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Colson to Hunt: You're Obviously Loyal Soldier

On Nov. 24, 1972, E. Howard Hunt Jr. called his friend at the White House, special counsel Charles W. Colson, to ask that payments to the Watergate defendants for their legal defense and support be expedited.

Colson, unknown to Hunt, taped the call, which made Hunt feel he had been "set up," he told the Senate select Watergate committee yesterday.

In the conversation, Colson avoided making any commitments to Hunt, although his tone was friendly. Here is a transcript of the telephone call, introduced into evidence yesterday before the committee:

Hunt: Hi.

Colson: How we doing?

Hunt: Oh, about as well as could be expected. How are you?

Colson: Just about the same. Trying to hold the pieces together.

Hunt: Congratulations on your victory.

Colson: Thank you. I'm sorry that we haven't been celebrating it together with some good champagne and some good scotch, but . . .

Hunt: There may yet come a time.

Colson: There may, I assure you. Before you say anything, let me say a couple things. One, I don't know what is going on here, other than, I am told that everybody is going to come out all right. That's all I know. I've deliberately not asked any specific questions, for this reason. That I have my own ideas about how things will turn out and I'm not worried about them and you shouldn't be, but I've always thought that if it came to an open trial, that I would want to be free to come into it and character and testimony and etc., etc. This way, the less details I know of what's going on in some ways the better.

Hunt: I appreciate that.

Colson: If you follow. So, I have tried to stay out of asking specific questions and it's very hard for me to

do that for the reason that you're an old and dear friend and I'm sure you regret the day I ever recommended you to the White House.

Hunt: Not in the least, Chuck, I'm just sorry that it turned out the way it did.

Colson: Well, I am too, obviously, and I hope to hell you had nothing to do with it and I've clung to that belief and have told people that and if you did have anything to do with it, I'm goddamn sure it's because you were doing what you were told to do . . .

Hunt: That's exactly right . . .

Colson: Because you're a loyal soldier obviously and always have been . . .

Hunt: Would you be willing to receive a memorandum from me?

Colson: Yea . . . the only . . .

Hunt: Because I think it might help you.

Colson: Except there are things you may not want to tell me.

Hunt: No, there's really nothing I don't want to tell you. I would think that you could receive this memorandum, read it and destroy it.

Colson: Nope.

Hunt: You couldn't do that?

Colson: Nope. The reason I can't is the same reason your letter to me, when I got that and then I was asked by federal authorities, did . . . had I had any communication and I said yea I've received this letter and here it is. I can't, you can't get in the position where you're perjuring.

Hunt: No, of course not. And I'm afraid John Mitchell has already done.

Colson: The problem is, you see, I don't want to get into the position of knowing something that I don't now

know for the reason that I want to be perfectly free to help you and the only way I can help you is to remain as completely unknowing as I am. See, my problem . . . let me tell you the problem. Is that . . . I could do you a lot more good by not . . . by honestly being able to testify that I don't know, I just don't know the answer and I don't. And right now I don't know anything about the goddamn Watergate. Now, supposing Teddy Kennedy holds his hearings and I get called up there. Well, I can't refuse to answer and I wouldn't. I'd answer I just don't know. I have no idea what happened and I don't.

Hunt: Of course, I'm never going to be put on the stand as it stands now.

Colson: That's right.

Hunt: And so I won't have the opportunity to say one thing or another.

Colson: You don't want to.

Hunt: You wouldn't be willing to talk to my attorney? Wouldn't that be a different affair?

Colson: Uh, I don't know, Howard. I don't know whether it is or it isn't. He would know best.

Hunt: That was a suggestion of his.

Colson: Well, hell, I'll talk to him. That's not a problem. I'll be glad to talk to him. I'm sure that you're being watched.

Hunt: Oh, I am too.

Colson: And not by federal authorities. I'm sure the Washington Post is watching you.

Hunt: Oh, yea. Well, the reason I called you was to make . . . to get back to the beginning here is because of commitments that were made to all of us at the onset, have not been kept, and there's a great deal of unease and concern on the part of seven defendants and, I'm quite sure me least

of all. But there's a great deal of financial expense that has not been covered and what we've been getting has been coming in very minor gibbs and drabs and (Kenneth) Parkison, who's been the go between with my attorney, doesn't seem to be very effective and we're now reaching a point of which . . .

Colson: OK, don't tell me any more. Because I understand an . . .

Hunt: These people have really got to . . . this is a long haul thing and the stakes are very high and I thought that you would want to know that this thing must not break apart for foolish reasons . . .

Colson: Oh, no, everybody . . .

Hunt: While we get third-, fourth-hand reassurances, still the ready is not available. That's the basic problem.

Colson: I follow you. OK, you told me all I need to know and I can . . . the less I know really of . . . what happened, the more help I can be to you.

Hunt: Alright, now we've set a deadline now for close of business on the 25th of November for the resolution on the liquidation of everything that's outstanding. And this . . . they're now talking about promises from July and August. It just has been an apparent unconcern. Of course we can understand some hesitancy prior to the election, but there doesn't seem to be any of that now. Of course, we're well aware of the upcoming problems of the Senate and . . .

Colson: That's where it gets hairy as hell. See, for your information, Howard, . . . of course this thing has hurt us all because everybody . . . it's just unfortunate as hell, but the Democrats made such an issue out of the whole . . .

