

Colson's Complaint

Back in May, when the law was closing in on him, a desperate Chuck Colson was sweating bullets. And Jesus aside, he still figured the best defense was a good no-holds-barred offense. But this time he called a flying wedge up the middle—he tried to plant a self-serving conspiracy theory to rival the most paranoid ravings of the CIA-crazed National Labor Caucus. Namely, that the CIA through E. Howard Hunt had set up all of the Watergate horrors to "get" Nixon, Colson and rest of the White House gang.

The bare bones of Colson's theory, laid out in two interviews with private investigator Richard L. Bast (ironically, taped without Colson's knowledge), did make it into print recently. But the convoluted reasoning, as spun out in Colson's own words, was largely ignored, dropped as too manic to merit much direct quotation. Nevertheless, it provides a fascinating glimpse into the baroque workings of the President's hatchetman's mind.

What follows are excerpts from the Bast-Colson conversations held in Bast's home in suburban McLean, Va., on May 13 and 31. (Bast himself is the source of this material, but he does not attest to the truthfulness of any of Colson's statements.)

Colson: "I think it was framed, but I can't prove it. I think the whole Watergate was a setup. . . . As I look back on everything Hunt did, in the White House, it was to bag me or to bag somebody. He had everybody under his thumb by the time he was through."

Bast asks why Nixon does not reveal this plot. Colson: "There's enough evidence to support it . . . but his credibility is zero. I talked to the President about this in January at great length. We talked for two or three hours on a Sunday about this, about his doing just this. He's convinced the CIA is in this up to their eyeballs. He is afraid that if he went public with it, everybody would say, 'Look at Nixon now, what a diversion he's trying to create, what a red herring,' nobody would believe him.

"I'm convinced that Hunt was the CIA vehicle just like this Yeoman Radford was the Joint Chiefs' vehicle. Why they were doing it

or what they were trying to accomplish . . . whether they were in there to knock him off or whether they were in there just to spy and gain information—I don't know the answer to that." And why haven't the prosecutors gone after it?

Colson: "Obviously, if my suspicions are true, that throws the whole Watergate case



E. Howard Hunt: out to bag somebody?

into a cocked hat, and the prosecutors have all known of this stuff. They've not only not touched it, but they've gone out of their way to deflect people from it." And the press?

Colson: "Bob Woodward of the CIA is now subject to total blackmail by them." Bast interrupts to suggest that Colson has misspoken and means Bob Woodward of the Washington Post. Colson corrects himself, then

continues: "They [the CIA] can show how every story that he won the Pulitzer Prize for and got \$2 million on the movies was fed to him by the CIA. That makes him a whore." Colson suggests that the CIA could say, "Mr. Woodward, would you really like to tell the whole story of how you exposed the Watergate? We gave you everything you printed. We can show it. We've got it all in our files. . . . It makes Clifford Irving look like a goddamn saint. You want to be exposed as a whore?"

"You know Seymour Hersh of the New York Times? . . . He and I have become good friends. He's a left-winger and I'm a right-winger and we're pals." In February, said Colson, Hersh had access to some of the documents relating to the CIA involvement in Watergate. "He called Mr. Colby [director of the CIA]. Colby spent two hours with him, confirmed it all. Hersh within half an hour gets a call from his editor, who says 'no story,' and he didn't write it. Dan Rather gets the exclusive that the CIA kept tapes of everything and destroyed them four days after Mansfield requested them. . . . Boy, did they sit on Rather over there after that story."

As a brief epilog, we contacted the three reporters Colson mentions. Here are their comments. Bob Woodward: "I find it deeply regrettable and saddening that Mr. Colson, who has pleaded guilty to smearing Dr. Ellsberg, is still doing the same thing. . . . This is another typically diverting effort [to deflect people's attention from Watergate]."

Dan Rather: Colson is "dead-assed wrong" and "I think he knew he was wrong when he said it. Nobody at CBS ever sits on me not to pursue a story." Rather said he did develop the story to the point where he forced the CIA to admit that they had destroyed documents. "I eventually got to the point," Rather said, "where I thought I was being used in part for Colson's defense and then I made the decision to spend less time on it."

Hersh: "It's horseshit, complete utter nonsense. Colson tried to peddle me that story two months ago. I checked it out and there was no story there. When there's no story, there's nothing to write."

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