



Charles W. Colson
A Life Redeemed

JONATHAN AITKEN

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

CHARLES W. COLSON
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

ISBN 978-1-4000-7219-4

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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This book is copublished with Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:
Aitken, Jonathan, 1942—

Charles W. Colson : a life redeemed / Jonathan Aitken.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-57856-510-3 (WaterBrook Press) ISBN 0-385-50811-5 (Doubleday)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Colson, Charles W. 2. Baptists—United States—Bibliography. 3. Evangelists—United States—Biography. 4. Ex-convicts—United States—Biography. I. Title.

BX6495.C5687A35 2005

2004062137

286'.1'092—dc22

Printed in the United States of America

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Acknowledgments

I acknowledge with great thanks all those who have made this book possible.

Michael and Sylvia Mary Alison, Charles Colson's oldest British friends, first introduced me to the subject of this biography in 1987 and first suggested I should write about him in 1997. Sadly, Michael passed away as the book was nearing completion. Nevertheless, he and Sylvia Mary gave me so much encouragement during my biographer's journey, and so much of their own letters, papers, and recollections about Colson in the early days of Prison Fellowship, that this book is gratefully dedicated to them.

It would be invidious to single out for special thanks the most important contributors to this biography from among the numerous interviewees listed in the Source Notes. All of them are quoted in its chapters, and most of them contributed invaluable threads of insight to the tapestry of my understanding of Colson's life and personality.

Nevertheless, I must express exceptional appreciation to all members of the Colson family who between them gave me more than two hundred hours of interviews and allowed me to read numerous private letters and papers. Their nervousness at knowing that this was going to be a "warts and all" biography was tempered by an openness and willingness to "tell it like it was" to the author. The same appreciation, multiplied many times over, is due to Charles W. Colson, who was generous with his time and punctilious in keeping our agreement that all editorial control should rest with his biographer.

Various collections of papers were made available to me and my re-

search assistants. My thanks are due to the staff of the Nixon Library at Yorba Linda, California; to the staff of the Billy Graham archive at Wheaton College, Illinois; to the staff of the Library of Congress; and to the Federal Archivists at Laguna Niguel, California, and Washington, D.C. To Mrs. Nancy Bursaw I express special gratitude for allowing me access to her personal collection of letters and papers relating to Charles W. Colson, her first husband.

Several members of the staff of Prison Fellowship Ministries in Reston, Virginia, were particularly helpful in response to my biographer's questions regarding facts, figures, and papers. I would like to thank Al Lawrence, Val Merrill, Nancy Niemeyer, and Kim Robbins for their kind assistance.

I express my gratitude to the changing team of secretaries on both sides of the Atlantic who typed and retyped the manuscript of the book or who helped me with research and administrative support. They were: Jackie Cottrell, Helen Haislmaier, Helen Kirkpatrick, Megan Ring, and Jean Sinclair. The heaviest burden of transcribing the tapes of my interviews was borne by Pamela Spearing, whose enthusiasm and efficiency were a great blessing to me.

Finally, I thank my publishers and editors at Doubleday and Waterbrook. Special gratitude is due to Eric Major of Doubleday, who commissioned the biography; to Michelle Rapkin, who succeeded him as Vice President of the Religious Affairs Division; and to Trace Murphy, my editor, whose insights and suggestions made great improvements to the final text.

The final responsibility for all opinions, judgments, and factual statements in the book is, of course, my own.

Jonathan Aitken

Prologue

Easter in Texas

As a chilly dawn cast its first rays of light across the hill country of central Texas on Easter 2004, Charles W. Colson was waiting in a strange yet familiar place. The strangeness was supplied by glinting coils of barbed wire held aloft by iron pillars; double-banked lines of twenty-foot-high steel fencing; blinding searchlights; and fortified watchtowers manned by sentries with rifles. The familiarity came from his twenty-seven previous Easters, all of which had begun with Colson waiting in similar situations for armed guards to arrive and let him in.

The guards, true to form, were late. As a result there was a need for patience, a quality Colson does not possess in abundance. There was ample time to observe the wind swirling through Gatesville County's gray-green grasslands flecked with patches of bluebonnets, or to watch the rivulets of rainwater trickling down the reinforced wire meshing of the perimeter fence.

Noticing that a woman in his party was shivering, Colson took off his raincoat and put it round her shoulders, leaving his trim, six-foot-one-inch frame exposed to the elements. At odds with his surroundings, he looked the epitome of elegance, dressed in a Brooks Brothers blazer, a red-and-blue silk tie, pressed gray flannel trousers, and highly polished leather shoes. Colson's attire and demeanor suggested that he could be an Ivy Leaguer, a New Englander, a former officer in the armed forces, a partner in a white shoe law firm, or a successful leader in the worlds of money, influence, and power. In his time Colson had been all these things and more. But today there were two other clues to his life and mission. The first was the Bible he held in his right hand. The second was the quiet comment he

made to no one in particular: “You know, there’s nowhere I’d rather be on Easter morning than here in these tombs of modern society.”

As gates were unlocked and security passes checked with interminable thoroughness, there was more time to observe the inside of this particular tomb—Mountain View. The name could be for a ski resort or a real estate development, but here in Texas, the state Department of Corrections had chosen it as the title for a high-security jail incarcerating over six hundred women inmates. Colson’s term, “tomb,” seemed singularly appropriate as a label here, for Mountain View resembled a moonscape punctuated by mausoleums. Emotionally Colson was soon sent into a sepulchral mood. The first of the mausoleums, or cell blocks, on his itinerary was death row.

In nearly three decades of prison ministry, Colson has visited over eight hundred prisons in forty countries and at least seventy death rows. Inevitably, his times with men and women under sentence of death are emotionally searing. This one was especially so. A senior prison officer explained in an advance briefing that there were eight women in the condemned cells, but one of them, Agnes Miller,* was likely to be executed later in the year. “She’s come to the end of the road in her appeals. She has no chance of a reprieve. So she’s the next one up,” said the officer in a Texan drawl as metallic as the sound of his jangling keys.

Colson came face-to-face with Agnes in a whitewashed visitors’ room overlooked by guards watching from behind a glass panel. To get there, he and his party passed through three sets of electronically controlled iron doors, each with the words DEATH ROW painted on its lintel. “Subtle directions in here,” Colson remarked dryly.

Agnes herself was subtle too, but in a profound way that reflected the tensions between the peace of acceptance and the palpitations of fear that she was feeling at this most fragile of times in her life’s journey. She was a highly intelligent, vivacious, and attractive African-American woman of thirty-nine, with elaborately pleated hair. It emerged from the conversation that she had committed her crime eighteen years ago, when she was twenty-one. She said she had changed a lot during her time on death row. “Have you come to know the Lord?” asked Colson. “Yes sir, I love the Lord,” said Agnes, touching her Bible. She said the passage that spoke to her with special power at this testing time was Isaiah 43:1–5. In it the Lord promises to protect those whom he loves and calls by name even though

*This name and the names of most prisoners in this book have been changed.

they pass through floods, which will not drown them, and flames, which will not scorch them. Agnes asked her visitors to pray for her mother and father. So Colson said prayers for them in words of great beauty, also asking for God's mercy, God's peace, and God's grace to be granted to "Agnes, our sister in Christ."

Colson's party of four companions for this death row visit (among them this author) included a young folksinger named Kelly Minter, who sat on the floor of the visitors' room playing gentle gospel music on her guitar. The tuneful lilt of her songs brought tears to the inmates' eyes. Agnes, taking on the role of an etiquette-conscious hostess, offered her chair to Kelly several times, but the singer preferred strumming from her cross-legged position. Two other death row prisoners joined Agnes in the room with Colson. One of them, Maria, had prepared a little speech. "Mr. Colson, I want to thank you so, so much for all you've done for me," she began.

