

Colson's Suspicion That CIA Planned Watergate

By Rudy Maxa
Washington Post

Washington

In the days before he walked into a federal courtroom to enter his guilty plea, Charles W. Colson made a startling series of allegations about President Nixon's fears of a Central Intelligence Agency involvement in the Watergate scandal.

Colson, once among the President's most trusted White House aides, gave his account during two bizarre evening confessionals with Washington private investigator Richard L. Bast.

In the course of the conversations, Colson told Bast that President Nixon confided to him last January that he was on the verge of dismissing CIA Director William E. Colby because of suspicions that the agency was deeply implicated in Watergate.

He also told Bast that the President was finally dissuaded from launching a full-scale investigation of the intelligence community by Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and White House Chief of Staff Alexander M. Haig Jr.

Colson portrayed the President as a virtual oval office captive of suspected high-ranking conspirators in intelligence circles, against whom he dared not act for fear of international and domestic political repercussions.

The former White House aide told Bast of a January phone call from President Nixon in which Colson said "the President was out of his mind over the CIA and Pentagon roles" in Watergate.

Colson's underlying suspicion, as expressed to Bast, was that the CIA planned the break-ins at Watergate

and the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

The motive: to discredit the President's inner circle of advisers.

Colson indicated that the CIA was concerned it was being bypassed on policy matters and channels of information bearing on national security.

This could well be the main line of Colson's forthcoming testimony to the House Judiciary Committee and the Office of the Special Prosecutor, although he has yet to substantiate it with specific evidence.

Colson first went to Bast's

Back Page Col. 1

From Page 1

\$250,000 home on May 13 on the recommendation of mutual acquaintances to discuss the possibility of a private investigation of the CIA's role in Watergate.

He returned for another session beside Bast's lushly landscaped swimming pool May 31—three days before he went before U.S. District Court Judge Gerhard A. Gesell to deliver his guilty plea.

Bast, who has largely retired from investigations work to conduct a highly speculative commodity futures fund and other business interest, disclosed the substance of the conversations on the basis of his records and an understanding with Colson that he would be free to speak about it after Colson's sentencing.

Colson was sentenced Friday to a one-to-three-year jail term and \$5000 fine for obstructing justice in the Daniel Ellsberg case.

Watergate investigators said Colson had previously told them about some of the same allegations he made to Bast. Some of those charges, they said, are being investigated.

Haig and Kissinger de-

clined through spokesmen to comment on the Colson account.

One of the most specifically detailed assertions made by Colson to Bast concerned a March 1, 1973, memorandum by a high-ranking CIA official dealing with the agency's relationship to the Washington public relations firm of Robert R. Mullen & Co.

Mullen's is the firm that employed Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt after he left the CIA and before he was hired as a member of the Plumbers unit.

Colson said he was allowed to read the 25-page memorandum drafted by Eric W. Eisenstadt, chief of the central cover staff of CIA's clandestine directorate, at the home of Senator Howard Baker (Rep-Tenn.), vice chairman of the Senate Watergate committee last December.

The existence of the still-classified memorandum has been confirmed by Watergate investigators. Colson summarized the contents of the Eisenstadt memo for Bast as follows:

- Robert Mullen, founder of the public relations firm, complained that former CIA Director Richard M. Helms "twisted my arm hard" to hire Hunt.

- Former CIA Director James Schlesinger, now Defense Secretary, endorsed a suggestion by Eisenstadt that Mullen and Robert Bennett, an associate in Mullen's firm, be permitted to read FBI and CIA memoranda on witnesses who should not be interviewed in the Watergate case. The firm was directed to "lie if necessary" in denying any association with CIA, Bast said he was told

- The Senate Watergate committee was informed of the times and places of at least 300 break-ins conduct-

ed by convicted Watergate conspirator Eugenio Martinez.

- Bennett, the son of Senator Wallace Bennett (Rep-Utah), bragged to the CIA of favorable news treatment in the national news media, including Newsweek and The Washington Post, for stories he planted to discredit the

President's top White House advisers.

