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Charles W. Colson, accompanied by his wife, talks to reporters outside courthouse about why he pleaded guilty.

Colson's Plea Worries White House

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The decision of former special presidential counsel Charles W. Colson to plead guilty to a felony yesterday created considerable consternation at top levels of the White House, according to informed sources.

Presidential aides immediately began intense efforts to learn what information Colson—Mr. Nixon's former top political aide—had agreed to provide the Watergate prosecutors, the sources reported.

By last night, sources familiar with Colson's version of events—including per-

sons respectively close to Colson, the White House and the ongoing government investigations—agreed that Colson can provide testimony that will both buttress and damage aspects of President Nixon's Watergate defense.

Most damaging, several sources suggested, is information from Colson that suggests that the President was aware of the Watergate cover-up three months before Mr. Nixon has acknowledged he knew.

Specifically, the sources said, Colson is prepared to testify that he personally warned the President of the existence of an organized

cover-up in December, 1972, and January, 1973. The President has maintained that he first learned of the cover-up in March, 1973, from John Dean III, who was then White House counsel.

Colson's explanation of the President's response to such warnings would indicate that Mr. Nixon at various times showed both "an interest in finding out the truth and keeping the lid on," in the words of one government source.

Another source, however, said that any testimony by Colson would show that the President made a concerted attempt "not to learn the facts," and instead tried to

isolate himself from knowledge of the cover-up.

At the White House yesterday, officials said they were particularly concerned about the totality of Colson's knowledge of the secret workings of the White House and by the virtually unlimited access to the President he enjoyed as Mr. Nixon's special counsel.

Accordingly, they said, Colson might be able to supply Watergate prosecutors with a much more complete accounting of Mr. Nixon's role in Watergate-related areas—including the ITT controversy, political contri-

WATERGATE, From A1

butions from the dairy industry and other subjects of investigation.

Associates of Colson insist that Colson is innocent of the charges against him in the Watergate cover-up and the 1971 break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

But the associates said that Colson felt guilt about the campaign he had conducted against Ellsberg. It was only to the charge of obstructing that prosecution that Colson pleaded guilty yesterday.

All the sources said that Colson's testimony about the President would center on a series of conversations he had with Mr. Nixon about the Watergate case. On some occasions, the sources said that Colson would testify that the President asked for the facts, saying that he wanted the truth, as Mr. Nixon himself has contended.

On other occasions, "it was more in terms of 'tell it to me, so I'll know how bad it is' rather than an attempt to make sure the government prosecutors were given the full details," one source said yesterday.

In an agreement with the Watergate prosecutors that followed a week of plea bargaining, Colson promised to cooperate with all ongoing government investigations arising from the Watergate scandal, including the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry.

However, several sources reported that the prosecutors are initially taking a skeptical view of information from Colson pending further investigation.

"There is some evidence that he is cooperating fully," one government source said yesterday. "I'd like to believe it, but I'm very skeptical after all that has happened. . . the nearly two years in which he protested his innocence so vehemently."

Sources close to Colson, however, insisted that the

former White House official has always told the truth in asserting his innocence in the Watergate bugging and its cover-up, and cautioned against expectations that he will broadly implicate the President in illegal activities.

"His basic story has never changed," said one person close to Colson.

"He will say that there was never any offer of executive clemency made to Howard Hunt, for example, and that he and the President never considered that road."

The government sources said that the Watergate prosecutors have not yet decided whether Colson will be used as a witness in any of the Watergate-related trials.

The sources said that prosecutors will begin lengthy discussions with Colson in the next day or two to determine if any of it is relevant to any of the ongoing investigations or prosecutions.

Colson then could be called before one of the several Watergate grand juries or could appear as a witness before the House Judiciary Committee if his testimony was deemed relevant to the impeachment investigation.

The same source suggested that a key to Colson's role in Watergate and the cover-up was a desire to isolate himself from any criminal activity by "trying not to learn the facts."

Thus, the source said, "Colson was always throwing people out of his office when they tried to tell him what was going on. Or he'd send them to John Dean."

The same demeanor, the source suggested, extended to Colson's Watergate dealings with President Nixon. "He was interested in protecting himself and the President—he tried to keep both of them isolated."

Sen. Harold E. Hughes (D-Iowa), who has acted as spiritual mentor in Colson's recent awakening to Christ, outlined yesterday in an interview the steps that led to

Colson's decision to plead guilty.

