

Colson Guilty

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In the first Nixon Administration, there were several insiders who had ready access to the President and who individually had knowledge of most of his political and legislative tactics. Those insiders included John Mitchell, Attorney General and campaign manager, and H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson, three senior White House aides. All four are now under criminal indictment.

Mr. Colson, who pleaded guilty yesterday to one count of obstructing justice, is the first of these insiders to break with the others and agree to cooperate fully with the office of the special prosecutor. He also apparently intends to be a witness before the House Judiciary Committee in its impeachment inquiry. His decision could be a most fateful turn of events both in the possible impeachment of Mr. Nixon and the forthcoming criminal trials of his former associates.

As special counsel to the President, Mr. Colson was in charge of the Administration's political relationships with industry, labor unions, ethnic blocs and various special interest groups. He was involved, for example, in arranging the parole of James R. Hoffa, the former Teamster Union president, and the financial contribution of the milk cooperatives to the Nixon campaign. He also specialized in planting favorable stories in the press and "leaking" information that would discredit Administration opponents. He had a well-earned reputation for political ruthlessness.

His plea of guilty points up once again the dismal record of the lawyers with whom President Nixon originally surrounded himself. Mr. Mitchell, his first Attorney General, has been cleared of one set of criminal charges but is awaiting trial on a second set. Richard G. Kleindienst, his second Attorney General, has pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and is awaiting sentencing. Mr. Ehrlichman, the President's first counsel, is under indictment. John W. Dean, his second counsel, has pleaded guilty. Now Mr. Colson, the President's special counsel, has joined him in confessing to an illegal act.

Against this background, there inevitably rises the question whether Mr. Nixon has been able to discharge one of the principal duties laid upon a President by the Constitution. Article Two, Section Three states: "He shall take care that the laws be faithfully executed."