

The Man Nobody Knew: In Search of My Father, CIA Spymaster William Colby

Carl Colby (Act Four Entertainment, 2011), 104 minutes.

Reviewed by Randall B. Woods

William Egan Colby was one of the most intriguing figures of the Cold War. The son of a career military officer, he spent his youth on Army posts in the United States and China. He graduated from Princeton and then enrolled in Columbia University Law School in 1941. Following Pearl Harbor, Colby enlisted and eventually found his way from the regular Army to the Office of Strategic Services. In 1944 and 1945 he earned a hero's acclaim for his activities behind enemy lines in France and Norway. Colby joined the CIA in 1950 and served with the agency until his dismissal as director by President Ford in 1976.

Rather than being a spymaster—as the subtitle of this movie by one of his sons, Carl Colby, suggests—Colby was from first to last a covert operative, a specialist in psychological and political operations, counterinsurgency, pacification, nation-building, and unconventional warfare. During the 1960s he continually proffered counterinsurgency and pacification as far better alternatives to conventional warfare in the struggle with the forces of international communism, especially in the developing world. After successfully overseeing the CIA's political warfare shop in Italy in the 1950s, Colby went to Saigon in 1959, rising to the position of station chief and in the process establishing the prototype for what would be the Strategic Hamlet Program.

As Far East Division chief in CIA's Directorate of Plans (the current-day National Clandestine Service) from 1962 through 1968, Colby continued to supervise counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam and struggled mightily, but unsuccessfully, against Gen. William Westmoreland's search-and-destroy approach. At the same time, he oversaw a massive unconventional war in Laos.

In 1968 Colby returned to Vietnam as head of CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), the most promising counterinsurgency/pacification operation ever undertaken by the United States. Mingling military with civilian personnel in a vast countrywide operation that included everything from education and health to the Phoenix Program, CORDS had pacified significant portions of the countryside by 1972. Unfortunately, Colby's operation could do nothing about the corrupt military regime in Saigon or waning support in the United States for the war effort.

In 1971, Colby returned home to be closer to his ailing elder daughter, Catherine. He served in various subordinate capacities in the CIA until 1973, when President Nixon appointed him director of central intelligence. As head of the agency, it became his lot to preside over revelations of past CIA misdeeds—the “family jewels”—and in 1976, Ford fired him. In 1982 Bill Colby left his wife of 37 years for another woman. In 1996 he died alone while canoeing near his home, under what some consider mysterious circumstances.

Carl Colby has produced a documentary on his father's life that is at times penetrating, vivid, and insightful, and at other times disconnected and confusing. The film attempts all at once to be a biography of Bill Colby, a history of America in the world from 1945 to 1976, and an indictment of an absentee father. The family history is delivered by Barbara, Bill's first wife, on-camera, and by Carl, the neglected son, off-camera.

Bill Colby is portrayed as a cold-hearted patriot who put the welfare of his country above the welfare of his family. Carl forgives excesses he perceives his father may have committed in the line of duty—allowing the

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Phoenix Program to become an exercise in “assassination” and spilling the guts of the CIA before congressional committees, for example. But Carl is less forgiving when it comes to what he believes his father did to his family. “I’m not sure he ever loved anyone,” Carl observes toward the end of the film, “and I never heard him say anything heartfelt.” Other members of the Colby family have disagreed with that assessment, and there is much evidence available to back them up.

This film is not a mixture of apples and oranges but a whole fruit basket turned upside down. Carl has done wonderful and prodigious work in various film archives and many of the images are very powerful, particularly having to do with the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) and the Phoenix program. But the film suffers from the lack of a single historical narrator. The story of US foreign policy, the CIA, Vietnam, and the family jewels is told through a dizzying array of voices. The only constants are the lengthy commentaries of Barbara and Carl.

The material on the CIA’s campaign to prevent Italy from going communist by influencing the electoral process during the 1950s is good as is the depiction of counterinsurgency and pacification in Vietnam, although the film fails to make the key point: overall, CORDS was a success, although South Vietnam never became a coherent state able to command the respect and support of a majority of its population. CORDS and its South Vietnamese allies could never find a way to connect the rice-roots revolution in the countryside to the corrupt military regime in Saigon. In a sense, Bill Colby’s posture toward Tran Ngoc Chau—the populist leader the Thieu regime convicted of espionage and imprisoned—was as important as his attitude toward the Ngo brothers.

The political dimension, such an important part of Bill Colby’s life and of the life of the CIA, is totally missing from the film. Like American society as a whole, the agency featured both New Deal liberals—who believed it was America’s duty not only to protect its interests but to spread the blessings of liberty and democracy to the less fortunate peoples of the world—and conservatives, who limited their vision to bases, alliances, and traditional espionage. Significantly, liberals like Colby wanted to make openings to the Left as part of an effort to separate socialists and revolutionary nationalists from communists, while conservatives

wanted to rely on ties with royalists and even neofascists to wage unrelenting war against the Left.

Also missing from the film is the ongoing rivalry between William Colby and James Jesus Angleton, and between the two CIA cultures they represented: the covert operatives and nation builders, and the spies and counterspies. That rivalry, along with the Glomar Explorer drama, had as much to do with Colby’s decision to release the family jewels as anything.

All too frequently, the focus of the film, Bill Colby himself, becomes lost. Or perhaps he is not really the subject of the film. He wrote two memoirs, some of which must be taken with grains of salt, but they are for the most part reliable and could have provided the elder Colby a voice throughout the film. Barbara, rather, is the documentary’s heroine—a long-suffering and neglected wife, and Bill’s putative constant moral compass.

Another problem for the film is that it contains too many historical inaccuracies. Henry Cabot Lodge did not engineer the 1963 coup against the Ngo brothers. He allowed it to happen, as Washington had instructed him to do. Hugh Tovar’s observation that, after the coup against Diem, the war became America’s war—no turning back—is misleading. The decisions to escalate were made in late 1964 and early 1965. The trigger was North Vietnam’s decision to begin infiltrating troops into South Vietnam. And it was never entirely America’s war. If it had been, as John Paul Vann and others lamented, pacification might have turned the tide.

The most controversial part of the film is Carl’s insinuation, supported by James Schlesinger and Brent Scowcroft, that Bill was wracked with guilt over his daughter Catherine’s illness and death, and the excesses of the Phoenix Program. So true was this, by the film’s depiction, that it prompted the elder Colby to decide that life was no longer worth living. Scowcroft, an instrument of Henry Kissinger who had worked frantically to keep Colby from sharing the family jewels with Congress (his duty under the law) is a particularly unreliable witness. Bill Colby was terribly distraught over Catherine’s demise, but he felt no more than ordinary guilt. The notion that he experienced remorse over Phoenix is absurd. As Carl repeats over and over in the film, his father was a warrior, and war requires killing. Bill Colby was as comfortable with the responsibilities of deadly force as any sane man could be.