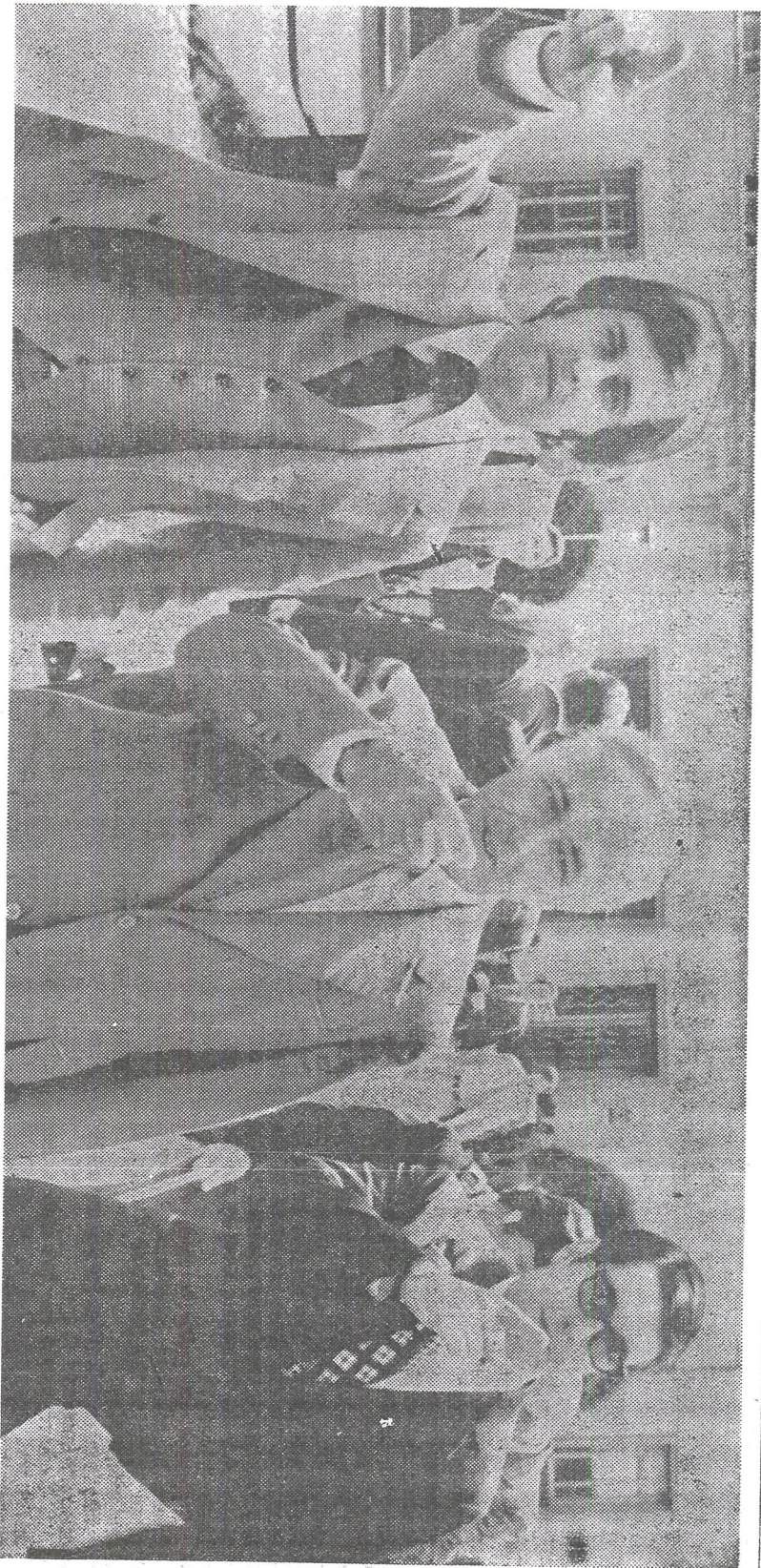
"It started about a week or 10 days ago," Hughes said, "when Chuck came and started talking to some of us" in an informal prayer group.

Hughes said the final decision was discussed as late as 1:30 a.m. Monday at a meeting at Colson's McLean home with Hughes and three other members of the prayer group.

"The guilty plea is a result of his conversion to Christ," Hughes said. "The work of Christ on a man's conscience. He always wanted to tell the truth . . . He said he was not guilty to what he was charged with and he went in search of what he had done that was criminal."

Hughes has spent dozens of hours in consultation with Colson.

"I'm convinced that he intends to tell all he knows to the appropriate authority," Hughes said. "It's not a matter of purging himself—he



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Nixon lawyers disagree on where their car is parked as they leave court. They are, from left, Michael Sterlacci, James St. Clair and Jerome Murphy.

wants to help his country. I believe he has much to tell, an important story . . . I don't know any of the specifics. I have deliberately

stayed away from them.

"When he accepted Christ, full truthfulness was the inevitable result," Hughes

In a recent television interview Hughes had said that Colson was "a baby in Christ" because of Colson's apparent unwillingness to

talk about all his transgressions.

Yesterday Hughes said that Colson's guilty plea shows "a sudden maturity

. . . I'm very proud of him."

"Chuck is not out to get anyone," Hughes added. "If the chips fall on someone's yard that's the way it is."