- A prominent Charlotte, N.C., lawyer with CIA connections reported after a plane ride with Senator Sam Ervin (Dem-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, that Ervin would steer clear of CIA involvement in Watergate.

(The lawyer, who asked anonymity, told The Washington Post he was indeed a friend of Ervin but denied either suggesting or receiving assurances described by Colson.)

- Bennett reported to the CIA that through his father "he could handle the Ervin

More Watergate-related news on Pages 8 and 9

committee if the CIA could handle E. Howard Hunt." Robert Bennett denies having told that to the CIA.

Colson told Bast he made the unusual approach to the investigator in order to get proof of the extent of CIA's Watergate role on behalf of himself and H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman, John N. Mitchell, Robert Mardian, Gordon Strachan and Kenneth Parkinson, all defendants in the Watergate coverup conspiracy case.

He also told the detective he wanted information on who was "financing" President Nixon's fired counsel, John W. Dean III, and also a closer look at the circumstances of the plane crash that took the life of Hunt's

wife, Dorothy, in December, 1972.

In explaining his motives for seeking the investigation, Bast quoted Colson as saying "I'm interested in getting out of my problems, but I'm more interested in straightening out what's going on in the country right now."

The former White House aide, who has recently proclaimed himself a witness for Christ, spoke with high emotion of his concern over CIA influence. "If this happens with us, it could happen to any President," he told Bast.

But Colson also acknowledged that "what is exculpatory for me is if I am able to expose the fact that there was a major plot by the CIA and they were responsible for the coverups throughout the investigation."

In the early days of the Watergate scandal President Nixon, through Halde- man and Ehrlichman, sought to delay the FBI's investigation of Nixon re- election funds channeled through Mexico on grounds that it might expose covert CIA activity and thereby imperil national security.

The President later ac- knowledged that his fears were groundless as far as the Mexican funds were concerned.

Bast said he would, under certain conditions, consider undertaking an investigation of alleged CIA illegal influ- ence directed at the White House.

Those conditions, he said, included the authorization of grand jury subpoena power, full presidential backing and

the appointment of an addi- tional special prosecutor. But Colson found no takers at the White House, as far as could be determined, though Colson told Bast the President was "enthusias- tic" about the idea.

During his two conversa- tions with Bast, Colson por- trayed the CIA as a "fright- ening" power operating with no congressional or execu- tive branch control.

He disparaged the chair- men of the House and Sen- ate CIA oversight investiga-

tions and told Bast that "al- most everywhere you turn" the CIA has its "tentacles." Colson indicated his belief of the pervasiveness of the CIA encouraged him to ask ac- quaintances to recommend an incorruptible investiga- tor.

Bast, 41, a Washington na- tive from a blue-collar neighborhood, developed a reputation for flamboyance, toughness and blunt talk during his career as a pri- vate investigator. ("My fees start at \$100 an hour, I ac- cept one case a year only if I find it interesting," he told Colson.)

He also told Colson at the start of their conversations that the Nixon administra- tion "tore the Constitution to shreds."

"I'm not saying that's not true," He quoted Colson replying. "But I'm not sure that the guys who are going after us now aren't doing more disservice to the coun- try."

Bast said he told Colson that "perhaps your whole crew maybe belongs in jail" but not if "they (the special prosecutor's staff) violated your constitutional rights."

"They've been violated several times," Colson re- plied glumly. He offered no specifics but commented on the overwhelming strength of Special Prosecutor Leon J a w o r s k i 's prosecutorial staff against an individual defendant.

"You know how strongly I feel about all this?" Colson asked Bast three days be- fore pleading guilty. "You're going to think I be- long in an asylum when I tell you this: I've thought about walking into that courtroom Monday (June 3) before Gesell and saying, "I want to plead guilty."

"I told him in that case — he'd have to go to jail," Bast said.