

Nixon Warned on Aides, Colson Says

By Jack Anderson

Former White House special counsel Charles Colson has told House impeachment investigators he warned President Nixon twice by mid-February, 1973, that Nixon confidants were involved in the Watergate scandal.

That was five weeks before March 21, the day Nixon insists he first became aware that the scandal touched his own staff. On that day, said Colson, he suggested to the President that he immediately call in a distinguished outside lawyer to investigate the case for him, a recommendation Nixon did not take.

While Colson's statements do not technically contradict the President's, his testimony clearly shows that Nixon faltered in pursuing the avenues open to him.

We have obtained a draft of testimony prepared by Colson. It parallels what Colson has already told the House impeachment panel's chief counsel John Doar.

In January, 1973, Colson said, he became convinced that people close to the President, including John Mitchell and Jeb Magruder, were involved in Watergate. He talked about his concern to White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, and to Nixon.

"I'm not sure of the exact time sequence but I believe it was after my first conversation with

Mr. Haldeman that I determined it my responsibility to express to the President my belief that certain persons in the campaign organization, namely Messrs. Mitchell and Magruder, must have been involved in the Watergate," Colson said.

"I told (the President) that whoever it was who had ordered the Watergate had 'ill-served him.' I did not discuss any specific information about Mitchell, Magruder or others because frankly I had no hard evidence that they were involved, but I did express anger that my friend, (E. Howard) Hunt, would be punished while others who must have been responsible would not be.

"During the conversation, I did express my compassion for Hunt's plight, particularly the fact that he had lost his wife upon whom he had relied so heavily and that he had four children to raise. I did not ask the President for clemency for Hunt. The President said that if I had any facts about the involvement of others in Watergate, I should bring them to him."

At that time, Colson was preparing to leave the White House to join a Washington law firm. He said he discussed the Watergate situation with his lawyer and partner-to-be, David I. Shapiro, in early February.

"After reviewing all the information than available to me, Mr. Shapiro said the real problem

for the White House did not appear to be the Watergate brekin, per se, but rather the possibility that the White House might become involved in obstruction of justice. He urged me to get to the President at the first opportunity to explain the necessity for him to get 'out in front' of the situation.

"On Feb. 14, I told the President of the extensive conversations I had been having with Mr. Shapiro. I told him that I thought whoever was involved at the Committee for the Re-election in ordering or authorizing the Watergate would eventually be exposed. I told the President specifically that I thought John Mitchell had to accept the responsibility, that the facts would in due course come out, and that from the President's standpoint, the sooner the better.

"The President again asked whether I had any evidence. I told him no, that I merely had hearsay reports and my own suspicions. I recall that the President reacted angrily. I can almost recall his precise words: 'Are you suggesting that John Mitchell be held responsible or be made a scapegoat? Mitchell has, after all, sworn he was not involved. I want to get to the bottom of Watergate, but I cannot ask a possibly innocent bystander to be a scapegoat.' "

Colson said Nixon told him to report to him directly if he

learned any significant information.

After that February meeting with the President, Colson went to Europe for three weeks to negotiate the emigration of Jews from Russia to Israel. When he returned to Washington, he said, Shapiro "told me that, in his view, the situation was getting serious. He said, 'For God's sake, the President has to get the facts. Who knows what's going on in that place. The fox may be guarding the chickens.'

"I reminded Mr. Shapiro that I had discussed my suspicions about John Mitchell on Feb. 14, but the President said that Mitchell had sworn he was innocent. I said it was impossible to know what advice the President was getting ... I further said that if I should now start warning the President about others without hard evidence, he might erroneously think that I was myself involved and was only trying to shift the blame to others.

Colson said that Shapiro suggested impartial outside counsel for the President and mentioned J. Lee Rankin, U.S. Solicitor General during the Eisenhower administration. Shapiro met with Rankin on March 21, 1973, to see if Rankin would take the job.

"The President seemed receptive. As I recall, he told me that he had been unable to get the facts, he had had a lot of conflicting reports ..."