry in three years. But he needed Nixon very badly. Nixon was a great steadying influence on Henry. Nixon was really the architect and Henry was the engineer. I know Kissinger could never have done alone what Nixon and Kissinger did together. You have to remember that Henry was a part of that same foreign policy cold-war ideology that I described earlier—very palsy-walsy with all the characters in the intelligence establishment. He was part of that "in" cadre. Nixon never really trusted Henry, and vice versa. It was sort of an accommodation relationship.

ARGOSY: Did Kissinger's closeness to the intelligence community cause the mistrust?

COLSON: That was clearly one of the reasons for the lack of trust.

ARGOSY: What were some others?

COLSON: Oh, Henry's affinity for giving stuff to newspapers. Also, some of his friends that Nixon was very distrustful of—Bob McNamara, Averell Harriman, people like that.

ARGOSY: As Watergate progressed, what change did you see in Nixon? Was it a steady deterioration, as has been described?

COLSON: Yeah, I think so. He was consumed by it. He never could understand it, and it was gradually tearing him down. In lots of conversations and visits in 1974, I could tell he was getting to where he could trust fewer and fewer people. Fatigue was very evident. I know he was having trouble sleeping, he told me that. And the more embattled he got, the more indecisive he became and the more he was losing his strength and capacity. It was really insidious the way you could see it sort of eroding the guy. Corroding him. By the way, he is a remarkably rugged man. It took less of a toll than I would have expected.

ARGOSY: Why did he finally throw in the towel? Had he been resigned to it for some time?

COLSON: I think he had been fearful it was going to come for quite awhile. He eventually got to the place where he knew he was defeated, and if he kept going much longer the country would be

in such turmoil it could only be disastrous—to the country and to him personally. Everybody was in favor of him stepping down. His whole White House had turned against him. I was in favor of it in April when the tapes came out—very reluctantly and sadly, but I was. He's the best mind I've ever known and had very noble goals for the country, even though people don't believe that now. Unfortunately, his moral code wasn't very good when it came to telling the truth. What ultimately trapped him were his own lies—and the fact that he'd taped things and was stuck with the tapes.

ARGOSY: Did you ever tape any of your conversations in the White House?

COLSON: Oh yeah, quite a number. Just to keep a record. A lot of people would call in with poll data and statistics; I'd just take it all down. And usually when I talked to the press, I'd use a tape recorder. I never taped anyone inside the White House. Ehrlichman used to tape a lot, and Kissinger, and Haldeman. John Dean taped a little. It was not uncommon. It was done for protection, not any ill intent.

ARGOSY: What role did Bebe Rebozo play in Nixon's life?

COLSON: The dog you talk to when you feel like talking and you need somebody. He's a convivial, pleasant guy, and totally trustworthy.

ARGOSY: Among Nixon's White House staff, who was closest to him?

COLSON: He had different kinds of relationships with each of us. Sometimes, on a personal basis, he was closest to me. But now I discover lots of things he never told me about. I guess Haldeman was the closest; I probably came next. He had fond feelings about John Mitchell, but he was drifting away from him in the last two years before Watergate. I think he was becoming distrustful of John's judgment of things.

ARGOSY: Of course, you've been described time and again, despite what you've revealed here, as the master of "dirty tricks." How do you react to that?

COLSON: I've read a hundred stories. Like everything else in this whole bizarre time, part true, part untrue, most in between, and some totally false. I never heard of [Donald] Segretti until his picture appeared in the *Washington Post*. I knew nothing about the Watergate in advance and did not prepare the "Enemies List"—John Dean did. A lot of the horrors that I took the heat for, I not only had nothing to do with, I didn't even know about. I can't ever catch up with all the charges, and there's no point in even trying.

ARGOSY: What about the "Gemstone" plan and all its illegalities?

COLSON: Never heard of Gemstone then. People forget that Magruder and I never got along, nor did Mitchell and I. We were heads of opposing camps.

ARGOSY: It feels like there must have been an incredible, baroque power struggle going on in the White House—if people were doing all these weird things behind each other's backs.

COLSON: I suspect that every White House has been like that, where rival factions are vying for power. It was that way in the Kennedy years, and probably it's going on now between the [Bob] Hartman and [Donald] Rumsfeld people.

ARGOSY: Did a lot of what happened in the Nixon years come out of the aura surrounding the Kent State shootings, the fear of domestic violence in this country?

COLSON: It sure did. There was a legitimate fear about whether we could really hold the country together. And this led to distorted views of things and lots of excesses. It grew out of the insecurities we had about the country and the government when we came to power.

ARGOSY: How did Gerald Ford wind up as Nixon's vice-president?

COLSON: I don't honestly know. I didn't write about this in my book, because it would have been unfair of me to speculate. I think he was chosen because Nixon figured he was good enough to hold the job and get confirmed, but not good enough for the Congress to ever want to put him in as president. I think he was picked as impeachment insurance.

ARGOSY: How do you compare his performance as president with Nixon's?

