

# Down the Line With

By Lawrence Meyer

Washington Post

Washington

Back in his salad days, when Charles W. Colson was still in the White House, he cultivated an image of himself as a top-level tough guy — “the chief ass kicker around the White House,” he called himself.

The best known statement about Colson was one he made himself in a celebrated memo to other White House aides 71 days before the 1972 Presidential election to fire them up by demonstrating his own zeal: “I would walk over my grandmother if necessary.”

Colson — the ex-Marine, the man who thumbed his nose at Harvard because nobody ever said no to Harvard — became a behind-the-scenes operator while serving Richard M. Nixon as special counsel to the president. He built up his own staff and a reputation for a willingness to do the unsavory. “Colson would do anything,” President Nixon told White House Counsel John W. Dean III during a recorded Feb. 28, 1973, Oval Office conversation.

Colson was so much the wheeler-dealer that even in that the White House of Richard Nixon, the focus for Colson's loyalty, Colson was viewed with apprehension and concern. “That is your fatal flaw in Chuck,” White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman told President Nixon once. “He is an operator in expediency, and he will pay at the time and where he is to accomplish whatever there is to do.”

But even when the other Nixon aides — Dean, Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell — had fallen, Colson appeared un-touchable; under suspicion to be sure; but too smart to have left any tracks that would lead to hard evidence.

It was later, after word leaked out that Colson was under investigation by the federal grand jury looking into the Ellsberg break-in, that word spread around Washington that there was a new Charles Colson.

Colson, the erstwhile tough guy, had found Christ. But Colson's reputation for the Machiavellian was so pervasive that this story of a new, contrite Colson was greeted with widespread skepticism among those in Washington who had no reason to harbor affection for him.

Yesterday, Colson opened a new chapter. He became a confessed criminal, facing a possible five-year prison sentence. And, again, even as he was confessing to a crime and proclaiming a new, but profound, respect for individual rights, sources in the special Watergate prosecutor's office were questioning whether the story Colson was telling them would be either valid or useful.

Colson came from Boston, but not the Brahmin Boston of the Cabots and the Lodges, and not the Irish, political Boston of the Kennedys. Colson's father went to law school at night to become a lawyer with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Colson, a bright only child, was sent off to prep school by his parents, who, he said later, did so at considerable financial sacrifice.

When the time for Colson to go to college, he told an interviewer years later, Harvard was prepared to give him a full scholarship. But Colson wasn't impressed by Harvard.

“They already had their bomb throwers,” Colson said. “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 at Harvard.’ So I turned it down. I always enjoyed things people have never done.”

Colson went to Brown, graduated with distinction and was commissioned an officer in the United States Marine Corps. Though he completed his training too late to fight in the Korean War, Colson leaves the impression that the Marine Corps had a profound effect on him. The Marine Corps taught him — or reinforced — the “can do” spirit for which it is famous.

# Charles Colson

After the Marine Corps, Colson worked briefly for the Navy Department before joining the staff of Senator Leverett Saltonstall (Rep - Mass.). By 1958, Colson, then 27 years old, was the youngest administrative assistant on Capitol Hill and a night student at Georgetown Law School.

In 1960, after Saltonstall was re-elected, Colson quit the senator's staff to begin a law partnership with Charles Morin. Their firm prospered. In 1964, Colson tried to persuade Richard Nixon, who had first met Colson while still vice president, to run again for president. Mr. Nixon did not run in 1964, but when he did run in 1968, Colson was counsel to Mr. Nixon's Key Issues Committee.

Colson joined the White House staff as special counsel in November, 1969. Beginning with a small staff, Colson built a little empire



in the White House and concentrated on defining and cultivating political interest groups. He played a key role in trying to bring the so-called hard-hat vote into the Nixon fold, along with other ethnic and working-class groups.

Among a group of White House insiders who prided themselves on playing political "hard ball," Colson was a bare knuckled practitioner of the art. In 1970, when the White House identified certain key liberal senators whom it hoped to defeat, Colson played a significant role.

Homing in on Senator Joseph D. Tydings (Dem-Md.), Colson assisted Life magazine reporter William Lambert in preparing a story charging that Tydings used his influence to land a \$7 million government loan to help a firm in which he acquired a large financial interest. Tydings lost a close election and afterwards some thought the Life article had helped wupply the margin of defeat.

Colson has admitted leaking a story to the press attacking Federal Reserve Chairman Arthur Burns because he disagreed with President Nixon's economic policies. And Colson is credited with directing Labor Secretary James Hodgson to say that AFL-CIO President George Meany was "sadly out of step" with the working man after Meany criticized Mr. Nixon's wage-price freeze in 1971.

It was Colson, according to the sworn testimony of Dean, who suggested to a White House intelligence operative that he disguise a proposed burglary of an office at the Brookings Institution by firebombing the premises. Dean said he himself intervened to have the mission aborted.

That was in 1971 and by then Colson had found a willing instrument for his intrigues, a fellow graduate of Brown University whom Colson had met at an alumni gathering—E. Howard Hunt Jr.

