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Colson: Power Mechanic

By Myra MacPherson

Seventy-one days before the election, Charles W. Colson, a top presidential aide, wrote a memo to the White House staff, demanding around-the-clock devotion to the task of getting his boss re-elected.

Colson wrote, in part, that a statement once attributed to him: "I would walk over my grandmother if necessary," was absolutely accurate.

A former corporate lawyer who plans to return to that six-figure career, Colson—one of the President's anonymous but high-level and closest aides—agreed to his first personal interview shortly before the President announced Colson's resignation Saturday. 2 DEC

Colson has been called a lot of things in the three years he served as Mr. Nixon's special counsel and behind-the-scenes, heavy-handed, key political operative. The names literally pour forth—"Hatchet man," "Mr. Political Fix-It," one of the "original backroom boys," "Chief of the dirty tricks department." Some regard him as a "power mechanic" who feels beating the opposition at all costs is the only victory.

He has been called a "cold bastard" and, conversely, "kind." There have been attempts to link him with political sabotage and espionage. He recommended that E. Howard Hunt Jr. be hired as a White House consultant and Hunt was later indicted in the bugging of Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate.

But, as that memo suggests, the image he likes best to project is one backed up by his wife and friends:—A Mr. Tough Guy super-loyalist who would do "anything Richard Nixon asks me to do—period."

Colson, who defines himself as "the chief ass kicker around the White House" interrupted a conversation last week in his office for a terse phone call:

"The reason I would say no on him is he's part of the entrenched establishment we've got to clean out over there. We've got to have someone willing to go in there and clean 'em out."

It's that kind of hard-nosed viewpoint that the President values in Colson and one that Colson will continue to exercise in his new role as "civilian" consultant to the White House.

Colson's yellow, blue and white office, which he will vacate early next year, looks like a furniture show room. Swivel chairs are left over from the 9:15 a.m. "attack group" sessions when top aides engineered the election. There are cartoons, statues, pictures of Nixon and a Marine poster.

A former Marine captain who once thought of making the military his career, Colson is the White House King of the Hard Hats; the architect of the "new coalition" of labor-ethnic-Catholic-Wallaceite voters who never before were Republicans.

Colson is extremely proud of his role, as well as the fact that 10 days before the election he predicted Mr. Nixon would get 61 per cent of the vote. The only reason the President lost Colson's home state of Massachusetts, is, Colson says, because it "has a disproportionate share of kooks."

Colson urged the President to pursue a policy that the "new" middle class "approved" of. And so Mr. Nixon became the first President to favor aid to parochial schools, no small thing to Catholic voters, who also took note of the Colson-directed decision to voice the President's personal anti-abortion views. Then came the anti-busing position that, the way Colson put it, "addressed itself to the problem of the new emerging middle-class constituency," and the hard stand against amnesty that wooed the hard hats.

The laborer of today is "not fighting against the establistment but to protect it. The have-nots of the '30s are the haves of the '70s. They have their boats and suburban homes," says Colson, denying, however, that there was any racism in any of the messages Nixon was sending and the the hard hats were receiving.

Along the way Colson found time to recommend that the President commute the prison sentence of former Teamster boss James R. Hoffa, although he had been turned down three times by the parole board. Maurice Sigler, chairman of the board of parole, says a presidential commutation is "not a usual happening." Colson denies that Hoffa's release had anything to do with the Teamsters Union endorsement of the President.

"I would consider that a dumb thing to do," he says, emphasizing the pragmatic aspects rather than the ethical, "because I think those kind of things catch up with you." Colson felt Hoffa "served his time. He'd been a model prisoner."

These days, Colson relaxes a little. He allows himself two martinis one evening between phone calls from Camp David and the White House and banters with a photographer trying to capture Colson's camera-shy wife, Patty. The photographer suggests they sit halfway up on the landing to the second floor while he shoots from above. Colson keeps up a dry monologue; "Yes, this is how the Colsons spend their cocktail hour, folks; he's drunk and she can't get him up the steps . . ."

