

The Days of Watergate

Colson Talks of His Role

By Seymour M. Hersh
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Washington

Charles W. Colson, in a reflective interview about his days as a White House tough guy, has declared that he and other high-level aides were convinced that they were "above the law" while working for President Nixon.

Despite this, he insisted during a four-hour, tape-recorded interview last week, "on balance, he's (President Nixon has) done a tremendous job as President."

And Colson said he has no "bombshells" in his files that would provide the House Judiciary Committee with more evidence in the current impeachment proceedings.

Colson, who has been ordered to begin a minimum one-year prison term today, did characterize the President's release of the edited White House transcripts in May as "one of the poorest exercises of political judgment I've seen."

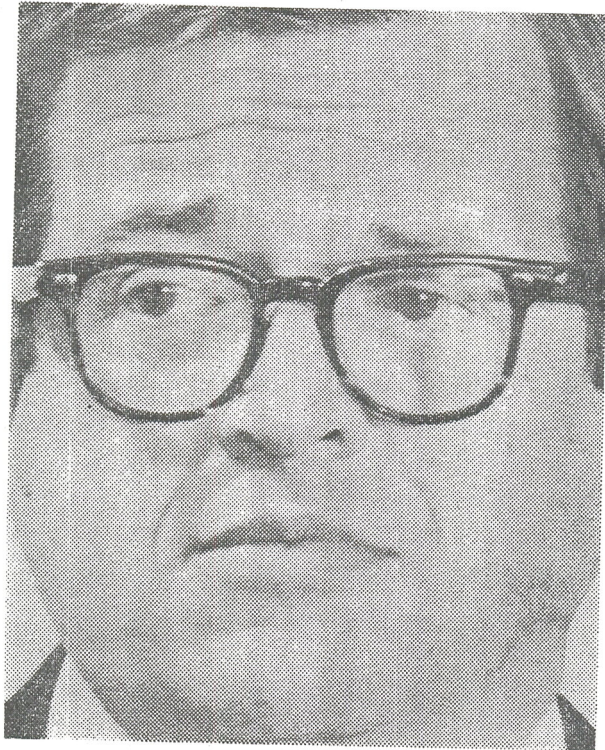
Colson again insisted that contrary to many published reports he was not distressed by the President's seemingly harsh appraisal of his character that emerged from those transcripts.

Colson also discussed his negative public and press image, characterizing himself as a victim of what he termed an "almost irreversible" mindset among the press corps.

If he did serve as a "hatchet man," Colson said, it was at the specific direction of the President.

Colson, who was sentenced last month for his admitted involvement in obstruction of justice against Daniel Ellsberg, smoked constantly during the interview and sharked a drink or two, but otherwise seemed as much at ease as anyone could under the circumstances.

He talked animatedly about the misconception of authority and power among aides serving in the White House, and urged, as he has in other recent interviews,



'It was an asinine thing to ever make all the tapes . . . To make them all public the way they were made public, to me, was one of the poorest exercises of political judgment I've ever seen.'

that consideration be given to setting up a permanent special prosecutor's office to avoid White House control of due process.

"Inside the White House," Colson said, "you had the feeling that well, the Congress, they can't get at us because this is a tug of war between Congress and the presidency.

"The Justice Department, they work for us," he added, "so really you know that as long as you don't do something blatantly stupid nobody really is looking over your shoulder."

Ironically, the former presidential aide said, the one internal source for ethical guidance inside the White House was former counsel John W. Dean III, who emerged as the President's chief attacker.

"I think Dean tried very hard during the pre-Watergate period to see that everybody in the White House did toe the line," Colson said.

But Dean's concern, added Colson, extended only to personal ethics. "Keeping yourself personally clean is a fine idea," Colson said, "but

you have a public trust in terms of what you do with the government."

Some of the questions and answers in the Colson interview:

Q.—There were an awful lot of stories in 1971 about Colson the hatchet man, saying he doesn't mind that it gets out that he's a tough guy, he's going to do things.

A.—Did I mind it? No. The real answer to it, I think, is that I did not want to see the press. So there was a practical reason in terms of the internal White House politics. I mean, if I started getting good press, I'd be suspect. Anybody in the White House staff — and this was a grave mistake that we, I think we made — anybody on the White House staff who got good press had to automatically be suspect because, a fortiori, you must have been cultivating the

press, and to cultivate the press meant you had to give them something, and the whole attitude was don't give them a damned thing.

Now, once the hatchetman story started to develop, there wasn't anything I could do to turn it off. I mean, I did make a couple of efforts at turning it off and didn't succeed. I asked Bill Safire, your colleague (at the New York Times), if he would help me once or twice in talking to reporters and say, 'Yeah, this guy isn't the evil guy you think he is' and it did no good.

