

# Nixon's Night Out at

By Charles W. Colson

THE JOB OF a President's assistant was not concerned exclusively with matters of national and international policy. I remember a night in early October, 1971, when I was working late with Budget Director George Shultz, preparing for delicate negotiations with union leaders over wage-and-price-control policies. By 9 p.m. we had papers strewn all over Shultz's office.

The President had just finished a television address to the nation on the economy, which we had watched. I expected his call. He always wanted reactions from me and it was a part of my job to be on the alert for this and anything else 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

A few minutes after 9 the phone rang. "Well, what did you think of it, Chuck? How did you like the point I made about public cooperation? Remember, that's what you were so concerned about." We rambled on. About 4 minutes into the conversation, he asked, "Where is Eugene Ormandy tonight?"

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*Colson was special counsel to President Nixon from 1969 to 1973. This is an excerpt from his book, "Born Again," (c) 1976 by Charles W. Colson, published by Chosen Books Inc. and distributed by Fleming H. Revell Co., Old Tappan, N.J.*

"I don't know," I answered, wondering what the conductor of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra had to do with an economic speech.

The President explained that Julie had been to the Kennedy Center a few days earlier for an Ormandy performance which she highly recommended. "Find out if Ormandy is still at the Center and call me back," he asked.

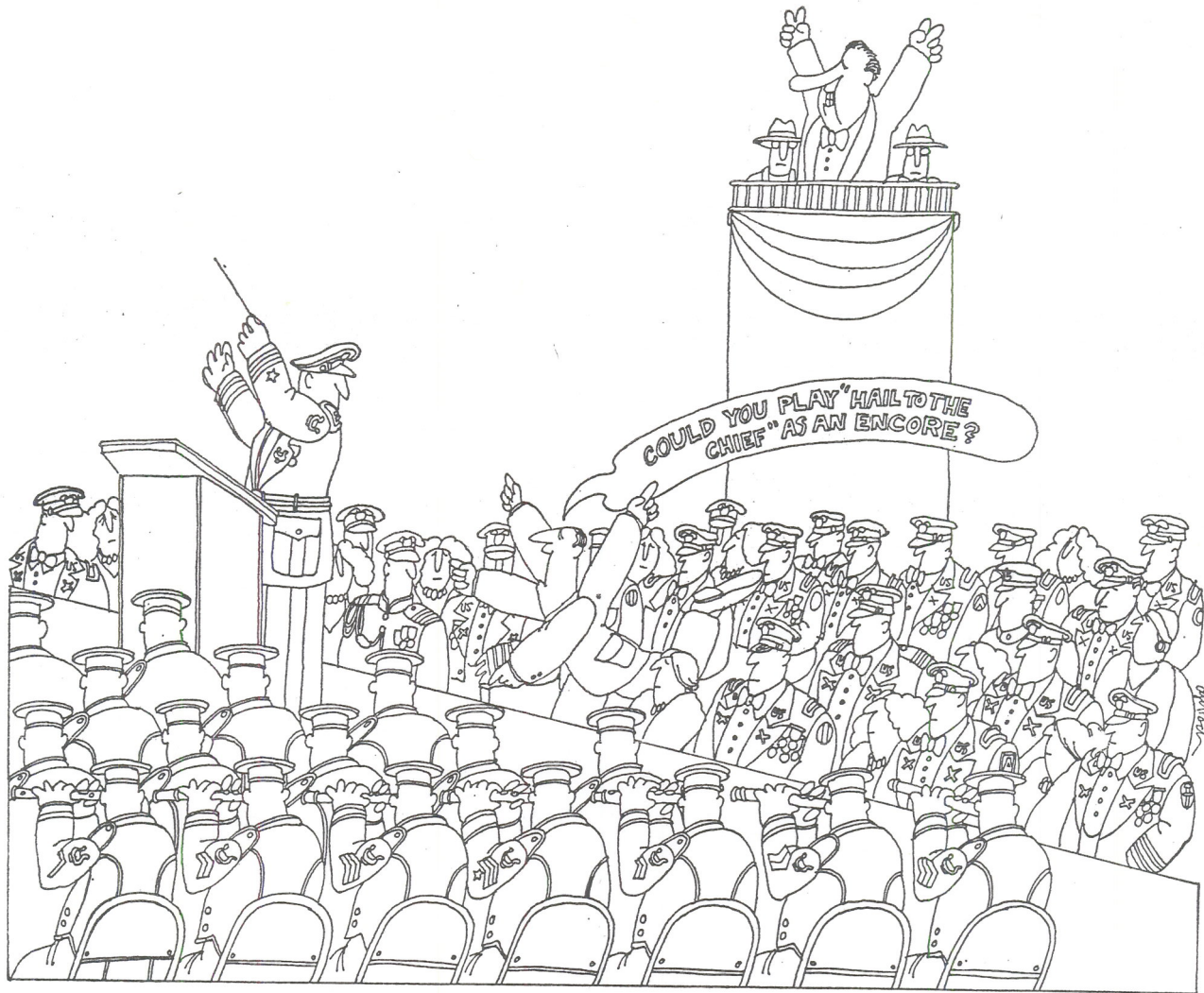
*Simple enough*, I thought. But through the White House operators I discovered that staff members who usually handled such details had left for the day. Shultz's secretary, Barbara Otis, began thumbing through newspapers. There were performances listed for the two other theaters in the Kennedy Center—the Opera House and the Eisenhower Theater— but none for the Concert Hall nor any mention of Eugene Ormandy.

