

Colson's Commandment: Tell the Truth

Repentant Ex-Aide Won't Cast Stones at Former Boss

By William Greider
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Charles W. Colson, the repentant Christian, is going to prison at peace with himself and he does not wish to join those who are casting stones at his old boss, the accused President.

"I do not intend to be an advocate," Colson explained. "I'm not going to try to frame a case. I'm sure there are guys in the White House sweating, but I'm not going to testify that way. I've made a commitment to Christ and I really believe the only commandment I have to follow is to tell truth. I will tell the truth."

But the "truth," as Colson tells it, may be damaging enough to Mr. Nixon's case. Colson was there at so many crucial points in the long and tangled saga of Watergate that even a neutral retelling of events seems certain to deepen the evidence of presidential dereliction.

Yesterday, when he was given a prison sentence of one to three years, Colson offered a glimpse through one of several doors he can open for impeachment investigators. The President, he recounted, had personally ordered him to smear Daniel Ellsberg before his Pentagon Papers trial — the very crime to which Colson pleaded guilty. If Colson is guilty of that offense, then what will the House Judiciary Committee conclude about the man who directed him to do it?

Even so, Colson offered a lengthy explanation in mitigation for the President. "The President, I am convinced, believed he was acting in the national interest," Colson said.

In a similar manner, Colson talked sketchily during an interview before his sentencing about some of the other crucial areas on which he will testify for the special prosecutor, the House impeachment inquiry and other con-

gressional investigators. He does not sound like a man intent on savaging Mr. Nixon, the way former White House counsel John W. Dean III did.

He talks like a friend, not an adversary. He offers explanations, not accusations. He tries to put the most charitable construction on what otherwise would be very damaging facts.

In January and February of 1973, for instance, Colson on at least three occasions personally warned the President that the Watergate conspiracy went much higher than the seven men who were indicted for the break-in. With varying intensity, he urged the President to force Jeb Magruder and former Attorney General John N. Mitchell to come forward and accept the blame. Mr. Nixon did not act on those warnings and it was more than two months before he did anything pub-

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likely to acknowledge the depth of involvement.

Colson will not discuss precisely what he said to the President and what the President said to him in those conversations, but he did philosophize about why Mr. Nixon might have disregarded his warnings.

And Colson emphasizes that he acted out of a "pragmatic" desire to keep Watergate out of the White House, rather than on any point of moral principle. He is "sickened" by others like John Dean who have cast themselves in nobler light.

"The disability that I was operating under was that I knew about 10 percent of what, in fact, was going on," Colson said. "Therefore, my ability to argue that point of view was not very great.

"And my credibility wasn't worth much because . . . it was known to the President that I was a great rival of John Mitchell. There was no love lost between us. Accusing fingers had been pointed at me in regard to Watergate over and over again. So I suppose really the President had no more reason to listen to me than he would to listen to Mitchell."

Colson would not disclose precisely what triggered his suspicions, but in one meeting on Feb. 14, 1973, he reportedly told the President that Mitchell was going to be accused by James McCord, one of the Watergate burglars. According to the White House defense case, Mr. Nixon did not learn of the cover-up going on around him until more than a month later on March 21. The Colson conversations, thus, refute the claim that Mr. Nixon was in the dark until then.

But, again, Colson describes his warning as casual and sketchy:

"I didn't have anything hard," he said. "What I had was all surmise and hearsay and concerns that I was feeling at the time. To put it all in a very honest perspective, I would like to say in hindsight that, had I known everything, I would have really kicked over the traces to get him to act, but that

isn't fair. I don't view myself in the role that some people have tried to cast themselves in, that is, a great protector of the public conscience."

How much will Colson's version hurt Mr. Nixon?

"I'm going to state cold, hard facts, as best I can recall them," Colson promised. "I'm not going to manufacture things to make a case. And I won't shade anything to avoid a point."

At 42 years, Colson seems lean and relaxed, stoical about going to prison and already looking forward to post-prison projects like writing a book and working as a lay minister to help young people in trouble find Christ.

At the White House, as he says himself, Colson was "the leader of the expedient gospel in politics." Now he spends a lot of time in prayer and brotherly conversation with former political enemies like Sen. Harold Hughes (D-Iowa).

In his new role of public truth-teller, Colson hopes to revise great portions of his public image. For one thing, he insisted yesterday in court that he was not the White House's ruthless "tough guy" of popular legend.

"Actually," he said, "I was often frightened by the enormity of the decisions I was asked to take part in and by the awesome responsibilities of the man with whom I worked."

Furthermore, as he insisted in the interview, he was not as "inside" at the White House as most folks assume. He did not attend the endless strategy meetings on containing the scandal. He did not know about the money floating secretly from White House safes to Watergate defendants. He did not know Dean was coaching witnesses to lie. Therefore, he says he didn't warn Mr. Nixon about such specifics.

"The problem is that I didn't know," he insisted.

In another area, the question of campaign financing, Colson has picked up some of the reformer zeal which he used to despise in liberal opponents. He now advocates public financing to eliminate the seamy money deals which he says are associated, not just with the Nixon White House, but with Congress and past administrations.

Colson himself was implicated in the bundle of campaign cash which dairy cooperatives showered on the Nixon

White House. He is not willing to characterize the deal as a "quid pro quo" in which the dairy farmers received higher milk price supports in exchange for the money, but Colson does denounce the whole business of milk money as sordid, bordering on criminal bribery.

"That to me is really just criminal, it's just criminal," he said, "and not just for what they tried to do with us, but what they had done with prior administrations and what they've done with at least 50 per cent of the Congress."

Colson said he dealt with the money end of White House relations with the dairy co-ops and tried to keep that separate from the policy end — deciding on higher price supports — but he agrees that it is hard to keep them apart.

"Anybody in public office tries to do that, I think," he said. "The question is how well you succeed because, even if you remove it from your conscious consideration, how do you know your subconscious isn't affecting you?"

Colson contends the White House was more worried about losing voters in the dairy states than it was about praising campaign money, a description which parallels the official White House account. But the dairy co-ops offered campaign money "in a very heavy-handed unsubtle approach," he said. "It's just an attempt to bribe you, that's all."

Whatever his testimony does for the President or to him, Colson is already thinking to the days beyond federal prison. Meanwhile, he will be spending a lot of time under oath as a witness.

"Nobody likes the idea of having his freedom restricted," Colson said. ". . . There was a time when I would have feared being put in a different environment like that. My view of other people is very different than it was. Now I see that everyone is the same."

In addition to all of those questions which investigators want to ask, Colson finds strangers approaching in



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Escorted by Sen. Harold E. Hughes (D-Iowa), left, Charles W. Colson leaves District Court after sentencing.