

What Colson May Tell

By Carl Bernstein and
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The decision of former special presidential counsel Charles W. Colson to plead guilty to a felony yesterday created considerable consternation at top levels of the White House, according to informed sources.

Presidential aides immediately began intense efforts to learn what information Colson — Mr. Nixon's former top political aide — has agreed to provide the Watergate prosecutors, the sources reported.

Last night, sources familiar with Colson's version of events — including persons respectively close to Colson, the White House and the government investigations — agreed that Colson can provide testimony that will both buttress and damage aspects of President Nixon's Watergate defense.

Most damaging, several sources suggested, is information from Colson which suggests that the President was aware of the Watergate coverup in December, 1972, and January, 1973. The President has maintained that he first

learned of the coverup in March, 1973, from John Dean III, who was then White House counsel.

Colson's explanation of the President's response to such warnings would indicate that Mr. Nixon at various times showed both "an interest in finding out the truth and keeping the lid on," in the words of one government source.

Another source, however, said that any testimony by Colson would show that the President made a concerted attempt "not to learn the facts" and instead tried to

isolate himself from knowledge of the coverup.

Several sources reported that the Watergate prosecutors are initially taking a skeptical view of information from Colson pending further investigation.

"There is some evidence that he is cooperating fully," one government source said, "I'd like to believe it, but I'm very skeptical after all that has happened . . . the nearly two years in which he protested his innocence so vehemently."

Sources close to Colson, however, insisted that the

the Prosecutors

former White House official has always told the truth in asserting his innocence, in the Watergate bugging and its coverup, and cautioned against expectations that he will broadly implicate the President in illegal activities.

Senator Harold E. Hughes (Dem - Iowa), who has acted as spiritual mentor in Colson's recent awakening to Christ, outlined yesterday in an interview the steps that led to Colson's decision to plead guilty.

"It started about a week or ten days ago," Hughes

said, "when Chuck came and started talking to some of us" in an informal prayer group.

Hughes said the final decision was discussed as late as 1:30 a.m. yesterday at a meeting at Colson's McLean, Va., home with Hughes and three other members of the prayer group.

"The guilty plea is a result of his conversion to Christ," Hughes said. "The work of Christ on a man's conscience. He always wanted to tell the truth . . . he said he was not guilty to what he was charged with

and he went in search of what he had done that was criminal."

Hughes has spent dozens of hours in consultation with Colson.

"I'm convinced that he intends to tell all he knows to the appropriate authority," Hughes said. "It's not a matter of purging himself — he wants to help his country. I believe he has much to tell, an important story . . . I don't know any of the specifics. I have deliberately stayed away from them."

"When he accepted Christ, full truthfulness was the inevitable result."