I was becoming a trifle concerned; 4 or 5 minutes had passed and the President would be getting restless. Recognizing my distress, Shultz had abandoned the complex option papers that were spread out on his desk. All three of us—the director of the Office of Management and Budget, his secretary and the President's special counsel—were flipping through newspapers and weekly entertainment magazines.

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## the Concert



By Cameron Gerlach for The Washington Post



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White House operators, who had never failed us in reaching anyone, anywhere, anytime, were frantically now trying every conceivable number at the Kennedy Center: backstage phones, listings for the manager's office, emergency numbers—all to no avail. (We learned later that the Center did not answer its phones after 9 p.m. when its box offices closed.)

Six minutes had elapsed since the President's call. As I feared would happen, he called again. He was very pleasant. "Just wondered if you have found out whether Ormandy is at the Kennedy Center?"

"Not yet, sir. We're still searching."

He made one of those indistinguishable muttering noises, cleared his throat and suggested I call him back when I had the information.

I was getting nowhere in Shultz's office and decided to return to my own. My resourceful secretary, Joan Hall, would surely be able to handle this. Joan came up with a reasonable idea. She placed a call through the White House switchboard for Eugene Ormandy at his home in Philadelphia.

"Mr. Ormandy, this is the White House calling."

"Really."

"Yes, the President is trying to find out if you are at the Kennedy Center tonight."

Long pause. "No. I am here at home reading a book."

"Oh. Well, thank you. Sorry to have disturbed you."

Joan hung up a bit sheepishly. I have often wondered what thoughts went through Mr. Ormandy's mind that evening about the President, and how well we were managing the nation's affairs.

ALWAYS BEFORE, in handling sensitive, special tasks for the President, I had remained cool. And never before had I been given such a simple request, although anything to do with his travel had always been handled by someone else. But in those few moments after his second call—it was now about 9:25 p.m.—I found myself on the verge of panic. What if he decided to go? Oh, no! How would I handle it?

At this point Patty (Mrs. Colson) called. "When are you coming home?" she asked.

"Get your copy of the newspaper and find out what's playing at the Kennedy Center," I shouted into the telephone. "Don't ask me any questions, just find out and call me. I'll explain later."

I don't think she even replied. Patty would assume the worst, I knew. She had been urging me to take a rest. Meanwhile, Joan continued making calls to the social office, the newspapers, the military aide's office and elsewhere, trying to find out what in fact was playing at the Concert Hall. Harried, frus-

trated, I decided to send a message to the President through Manola, his valet.

"Manola, this is Mr. Colson."

"Yes, sir. Do you want to speak to the President?"

"No, no. Has he—er—retired for the night?"

"No, Mr. Colson. He is walking around the Lincoln Room. He seems restless, sir."

"Manola, please take him a note. Tell him that Mr. Ormandy—Yes, O R M A N D Y—is not playing at the Kennedy Center."

I hoped that the note from Manola would satisfy the President. After all, it was now 9:30 p.m., really too late to go anywhere. Maybe—I hoped—he would just decide to read a good book. But it was not to be.

At 9:35 p.m. the President called again, his irritation quite evident in the tone of his voice. "Well, Chuck, you found out that Ormandy wasn't at the Kennedy Center, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's very good, Chuck, very good," he replied. There was a short pause and then came the question I dreaded, "Do you suppose, Chuck, you might find out what is playing there?"

I explained to him that none of the papers had been any help to us.

"Have you thought about calling the Kennedy Center, or should I?" the President asked, deliberately measuring each word.

I told him that I had tried that, but the phones didn't answer, that I would keep trying and call him back.

He said, "That is very good. You do that," and hung up.

By now my tie was down and I was perspiring. My assistant, Dick Howard, was also in the office calling friends, seeking their help.

