

Nixon Believed Mitchell Innocent, Colson Says

Washington

Former White House special counsel Charles W. Colson says that late last January, and again in February and March, he warned President Nixon that he must force former Attorney General John W. Mitchell to admit that he had played a role in planning the Watergate burglary.

However, Colson, one of Mr. Nixon's closest political confidantes, says that as late as mid-March, the President told him that he did not believe that Mitchell or any of his senior aides were guilty and that, with specific reference to Mitchell, he would make a scapegoat of an "innocent person."

(Colson himself has been named often in testimony as having been aware of the Watergate burglary plans, and as having participated in numerous "dirty trick" operations during the 1972 campaign.)

(The testimony had come from convicted Watergate conspirator James McCord, deputy campaign director Jeb Magruder and Fred LaRue, an ex-White House aide.)

LIFE

Colson said that on the basis of daily conversations with Mr. Nixon last year and frequent consultations this year, before and after returning to private law practice on March 1, "I would stake my life" on the President's disclaimers, "only because I can't think of anything that he and I didn't talk about openly."

William Hundley, Mitchell's lawyer, responded to the Colson interview by saying, "the whole tenor of Mr. Colson's allegations against Mr. Mitchell is untrue. When Mr. Mitchell lays out his story before the proper forum, the untruthfulness of Mr. Colson's version will be clear."

Colson, in defense of the President, charges that oth-

er Nixon loyalists, notably H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, formerly the President's top aides, diverted important information about the Watergate affair from their chief and may have been participants in the coverup.

In early February, Colson has told federal prosecutors, he informed Haldeman that he was worried about possible perjury and obstruction of justice at the first Watergate trial, held last January. Payments by Nixon associates to the Watergate defendants could be construed as criminal "hush money," he remembers telling Haldeman. But he has testified that Haldeman responded that he knew about the payments and was not concerned.

It was at the end of January, after Mr. Nixon's second inauguration, that Colson says he felt "deep concern" about official involvement and spoke to the President about it. He said he had told the President that "if Mitchell and Magruder were involved they had to step forward and take the consequences."

Mr. Nixon's answer, as Colson related it, was, "get me the evidence and I'll act on it."

MITCHELL

On February 14, the day before Colson began a semi-official trip to Moscow, his last White House assignment, he says he still lacked evidence but told the President again, "you've got to call Mitchell in and have

him accept his responsibility."

The President said, as Colson recalls the conversation, "I want to get to the bottom of this and to get Watergate over with, but not at the expense of making an innocent person a scapegoat."

Colson commented this week:

"I realized I had gone too far, seeming to suggest that John Mitchell be thrown to the wolves. But the President's objection to that, on grounds that Mitchell said he was innocent, leads you to draw one of two conclusions. Either the President knew things that he wasn't telling me, or he didn't know any more than I knew. I would stake my life on the latter. Our relationship was open enough that I don't believe the President would put on an act. He was not acting on February 14."

Yet it is also Colson's testimony that Mr. Nixon was neither a harsh nor persistent questioner of his own staff members after they fell under suspicion in the Watergate affair. Shortly after the Watergate burglary, when Colson's name was being linked to the burglary in the headlines, Colson recalled that the President wanted more to reassure him than to examine him.

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