"What have I done for you?" asked Colson with surprise.

"I'm talking about Angel Tree," said Maria, "and those wonderful Christmas presents Angel Tree gives every year to my three kids. That's been my only way of doing something for them at Christmastime to show them I love them. So I want to thank you personally, from the bottom of my heart."

Colson, who was visibly moved, explained how Prison Fellowship, the ministry he founded in 1976, now distributes six hundred thousand Christmas gifts a year, labeled "With love from Mom" or "With love from Dad," to the children of prisoners.

"It's one of the best things we do, but the idea didn't come from me," he told Maria. "It came from a lady who, like you and like me, had been in prison. She knew as a mother how awful it feels to be so helpless over Christmas when you're in jail, so she put up the idea of giving presents to prisoners' kids, and the Lord blessed it."

After more prayers and conversations with the inmates of death row, some of them on a one-on-one basis in individual cells, Colson moved to the main body of the prison and into the chapel. It was packed with about 350 women dressed in their all-white prison uniforms. When Colson rose to give the main address of the service, he strode onto a platform festooned with colorful banners saying, *This is God's House of Freedom* and *I am the Resurrection*, and he seemed to have the physical vitality of a man half his seventy-three years. Speaking without notes, in a resonant, baritone voice accompanied by expressive gestures, he began with an extension of his earlier comment outside the prison gates comparing prisons to tombs.

“Easter isn’t about parades, bunnies, chocolate rabbits, and fancy bonnets. It’s about the empty tomb. And you and I know about tombs, because prisons are the tombs of our society and we’re in one now. But you and I also know that the only way to come out of these hellholes, these tombs, is by knowing the risen Lord.”

That opening created a risen audience as the ladies of Mountain View leapt from their seats shouting hallelujahs and amens. Colson quieted them down with a personal analysis on whether the resurrection of Jesus was a mythical conspiracy of untruths invented by his disciples. “Ladies, you are all too young to remember Watergate,” he began.

“Oh no we’re not!” chuckled an elderly lady with white hair at the back of the hall. “I’m old enough to be that grandmother of yours.”

Few if any of her fellow inmates got this joke,* to which Colson, by now in full flow, did not respond.

“The great scandal of Watergate really started when everybody tried to cover up for themselves after March 21, 1973. That was when John Dean told Nixon that there was a cancer in the presidency, and then he ran away to make a deal with the prosecutors,” declared Colson, turning from politics to polemics as he added: “Jesus had Judas. Nixon had John Dean. Because of both those betrayals, twelve men came under pressure. Those of us around Nixon at that time could have been called twelve of the most powerful people in the world. But we twelve powerful men couldn’t hold a lie together for two weeks. We couldn’t support a secret that wasn’t true. The pressure was far too much for us.”

Building on this analogy, Colson turned up the heat as he continued: “Look what pressure Jesus’ disciples came under! They were persecuted, tortured, brutally murdered, stoned to death. But none of them snitched. None of them copped a plea by confessing to their tormentors, ‘We’ve been part of a conspiracy to tell lies about the resurrection.’ They were willing to die for something they knew to be true. No one ever gives up their lives for what they know is untrue. But the disciples were willing to give up their lives because they knew that resurrection of Christ is true. So do you and so do I. He is risen!”

The Watergate references seemed to fascinate the inmates of Mountain View, some of whom evidently had more than a passing acquaintance with conspiracies, snitches, plea bargains, and prosecutors piling on the pres-

*Colson achieved great notoriety while a White House aide for allegedly saying in 1972, “I would walk over my grandmother for Richard Nixon.”

sure. But Colson quietly changed the current of his oratory to a lower voltage in order to connect with those prisoners (usually a majority in any prison) who were in denial about their crime.

“When I first got entangled in the Watergate scandal, I said to myself, ‘I’m not a bad guy,’ ” explained Colson. “I didn’t feel I was a bad guy, because I thought I hadn’t done any worse things than the Democrats had done. But when I came to know Christ I was appalled by my sinfulness. And as I realized that Jesus died on the cross for me, so that my sins could be forgiven, I knew that out of gratitude I had to give my life to him. That is why God sends me into prisons. That’s why I’m in this prison today—to serve him, to live for him.”

The chapel fell quiet, and in the stillness Colson launched an appeal to his audience: “Ladies, I want *you* to live for *him*,” he said. “I know it’s not easy, I’ve been in prison. I know the temptations—the drugs, the deals, the homosexual stuff—but I want you to turn your back on all of that.” He gave a circular swing of his arm, half turning as he gazed up at the cross on the altar. “Because if you do give it up and live for the one who died for our sins, then out of gratitude to him you will want to join me in these words of prayer.

“Jesus, you’re holy. I’m guilty . . . ,” he began in an extempore flow of supplication, which ended: “So, Lord, bless these ladies, and thank you for their willingness to open their hearts to you. Bless them on this Easter day in a special way. Pour your grace out on them and on their families, and show them how much you love them and we love them, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.”

In an almost supernatural way Colson was able to tune in to an invisible wavelength that bonds offenders in jail with ex-offenders who come back into jail. On that Easter Sunday morning, former prisoner 23226 Colson touched hearts that most other preachers could never have reached.

Mountain View was not the only stop on Colson’s weekend travels. In the last forty-eight hours he had been to four other prisons as part of the Prison Fellowship’s nationwide crusade, Operation Starting Line, which aims to bring the gospel to every single inmate of America’s penal institutions over the next ten years. In Texas alone, Operation Starting Line has a systematic plan of campaign for Christian volunteers of all denominations to visit 160,000 prisoners in the Lone Star State’s 119 jails over two years. Raising the money, training the volunteers, and running the organization for such a massive enterprise are formidable tasks. Yet they are

essential to the cause that Colson has given his life to since starting Prison Fellowship twenty-seven years ago.

Some thoughtful observers of Prison Fellowship have in the past expressed fears that its impetus might falter or even fade away when the time comes for Colson to relinquish the leadership of the ministry. These anxieties are now starting to recede, after the appointment of a chosen successor, fifty-year-old Mark Earley, the former attorney general of Virginia, who now runs the day-to-day operations of the ministry as president of Prison Fellowship. On this tour of Texas prisons, Colson took an almost paternal pride in his protégé's preaching to the inmates. After the two men shared the morning's heavy schedule of sermons, Colson told a friend: "This Easter is different. The ministry doesn't need me anymore. Mark is so gifted that my heart lifts every time I hear him speak. He can lead Prison Fellowship superbly well long after I'm gone."

For all Mark Earley's leadership abilities, he is the first to say that Colson, the chairman, will be needed at the helm of Prison Fellowship for the foreseeable future. Passing the torch may take years of transition. But the colorful, charismatic founder of the ministry and his quieter heir apparent are a good team. They are branching out together into new fields, such as a teaching ministry for the Centurions (one hundred handpicked Christian leaders) in biblical worldview educational programs. This is a relatively new Colson passion, with the ambitious purpose of changing the culture of secular American society. The mere fact that Colson has started it with such gusto at the age of seventy-two suggests that he has lost little of his appetite for Christian evangelism. His energy and enthusiasm for this big-picture goal is impressive.

So also is his attention to small-print details and the control of them. This aspect of Colson's character was well illuminated by the next episode on his Easter schedule.