Then Joan signaled me. She had the head waitress from the Kennedy Center restaurant, La Grand Scene, on the phone. The young lady, Raquel Ramirez, was Spanish and did not speak very good English. Would I talk with her? Yes, I sure would.

"Miss Ramirez, my name is Charles Colson—Colson—COLSON. Yes, I am Special Counsel to the President. The President of the United States, that is—Yes, that's right—Mr. Nixon."

I loosened my tie further.

"Now, Miss Ramirez, the President would like to come to the Concert Hall tonight. But we cannot seem to discover what is playing there. Would you be kind enough to walk over to the Concert Hall and find out what is going on?"

"The President wants me to go over to the Concert Hall?" a wee voice said incredulously.

Carefully, I went through it again. "I'll wait on the line until you come back," I said desperately.

La Grande Scene is on the fourth floor of the mammoth building at the far south end. Fortunately—the only break so far in the evening—the Concert Hall is also on the south end.

For some inexplicable reason, that waitress believed me. Within a few minutes, she was back, explaining in broken English that the Concert Hall seemed to be filled with military officers in dress uniforms and a



military band was playing. I asked her for one other small favor: to go backstage, find someone who looked like he might be in authority, and tell him that the President might be coming and to make necessary arrangements.

With this clue, Joan reached the duty officer at the Pentagon and learned that this was a formal black-tie affair for senior officers, plus a performance by the four military bands. With a sigh of relief I called the President at 9:53 p.m. to tell him it was a military concert, private, by invitation only.

These are the same bands you hear at the White House, sir; I don't think you are missing anything. These bands will come and play for you anytime you like."

"Marvelous," he replied to my consternation. "That is just what I feel like hearing tonight, but I'm not dressed. If it's black-tie, I'll have to change."

"Do you really want to go to all that trouble — I mean, you must be tired," I suggested meekly. I should have known better. That was the surest way to guarantee that he would go.

"Have the car at the South Entrance in 5 minutes, Chuck."

I sat for a long instant in frozen horror. How did I start this process by which the President could have a night on the town? There were Secret Service men to notify and the problem of carrying that vital little black briefcase housing the nuclear-alert device. Doctors, the press, radio hookups. For the President to walk across the street involved assembling a small army. I'd never had anything to do with arranging his travel.

Fortunately, my assistant had been an advance man for a year and a half. He called W-16, the Secret Service control office in the White House basement. He would take care of getting the President to Kennedy Center, Dick told me as he pushed me out the door. "You get down to the Concert Hall and let someone know that the President is coming."

Dashing out the door like a scalded bird, I jumped into a White House limousine which Joan had called. "Come on, step on it. The President is right behind us," I shouted to the driver, forgetting to give him directions. The driver looked startled, then suspicious; for a moment I thought he was trying to get a whiff of my breath. Finally, when I told him our destination, we shot out the driveway.

As we sped down Virginia Avenue toward the Kennedy Center at 70 miles an hour, I could listen on the two-way radio to the frantic calls from W-16 summoning agents back to the White House, calling for the President's car and an accompanying Secret Service car. All but two agents had retired for the night, I later learned.

A sudden and sickening thought: *What if the Concert Hall performance was already over?* I had forgotten to check that. A cringing sensation began to rise

from the bottom of my stomach as I imagined the President arriving at the Kennedy Center only to find the crowd pouring out. We had been unable, except through the very accommodating waitress at La Grande Scene, to let anyone know that the President even might be on his way. Would they believe her? As I thought about it, I became even more mortified. Why should they believe her? I wouldn't have.

When we arrived at the southern entrance to the Kennedy Center, I was relieved at least to see one of the President's own Secret Service agents there with a radio plug in his ear. The professionals had taken over! Backstage were a collection of stagehands, a tall and very distinguished man standing in the shadows, and the red-tunicked conductor of the Marine Band. Cheerily I gave him the news: "The President is on his way to listen to your concert."

He turned pale. "It's too late. Tell him not to come. All four service bands are now playing together on the stage. It is the final medley. In six minutes the program will be over."

"The President will be here any moment. You'll have to play something. Play the medley over again," I said firmly.

Marines follow orders. The conductor took a full breath, stared at me for an instant, still ashen, then turned and marched onto the stage. He began whispering into the ear of the Army conductor. It was like watching a silent movie.

The Marine nodded his head up and down vehemently.

The Army musician shook his head stonily from side to side.

More whispers. The same thing all over again. One head bobbing up and down—the other shaking side to side.

Suddenly, there was another flurry of whispering. Then the Army conductor began nodding his head up and down. I sighed in relief.