One of my beliefs is that once a mind sets in among the press corps it's, you know, almost irreversible. It takes something, you know, cataclysmic to change it.

Q—What is the President talking about when he says in the White House tapes that Chuck would do anything? What does he mean? Is he saying that in fear of what you know?

A — No. The "Chuck-would-do-anything" remark I heard him make dozens of times. I had a very good relationship with him, but he

used me in a way that he found effective, but it didn't enhance my popularity standing in the White House. When something was bogged down, he would always get me into it and say, "Now Chuck, I don't care." One of his favorite expressions to me: "Break all the china in this place. I don't give a damn. I'll back you up. Just get this done." And then bravely I would get it done.

And he would goad the other members of the staff with that. And that's why there were times of bitter and intense rivalry between me and John Ehrlichman and times of bitter feelings between Henry Kissinger and myself because the President would kind of set me up in the sense that he would give me something to do, I would get it done, and then he'd turn around and say, "See, Colson can do it, why can't the rest of you guys get off your duff."

Q—Why did the President feel threatened by you on the transcripts? That is, do you have information that can impeach the President? Is there any great dark secret you know? Any great single serious crime that should make him impeachable?

A—No.

Q—You've said that before.

A—The answer is no. I consider him a personal friend. He's a man who has qualities that I enormously

admire. He has deficiencies like you have and like I have. I think on balance, he's done a tremendous job as president.

Q—What about impeachment?

A—If I were a member of Congress I would want to take a look at every scrap of evidence that's presented and if I was decided that it did in fact constitute bribery, treason, or the high crime or misdemeanor, then I would want to do a lot of weighing in my own conscience as to whether that particular offense was sufficient grounds to remove him from office, based upon his whole record as president and based upon the impact I think it would have on the country.

Q—Let me ask you a basic question. Were you hurt by the tapes? There's been a lot of reports saying that you were hurt, your feelings were hurt.

A — No. Everybody who read those tapes came to me and said, "Gee, isn't that awful, those terrible things that were said about you." I wasn't hurt by them the way people think I should have been hurt by them, because I didn't look at them as being derogatory about me. What Haldeman said about me to the President is exactly what Haldeman said to my face.

The one thing about Bob Haldeman — and I think it's a very commendable characteristic — he never says anything behind your back he won't also say to your face.

The problem with those tapes, first of all, it was an asinine thing to ever make all the tapes. I mean put the equipment in place if you ever needed it and then activate it if you need it, maybe is defensive. To have it running continuously is wrong.

Secondly, once they were made and he had them, then to preserve them in the hope that they would somehow exonerate him, when obviously most of them were made without his ever being conscious of the fact they were being made. It was just bad judgment.

And, thirdly, once you had them — and then to make them all public the way they were made public, to me, was one of the poorest exercises of political judgment I've ever seen. I mean, it may have been necessary from the standpoint of showing that he technically wasn't involved in obstruction, as far as the lawyers would argue to the impeachment committee, but in terms of the impact on being able to rally public support, showing a man — any man,

you, me, Nixon, De Gaulle — in his inner councils when he's beset with a problem and he's under pressure, is just to me the worst exercise of political judgment I've ever seen, to release them. I mean it had to have a bad impact. It's just incredible.

Q. Do you have any qualms about the morality, your morality, or the absence of your morality in the White House?

A. Yes.

Q. In what sense?

A. Well, I think if I had, I think on many occasions when I put my own better instincts, thought that my own better instincts, to do things that I thought were expedient because they helped the President get re-elected.

Time and again I can recall saying to myself, "Well, I'm not sure this is the right thing to do but we got to do it because this, you know, we'll get the election behind us." You lose sight of that, and you know I don't think I served the President well in the sense that in just the respect you're talking about, there were a lot of times when I should have stepped up and said, "Well, we're not going to do this, this just isn't the right thing to do." It's very hard to account for the specifics but there were plenty of times when that happened.

You tend to become ethically insensitive when your goal, I don't want to use the old cliché that the ends justify the means, but when a goal becomes so important to you . . . You know I was really totally convinced that the most important thing in this country was to get President Nixon re-elected, I would not run over my grandmother to do it except to the extent that that became a fun catch phrase, but there wasn't much else I wouldn't have done to get him re-elected and that obviously is not a healthy attitude.

Q. What do you think about the press? And don't be charitable.

A. I've never been charitable about the press. There's no sense beginning now. I think the press has a lot of problems. One of them being that the first 20 stories written about a public figure set the tone for the next 2000 stories and it is almost impossible to reverse it. That's one problem.

The second point, I think that the press ought to have a healthy skepticism. But there is such a thing as an unhealthy skepticism and I think the press is a little too skeptical at times to accept things that maybe they ought to accept.