

'A Simple Case,' Nixon Told Colson

Hunt Clemency Plan Revealed

11-19-74.
By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Nixon secretly planned to grant executive clemency to Watergate spy E. Howard Hunt Jr. because he knew so much about the scandal, a new White House tape recording showed yesterday.

"Hunt's is a simple case," Mr. Nixon told an aide on Jan. 8, 1973, the day the original Watergate trial started. He suggested that it would be easy to create public sympathy for the move in light of Hunt's family problems.

"We'll build, we'll build that

son of a bitch up like nobody's business," the President predicted confidently to then-White House special counsel Charles W. Colson. Mr. Nixon said that newspaper columnist William F. Buckley Jr.—an old friend of Hunt—might even be enlisted in the publicity campaign.

"We'll have Buckley write a column and say, you know, that he, that he should have clemency, if you've given 18 years of service," the President said emphatically of the former CIA agent. "That's what we'll do."

According to the tape, played at the Watergate cover-up trial here for the first time, Mr. Nixon was far less solicitous of the other defendants at the Watergate break-in trial but Colson assured him that the only one in "a very desperate" position was Hunt.

The vulnerabilities are different," Colson added a few minutes later about all the defendants, except for Watergate spy G. Gordon Liddy. "Hunt and Liddy did the work. The others didn't know any direct information . . ."

See TRIAL, A9, Col. 4

Nixon Planned Grant Of Clemency to Hunt

TRIAL, From A1

"Uh, well, I think I agree," Mr. Nixon replied.

A long-time friend of Colson, Hunt had already warned the White House, in a "Dear Chuck" letter written on New Year's eve, that he had reached the limits of his endurance. Hunt's wife, Dorothy, had been killed in a plane crash on Dec. 8, 1972, and Hunt testified he was looking for assurances that he had not been abandoned.

Hunt also had let it be known through his lawyer, William O. Bittman, that he planned to plead guilty at the break-in trial. Colson, in turn, initially gave veiled assurances to Bittman on Jan. 4, 1973, that clemency could be



E. HOWARD HUNT JR.



CHARLES W. COLSON

. . . Nixon aide Colson discussed Hunt clemency with Nixon.

expected by the following Christmas.

Mr. Nixon seemed fully aware of all this when Colson stepped into the President's suite at the Executive Office Building late in the afternoon of Jan. 8, a few hours after the the break-in trial had started before U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica.

Hunt finally pleaded guilty before Sirica three days later, on Jan. 11, to all the charges that had been lodged against him for the burglary and bugging of Democratic National Committee headquarters on June 17, 1972, here.

In the portion of the Jan. 8 tape played before Sirica at the cover-up trial yesterday, Mr. Nixon opened the discussion by saying that White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman had already briefed him on what Hunt was going to do.

"I think it's the right thing for him to do, Chuck," the President added.

"Uh, he's doing it on my urging," Colson claimed.

Mr. Nixon showed he was up to date on other secrets as well, declaring that Haldeman was "after some kid" who had, as the President understood it, "bugged" Gary Hart, the campaign manager for Democratic presidential candidate Sen. George McGovern. (A student from Utah had been planted at McGovern headquarters by the Nixon campaign.)

The President said he was somewhat puzzled by all that, however, because he thought the Watergate bugging had come before McGovern "got off the ground" as the Democratic nominee.

Colson set the President straight, reminding him that the June 17, 1972, Watergate arrests had not come until after McGovern had won the crucial 1972 Democratic primary in California.

"Hmpff, Christ," Mr. Nixon replied, complaining that all the espionage seemed to have been fruitless.

"We didn't get a God damn thing from any of it that I can see," the President said in rapid-fire syllables.

"Well, frankly, they did," Colson insisted.

The talk then turned to the

break-in trial, with Mr. Nixon telling his aide not to be bothered by all their critics.

"We're just not gonna let it get us down," the President said of the Watergate case. "This is a battle, it's a fight, it's war and we just fight with a little, uh, you know, uh, remember, you, we'll cut them down one of these days."

Colson said he was inclined to agree "because the only one who's in a, is a very desperate

... sensitive position is Hunt," the President said, completing Colson's sentence for him.

Speaking generally of the break-in defendants, Mr. Nixon scoffed at the idea that they could think former Attorney General John N. Mitchell could "take care of them" simply because they were working under him.

"... You know, Chuck, it's something they all undertook

knowing the risks. Right?" the President said.

Speaking up for Hunt, Colson said that the former CIA agent "violently" objected to the second, bungled break-in at Democratic headquarters but that Liddy, whom Hunt considered "kind of dumb," insisted on it.

At that point, the President seized on "the question of clemency" for Hunt. The conversation showed that Mr. Nixon was aware of such details as the brain damage that had been suffered by Hunt's daughter, Lisa, years earlier in an automobile accident. The President was also the first to mention columnist Buckley, whom Hunt had described as one of his "outside agents" on a long-ago CIA assignment in Mexico.

"Hunt's is a simple case," Mr. Nixon volunteered in clinical tone. "I mean, uh, after all, the man's wife is dead, was killed; he's got one child that has..."

Colson: "Brain damage from an automobile accident."

Mr. Nixon: "That's right."

The President then spoke of creating a publicity buildup, with Buckley's help, that could pave the way for a grant of executive clemency.

"He served under Hunt in CIA, of course," Colson said of the conservative columnist.

"That's, that's it," Mr. Nixon replied. Then he alluded to the other defendants, such as the Cubans whom Hunt had enlisted to carry out the bugging. "I would have difficulty with some of the others," the President said. "You know what I mean."

Colson: "Well, the others aren't going to get the same... the vulnerabilities are different with the others also."

Hunt and Liddy, the White House aide explained, "did the work." The others, he said, had no "direct information" about what was behind it.

"See, I don't give a damn if they spend five years in jail," Colson added quickly.

"Oh, no," Mr. Nixon agreed.

"They can't hurt us," Colson said. But Hunt and Liddy, he warned, perhaps mindful of his own intercession in early 1972 on behalf of their temporarily stalled political espionage program, were in a different category. They had knowledge, Colson said, of discussions that "are very incriminating to us."

The President said he thought Liddy would hold firm. "Liddy is pretty tough," Mr. Nixon observed.

Colson agreed, saying that Liddy was "apparently one of these guys who's a masochist. He, uh, he enjoys punishing himself, but okay, as long as he remains stable. I mean, he's tough."

The conversation ended with a bit of praise for Hunt and Liddy. "They're both good, healthy right-wing exuberants," Colson assured the President.