In between leaving Mountain View and getting to his next and crucially important Easter Sunday destination, the Carol Vance Unit at Sugar Land, near Houston, there was a glimpse of what might be called Colson the control freak. There are times (and this was one of them) when this cap still fits the hyper-controlling former USMC officer, law partner, and special counsel to the president of the United States for whom glitch-free scheduling and zero-defect command of detail were once daily imperatives.

The schedule for the 220-mile journey between the Mountain View and Sugar Land jails was a tight one. Phase one was a fast drive to Waco airport. Phase two was a 170-mile flight on a Learjet from Waco to Sugar

Land. Phase three was a short trip from Sugar Land airport to the Carol Vance Unit, for one-on-one meetings with major donors and prominent politicians before the Easter service started. Prison Fellowship staffers had gone ahead to be on duty at every juncture of this itinerary, and Colson kept them on their toes with frequent calls from his cell phone.

The first and very minor glitch came when the driver of the van carrying Colson and his five companions took a wrong turn inside the Mountain View prison perimeter, which resulted in an extra circuit of the parking area. This forty-second detour was enough to make Colson decide that he should take over the navigation for the rest of the journey. So he sat up front with a map and directions, calling out mileages and left or right turns to the driver while simultaneously calling up various Prison Fellowship staffers ahead of him on the route to check that every last detail had been attended to.

One detail beyond anyone's control was the weather. Colson's arrival at Waco airport coincided with a thunderstorm. The Learjet pilot said he could take off in it, but he didn't think he could land in it at Sugar Land, because the visibility was even worse there. Colson the meteorological expert now came to the fore. After studying various charts and screens in the weather center at Waco, he decided to take off as soon as possible, heading for either Hobby or Bush International Airport in the Houston area before they too closed down because of visibility problems. Various Prison Fellowship aides waiting in cars at Sugar Land were called and ordered to head for the alternative landing grounds of the chairman's aircraft.

As the Learjet (on loan from a local supporter) bucked and tossed through the stormy skies of Texas en route to its uncertain destination, Colson kept busy on his cell phone asking his men on the ground where exactly they were and issuing them new instructions. Frequent questions and instructions were also issued to the pilot and copilot, who had to keep the door of their cockpit open for this purpose. As Colson was in the backseat of the aircraft, his requests were sometimes hard to hear, so they had to be relayed to the pilots by his close friend and major Prison Fellowship donor Dallen Peterson, who was occupying the seat nearest to the cockpit. The dialogue between Colson, Peterson, and the pilots eventually became a little strained: "Would you mind telling Mr. Colson we're kinda busy up here?" said the captain. That veiled rebuke produced a welcome silence in the passenger cabin until his next announcement: "Hey, there's a gap opening up in the cloud bank and I think we're going to be able to get through it and come down at Sugar Land."

“Sugar Land!” exclaimed Colson, seizing his cell phone to issue counterorders to members of the team on their way to Hobby or Bush. Thanks to their first round of orders being countermanded, there was no reception party at Sugar Land. But after a flurry of fresh calls from the chairman, a local volunteer living near the airport was recruited as his stand-in chauffeur. So the hanging-around time on the ground was minimal, even though Colson kept looking anxiously at his watch and making more calls throughout it. “Oh well, Chuck gets like that some days,” said Dallen Peterson philosophically.

Colson’s anxiety to reach his destination on time was understandable, for the InnerChange Freedom Initiative at the Carol Vance Unit at Sugar Land stands out as one of his most interesting and innovative creations in his role as a criminal justice reformer. In terms of prisoner rehabilitation, Sugar Land is America’s most successful penal institution. Colson got the idea for it from visiting APAC, a Christian-run prison in Brazil, in the early 1990s. His proposal for repeating the APAC formula in a Texas jail was supported by Governor George W. Bush and by the head of the state Department of Corrections, Carol S. Vance, in April 1997. The regime at Sugar Land, known as the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), which the jail’s 311 inmates—all volunteers but not all Christians—sign up for, is based on “restorative justice” principles aimed at bringing about behavioral, moral, and spiritual changes in the lives of those doing the course. Restorative justice is another of Colson’s major interests, which he has championed through the Justice Fellowship arm of Prison Fellowship and in his book *Justice That Restores*. Every prisoner in the IFI unit at Sugar Land (and at the other new IFI jails run by Prison Fellowship in Iowa, Minnesota, and Kansas) has to follow the path of repentance, restoration, and public apology to victims that is described in the gospel story of the corrupt tax collector Zacchaeus. The regime is compulsory, not only while an inmate is incarcerated but also for another twelve months of post-release mentoring in the community. There is nothing soft or easy about the program, but every IFI prisoner has volunteered for it and has gone through a competitive selection process run by PF in cooperation with prison chaplains.

An IFI prisoner’s day, which at Colson’s insistence starts at 5:30 A.M. (an hour earlier than for inmates in other Texas jails), consists of life-changing and life-enhancing skills training. It is also full of Christian devotional activities, such as chapel services, prayer meetings, hymn singing, Alpha Course sessions, and Bible reading. These features caused the *Wall Street Journal* to

scoff at the IFI unit as a “Bible boot camp” back in 1997. Such cynicism was originally shared by many of the Corrections Department officials who run the security and administration of Sugar Land IFI. However, their skepticism has steadily diminished in light of the unit’s results. According to a recent independent study by the University of Pennsylvania, inmates released from this IFI prison over the last seven years have reoffended at the rate of 8 percent. This compares to the 67 percent reoffending rate that prevails across the totality of prisoners released from American jails.

In light of the growing political and media interest in these remarkably low repeat-offending statistics, it was not surprising to find Colson in an upbeat mood on Easter Sunday afternoon as he showed his visitors, including Congressman Tom DeLay, the majority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, around the facility. “You can argue with faith but you can’t argue with the consequences of faith. That eight percent reoffending figure speaks for itself,” said Colson. And several of the IFI inmates wanted to speak for themselves. One of them, Jason Edwards, told Colson that a copy of his 1976 autobiography, *Born Again*, was on his bedside table and that he read it every night “because it’s been such a great inspiration to my life.”

After listening to this and several other testimonies from IFI inmates, Colson swung into inspirational mode himself as he delivered his second Easter sermon of the day.

“The whole world is now watching IFI to see if what is happening here is truly God’s work,” Colson told the prisoners. “I believe the Lord’s hand is upon you. Show your gratitude to him by living for him. Don’t you dare let him down when you get out of here! Stay faithful to him, and he, in his great love, will be faithful to you.”

The amens and hallelujahs in the men’s prison, where two-thirds of the inmates are African-Americans, were just as fervent as they had been in Mountain View women’s prison a few hours earlier. But the big difference was the joy on so many of the men’s faces and their obvious commitment to the IFI course they were following.

Congressman Tom DeLay was one of several VIPs in the audience who took in the importance and the promise of the IFI experiment. “I have visited many prisons but this one is completely different,” said the House majority leader. “It is clean, there are no unpleasant smells, you get lots of smiles, and good feedback from the inmates. Many people in Washington are positive about this place and are impressed by its remarkably low repeat-offending statistics.”

DeLay explained that his interest in IFI had been affected by Colson's latest best seller, *How Now Shall We Live?* He added that after reading it, he had invited the author to be the first speaker in a series of talks on Capitol Hill known as the Majority Leader's Lecture Series. Colson's lecture had apparently made a big impact on several members of Congress.

