

Colson Describes Watergate Years

WXPPost By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

The first member of Richard M. Nixon's tight inner circle to reach print, Charles (Chuck) Colson, has described what it was like inside the Oval Office during the Watergate years.

He has completed a compelling book called "Born Again," which is loaded with inside stories about Nixon, Spiro Agnew, Henry A. Kissinger, and other headline figures from the incredible Nixon era. We have obtained a bootleg copy of the book, which hasn't yet hit the bookstands.

Colson portrays Nixon as a shy, haunted man who got down on his knees at night to pray, yet a vicious, vindictive man who was eager to stomp on his enemies. Colson also traces his own astonishing transformation from a ruthless political hatchet man to a zealous Christian.

Here are a few of the book's most startling revelations:

—As the specter of impeachment began to haunt Nixon, he became paranoid and suspected a conspiracy against him. He feared that the special prosecutors were wiretapping the White House. He even came to believe that his own aides and secretaries might be conspiring to bug him.

Once he took Colson to the Lincoln sitting room on the second floor of the White House to thwart the suspected eavesdroppers. "The problem, Chuck," he confided, "is that I don't think I can trust anybody. Not even the secretaries."

The thought so preyed on Nixon that he

called Colson at 11:30 that night. "Let me ask you one more time. . . ." the President pleaded, "do you have some information (about the White House being bugged) that you didn't tell me?"

It turned out, ironically, that Nixon bugged himself and provided the prosecutors with the damning transcripts that brought his own downfall. But the President blamed his major domo, H.R. (Bob) Haldeman, for this. Speaking to Colson later about the White House recording system, Nixon said: "They were all Haldeman's idea. Stupid, just stupid. I told Bob twice to have the system removed, but you know Bob. I forgot all about them."

—The beleaguered Nixon once told Colson he had considered becoming a Roman Catholic. But he added: "If I converted, everyone would say it was some political gimmick —Tricky Dick making a pitch for the Catholic vote."

But Nixon told Colson earnestly: "You know, Chuck, I get on my knees every night and just pray to God." When Colson spoke to then Sen. Harold Hughes (D-Iowa), the Senator asked Colson to invite Nixon to join them in their prayer circle. But Nixon, partly out of shyness, declined.

After Colson had served seven months in prison, he had a trauma in his family. Sen. Hughes, Rep. Al Quie (R-Minn.) and two other prayer group members offered to serve out Colson's term under an antiquated statute. Quie was ready to go to the White House with the substitution plan when Colson was unexpectedly released by

Judge Gerhard Gesell.

—The ugly side of Nixon's nature showed itself on the presidential yacht Sequoia one balmy spring night. The President's staff began to talk about his enemies.

"One day we will get them," he vowed, "we'll get them on the ground where we want them. And we'll stick our heels in, step on them hard and twist—right, Chuck, right?"

Listening solemnly to this presidential diatribe were Kissinger, Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. Only Ehrlichman looked away in apparent disagreement, Colson reports.

This vengeful side of Nixon came out again when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers. "I want him exposed, Chuck," said Nixon. "I don't care how you do it. . . do you understand me? That's an order." Colson eagerly worked to discredit Ellsberg.

—Perhaps the most important news story in the book is Colson's confirmation that Nixon planned to pardon every one of his aides caught in the Watergate web.

Colson recalls he was helping Nixon with his coat one day when the President, obviously referring to his embattled aides, promised: "There'll come a time when we wipe the slate clean. Not yet but it will come."

Instead, only Nixon wound up with a pardon.

Footnote: We have made repeated calls to San Clemente for Nixon's comments. But he has offered no response.