COLSON: As a convicted felon, I can't vote this year. I have the luxury of doing other things than politics.

ARGOSY: What about Nelson Rockefeller? How do you see his role in the report on CIA domestic activities?

COLSON: Well, it was a whitewash. And I don't know what his role was. The question is his relationship with Kissinger. But I don't want to speculate.

ARGOSY: Are you still in touch with many of the men you worked with in the White House?

COLSON: Yes.

ARGOSY: Are there any you consider to be enemies or to whom you aren't speaking at present?

COLSON: No. I've tried to heal as many wounds as possible.

ARGOSY: What about John Dean, why did he tell everything to the Senate?

COLSON: Partly to save his neck, partly in conscience.

ARGOSY: And have you stayed in touch with him, too?

COLSON: We were in prison together. You put the past behind you when you're just a couple of cons. I've become friends with Dean again. We don't talk about a lot of things. I believe what's missing in our society is the spirit of forgiveness. I've forgiven Dean and he's forgiven me. We can look at one another now as two human beings trying to rebuild our lives.



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ARGOSY: What about Hunt, have you had communication with him?

COLSON: I wouldn't want to say. I've had communication with a lot of people, trying to help them spiritually.

ARGOSY: And Richard Nixon?

COLSON: We are still in touch. He believes he was set up. He'd love to know why. And he's very depressed by what's continued to happen to the country.

ARGOSY: Do you think he would ever go back into political life?

COLSON: I don't know where he would go, and I don't think he would.

ARGOSY: And you?

COLSON: I can't possibly conceive of any circumstances.

ARGOSY: So as you look back on Watergate, what did it all mean?

COLSON: It hasn't done much good yet. Out of the 71 recommendations to the Ervin committee, not one has been enacted—except a campaign finance law which reduced the statute of limitations from five to three years for members of Congress on violations of the corrupt practices act, saving them all from being prosecuted for 1972 violations. That's just bunk as far as reform is concerned. And I think this process of exposing ev-

Hoover had something on everybody. Nobody could get to be president without the FBI having something on him."



everything, and nothing being sacred, is a direct result of Watergate, and kind of sad. There's no end to it, until you've torn down everything there is.

ARGOSY: Do you think some institutions, like the CIA, need to be torn down?

COLSON: Yes, but it's two separate issues. Something does need to be done, but the process that's going on is unhealthy. Let's straighten it out and get on with the business of running a clean intelligence operation.

ARGOSY: How else would you get at it?

COLSON: If you had a president who was willing to do the right thing, he could do it himself without causing Congress to drag it all through the mud. If the aim of the people on the Hill was to reform the CIA, that I would rejoice over. But if the aim is simply more of this masochistic process of tearing ourselves apart, with confidence in the country and government gradually eroding, then that's bad.

ARGOSY: What about your book? Will it go deeply into Watergate and all the issues we've touched upon?

COLSON: Well, it's partly about Watergate, obviously. You can't tell the story of what happened to me in the last few years without talking about that. It's a lot about prison, the agony of being a Watergate defendant and the decision I had to make to plead guilty. It's a story really of my conversion to acceptance of Jesus Christ. I've written it, hoping it will be an uplifting book—to help other men find meaning in life. I'd like to think that out of all of Watergate, there could come a redeeming message.

ARGOSY: Can you tell us briefly how your religious conversion happened?

COLSON: It's a very complicated story. After the '72 elections, I experienced a period when I felt a certain inner deadness. I was returning to private life, was beginning to wonder what life was all about, and I had a very dear friend who'd had a conversion during the four years I was in the White House. He helped me look at what was happening in a very dark period of my life: he showed me how to find a relationship with God through Christ. It has been the most beautiful experience ever.

ARGOSY: From a religious standpoint, how do you see these times? Are they prophesied?

COLSON: Yes, I think so. From a theological standpoint, I can see a lot of signs of end times, when things go into tribulation, before the coming of Christ. Only God, of course, knows the timing period. I see it as a time of real emptiness in the country. I believe the only thing that will bring America back is a spiritual revival. We have to go back in utter humility to what we were in the beginning—a nation under God. We're without moorings today and I don't think man can change it. Only God can. ■

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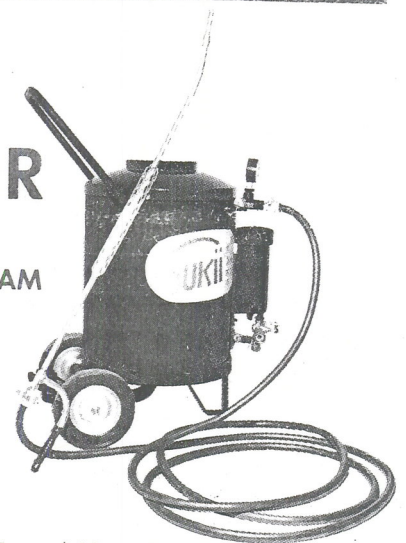
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