

Was Colson Just Joking or Plotting?



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THE REPORTED White House plot to set fire to the esteemed Brookings Institute as a cover for an FBI burglary of its files, according to secret testimony, was no joke but a serious proposal from Charles Colson.

The former presidential trouble-shooter laughed off rumors earlier this year of a scheme to burn Brookings. When we told him about the sworn testimony we have now obtained, he dismissed it as "Disneyland East."

But the testimony was taken from no less than John Caulfield, the ex-Treasury aide and Jack-of-all tricks, who did undercover work for the White House. He told the Senate Watergate investigators behind closed doors that he refused to start the Brookings fire because "enough is enough."

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THE preposterous plot raises specters of the Reichstag fire in 1933 when Adolf Hitler's aides conspired to burn down the German Parliament so it could be blamed on the Communists.

The mini-Reichstag by Mr. Nixon's aides, as detailed in a secret summary of Caulfield's testimony, was proposed "in early July of 1971." Caulfield said Colson asked him "to get some national security documents from the office of Leslie Gelb (a former Defense Department official) at the Brookings Institute."

The careful Caulfield, uneasy about sneaking documents out of Gelb's office, warned Colson "of the difficulties that the

project would cause because of the security questions."

Declares the document: "Colson suggested that one way of getting the information was to have the District of Columbia fire regulations changed and have the FBI respond to all arsons. Colson suggested that there could be a fire at the Brookings Institute and then the FBI could take the file out of Gelb's office."

Caulfield said he "believed that the clear implication was for (him) to start a fire there." But this was too much for the White House gumshoe. After hearing Colson's proposal, Caulfield "literally ran to (presidential counsel John) Dean's office" and said he was catching "the next plane to San Clemente because 'enough is enough'."

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CAULFIELD explained that Dean had also been interested in Brookings and had sought "background about its personnel and financing." Indeed, Dean may have had Brookings' tax returns "pulled . . . in the summer of 1971." But the Reichstag concept was also too much for Dean.

So Dean himself, rather than Caulfield, flew to San Clemente. Upon his return, Dean instructed Caulfield "to forget about Colson's project and the Brookings Institute." That was the last Caulfield "heard of the project," he testified, "until Colson brought it up at a wedding January 1973, and mentioned that he considered it a very funny joke."