

Colson: Nixon Suspected CIA

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In the days before he walked into a federal courtroom to enter a guilty plea early this month, Charles W. Colson made a startling series of allegations about President Nixon's fears of a Central Intelligence Agency involvement in the Watergate scandal.

Colson, once among the President's most trusted White House aides, gave his account during two bizarre evening confessionals with Washington private investigator Richard L. Bast at Bast's home in McLean, Va.

In the course of the conversation Colson told Bast that President Nixon confided to him in January that he was on the verge of dismissing Central Intelligence Agency Director William E. Colby because of suspicions that the agency was deeply implicated in Watergate.

He also told Bast that the President was finally dissuaded from launching a full-scale investigation of the intelligence community by Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr.

Colson portrayed the President as a virtual captive in the Oval Office of suspected high-ranking conspirators in the intelligence circles against whom he dared not act for fear of international and domestic political repercussions.

The former White House aide told Bast of a January phone call from President Nixon after which Colson characterized Mr. Nixon as being "out of his mind over the CIA and Pentagon roles" in Watergate.

Colson's underlying suspicion, as expressed to Bast, was that the CIA, rather than the White House plumbers with whom he was associated, planned the break-ins at Watergate and the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. The motive: to discredit the President's inner circle of advisers.

Colson indicated that the CIA was concerned that it was being bypassed on policy matters and channels of information bearing on national security.

This could well be the main line of Colson's forthcoming

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testimony to the House Judiciary Committee and the Watergate special prosecutor although he has yet to substantiate it with specific evidence.

Colson first went to Bast on May 13 on the recommendation of mutual acquaintances to discuss the possibility of a private investigation of the CIA's role in Watergate. He returned for another session beside Bast's lushly landscaped swimming pool on May 31—three days before he went before U.S. District Court Judge Gerhard A. Gesell to deliver his guilty plea to a charge of obstructing justice.

Bast, who has largely retired from private investigations to conduct a highly speculative commodity futures fund, and other business interests, disclosed the substance of the conversations on the basis of his records and an understanding with Colson that Bast would be free to speak about it after Colson was sentenced.

Colson was sentenced last Friday to a one- to three-year jail term and \$5,000 fine.

Watergate investigators said that Colson had told them about some of the same allegations he made to Bast. Some of those charges, they said, are being looked into.

Haig and Kissinger declined through spokesmen to comment on the Colson account.

One of the most detailed assertions Colson made to Bast concerned a March 1, 1973, memorandum by a high-ranking CIA official dealing with the agency's relationship to the Washington public relations firm of Robert R. Mullen & Co.

Mullen is the firm which employed Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr. after he left the CIA and before he was hired as a member of the White House "plumbers" unit.

Colson said he was allowed to read the 25-page memorandum drafted by Eric W. Eisenstadt, chief of the central cover staff of CIA's clandestine directorate, last December at the home of Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), vice chairman of the Senate Watergate committee.

The existence of the classified memorandum has been confirmed by Watergate investigators. Colson summarized the contents of the Eisenstadt memo for Bast as follows:

• Robert Mullen, founder of the public relations firm, complained that former CIA Director Richard M. Helms "twisted my arm hard" to hire Hunt.

• Former CIA Director James R. Schlesinger, who succeeded Helms, now Defense Secretary, endorsed a suggestion by Eisenstadt that Mullen and Robert Bennett, an associate in Mullen's firm be permitted to read FBI and CIA memoranda on witnesses who should not be interviewed in the Watergate case. The Mullen firm was directed to "lie if necessary" in denying any association with the CIA, Bast said he was told.

The Senate Watergate committee was informed of the times and places of at least 300 break-ins conducted by convicted Watergate burglar Eugenio Martinez.

• Bennett, the son of Sen. Wallace Bennett (R-Utah), bragged to the CIA of favorable news treatment in the national media, including Newsweek and The Washington Post, for stories he planted to discredit the President's top White House advisers.

• A prominent Charlotte, N.C., lawyer with CIA connections reported after a plane ride with Sen. Sam E. Ervin Jr. (D-N. C.), chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, that Ervin would steer clear of CIA involvement in Watergate.

(The lawyer named by Colson told The Washington Post he was indeed a friend of Ervin but denied either suggesting or receiving assurances described by Colson.)

• Bennett reported to the CIA that "through his father, Senator Wallace Bennett, he could handle the Ervin committee if the CIA could handle E. Howard Hunt." (Robert Bennett denies having told that to the CIA.)

Colson told Bast that he made the unusual approach to the private investigator in order to get proof of the extent of CIA's Watergate role on behalf of himself and H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman, John N. Mitchell, Robert C. Mardian, Gordon Strachan and Kenneth Parkinson, defendants in the Watergate cover-up conspiracy case.

He also told the detective he wanted information on who was "financing" John W. Dean III and also a closer look at the circumstances of the plane crash which took the life of Hunt's wife, Dorothy, in De-

cember, 1972.

In explaining his motives in seeking the investigation, Bast related, Colson said: "I'm interested in getting out of my problems but I'm more interested in straightening out what's going on in the country right now."

The former White House aide who has recently proclaimed himself a witness for Christ spoke with high emotion of his concern over the CIA. "If this happens with us, it could happen to any President," he told Bast.

But Colson acknowledged that "what is exculpatory for me is if I am able to expose the fact that there was a major plot by the CIA and they were responsible for the cover-ups throughout the investigation."

In the early days of the Watergate scandal President Nixon, through Haldeman and Ehrlichman, sought to delay the FBI's investigation of Nixon campaign donations funds funneled through Mexico on grounds that it might expose covert CIA activity and imperil national security. The President later acknowledged that his fears were groundless as far as the Mexican funds were concerned.

Bast said he would, under certain conditions, consider undertaking an investigation of alleged illegal CIA influence directed at the White House.

Those conditions, he said, included the authorization of grand jury subpoena power, full presidential backing and the appointment of an additional special prosecutor. But Colson found no takers at the White House, as far as could be determined, though Colson told Bast the President was "enthusiastic" about the idea.

During his two conversations, Bast said Colson portrayed the CIA as a "frightening" power operating with no congressional or executive branch control.

He disparaged the chairmen of the House and Senate CIA oversight subcommittees and told Bast that "almost everywhere you turn" the CIA has its "tentacles." Colson indicated his belief in the pervasiveness of the CIA encouraged him to ask acquaintances to recommend an incorruptible investigator.

Bast, 41, a child of Washington's Southeast blue-collar district, developed a reputation for flamboyance, toughness and blunt talk during his climb into diversified business activity from the ranks of private investigators. ("My fees start at \$100 an hour, I accept one case a year only if I find it interesting," he told Colson). Bast told Colson at the start of their conversations that the Nixon adminis-



CHARLES W. COLSON



WILLIAM E. COLBY

... ex-aide said Nixon was on verge of firing CIA Director Colby last January.

tration "tore the Constitution or shreds."

"I'm not saying that's not true," he quoted Colson as replying. "But I'm not sure that the guys who are going after us now aren't doing more disservice to the country," Colson

was quoted.

Bast said he told Colson that "perhaps your whole crew maybe belongs in jail" but not if "they (the special prosecutor's staff) violated your constitutional rights."

"They've been violated several times," Colson replied

glumly. He offered no specifics but commented on the overwhelming strength of Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski's prosecutorial staff against an individual defendant.