As the pantomime onstage was going on, I peered around the curtain into the cavernous, elegantly decorated Concert Hall. Men were in dark blue dress uniforms, bedecked with gold braid and colorful ribbons; women were in long flowing gowns. The reflection of the stage lights on the glittering braid against the darkened backdrop of the hall was a magnificent sight. Then I began to think about the puzzlement that would soon sweep over the crowded hall when the exact same medley was replayed.

The Marine conductor was now backstage with his colleagues from the Navy and Air Force, working out additional numbers that would extend the program another half hour. It was then I recognized the tall distinguished man nearby. He was William McCormick Blair, director of the Kennedy Center, former ambassador to Denmark during the Kennedy administration, married to Danish nobility and a prominent Washington socialite. He, along with much of the Washington establishment, viewed us Nixon men as uncultured intruders at his Center.

I introduced myself to Blair, who dilated his nostrils and said, "This is highly irregular, you know." I explained that the President had a regular box at the Kennedy Center. It was the Presidential Box and the President's prerogative to use it whenever he wanted.

"I have had a very clear understanding with the



White House that the President will always give us 24 hours' notice before he attends," Blair said testily.

I decided I didn't have time to stand there arguing and was afraid, in my distraught condition, I might commit some violent act—like punching him in the nose. I did think about it, but only for a fleeting moment.

**E**XPECTING THE PRESIDENT at any moment, I sped back down the passageway to the double fire doors which led back into the main lobby. I was running and there was no point in slowing down. So I hit the two bar-type release handles at full speed. *Pow!* The doors exploded open. Barely a foot away was a startled President and an agitated Secret Service man who had started for his gun. I had nearly knocked the President down!

"Well—Chuck!"

Recovering my composure, I noticed that the President was wearing a red smoking jacket with black lapels. I started to tell him he had forgotten to change, but wisely thought better of it. "Everything is in order," I said breathlessly. "You can go directly to your box."

"Where is the box?" the Secret Service agent asked.

"I'll lead the way," I said nonchalantly, not knowing the location but hoping that I could bluff it through.

Halfway down the long passageway leading to the back of the hall, the President turned and said "Have you made arrangements for them to play the you-know-what, Chuck?" He tried to slough it off with a wave of his hand, not wanting to come right out and

say, "Hail to the Chief." According to protocol, it had to be played when he entered the hall. Once more I sped backstage to find my new friend, the Marine conductor, grateful that the Secret Service agent would now have to find the entrance to the President's box.

The Marine bandleader did not seem happy to see me. "Watch for the President. When he appears in his box, have the band play 'Hail to the Chief,'" I panted.

The conductor looked started. "The four bands are still onstage. They have never played 'Hail to the Chief' together, and I don't see how they could do it without rehearsing."

I must have looked on the verge of apoplexy because he raised his hand. "Wait a moment." Another consultation. More pantomime. Then he was back. "We'll have the Marine Band play it alone."

Back down the long hallway I loped until I found the President's box. To my relief, the Secret Service agent was guarding the door. The President was stand-

ing alone in the small anteroom between the open entrance hall of the mezzanine and his box. It is a lovely room with red-velvet-covered walls, a private bath and a refrigerator.

The scene is forever engraved in my consciousness. The President was standing facing the wall, about a foot away from it. He was staring into the red velvet, his arms hanging limply by his side in the most dejected posture I have ever witnessed. I imagined that he was either counting to 10 or else repeating over and over to himself, "Colson must go—Colson must go."

I went into the box, brought out General Haig, who was using it that evening, opened the door wide so the Marine conductor would get the signal, and ushered the President in. The Marine Band then struck up "Hail to the Chief" and the President began waving to the cheering crowd.

Slowly I returned to my waiting limousine. My legs were weak. On the way home I advised the Secret Service command post by radio that the President was in his box and they should do whatever they normally do to take the President home after the performance. I also left word that if he were to ask for me—a possibility I considered quite remote—I would be at my residence.

At home, halfway through the second Scotch, it did occur to me that I should let someone other than the Secret Service know that the President was at the Kennedy Center. I called Press Secretary Ron Ziegler and crisply gave him the news.

"The President couldn't be there," he said stiffly. "Otherwise I would have been notified."

The next day Haldeman summoned me to his office and dressed me down for breaking every rule in the book. "You know, Chuck, this isn't funny. You could have put the President's life in jeopardy. The Secret Service wasn't prepared. It was a thoroughly stupid thing for you to do."

I agreed it certainly had been stupid, but I asked Bob what I should do if it ever happened in the future.

"Just tell him he can't go, that's all. He rattles his cage all the time. You can't let him out." While I pondered this startling metaphor, the usually stern Haldeman softened. "The President enjoyed himself and it came out well. I guess that's what counts."

The next time the President called me, to my relief it had to do with the war in Vietnam, inflation and negotiations with Russia.