Later in the evening Colson was making a big impact with a speech to a hotel room packed with Houston-based supporters of Prison Fellowship. Many of them work as voluntary mentors to released inmates, helping them to find jobs and new roots as they adjust to the world of freedom in their home communities. Others are donors who produce the \$650,000 a year it costs Prison Fellowship to run the IFI course at Sugar Land. Fired with enthusiasm for the success of his project as it reached its seventh anniversary, Colson made an upbeat speech and introduced a number of former inmates who gave a human face to the repeat-offending statistics. They included Robert Sutton, a paroled ex-murderer who had been in the prison when Governor George W. Bush opened it in 1997.

"Last year Robert came with me to a meeting in the Roosevelt Room of the White House," declared Colson. "When I introduced him to President Bush, the president greeted him like an old friend, embraced him in front of the cameras, and congratulated him on becoming a law-abiding citizen, all thanks to IFI."

Three and a half decades before that White House meeting with President Bush, Colson began working there as special counsel to President Richard M. Nixon. Within three years, Colson became second only to Nixon himself as the object of media notoriety and political hatred. He was vilified as one of the most wicked architects of Watergate and loathed for his arrogant, overbearing style of political ruthlessness. His reputation, as much as his actions, led to his indictment in 1973 on Watergate-related criminal charges. After entering a plea of guilty he was imprisoned, disgraced, demoralized, and finished. No one would have predicted that he might one day return to the White House as a regular visitor and confidant of another president. Even more unbelievable would have been the idea that Colson would reemerge in the public life of America as someone famous, only this time for good deeds and moral leadership. His demonization in the 1970s has been replaced by lionization in the 2000s—at least among the nation's 65 million evangelical Christians, who often claim that he has been "anointed by the Lord." That label aside, Colson has lived to see his reputa-

tion transformed and his life redeemed. By any standards it is a remarkable turnaround, which his admirers say could have been accomplished only by the hand of God.

Colson's redemption has not gone unquestioned. When he came out of prison in 1975 and published his best-selling autobiography, *Born Again*, his conversion was greeted with far more secular cynicism than applause. Much of that skepticism has receded after twenty-eight years of public ministry accompanied by impeccable financial and personal rectitude. Yet some doubts remain. As recently as two years ago, Henry Kissinger asked this author, "Are you sure Colson is for real?"

Kissinger's question was answered with a confident affirmative based on deeper knowledge than the research for this book. For I have known Colson for over seventeen years and have special personal reasons for being able to make a positive judgment on the authenticity of his post-conversion life and ministry.

The Colson and Aitken paths first crossed in 1988 when I was a young British Member of Parliament. At the time of our meeting I was combining my duties as a backbencher in the House of Commons with writing a biography of President Richard M. Nixon.* Colson was an excellent source for that book, and a good relationship grew between us, subsequently strengthened by visits to each other's homes on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although friendly toward Colson, I did not share his evangelical faith or fervor. Far from being "Born Again," I was merely a nominal member of the church-reticent wing of Anglicanism. Perhaps for that reason our relationship did not deepen much below the level of personal cordiality and political gossip. Colson was interested in my political career, which prospered in the 1990s when I became a defense minister and chief secretary to the Treasury in the cabinet of Prime Minister John Major. During that turbulent era of British politics there was media speculation that I could emerge as a possible leader of the Conservative Party. As a result of coming under intense journalistic scrutiny, I had a spectacular fall from grace. In the course of an ill-judged civil libel action against *The Guardian* newspaper, I was caught telling a lie while giving evidence in court. A press campaign to have me prosecuted for perjury resulted in my indictment on this charge in 1999. I pleaded guilty to it and was sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment.

**Nixon: A Life* by Jonathan Aitken (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1993).

On the day that my world fell apart during the libel case, Colson, by coincidence, was on a visit to London. He witnessed my public humiliation in the headlines and on the television news. Although we had not been in touch with each other for some time, Colson's immediate reaction was to come alongside me as a friend and spiritual counselor.

"I just want you to know that my heart goes out to you, that you're in my prayers, and that I consider myself your friend," began one of his first letters. "Your greatest test will be right now, Jonathan. You can let circumstances shatter you as I saw you quoted in the press or you can decide that adversity will be your greatest blessing . . . As you know, I have looked back on Watergate and thank God for it. Through that crucible I came to know Christ personally and discovered that in the darkest moments of my life He was working to produce what I would later see as the greatest blessings of my life."

These sentiments, and the follow-up actions that accompanied them, were characteristic of Colson. He has a natural empathy with those going through the agony of a breaking experience, and a natural inclination to witness to them in their time of trouble. Around the world there are numerous individuals, unknown and well known, whose wounds have been healed with the help of Colson the Good Samaritan. I am one of them.

Under Colson's guidance, and with the help of a group of prayer partners convened by his closest friend in Britain, Michael Alison, I traveled along a road of pain, penitence, and prison. In the course of these spiritual searchings I eventually made a commitment to a new life in Christ. When I came out of jail in January 2000 I studied at Oxford University for two years, reading Theology at Wycliffe Hall. I have subsequently devoted my life to authorship and prison ministry.

Although there are obvious similarities between the trajectories of my career and Colson's, I shy away from such comparisons because his life of service is so infinitely greater than mine will ever be. However, I recognize that our shared experiences have given me, as an author, some unusual, possibly unique insights into Colson's story. As a result, it is told in the ensuing pages by a kindred spirit—although not by an uncritical one. For there are aspects of Colson's life that were deeply unattractive. As a result, this is a "warts and all" portrait of the man. It is not religious, political, or personal hagiography. It stands or falls as a work of historical biography.

As a result of my biographer's journey through the first seventy-four years of Colson's life, I have come to believe that he is a far more significant figure

in the history of twentieth-century America than many contemporaries have realized. In the Epilogue I have attempted to explain why this is so. For Colson's footprints on the sands of time go predictably deep in the spiritual fields where he has worked since his Christian conversion. There he has made an enormous impact on prison ministry, church unity, evangelism, discipleship-teaching, and authorship. Less predictable but no less important is Colson's impact in secular fields such as prison reform, politics, and presidential election campaigns. Few men who influenced the presidency of the United States in the 1960s are still doing so in the 2000s. Yet this is true of Colson. Anyone who expected that his contribution to politics would end when he left the Nixon White House in 1973 would have been surprised by the following two Colson vignettes from the presidential election of 2004.

Three weeks before the two presidential candidates were to debate on television, George W. Bush invited Colson to the White House for a private meeting. In part their encounter was a recognition of Colson's importance in helping Bush build the "moral majority" that was to prove so crucial to the election result. For in recent years Colson has become a confidant to the forty-third president, and to his principal political adviser, Karl Rove, on faith-based issues such as international human rights, the war in Sudan, religious persecution in North Korea, AIDS in Africa, sex trafficking, prison reform, and partial birth abortion.

Important though these issues were to many moral-majority voters in 2004, this particular meeting, held at 1:00 P.M. on September 15 in the Executive Office Building of the White House (by surreal coincidence in the same suite of offices where Colson often talked with Richard Nixon), was more related to politics than to faith.

The president wanted to know how Colson thought the campaign was going. So far so good, was the essence of Colson's reply, as he gave an upbeat assessment of the election from his perspective as a Christian leader, a Florida voter, and an old political pro who, thirty-two years earlier, had played the Karl Rove role in Nixon's reelection.

As the discussion moved to the upcoming debates with John Kerry, Colson offered George W. Bush some prescient advice: "Whatever you do, Mr. President, don't make the mistake that my boss made in 1960. Before his first debate against JFK, Nixon got tired. He made his tiredness worse by campaigning on the morning of that debate. As a result, Nixon looked exhausted. That was why he lost the first debate in the eyes of the television audience. So please, don't overtire yourself, Mr. President."

