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Charles Colson: 'Making a Great Deal Out of Nothing'

We know very little about what Mr. Charles W. (Chuck) Colson actually did in the White House. He has never been tied in very tightly to the Watergate mess, and while he has been vaguely associated from time to time with "dirty tricks" and "hatchet-work" of one sort or another, he left his job with Mr. Nixon last March to take up the practice of law in this city with his contribution to the public weal still something of a mystery. As to his character and his cast of mind, however, we know more, thanks in large part to two documents, and what we know is richly revealing, in its way, of the style and attitudes and moral standards which, collectively, have contributed so heavily to the crisis now breaking over the head of the Nixon presidency. The first document consisted of an instruction last fall from Mr. Colson to the White House staff—paid servants, all, of the taxpayers—to devote 24 hours of every one of the final 71 days of last year's presidential campaign to nothing other than the reelection of the President; you may perhaps recall the part about "walking over his grandmother, if necessary" to achieve this end.

Now a second document offers us a glimpse of Chuck Colson, ex-White-House-aide-turned-lawyer, at work. Again we have the familiar rough talk. Again it has to do entirely with an entirely unprincipled transaction—this one involving the use of old White House connections to implant in an important post at a sensitive government agency an official who could be counted to look favorably upon the interests of Mr. Colson's law clients. The plot, we are told by Mr. Colson's law firm, never materialized—none of the shady things associated with Mr. Colson ever seem to materialize. But the substance of the plot and the spirit which went into it, are eloquently set forth in a memorandum which came into the hands of Mr. Bob Woodward and Mr. Carl Bernstein of this newspaper, and which was published in this newspaper on Wednesday. The memorandum, dated April 19, 1973, was to Mr. Colson, from his law partner, Mr. Charles H. Morin, and the substance of the plot proposed by Mr. Morin was as follows:

Mr. Colson, using his old White House connections and his professed role in getting Mr. G. Bradford Cook

the job of Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, was to mobilize pressure upon Mr. Cook to appoint Mr. King Mallory as general counsel of the SEC. The idea apparently was that Mr. Mallory would, thereafter, be in Mr. Colson's debt. Otherwise, for reasons unspecified, Mr. Morin feared that Mr. Cook, who has since resigned as SEC chairman, "may turn into a disaster for us." Mr. Cook said on Tuesday that he never was put under White House pressure—although a note in Mr. Colson's handwriting on the memo instructs another of his law partners to make an approach through Mr. Jerry Jones, presently handling recruitment at the White House. "I'll call Cook if necessary," Colson wrote, "but I think Jerry Jones could lock this one for us." In any case, Mr. Mallory, who said he was "outraged" by the whole idea, has not gotten the job. As for Mr. Colson, he said he really thought that even to bring the matter up was "making a big deal out of nothing."

So much for the substance. As for the spirit of this enterprise, it is nicely captured in one paragraph of the memorandum:

"I really think [wrote Mr. Morin] that if we want King's appointment to materialize we have got to lean on Brad and not just lightly recommend people. He ought to be reminded of how he got the job and how he almost did not get the job. This is one of the chips we really should pick up because it is a key job in the Commission and one of extreme importance to us in representing our clients."

So there you have it: simple influence peddling, perhaps, and therefore not too different in essence from the Sherman Adams affair or the Truman "mess in Washington" of which Mr. Nixon made so much when he was running for vice president 21 years ago. But there is also something in this crude talk of "leaning on" people and of picking up "chips" and of the "extreme" importance of the matter at hand, which is almost uniquely the language of Watergate, Vesco and ITT. There is the same arrogance, and amorality, and insensitivity to public trust. And in the offhand, big-deal-out-of-nothing response when the question of propriety is raised, there is the same sense of no fixed principles—and thus no shame.