Then, in the den with his feet up on the desk with its pictures of Colson and the President, Colson talks about some of the things he's done and the life that "drove" rather than led him to the White House.

At 41, six-foot Colson has a moderate paunch he'd like to lose and an easy-going manner which belies the tensions and pressures that give him stomach problems. Last summer, doctors found an irritated throat and Colson prompt-

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By Craig Herndon—The Washington Post

Charles W. Colson

COLSON From B1

ly quit his three packs of cigarettes a day. He now swears when he chomps on a cigar or breaks in a new pipe and fiddles with a silver pipe tamper.

His hair is not as short as when he was a Marine but he is one of the few men around whose sideburns are almost at the top of his ears.

His oldest son, Wendell, 18, and a Princeton freshman interested in political science, is "more conservative than I am" Colson says with a note of pride, then laughs as he remembers the Marine-style cuts he used to give Wendell when he was a boy, complete with a shave up the back.

When Colson mentions the Marines it is with unabashed devotion. "It was a great life. I loved it." His wife says, "When we have a dinner party, and I ask him to put on music, it's the 'Marine Battle Hymn'." His three heroes are the late Marine commander Lt. Gen. Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller ("the greatest blood and guts Marine who ever walked—a great guy"), John Wayne and Richard Milhous Nixon.

Although he works 15 hours a day and often on weekends, he took time out recently to watch "The Green Berets" on television, John Wayne's testimony to our Vietnam involvement. The next night, he watched part of the movie "Patton."

The most important day in his life, he says, came when he was a 22-year-old Marine in the early '50s. Training for the Korean war, which ended before he got there, Colson was told to take a platoon of "green kids" up a mountain on a Caribbean island. Colson recalls, "it looked like a straight-up cliff about 70 feet high. I thought, 'Jesus that's impossible,' but you learn not to even question. So I did it." Since that day, his attitude has been "If you really have to do it, you can."

Says his wife: "The word 'can't' is not in his dictionary."

Colson looks more like a successful insurance executive than a suave corporate lawyer. He can be described as smart, blunt, astute, cool, frankly ambitious. And he can conceal his tough-guy role with an affability that charms some, makes others wary. A former Saltonstall staff member once said, "I didn't particularly like him, but I respected him. He was skillful and hard-nosed but seemingly sweet. When he wanted something, butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

His overachieving days began early. His father, Wendell Colson, 72, and a lawyer with the Securities and Exchange Commission, recalls that when his son went to Browne and Nichols prep school he made honors but was "terrifically upset because he didn't make the high honor roll."

In Boston, where Colson was a Yankee but no Brahmin, the caste system was ever present when he grew up: "You could feel it in the air." Like other middle class WASPs and the Irish, Colson was one of the strivers who is still contemptuous of the Harvard Square-Beacon Hill "aristocrats" who trade on their backgrounds.

An only child, he was pushed by his parents. At 7, he saw his father graduate from night law school and later was acutely aware of the sacrifices his family made to send him to prep school. Because of that pressure he resisted and had to be "dragged off kicking and screaming" to Browne and Nichols.

The elder Colson and his son are very close. His father says "we think alike." His son jokes that his father has "the last crew cut east of the Rockies." His father says, "Chuck did all the things other boys did, except he always worked a little harder. He was a product of the old school. I brought him up to believe in the golden rule." Chuck's grandfather, he notes, was an orphan who studied hard and wound up a musician in the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

When he entered college, Colson says he was "already turned off by Harvard Square. They already had their bomb throwers. And there was this dean of admissions—a very stuffy Bostonian. Harvard offered me a full scholarship. He said, 'You can't turn it down; no one has ever turned down a full scholarship to Harvard.' So I turned it down. I always enjoy things people have never done."

So Colson went to Brown, became secretary of the student governing body, was on the debating team, active in Young Republican politics, rushing chairman of his fraternity for two years and a big gun in ROTC. By his sophomore year, he was so busy he almost flunked out. But then he "went from probation to the deans list in one semester and graduated with distinction." He graduated, got commissioned in the Marines and married his first wife, Nancy—all in one June week in 1953.