George W. Bush was politely dismissive of Colson's counsel. Brushing it aside, his response in effect was that tiredness wasn't a problem for him. In reality, however, the forty-third president did allow his campaigning schedule to overtax him. Ignoring Colson's advice, he added to his fatigue on the morning of the first debate against John Kerry by taking time out for a visit to Florida victims of the September hurricanes. The net result was that on the night of the debate Bush came across as tired, tetchy, and more than a touch petulant. Opinion polls declared that he had been outscored by John Kerry. "How we wished that Colson's warning had been listened to by the president," a senior White House aide told this biographer. "From that time on he took Colson's advice and changed his schedule to make sure he rested up properly before the next two debates. That made a big difference."

While his positive contribution to George W. Bush's reelection remained private, Colson also made a public and embarrassingly negative appearance in John Kerry's campaign. This occurred when the Democrats were attempting to discredit Vietnam veteran-turned-author John O'Neill on account of his book, *Unfit for Command*, which had cast doubts on Kerry's military record. In the course of their discrediting efforts, the Democrats discovered that there had been a Colson-O'Neill connection dating back to the 1970s, when Colson had brought O'Neill into the Oval Office to see President Nixon. The purpose of the meeting was for Nixon to enlist O'Neill's support in countering Kerry's antiwar activism. At that time Kerry was a twenty-seven-year-old former navy officer who had become a thorn in the administration's side because of the powerful evidence he had given to a Senate committee regarding Vietnam War atrocities.

Extracts from the 1971 White House tapes, extensively replayed on many radio and TV channels in 2004, showed both Colson and Nixon to have been full of hostility toward the young Kerry:

COLSON This fellow Kerry they had on last week . . .

NIXON Yeah, yeah.

COLSON Hell, he turns out to be really quite a phony.

NIXON Well, he is sort of a phony, isn't he?

COLSON Well, he stayed, when he was here.

NIXON Stayed out in Georgetown.

COLSON You know he's just the complete opportunist.

NIXON A racket, sure.

COLSON We'll keep hitting him, Mr. President.

These reminders of the dark side of Charles Colson in his White House years reignited old flames of controversy around him. He had to take considerable criticism for his past hostility to John Kerry. However, if the full story of the Kerry-Colson relationship had been known, both men might have been seen in rather different light.

More than two decades after Colson had promised to “keep hitting” John Kerry, their paths crossed at the 1993 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. Colson was in the audience as a national Christian leader. Kerry was on the platform as a United States senator delivering a homily on the New Testament reading of John 3:1–21—the story of Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus.

Colson was deeply moved by Senator Kerry’s remarks on the reading’s themes of the search for faith and renewal by the spirit. Returning to his Prison Fellowship office immediately after the prayer breakfast, Colson wrote this letter to his former adversary:

February 5th 1993

Dear Senator Kerry,

Some years ago you and I were on opposite sides. I suspect from your point of view that’s the most charitable way it could be put.

But I must tell you, we certainly are not today. In the twenty or so years that I have been attending the National Prayer Breakfast, I have never heard a more articulate, unequivocal presentation of the Gospel than your scripture reading. It was the highlight of this Breakfast—and perhaps of any I have attended.

I suppose we all have to live with our stereotypes; I certainly have. But whatever stereotype I have of you is totally changed.

I write this letter asking your forgiveness for any ways in which I hurt you in the past; and to express great joy over your Christian conviction and the courage with which you expressed it to the National Prayer Breakfast.

I hope our paths will cross under what I suspect now will be very happy circumstances. God bless you.

*Yours in His service,
Charles W. Colson*

Surprisingly, Colson’s letter received no reply from John Kerry. However, several weeks later Colson was contacted by a political reporter from the *Boston Globe*. The reporter said he had been told by Senator Kerry that

Colson had “apologized” to him. Could Colson please comment on his apology? The reporter made it clear that the story had been given to him with a hostile political spin by the Massachusetts senator. Colson turned the other cheek, staying silent about the true contents and context of his letter.

Whatever this episode may say about John Kerry, taken as a whole it reveals far more about Charles Colson. The unattractive stereotype of the president’s hatchet man is preserved for all to hear on the 1971 White House tapes. Yet Colson’s 1993 letter to Kerry is transparently sincere in its sentiments. Who can doubt that the tough, hardball-playing, “We’ll keep hitting him, Mr. President” Colson of his White House years, and the gentle, forgiveness-seeking Colson of his Prison Fellowship years, are figures who have traveled from two opposite poles of the spiritual compass?

This polarization is intriguing. Few figures in contemporary society have in their lives stirred up greater passions—negative and positive, secular and spiritual. Even though he has now become America’s best-known Christian leader after Billy Graham, people still ask: “Who is the real Charles Colson, and what is the full story of his life before and after his conversion?”

This biography hopes to provide the answers.

An Unsettled Upbringing

Parents and Childhood

In the beginning was the energy, a life force so enthusiastic that everyone noticed him as a boy with leadership qualities, who never did things by halves, and who rarely knew when to stop. Whether it was collecting nickels and dimes for the war effort, selling ads for the school magazine, or playing practical jokes on his friends, he had exceptional drive that combined zeal, ingenuity, and humor. Yet the *levitas* in his nature was balanced by a *gravitas* shown in the self-discipline he applied to achieving the academic goals of his schoolboy years. So even in his earliest days there were intriguingly polarized characteristics in the young Charles Colson. It did not need an expert in genetics to deduce that they flowed from his radically different parents.

No mother could have had a more appropriate nickname than Dizzy Colson. The nineteenth-century British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, who acquired the same sobriquet, coined a phrase to describe his parliamentary opponent William Gladstone: “Inebriated by the exuberance of his own verbosity.” It was a cap that would have fit well on Inez Ducrow Colson. For Dizzy Colson was a twentieth-century American eccentric who never stopped talking, showing off, spending money, or striking attitudes that she hoped would shock her friends and relatives. Colorful anecdotes of Dizzy abound throughout the story of her son’s life.

When Dizzy made her first visit to the White House in 1969 to see Charlie, as she always called her son, in his office as special counsel to the president, she was unusually dressed for the occasion. She wore a light overcoat, but beneath it she was clad in nothing more than her underwear and a slip. When she explained to a startled cousin how she justified this

bizarre ensemble, Dizzy declared: "But no one ever lets you take off your topcoat in the White House!" History does not record whether Mrs. Colson ever tested her theory of the disrobing customs at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in the Nixon years or whether she simply invented the story to shock her straitlaced relative. The latter seems more likely since Dizzy was not given to understatement either in dress or in words.

One post-White House occasion when Dizzy might have found it difficult to overstate her own role in the proceedings was the Washington movie premiere of the film of her son's best-selling autobiography, *Born Again*. Surrounded by Hollywood stars, Beltway celebrities, the sister of the president of the United States, and a theater full of heavyweight figures from the worlds of politics, journalism, and religion, most mothers might have been content to bask in reflected glory from a backseat. Not Dizzy. Although she was under strict instructions not to talk to the press and had even been assigned a minder to ensure her silence, Inez Ducrow Colson was not one to hide her light under a bushel. She escaped from her minder, Mrs. Beth Loux, by slipping into a stall in the ladies' rest room and slipping out again underneath one of the partitions separating the toilets. By the time Mrs. Loux had discovered that her charge had bolted even though her toilet door was still closed, Dizzy was in full flow, giving an interview to the style correspondent of the *Washington Post*. The main feature of the interview was Mrs. Colson's ethically incorrect opinion of her son's role in Watergate and of his efforts to blacken the character of Daniel Ellsberg. "I'm proud of what Chuck tried to do to that communist Ellsberg. . . . I wish *he* would get up and say, 'I'm proud.' . . . I never want to hear Chuck saying, 'I'm sorry,'" she declared. Apparently oblivious to the new Colson message of Christian contrition and change, Dizzy professed to be mystified by the book's title. "I born him first. I had him baptized as a baby. I don't understand this 'Born Again' business," she told reporters.

