

Interpreting the Colson Scenario

A man who experiences a religious conversion tells the truth. We all know that. But what if the man is only faking a religious conversion?

Or what if he's crazy?

I raise these questions because religious convert Charles Colson has now come forward with the following allegations:

(1) That the Central Intelligence Agency carried out an espionage program on the White House "in order to get what they wanted from the President of the United States."

(2) That the agency helped carry out the Ellsberg burglary and that of the Democratic National Committee, and that the reason for the latter break-ins was to try to find out how much Democratic National Committee chairman Barry O'Brien knew about a CIA connection with Howard Hughes.

The first of these allegations is impossible to believe; the second is merely very difficult to believe.

What would—or could—the CIA want from the President? And what would a low-level agent (E. Howard) possibly find out?

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If the Howard Hughes organization was indeed a "cover" for CIA, and CIA wanted to know how much O'Brien knew of the relationship, why not ask the Hughes organization?

The whole thing is so preposterous that to argue it is to make nonsense seem credible.

Reporters from the major newspapers have gone over the Colson line since he first spouted it to Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) last summer. They found nothing in it.

A Senate committee has questioned former CIA director Richard Helms and given him a clean bill. The Senate Watergate committee investigators

also looked into the charges. They didn't think them worth airing in public session.

But the fact that a religious convert is putting out this stuff will make it credible to some. Others may ask whether the Colson conversion is real.

Is it possible that Colson—a bright and knowledgeable and disciplined man—is making one of the great sacrifice plays of history? Consider this scenario:

He experiences a religious conversion which gives him credibility. Then he pleads guilty to a crime with which he was never charged, avoiding larger and more substantive accusations.

He then confesses that the President

advised him to commit the lesser crime—that of putting out derogatory information about Daniel Ellsberg. Thus he implicates the President, but gently. Mr. Nixon will not be impeached for putting out derogatory information. What senator or representative hasn't done the same?

And finally, the religious convert, his believability now buttressed by having made a charge against the President, confesses that the really serious Watergate were committed not by the President but by the CIA.

Moreover, he testifies, the President wanted to investigate these serious crimes and bring the criminals to justice, but his "better nature" prevailed. He insisted on protecting his country's intelligence services.

So what was the President to do, poor, innocent, advantaged man?

This story finished, Colson goes to jail for a year. But his superior goes free.

A preposterous scenario? Not more so, I think, than the one Colson is trying to sell.