

The Regeneration Of Chuck Colson

CHARLES W. COLSON'S plea of guilty yesterday to obstructing justice came as a surprise to the general public and may well have brought consternation to his co-defendants in several criminal cases he is involved in. For the President's former special counsel has taken his place at the side of the prosecutors in the coming trials by promising to cooperate with them, turn over materials they want and appear as a prosecution witness if necessary.

This change of position and strategy on Colson's part leaves his co-defendant John Ehrlichman pretty well stranded at the defendants' table in the case involving the 1971 break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. That trial had been set for June 17, and up to yesterday Colson was battling the White House for permission to get at certain of his papers stored there which he needed for his defense. Then came his turnabout.

COLSON WAS ONCE KNOWN as a "hardball" player in the White House political games and strategies. He has told Judge Gesell that from the moment of Dr. Ellsberg's indictment for releasing the Pentagon Papers his "motives and purpose were to neutralize Dr. Ellsberg as an antiwar speaker." But lately Colson has evidently gone through a complete regeneration of conscience and moral outlook. Judge Gesell had made some remarks at a pre-trial hearing a few days ago that had a profound effect on him, Colson said. The judge had talked about those entrusted with enforcing the law being accountable for their actions. He said he had abandoned his once-held view that the plumbers' actions against Ellsberg's psychiatrist were totally justified in the national interest.

"We cannot accept the principle that men in high government office can act in disregard of the rights of even one individual citizen," Colson said to the judge. However novel and suddenly illuminating to Colson was this concept, it is one that any judge worth his place on the bench must have lived under all his life.

So "hardball" Chuck Colson joins the others who once served the White House in a public confession of guilt and "mea culpa."

JEB STUART MAGRUDER, another of these aides, who is to enter prison at Allenwood, Pa., today has lately written a line which seems to speak for all of these once powerful, ruthless and now contrite young men:

"We were completely wrong, and only when we have admitted that and paid the public price of our mistakes can we expect the public at large to have much faith in our government or our political system."