Hunt: Well, on the other hand, it kept them from the real issues.

Colson: Well, I always thought when I write my memoirs of this campaign, that I'm going to say that the Watergate was bril-

liantly conceived as an escape that would divert the Democrats' attention from the real issues and therefore permit us to win a landslide that we probably wouldn't have had otherwise. Seriously . . .

Hunt: Whether you believed it or not.

Colson: No, listen, I think there's a good bit of validity to that.

Hunt: I do too.

Colson: Dumb bastards were on an issue that the public couldn't care less about.

Hunt: See, I haven't known at any time what sort of an input you were getting from (former presidential counsel John) Dean and other people about who was responsible . . .

Colson: Minimum.

Hunt: . . . about who was responsible for all this.

Colson: Minimum for very good reasons because if somebody told me let me tell you the position I'm in. Whether I stay in the White House for awhile or whether I leave, doesn't matter, I want to be in a position to help you OK, that means I have to openly talk to people and no matter who it is, from a character standpoint or anything else, be able to say things about you that I want to say. Now, I can't do that the moment I know something that makes it impossible for me to talk to people and the moment that I know something that makes it impossible for me to talk to people, then I've got to be kept in the background and can't talk and I want to talk, so as long as I can help you and I'm going to see that you don't get a bad break out of this and I'll tell you sometime about that.

Colson: I would hope that somewhere along the line the people who were paralyzed initially by this within the White House could now start to give some creative thinking to the affair and some affirmative action for Christ sake.

Colson: That's true.

Hunt: I think now is the time for it and we expect it now and we want it and the election is out of the way, the initial terror of the number of people has subsided. Some people have already

left the administration and that's all to the good. So, now it's pared down to the point where a few people ought to really be able to concentrate on this and get the goddamn thing out of the way once and for all because I don't want to bore you with what it's been like, but it hasn't been pleasant for any of us.

Colson: Jesus Christ, I know it. I hope you're doing some writing to keep yourself busy.

Hunt: Oh, I am. I don't know if anything will ever come of it, but it's a good . . . it keeps my mind from my plight, let's put it that way. So that I was never clear in my own mind, and I'm still not, and . . . that one of the initial outputs that I had read about was that while this is done by a bunch of wild-assed guys and so forth . . . well, that's fine for we're protecting the guys who are really responsible, but now that that's . . . and of course that's a continuing requirement, but at the same time, this is a two-way street and as I said before, we think that now is the time when a move should be made and surely the cheapest commodity available is money. These lawyers have not been paid, there are large sums of money outstanding. That's the principal thing. Living allowances, which are due again on the 31st of this month, we want that stuff well in hand for some months in advance. I think these are all reasonable requests. They're all promised in advance and reaffirmed from time to time to my attorney and so forth, so in turn I've been giving commitments to the people who look to me and . . .

Colson: I'm reading you. You don't need to be more specific.

Hunt: I don't want to belabor it.

Colson: No, it isn't a question of that, it's just that the less specifics I know, the better off I am . . . we are, you are.

Hunt: So, Parkison is out of town until next Monday, at which time a memorandum is going to be laid on him and he's going to be made aware . . .

Colson: I'll tell you one thing I've said to people, and I just want you to know this because I think it's important. I've told people the truth that I've known you for a long time, that I've considered you a personal friend, you're a person in whom I've had high regard and high confidence, a patriot, real patriot, and that had you ever been the one masterminding this, it never would have fallen apart, that the reason that I am convinced, and I told this to the federal authorities on the grand jury, the reason

that I'm convinced that you Howard Hunt never had a gaddam thing to do with this or if you did, it was on the peripheries, is that if you ever did it, you would do it a lot smarter than this and that I've know . . .

Hunt: Chuck, if I had had my say, it never would have been done at all. Let me put it that way.

Colson: Say no more.

Hunt: . . . the position of another fellow too.

Colson: . . . Say no more.

Hunt: . . . high risk ball game.

Colson: Well, obviously I never knew about . . .

Hunt: That's right and I've always maintained to my attorney who of course has my complete confidence in this matter, that you absolutely had nothing to do with it.

Colson: If I had ever known it was coming I would have said to you as a friend, if some . . . wants to do this, fine, but don't you get involved. I mean, if you and I, if we'd ever had a conversation like that, I would have said, my God . . . but the point I've made is that you're a smart . . . among many other qualities, you are a brilliant operator and brilliant operators just don't get into this kind of a thing, so I've held and I was asked . . . and this is why I don't want to know any different, this is why I was asked by the Bureau, well, what about Hunt? And I could honestly say, look, I've known this guy a long time, he's a very smart fellow and I can't for the life of me conceive that he would ever get himself into this kind of situation, so I want to be able to stay in that position. That's why I don't want you to tell me anything beyond that. Give my love to Dorothy, will you?

Hunt: Alright, I will.

Colson: I know it's hard on you and the kids and . . .

Hunt: It's awful tough. My daughter up at Smith is really getting a rough time.

Colson: Is she really?

Hunt: Very, very hard time.

Colson: Well, you know, I'll tell you, I find it's only the rough experiences in life and you've had your share of them, God knows, that really harden you and make something out of you, and you learn by them and become a better man for it and we'll talk about that. You'll come out of this fine I'm positive of that.

Hunt: Well, I want all of us to come out of it, including you.