

Nixon Aides Contradict Own Statements on Watergate

By Carl Bernstein
and Bob Woodward

Washington Post Staff Writers

High Nixon administration officials refused to answer some crucial questions in depositions before Democratic attorneys in a Watergate bugging civil suit and gave testimony that sometimes conflicted with statements they made elsewhere.

Charles W. Colson, special counsel to President Nixon, for example, refused to answer whether he received information from a "confidential informant" after being told by attorney Edward Bennett Williams that the term is frequently applied to information obtained through wiretapping or electronic eavesdropping.

Colson also revealed for the first time that he initiated the hiring of convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr. as a White House consultant and that Hunt worked for him at the White House. Previously the White House has said that Hunt was hired "on the recommendation" of Colson and that he worked elsewhere in the Executive Mansion.

In another deposition, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell refused to discuss conversations he may have had after the June 17 bugging with other Nixon re-election officials.

The testimony by Colson and Mitchell was included in depositions sworn to in pre-trial testimony — taken last August and September in connection with a civil suit filed by the Democrats against the convicted Watergate conspirators and President Nixon's campaign organization. The depositions, taken in secret, were ordered unsealed Tuesday by the judge in the civil suit.

In other testimony by more than ten individuals:

• Colson said he first learned of the Watergate incident when, only hours after the break-in on June 17, he received a telephone call from John Ehrlichman, President Nixon's principal assistant for domestic affairs, and was told Hunt had been implicated. Colson has publicly stated that he first learned of the break-in when he heard about it on the radio.

• Former Attorney Gen-

eral John N. Mitchell said, "I have not the faintest idea" of who served as chairman of the finance committee of President Nixon's re-election campaign — generally considered the second highest position in the campaign. Mitchell was the President's campaign manager and former Secretary of Commerce Maurice H. Stans was the finance chairman.

• Mitchell revealed that in the 1968 and 1972 Presidential campaigns, he received information on opposition candidates from a newspaperman identified to him only as "Chapman's friend."

• Stans said he knew of no authority granted to Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy to spend money for security purposes. During the recent Watergate trial, Stans' principal assistant, campaign treasurer Hugh W. Sloan testified that he checked with Stans before turning over payments to Liddy that were used for security operations.

• Stans said he knew nothing about campaign funds that moved through Mexico until two or three weeks after the critical April 7 deadline for reporting campaign contributions. Later, he wrote to a congressional committee that he

had been informed on April 3 that campaign money might be coming from Mexico.

• Stans acknowledged that \$350,000 in campaign funds was deposited last May 25 with the notation "cash on hand prior to April 4, 1972, from 1968" — but said none of the money was actually left over from 1968.

Colson's testimony reveals for the first time that, within hours of the Watergate break-in, high White House officials knew that Howard Hunt had been implicated.

In September, Colson was asked by an interviewer for the National Journal if he was in any way involved in the Watergate incident. Colson replied: "Not at all. The first thing I knew about it

was when I heard about it on the radio."

In his testimony to Democratic lawyers, however, Colson said:

"I first heard about it (the Watergate break-in) on Saturday afternoon June . . . 17. I received a call from John Ehrlichman. I was home. It was about — it was late afternoon. He simply asked me if I had seen — did I know where Howard Hunt was. I think that is the way the question was asked. And I said no. And he asked me how long it had been since I saw Howard Hunt. I said quite a long time, several months. And I asked him why he asked.

"He said, 'Well there is a report of a break-in at the Watergate, and one of the people arrested had some-

thing in his possession with Howard Hunt's name on it."

There is nothing in the deposition suggesting how Ehrlichman learned that Hunt had been implicated.

Colson's testimony about the hiring of Hunt is considerably more detailed than any previous explanation by the White House and reveals for the first time that Ehrlichman also approved the hiring.

In response to a question from Democratic attorneys, Colson refused — on grounds of executive privilege — to answer whether President Nixon had also approved the decision to hire Hunt as a \$100-a-day consultant.

Colson said in his testimony that Hunt was hired because "there was a need for someone to come on

board to work on this particular Pentagon Papers controversy and Ehrlichman and I conferred by telephone that day, and the decision was made to bring Howard Hunt on board."

Although he could not remember the exact date, Colson said it was almost immediately after the Pentagon Papers were published by the New York Times and that the White House was attempting to find out both how accurate the Times version was and how the documents were leaked to the newspaper.

"It was my initiative" that brought Hunt to the White House, Colson said. "The reason I recommended him, along with four other people as possible candidates to join the White House to

work on the Pentagon Papers controversy was that I knew (a) he is a very good writer; (b) I knew his political disposition and his political feelings; (c) he had worked in the government (for the CIA) and knew the government well; and (d) he is a very bright guy, a very bright fellow."

Colson added: "I knew he was interested in government, in politics. I knew that he had a background in the intelligence community which would particularly suit him to the analysis and research into the Pentagon Papers issue, which as you know, was largely cable traffic, which frankly is all Greek to me. Here was someone who had background, experience, inclination, disposition and so on."

Although the White House has never acknowledged that Hunt did work for Colson, Colson said in the disposition:

"Well, initially when he came to the White House staff he was reporting to me. That lasted only for a few weeks. My function in the White House is oriented quite often to what is the hot, controversial problem of the moment. When the Pentagon Papers began to recede as a front page issue, the responsibility for the research and the security and all the other things that went with it were assigned to others in the White House. Mr. Hunt was then instructed to work under them and under their direction and was at that point not under my supervision."

Colson said in his testimony that "I had the understanding" that Hunt "was going to work or going to help with the Committee for Re-Election of the President" at the end of March, 1972.

That is when the White House — and Colson — have said Hunt left the Executive Mansion, but neither has previously suggested that Hunt was going to work for the President's re-election.

Hunt, said Colson in his deposition, "told me what he wanted to do was work in the area of convention security and the general area of security for the (re-election) committee . . . I remember his specifically referring a one point to the convention security, right."