It was not the first or last time that Charles Colson found himself at loggerheads with his mother. "The problem was that he and Dizzy banged smack into the middle of each other's energy fields," was how one member of the family summarized their turbulent relationship. The collisions between filial chalk and maternal cheese sometimes had awkward consequences. With the looks of a Bette Davis and the effervescence of a Goldie Hawn, Dizzy had a flamboyance in her character that was the antithesis of her son's self-discipline. Immensely attractive in her expansive personality, she combined generosity of spirit toward underdogs with financial reck-

lessness about overdrafts. One of her many iron whims was a determination to be on the move. This included house moves, for in the 1930s and 1940s the Colsons had at least fifteen different addresses in the Boston area, a velocity of change that caused young Charlie to attend eight schools before reaching the age of twelve.

Some of this switching of abodes may have been due to Dizzy's peripatetic restlessness of spirit, but the more fundamental cause was the constant fluctuation of the family finances. These cash flow problems were usually caused by Dizzy's chronic overspending on clothes, flowers, furniture, and household decorations—of which only the very best would do. Some of Charles Colson's most painful childhood memories concerned the aftereffects of his mother's extravagance, when forced sales of the family furniture were required because her bills had mounted too high. The shock of coming home from school and finding complete strangers carrying chairs out of the living room left its scars on the adolescent Colson. The anxieties created by the debt crises and rent shortfalls of his youth resulted in a careful frugality with money in his adult life.

Visits from debt collectors were not the only insecurities to trouble young Charlie. Another perplexity was his mother's sense of humor. Extraordinary though it sounds, Dizzy enjoyed pretending that her son was not her son at all. With a straight face she would tell her friends that she had really given birth to a daughter, who had been accidentally swapped by a maternity nurse in the hospital for the boy baby she now had to bring up. So elaborate were the details of this fantasy that some people actually believed it. Although Charlie himself was not among the believers, he was understandably unsettled by the frequency with which his mother repeated and varied the story in ways that could only have been hurtful to a young boy. As he recalled it: "This was my mother's favorite gag. Of course, I knew she was saying it half in humor, but it always left me feeling uncomfortable. Even to me she would say, 'I never wanted a boy. I really wanted a little girl and I had one.' Then she'd go on and explain how in the next room in the hospital there'd been a Mrs. Peterson who'd had a girl and that the hospital had mixed up the babies. 'So you really belong to Mrs. Peterson and her little girl is really my daughter,' she used to say."

A modern child psychologist might make interesting observations on the wisdom of these maternal jests, particularly since their negative impact was compounded by Dizzy's reluctance to express the love and pride she inwardly felt for her Charlie. These failings corrected themselves when she

spoke of him with loving admiration to other people. Yet the direct lines of communication between mother and son were curiously flawed, as the latter recalls: "My mother would never say to me, 'I am really proud of you and what you're doing.' She never said, 'You're wonderful,' or, 'I love you.' I can't ever recall my mother saying things like that to me . . . she never really understood me or my work . . . we just never clicked."

Fortunately for the young Charles Colson, he clicked happily with his other parent, his father, Wendell Ball Colson, with whom he had a good rapport and many similarities of both character and appearance.

The Colsons came from Scandinavian stock. Wendell's father arrived in America in the 1870s as an immigrant from Sweden. He became a successful musician, celebrated for his cornet solos with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but his life and career were ended by a virulent flu epidemic in 1919. Wendell was seventeen at the time of his father's death and he dropped out of high school in order to support his widowed mother. Throughout his remaining teens and twenties, Wendell worked as a bookkeeper for a Boston meatpacking plant, earning around \$32 a week. However, he was determined to better himself, for he spent his evenings studying at night school until, after twelve years, he achieved professional qualifications in law and accountancy.

In the middle of these exertions Wendell met the colorful Inez, or Dizzy, Ducrow, a beautiful twenty-one-year-old Bostonian whose penchant for fantasy extended to the claim that she was descended from the British aristocracy. The British part was true. Her parents emigrated from Birmingham, England, in about 1900 and never relinquished their U.K. citizenship, even though they resided in the United States for over forty years. Aristocratic lineage would have been harder to establish, for Dizzy's father was a silversmith, a trade that in nineteenth-century Britain was not usually associated with the nobility and gentry unless they were its customers.

The marriage of Wendell Colson and Inez Ducrow at Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, Orient Heights, in 1926, seems to have been inspired by that random arrow of Cupid known as "the attraction of opposites." In temperament and behavior, the bride and groom were poles apart, but perhaps Dizzy's intuition told her that she needed the qualities of stolidity and stability in a husband. Although Wendell must occasionally have wondered whether his down-to-earth normality was equal to the task of keeping his exotic wife rooted in reality, their forty-eight-year marriage was a happy one. Despite those creative fictions about the mix-up with Mrs. Peterson's

daughter in the maternity ward, one of the most joyful moments of the marriage must surely have been the birth of their only child, Charles Wendell Colson, on October 16, 1931. To be born during the years of the Depression in one of North Boston's poorer residential districts meant growing up in an environment tinged by economic hardship and food shortages. Although the Colsons never went hungry, because Wendell held down a steady job in the food industry throughout the Depression, many of their neighbors were not so fortunate. One of Charlie's earliest memories was of his mother cooking subsistence meals for people down the street who had nothing to eat, and of giving away her best coats to unemployed women who were cold in winter.

Wartime memories also loomed large in the Colson boyhood. He was ten years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and he remembers how fear stalked the streets of Boston in 1942–43 over expected Japanese or German bombing raids and submarine attacks. His father was appointed an air raid warden with the duty of going out on night patrol to check that everyone in the neighborhood had put blackout curtains over their windows so that enemy pilots could not see any lights on the ground. Charlie himself contributed to the war effort at the age of eleven, when he organized a schoolboy house-to-house collection to buy a jeep for the U.S. Army. As the leader of this fund-raising campaign, Charlie sold his model aircraft collection to swell the coffers, and was chosen to hand over the check to an army officer—an event recorded for posterity by a photograph published in the *Boston Globe*.

Also recorded for posterity was an early example of Colson's talent for public speaking and fund-raising. In the course of the campaign for collecting donations to the jeep fund, Charlie addressed his fellow sixth-grade classmates with a speech whose pencil-written text has survived in his family archives. "What I am about to say I want to be assured as a plea not as an offer," began the eleven-year-old orator. "There will be no reward for your donations and work, nothing but the satisfaction of knowing that you are helping our boys. . . .

"The war now rests on the shoulders of the American people. If the people of the conquered countries had another chance they would gladly give their money, their homes, yes, even their lives. We, the people of the United States, are the avenging sword of freedom destined to liberate the impressed [*sic*] world. This can be our destiny if we give this cause our fullest cooperation."