If such things can be dated with any precision, the beginning of Colson's downfall may have been a July 1, 1971 conversation with Hunt. The Pentagon Papers had

been leaked and published the month before and Colson had vengeance on his mind.

"Let me ask you this, Howard, this question," Colson said during a telephone conversation with Hunt that Colson inexplicably recorded. "Do you think with the right resources employed that this thing could be turned into a major public case against Ellsberg and co-conspirators?"

Hunt: Yes. I do, but you've established a qualification here that I don't know whether it can be met.

Colson: What's that?

Hunt: Well, with the proper resources.

Colson: Well, I think the resources are there.

Hunt: Well, I would say so absolutely.

Colson: Then your answer would be we should go down the line to nail the guy cold?

Hunt: Go down the line to nail the guy cold, yes.

The following day, Colson recommended to White House chief of staff Haldeeman that Hunt be hired, which he was, as a consultant to the White House.

Two months later, ex-CIA employee Hunt and an ex-FBI agent and former Dutchess county, N.Y., prosecutor who worked in the White House named George Gordon Liddy quarter-backed an entry into the Los Angeles offices of Dr. Lewis Fielding, Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Colson, who consistently proclaimed his innocence in connection with the Ellsberg break-in, raised the money to finance the operation, according to the testimony of several witnesses.

Despite his protestations, Colson ultimately was indicted in connection with the Ellsberg break-in, as he had been indicted earlier in connection with the Watergate coverup. And yesterday Colson pleaded guilty to one count of obstruction of justice "by devising and implementing a scheme to defame and destroy the public image and credibility of Daniel Ellsberg . . ."

Colson had other chores for Hunt. He suggested at one point that Hunt try his hand at fabricating cables that would implicate President Kennedy in the assassi-

nation of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

In 1972, when a memo from ITT lobbyist Dita Beard threatened to sink Richard G. Kleindienst's nomination to be U.S. Attorney General and to spread

considerable mud around the Nixon administration in the process, Colson sent Hunt off for a late night interview with Mrs. Beard in her Denver hospital hotel room.

When Hunt and Liddy had

trouble getting their intelligence-gathering program off the ground in early 1972, Hunt took Liddy to Colson with the problem. What Colson was told about the program is not clear, but a variety of witnesses agree that Colson picked up the phone and called deputy Nixon campaign manager Jeb Stuart Magruder to tell him that the plan—which resulted in the Watergate break-in—should be approved.

After the break-in and after Hunt had been charged, Colson and Hunt communicated directly and through Hunt's lawyer. According to Dean, Colson communicated a promise of executive clemency to Hunt. Colson has denied any improper conduct.

During the 1972 campaign, Colson participated in the "attack group" meetings every morning at 9:15 to take the offensive against the Democratic presidential nominee, Senator George S. McGovern.

After the election, Colson attacked the Washington Post, which had published a series of stories in the summer and fall containing allegations that high officials in the Nixon re-election campaign and in the White House were involved in the Watergate break-in. Colson in a speech to the Society of New England Editors in Kennebunkport, Maine on Nov. 11, 1972, charged that the Post's "charge of subverting the whole political process . . . is a fantasy, a





FORMER NIXON AIDE CHARLES COLSON  
'I would walk over my grandmother if necessary'

work of fiction rivaling only 'Gone with the Wind' in circulation and 'Portnoy's Complaint' for indecency."

Colson had already left the White House to resume what promised to be a quite lucrative law practice when the Watergate scandals cut a heavy swath through the White House in April, 1973.

Though his name was mentioned often during the Senate Watergate committee hearings and often in circumstances that were suspicious, no hard evidence tying Colson directly to either the Watergate coverup or the Ellsberg break-in had been produced when the committee recessed its hearings, without hearing from Colson, on August 7, 1973.

When the committee sought to summon Colson the following month, he invoked the Fifth Amendment and refused to testify. Colson told the committee that a federal grand jury had notified him he was a target of its investigation into the Ellsberg break-in.

From there on, despite the prayer sessions with Senator Harold Hughes (Dem-Iowa) and the new relationship with Christ that Colson said he had found, it was a downhill slide.

On March 1, along with six other men including Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Mitchell, Colson was indicted on charges of conspiracy and obstruction of

justice in connection with the Watergate coverup. Six days later, along with five other men — including Ehrlichman, Colson was indicted for conspiracy in connection with the Ellsberg break-in. 7 MAR 74

He said he was innocent of the charges for which he had been indicted. Yesterday, after kissing his wife, Colson stepped before U.S. District Judge Gerhard Gesell and said he was guilty of obstructing justice in connection with Ellsberg's trial.

According to Colson, Gesell's pronouncement of May 21 that this government of the United States was one of laws and not of men had come as a profound revelation.

"In the last two years," Colson told Gesell, "I have become acutely aware of something I was insensitive to before. I now know what it is like to be a defendant in a celebrated criminal case. Among other things, this experience has taught me to care about the rights of criminal defendants and to understand how those rights can be jeopardized.

"I have come to believe — in the very depths of my being — that official threats to those rights, such as those charged in this information, must be stopped and, by this plea, I am prepared to take whatever consequences I must to help in stopping them."