He got out of the Marines in 1955 and was a junior management trainee in the Navy department when he by chance met Brad Morse, then an aide to Massachusetts Sen. Leverett Saltonstall. Morse, who later became a congressman and is now at the United Nations, brought Colson to Saltonstall's staff in 1956.

Two years later, when Morse left, Colson at 27 was the youngest administrative assistant on the Hill. He simultaneously attended Georgetown law school at night, graduating in 1959. He ran a successful 1960 campaign for Saltonstall. "He urged me to be more aggressive," the senator recalled. But Colson's first marriage was disintegrating and divorce came in 1963. Nancy now lives in a Boston suburb with Christian, 16, and Emily, 14.

The day after Saltonstall's election, Colson quit—"the challenge was gone"—and started a law firm with Charles Morin, the man he plans to go back into practice with. It became Gadsby and Hannah and they were

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soon lobbying heavily for such firms as Grumman Aircraft Corp. on the Hill.

Back in 1958, Colson hired Patty Hughes, the woman he was later to marry, as a secretary for Saltonstall. She came to Washington from Vermont in 1948 as an 18-year-old secretary who later doubled as an assistant to Sen. Ralph Flanders, who launched the censure drive against Senator Joe McCarthy.

A warm, outgoing woman who laughs easily, Mrs. Colson, 42, married Colson in 1964. She was attracted to Colson, she said, because he is "so commanding. He says hop and you hop." She seems content to take orders and has no desire to go back to work. The hours they have together are often spent discussing poltitics—"It's his love and mine."

Colson says his wife has been his salvation the past three years. "She kept me alive. I'd come home totally wrung out. If her buoyant personality hadn't been working on me, I'd be wracked up."

Mrs. Colson says their English tudor-style home on two wooded acres in McLean, Va., built last December, is his salvation. Colson took a Polaroid snap of another house front he liked and showed it to the man doing their blueprints. He also planned the center hall interior with windows overlooking their pool.

The step-down living room has a blue velvet sofa, Oriental rugs; the panelled den has a lamp base made by Colson and son Wendell from a ship's wheel they brought back from England. The whole house has creeping elephantitis: there are ceramic and wicker statues of elephants on the floor, a small stuffed one in the kitchen, an elephant wall hanging and, of course, Colson has a tie with elephants on it. In the den is a bar he made one rainy afternoon where there is a plaque with the Green Beret slogan: "When you've got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow."

The one subject Colson speaks as enthusiastically about as the Marines is the President. Colson first met Mr. Nixon on the Hill when he was the Vice President and urged Mr. Nixon to run for the Presidency in 1964.

"Thank God he didn't take my advice then. He's the brightest man I've ever known in my life. And the most dedicated person." Like Colson, the President "relaxes by talking about work." Even at dinner, Colson says, the conversation is "always business."

Friends uniformly call Colson "intensely loyal." His father used the words "viciously loyal." Morse says that "like all men, Chuck's great strength can become a great weakness;" that his loyalty makes him heavy handed toward Nixon detractors and that "humor and balance can sometimes go out of the window." Another friend says Colson is a "technician who enjoys combat." Clearly a true believer in all Mr. Nixon stands for, Colson applauds attacks on the liberal press by Vice President Agnew, as well as his own, or those of any other government official.

Colson thinks of himself as a pragmatist.

John Quinlan, a Massachusetts state senator who worked with Colson in Saltonstall's office said, "My feeling is Chuck would go right up to and carry out anything this side of breaking law. I don't know if it would be for reasons of Christian morality or not. But he wouldn't get caught at anything. He's too bright—and he wants to be around too long—to break the law."

Colson says, "Politics is a very rough business," and is the consummate lawyer who can justify and explain every "questionable" action attributed to him.

He shrugs most criticism off, saying, "Somebody's got to be the lightning rod.

"I don't deny I had something to do with Joe Tydings' (Maryland's Democratic senator until his 1970 defeat) premature retirement. I'm kinda happy about that."

A few months before the 1970 election, a Life magazine article charged that Senator Tydings used his influence to land a $7 million government loan benefitting a firm in which he acquired a large financial interest.