Although a little flamboyant for an audience of ten- and eleven-year-old

schoolboys, Colson's first speech displayed some early promise of political leadership. It also revealed some early skills in the art of news management, since a version of the text appeared in the *Boston Herald*. Even to have attempted such an address while in sixth grade suggests a certain precociousness. This may have stemmed from the self-assurance that came from his overprotected home life as an only child. The privations of the Depression followed by the uncertainties and food rationing of the war were the ostensible reasons why Dizzy did not have any more babies. Her decision may also have been influenced by the exceptional pain she suffered in childbirth from her son's high forceps delivery. Like many an offspring without siblings, Charlie was cosseted by his parents. Yet his mother's cossetting seemed negative because she was excessively critical and overbearing in her maternal attentions. By contrast, his father was a more positive source of support and encouragement. Described by a contemporary as "the straightest of straight arrows . . . a lovable, kind old bear of a man with a wonderfully calm and easygoing tolerance which he sure needed to cope with Diz," Wendell was the rock on which his son's character was built. For Chuck, as his father preferred to call him, absorbed his core values from his dad and regarded him as a role model of diligence, dedication to the job, and patriotic duty.

In spite of the paternal emphasis on these values, Chuck grew up with a well-tuned appreciation of the absurd. Both his parents had a keen sense of humor, especially Wendell, who loved playing practical jokes within the family. This was a peculiarity that Chuck inherited. His boyhood was packed with slapstick episodes, such as letting off stink bombs in movie theaters, pulling away the legs of the hall table in a country club in order to leave a hapless cousin holding an unsupported surface laden with silverware, and hiding snowballs in the caps of train drivers. This humorous activity went deeper than the syndrome of "Boys will be boys," for as later chapters will show, Chuck's penchant for juvenile capers lasted long into adulthood. The child that was father to the man had a strong streak of comic, as well as serious, energy within him.

Perhaps the most serious legacy of his childhood was a reverence for academic achievement. Chuck was deeply impressed, when he was eight years old, at going to watch his father receive his degree from Northeastern Law School, formally dressed in gown and mortarboard. That graduation ceremony, and the long hours at night school he knew had preceded it, imprinted on Chuck a highly developed sense of the importance of education.

Browne & Nichols

That priority was reinforced by his parents' willingness to make financial sacrifices to give their son the best possible start in life. Chuck's earliest education had taken place in a swift succession of seven public elementary schools in various neighborhoods where the Colsons were renting a house. When he was eleven, his parents opted for scholarship and stability by moving him to a well-known private day school in Cambridge, Massachusetts—Browne & Nichols. Originally established to educate the male children of Harvard faculty members, B&N (as it was known) was not in the same *crème de la crème* social class of such New England private schools as Andover, Exeter, and Groton. However, the broader social backgrounds of its pupils and the intellectual families from which many of them came made B&N an outstanding academic school. It was expensive too. Its fees of approximately \$600 per term put a strain on the Colson family finances, but it was Dizzy who pushed hardest for it on the grounds that only the best was good enough for her Charlie.

Arriving at Browne & Nichols in September 1942, Colson was soon recognized as a clever and hardworking schoolboy. Recording an IQ of 159, he came top, or almost top, of his classes in Latin, French, History, and English. One early indication of his skills as a writer came when he was set an essay assignment requiring the description of an unusual house. At that time, the Colsons had temporarily moved into a renovated barn with a high roof whose eaves were populated with bats. Chuck and his father embarked on a joint exercise that combined essay composition with bat extermination.

“What my dad and I did was turn the roof lights out, position ourselves in the rafters and then, when the bats started flying, we would open fire on them with .22 scattershot guns,” recalled Colson. “We hit plenty of bats but some of them fell through the beams down to the rooms on the ground floor where we had guests staying. They were very surprised to be bombed by dead bats! Then my grandfather climbed up to the roof to find out what was happening and we mistook his noise for more bats so we almost shot him too. The whole story made a very humorous essay. When I handed it in to my professor, he gave me an A, and I remember him being very complimentary about it and saying, ‘Colson, you really should become a writer.’”

Although Colson did not turn his hand until he was in prison thirty years later to the writing that was to produce twenty-three books in eleven

languages with worldwide sales of over 10 million copies, he did exercise his abilities on schoolboy journalism. When he was in tenth grade, he unsuccessfully applied for a post on the editorial team of the Browne & Nichols newspaper, the *Spectator*. His response to this rejection was to launch a rival publication, the *Spec*, with the help of a fellow pupil, Jonathan Moore. The *Spec* was regarded as being so much livelier than its established competitor that in the spirit of “We’d better let them join us before they beat us,” Moore and Colson were offered posts on the *Spectator*’s editorial team after all. The offer was accepted and swiftly resulted in a reverse takeover, for in no time Chuck Colson became editor in chief of the *Spectator*, with Moore his deputy. Jonathan Moore was Colson’s best friend at Browne & Nichols. In some ways they were an odd couple. Moore described himself as “a skinny little kid with a bad eye problem, rather shy and confused by my many hang-ups. I was in awe of Colson at first because he was a year older than me. I saw him as a natural leader, bursting with drive and confidence. In retrospect, I think he may have gone out of his way to be generous in his friendship to me because I was such an obvious underdog.”

Colson was an obvious overdog. Photographs of him at the age of sixteen give the impression of a rather pretentious, self-satisfied youth whose chubby features protruding over his stylish collar and bow tie make him look like a cat who has recently consumed several dishes of cream. There were many reasons why his contemporaries, like Moore, felt somewhat overwhelmed by him. One was his car, a British Morris Minor given to him by Wendell and Dizzy. Colson equipped it with an accessory that suited his persona—a truck bullhorn. Moore recalls scenes of Colson’s progress down Boston’s Memorial Drive going west toward Route 2. With a blast or two on the bullhorn he would make the traffic ahead of him divide like the Red Sea before Moses. Then he would shoot through the empty middle lane, leaving behind him a trail of irate motorists realizing they had given way not to some gigantic juggernaut towing a trailer, but to a diminutive Morris Minor with a schoolboy laughing at them from behind the wheel.

Laughter was a big ingredient in the life of the teenage Colson. He was a life enhancer, forever having fun, playing jokes, and being the life and soul of every available party. Yet he had a caring side to him too. An incident recalled by several of his classmates involved a highly charged scene when the school’s English teacher, Mr. Paul Marsh, accused one of his pupils of cheating in an essay. The charge was plagiarism and the evidence pointed clearly to the boy’s guilt. However, before painful disciplinary mea-

asures could be applied to the plagiarist, Colson rushed to his defense. In the manner of an impassioned courtroom attorney pleading with the jury for a not guilty verdict, Colson produced a plethora of possible excuses and explanations for the malefactor's behavior. The arguments in his plea suggested that the boy had subliminally absorbed the plagiarized passages many years earlier; that he had retained them in his memory from a radio broadcast; or that he had innocently believed that copying another writer's work was an acceptable essay writing technique. So popular with the class were these creative defenses that the plagiarist escaped with a warning. It would not be the last time that Colson argued with eloquence for leniency on behalf of an underdog in trouble.

Although he was only an average athlete and football player, Colson made himself a force to be reckoned with at Browne & Nichols by displaying a talent for business and journalism. His power base was the *Spectator*. Although some contemporaries, with the wisdom of hindsight, later came to see his teenage seizure of school media power as an early example of the dirty tricks for which he became notorious in the Nixon administration, at the time Colson breathed new life into the moribund and money-losing newspaper.

"Colson made it a testy, zesty, much-talked-about paper," recalled his deputy, Jonathan Moore, "and he turned it around by sheer obsessive hard work. He was a control freak, who could lose his temper, and he quite often did, but he also did a lot of storming around in gales of laughter. If you were on his team you felt the warmth of his inclusiveness."

