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Snyder: What was it like, in that White House, the last couple of weeks before August 9th, '74?

Colson: Well, I wasn't there then. The last communication I had with the former President was in June of 1974, the day that I pleaded guilty [3 Jun 74] and he wrote me a hand-written note and called me. I had a lot of contact with his staff before I went to prison. My last contact with him was early in June, but I think they were -- the whole process from, say, December 1973 until August of 1974 was one of steady deterioration. I described it in [my] book as like the last days of Berlin. One of my assistants said, "You know, this is terrible. The staff is fighting with one another, the President is increasingly isolated, General Haig is running the government, you know, we're slowly going out of control, there's terrible internal bickering." The Presidency was under assault, in the same way that a command post would be under assault in battle when it was being overrun. To me it was a very, very dangerous time for the country.

Snyder: You said "dangerous time." What could have happened, Charles?

Colson: Well, I think you could have had a President immobilized, unable to act if there were a national emergency. After all, you had Al Haig, a four-star general, calling the Pentagon, saying "Take no orders from the Commander-in-Chief." You had --

Snyder: Did that happen?

Colson: Yes. Oh yes. A week before Mr. Nixon resigned General Haig called the Pentagon, called Secretary of Defense Schlesinger and said, "If you receive any orders from the President, disregard them." *

Snyder: But by what authority would he make that --

Colson: Well, none. You see, that's one of the problems. That's one of the things

I --

Snyder: It sounds like "Strangelove."

Colson: Yeah, well, that's right. And if you'd had a man who was really bent on personal power, he could have made any deal he wanted with the incoming President and could have perpetuated himself in power. You had -- I describe it in the book as the closest thing you've ever had in American history to a bloodless coup.

But I think when the government is paralyzed, you know, when the Senate and the House are bent on doing nothing except a full-fledged assault on the Presidency, when Mr. Nixon is doing nothing but defending himself -- well, we're paying the price for it today. I think the deterioration in the economy is directly attributable to the fact that the government wasn't really functioning during those days. And you have a huge governmental establishment, bureau chiefs doing their own thing, agency heads doing their own thing -- it's a dreadful precedent. I hope it never happens again in American history.

[Pause for commercials, after which conversation turns to other subjects.]

* See SFChronicle 7 Feb 76, "Why Presidents Worry Cranston."