Colson supplied the reporter, William Lambert, with the name of a State Department official who had met with Tydings about the project. Although a

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State Department report, released after Tydings was defeated, was widely interpreted as having cleared Tydings of wrongdoing, both Lambert and Colson insist he was not, in fact, guiltless. Colson said, "All that report said is they couldn't find conclusive evidence that Tydings influenced the contracts; but he sure as hell tried. The guy was guilty of gross improprieties."

This is but one example of many controversial issues surrounding Colson, including leaking stories to the press that the President was dissatisfied with Federal Reserve Chairman Arthur Burns because he disagreed with the President's economic policy (denied by Colson) and directing Labor Secretary James Hodgson to say AFL-CIO President George Meany was "sadly out of step" with the working man after Meany criticized Mr. Nixon's wage-price freeze. (Friends say Colson admits to that.)

During the 1970 election there was a furor over ads that branded seven Democratic senatorial candidates, including Tydings, as "radicals" who favored disorder and dissension in the United States. The ads were distasteful enough to some Republicans that three people listed as ad sponsors publicly deplored them.

One former White House aide said they "represented highly questionable political tactics," if no legal violation. Colson, accused of masterminding them, denied any knowledge of the ads at that time. Today he concedes he was "aware" of them "although I never saw them."

"That's one case when I took a lot of public heat but I was not the moving force." He declined to say who was the moving force.

As for the ethics, Colson says softly, "I'm not so sure they exceeded fair bounds of politics. So the ads hanged Tydings with statements made by his own supporters. Meanwhile Tydings was trying to hang all the supposed evils of the Nixon administration onto Glenn Beall. That's politics." (Sen. J. Glenn Beall Jr. won the Maryland Senate seat from Tydings in 1970.)

One former White House aide said, "Colson is a very knowledgeable opportunist who would not raise serious ethical questions about anything and has no ideological hang-ups about anything. He did the chores for H. R. (Bob) Haldeman," assistant to the President. "That's where his strength comes from. I admire him. He's a realist. He wasn't hired to be an ethical barometer for the administration."

As for stories linking him to the Watergate espionage, Colson said it's an "outrageous and bum rap" and that he wouldn't be caught involved in anything that bizarre and dumb.

He says that 99 per cent of his job has never been touched by the press and gives as an example of his usefulness his work with labor unions. He is proud that it was his influence with the maritime union which assured that the laborers would load the grain on the ships to Russia in unprecedented trade agreements between the two countries.

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And as for charges that the U.S. is shipping grain to Russia while American children go hungry, Colson retorts "No children are starving in America, By God, between all the private assistance and public programs, if anybody's starving it's because he doesn't know where to get help."

A former White House aide says he feels that while Colson could be interested in setting up an effective program to feed the poor, "his top consideration would be how much political good the administration would get out of it."

Colson is, above all, a man with a game plan. "I've always known all my life exactly what I wanted to accomplish. Just about everything I've ever set out to do, I've done."

Unlike some politicians who need the ego kick of recognition and publicity, Colson has relished his behind-the-scenes role. "My kick comes from having the people I like know what I'm doing is right."

He has some failings he'd like to change. He would like to be more detached about his work: "I like to slug it out, I have to see it through and I never let up." He does not think he paces himself well. "I've done absolutely nothing in three years except the job and the only relaxation has been building this house."

A compulsive practical joker when he was less busy, Colson tried his hand at it one night after the election. He was in Georgetown on the way to a dinner party when he spotted former White House aide Murray Chotiner. Colson went up behind him on the dark street, shoving his finger in Chotiner's back and said, "Reach for the skies." He laughed as he recalled "Poor Murray almost had a heart attack."

Relaxing is not one of the many things he intends to do in the future. He'd like to teach law, practice it and try writing nonfiction articles.

But few think he'll be far removed from politics while he's out there making money as a lawyer. And even fewer think he'll be inactive when the Republicans try for victory in '76.

Least of all Colson.