In 1947–48, the *Spectator* won the Columbia Journalism Awards' inter-school gold medal for best school magazine of the year. His track record as an editor was an early example of Chuck Colson's drive, energy, and can-do spirit, but it also revealed one of his less attractive characteristics—arrogance.

Toward the end of Colson's reign at the *Spectator*, the paper had built up a considerable cash surplus, largely on account of the editor's ability to sell advertising space to school contractors. Pre-Colson, the magazine's highest-ever advertising revenues had been around \$500. In 1947–48, those revenues tripled, to over \$1,500. Colson had proprietary ideas on how the surplus he had created should be spent. He produced ambitious plans for a bigger and better paper. Unfortunately, the teacher at Browne & Nichols responsible for school publications, Mr. Woodhead, was more cautious, which led to a clash of wills between the two. Unable to accept that his plans for expansion were being vetoed, Colson lost his temper dur-

ing an angry exchange of words with Mr. Woodhead and hurled a book at him. The editor in chief was immediately marched down to the principal's office and suspended from school for two days. Despite this punishment, the incident inflated rather than deflated Colson's ego, for his classmates threatened to go on strike in sympathy with the suspended martyr, and he returned to school with a hero's welcome.

A similar sense of bumptious invincibility characterized Colson's most successful activity at Browne & Nichols—debating. Thanks to coaching from his father and encouragement from the teacher in charge of debating, William Thomas, Colson won a place on the debate team at the age of fourteen. Two years later he was the team's captain and its prizewinning star, regularly carrying off interstate and interschool championship awards. One of the key ingredients behind those triumphs was Colson's self-confidence. The Browne & Nichols 1949 yearbook recorded the debate team's triumphs with this tongue-in-cheek comment on its captain: "Chuck's success as a debater is due to the fact that he feels anyone who disagrees with him is insane."

Rejecting Harvard

The adjective "insane" may also have been used by several early Colson admirers, including his mother, his teachers, and the dean of Harvard, to describe the most surprising decision of his schoolboy years—the rejection of a Harvard scholarship. There was, however, method in his apparent madness.

Browne & Nichols, located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, only a few hundred yards from the campus of Harvard, thought of itself as a preparatory school for its revered university neighbor. So in the eyes of the school and of his dotting parents, Colson's success in winning a scholarship to Harvard was the zenith of academic achievement. Chuck himself had other ideas. For at the same time as applying to Harvard, he had applied for, and won, a Naval ROTC scholarship to Brown University.

As he weighed the pros and cons of the two scholarships, Colson felt increasingly attracted to Brown. He had some good friends there. He liked the feel of the smaller but still prestigious Ivy League atmosphere of Brown. More significantly, the NROTC scholarship would pay for his full board and tuition, whereas the Harvard scholarship paid only tuition fees. These economic advantages of Brown were important at a time when the

Colson finances looked fragile, for Wendell had lost his job as vice president of General Seafoods and was struggling to make the grade as a Boston lawyer. Even more important was Colson's urge to escape from the narrow confines of Cambridge, where he had been based in home and in school for nearly ten years. The short walk up the road to Harvard seemed far less exciting than the forty-mile drive to Providence, Rhode Island, where Brown, the seventh-oldest university in the United States (founded 1764), was located.

In addition to all these substantive arguments and counterarguments, which Colson carefully annotated on yellow legal pad paper (a habit that stayed with him, whenever he made important decisions, for the rest of his life), there was the wild card ingredient of loving to surprise. Perhaps it was another characteristic inherited from his mother, but this time Dizzy was on the receiving end of a stage-managed shock. "It was my mother's dream that I should go to Harvard," recalls Colson, "partly because of the education there, of course, but also because it would make her so happy socially to be able to talk to her friends about her son at Harvard. So I must admit I enjoyed giving her the news that I was not going there. She really was shocked. She raged at me in that temper of hers. But my mind was made up."

Colson's next shock was delivered to the dean of admissions at Harvard, who, in June of 1949, interviewed him in the administration building overlooking Harvard Yard. Surrounded by university memorabilia and seated behind an elegant old colonial desk, the dean delivered his good tidings of great joy. "I am very happy to inform you, Mr. Colson—you are a fortunate young man—that the Board of Overseers has granted you a full scholarship to Harvard University."

The dean paused, expecting Colson to respond with elated acceptance. Instead, savoring the dean's aghast expression, Colson replied: "But I haven't really decided, Dean, whether I will be coming to Harvard."

"I can't imagine anyone turning down a scholarship to Harvard," responded the irritated dean, his temper worsening as Colson explained he had opted for Brown, a university traditionally regarded as a poor Ivy League cousin by Harvard men.

In his autobiography, *Born Again*, Colson portrayed this Harvard episode as an audacious act of rebellion against the values of Bostonian elitism and Eastern intellectualism. In fact there were more personal reasons of choice and economic self-interest governing his preference for Brown. Nevertheless, it was true that the young Charles Colson had an in-

teresting chip on his shoulder, which seems to have been created by a combination of social insecurity and social compassion. The insecurity came partly from the ups and downs of the relationship with his mother, and partly from being a “Swamp Yankee.” This was a label given to the poorer white Protestants of old Boston, who had never been accepted by the upwardly mobile denizens of the Harvard and Brahmin establishments living in the smart residential districts in and around Beacon Hill. Instead, this lower strata of society, which included the Colsons, had been left behind to jostle “in the swamp” of the old city alongside the Italians, the Irish, the Jews, the Slavs, and other ethnic groups. Chuck Colson’s resentment at his family’s rejection by the elite was greater than his enthusiasm for joining it. Climbing sideways and forward to middle-class Brown, in preference to soaring onward and upward to upper-class Harvard, was a small gesture of protest by an independent-minded schoolboy already forming his own agenda.

That agenda included an early interest in social justice, probably absorbed from his parents’ charitable activities. For not only did Colson see his mother doing her cooking for the hungry in the Depression; more interestingly, in view of subsequent events, he also observed his father righting wrongs for prisoners. Wendell Colson did a great deal of pro bono legal work on behalf of Massachusetts prisoners with wrongful-conviction appeals. He was a regular prison visitor, and he organized debating teams in prisons for competition. These initiatives were carried out under the auspices of the United Prison Association of New England.

The remarkable father-and-son parallelism in their concern for prisoners was not appreciated by Charles Colson until he was going through Wendell’s papers after his death and saw how much time his father had devoted to this cause. Wendell’s compassion for prisoners flowed from his Christian ethics, which he instilled into his son’s upbringing. Yet although the Colson family followed these ethics, none of them were Christian believers. Surprisingly, Dizzy sometimes said to her teenage son, “You ought to be a minister.” This may have been a mysterious intuition, but at the time her motives for making the suggestion were social rather than religious. Mrs. Colson was proud of being a member of the Episcopal Church and even prouder of her acquaintance with its diocesan bishop, Bishop Fisk, who she thought would be a splendid role model for her Charlie. However, she had no believing relationship in Christ, and neither did her husband or her son. None of them ever read the Bible (which Dizzy in-

sisted had been carved, word by word, on tablets of stone), and their extremely rare visits to church were purely nominal. So religious belief had no part to play in the early upbringing of Charles Colson.

As he left Browne & Nichols to spread his wings as a college student, the eighteen-year-old Charles Colson was the supreme self-believer, buoyed up by his own cleverness, brashness, self-confidence, and pride. These were the youthful characteristics that powered him forward to the new worlds he hoped to conquer: Brown University, the U.S. Marine Corps, and a girl named Nancy Billings.