

The Most Unpopular Man On the White House Staff

By John J. Lindsay

WASHINGTON — Two objects that grace the White House office of Charles W. Colson describe the nature of his duties as special counsel to the President: a lightning rod and a ball gum machine that dispenses ulcer pills.

"I deal with any and all organized groups, including hardhats, wildlife societies, the League of Women Voters, veterans and unionists," the 39 year old ex-Marine captain said of his assignment in the days before he stopped talking to the press. But in recent months, Colson's official role as liaison with special interests in the private sector has clearly expanded, frequently embroiling him in controversy.

"People seem either to detest him or deeply admire him," says Rep. Margaret Heckler who is, like Colson, a Massachusetts Republican. The admirers, who include Mr. Nixon and Colson's immediate boss, H.R. Halde- man, are those who like tough, even-if-it-hurts action and absolute loyalty.

Powerful

The defesters, both Republicans and Democrats, usually don't want to be quoted. The volume of work overflowing Colson's "In" basket and his open pipeline to the

Presidential Oval Room mark him as a powerful figure to be handled with care.

Not everyone is sure, moreover, whether Colson really deserves all the credit or blame he's getting for this or that political maneuver — or whether he is, in fact, the White House lightning rod, taking the rap for others and stoically chewing his ulcer pills.

On the negative side, Colson is blamed for:

- Getting the President in trouble with the Senate by composing a letter to Republican Sen William Saxbe of Ohio during the confirmation fight on the Carswell Supreme Court nomination. The letter asserted the President's power "to appoint" justices, whereas the Constitution limits his power to nomination.

- Instigating a newspaper advertising smear campaign against Sen. Edmund Muskie and seven other Democratic candidates in the 1970 elections. The campaign backfired and later was condemned by the Fair Campaign Practice Committee.

- Leaking stories that the President was "furious" with Federal Reserve Board chairman Arthur Burns and inspiring a Cabinet-level attack on AFL-CIO president George Meany when each

had disagreed with some of Nixon's economic plans.

Deny Charges

Colson or his friends have denied most of these charges. "Chuck has become the 'mystery man,'" White House speechwriter William Safire comments.

Insiders say Colson's job is to execute policy, not make it.

On the other hand, no one denies him credit for having swiftly organized a delegation of New York construction workers to present Nixon with a hard hat at the time of the Cambodian incursion.

The publicity took some of the heat off student protests at the time. In the same vein, he produced a group of veterans favorable to Vietnam policy at the time former Navy lieutenant John Kerry was attacking the war before Congress.

More significantly, he is credited with rallying support for the Administration's antiballistic - missile program, with decisive intervention in the ultimate settlement of the postal strike and acceptance of the Postal Service proposal, and with arranging meetings that won the President's support for aid to parochial schools — though the plan had later to



CHUCK COLSON

Least accessible

be scrapped because of a Supreme Court decision.

If Colson is a hatchet man, he is a personable one. He's a trim 6-footer with a wry sense of humor. And although Colson is much talked about at parties here, he rarely attends one. In fact, he hasn't taken a vacation in two years, he has had to give up his hobby of sailing and has even had to deprive himself of before - dinner martinis to stay fit. He lives quietly with his second wife in Washington's exclusive Spring Valley section and tries to find time for three teen - age children of a former marriage.