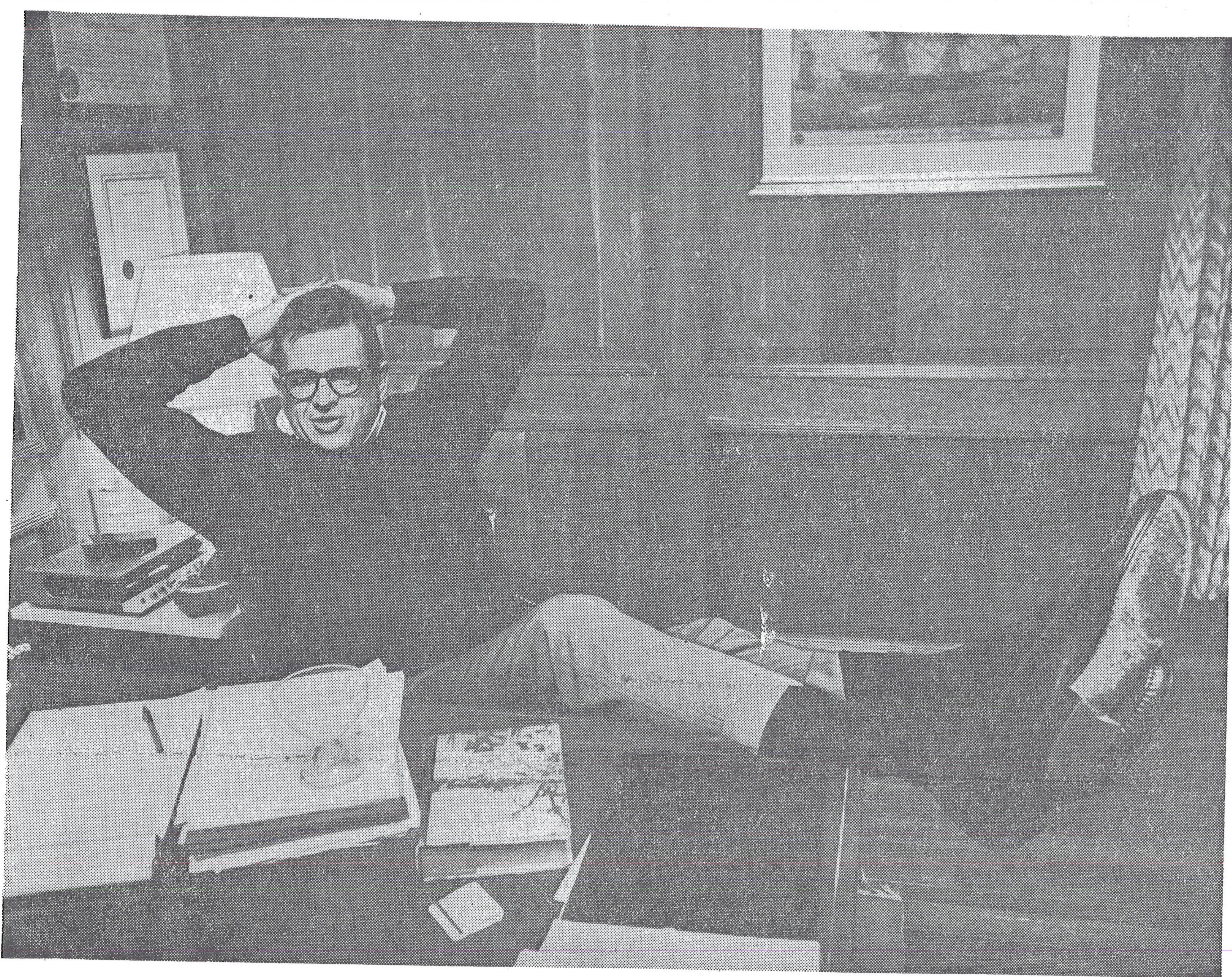
"When that old fire bell clangs, I'll be there."

By Craig Herndon—The Washington Post

Colson and his wife, Patty.

White House Photo

Colson and his father, Wendell Colson, with President Nixon.



By Craig Herndon—The Washington Post

Charles W. Colson, special counsel to the President, in the den of his McLean home.