

## William Colby: Retrospect

Harold P. Ford

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*That we stand here now on restricted ground, that we interviewed Colby in his seventh-floor office, are signs that the cloak has started coming off. Colby saw that coming, and, professional to the end, tried to prepare the CIA for the inevitable.... To defend his agency, he adopted a policy of cautious candor with investigating committees that sometimes got him into trouble within his agency and in the administration. He considers himself expendable, and he was expended.*

Journalist Daniel Schorr,  
January 1976<sup>1</sup>

During his first year as Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), William Colby enjoyed some success in illustrating his managerial skills, his powers of initiative, and—most of all—his unique confidence that the times called for a new, more open CIA. His last year as DCI abounded in trouble. Not only was he beset by a myriad of difficult problems, but also his position was progressively undermined by indications that the White House had decided to replace him. The public's first inkling of this came in May 1975, presumably the result of orchestrated leaks from the administration; such leaks continued up to the time President Ford announced in November that he was firing Colby.

It is ironic—and perhaps symbolic—that Colby and his adversarial Church and Pike committees all faltered at the very same time. It was

on 28 January 1976 that the House of Representatives voted against publishing the Pike committee report. On the following day, 29 January, the Church committee split on whether to publish its final report, with Senators Tower, Goldwater, and Baker all voting against making the report public. The next day, 30 January, was Colby's last as DCI.

Looking back on these events, it is difficult to quarrel with Colby's assessment that in the end it was the excesses of the Church and Pike committees—coming on top of his other troubles with the White House—that made him expendable. Yet almost from the outset of his DCI tenure two years before, he had operated under fundamental constraints limiting his authority and the impact he could reasonably expect to make as DCI.

To many knowledgeable observers, Colby's fall was largely of his own making. Former Deputy Director for Intelligence R. Jack Smith, for example, has stated that “the ethics of personal relationships do not apply to international affairs. And I do not think Bill recognizes that, if you follow his argument to its conclusion, you cannot have an intelligence service.” In Smith's opinion, a government has “to have some sort of sanctuary in a society's set of values in which secret things take place. America has never grown up in its thinking about it.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, former DCI Richard Helms—not surprisingly—has at times been critical of Colby. Yet many senior figures—in and out of the Agency—have given Colby very high marks, contending

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Harold P. Ford held senior positions in both the National Intelligence Council and the Directorate of Operations.

that he handled an extremely difficult job in an exemplary fashion. For example, Senator Charles Percy offered this encomium on the eve of Colby's retirement:

*At a time when the CIA was under great attack from all fronts for misdeeds before your directorship, you have maintained a degree of candor and openness and a very welcome and appropriate sense of humor....I think you've been a great American, and I think you have performed as a great human being.<sup>3</sup>*

Colby's tenure as DCI was one of mixed results. Although he was an often effective manager, only some of his ambitious initiatives led to significant or lasting gain, while his abrupt style sometimes provoked resistance from both below and above. Within the Agency, his openness with investigating committees and his particular handling of two difficult personnel issues—concerning James Angleton, long CIA's troublesome chief of counterintelligence, and former DCI Dick Helms—earned Colby the lasting enmity of many colleagues, especially in his own Directorate of Operations (DO). More important, up the line, he never became a confidant of Henry Kissinger, President Nixon, or President Ford. With them, Colby remained a senior staff officer, speaking when he was spoken to and offering the views of US intelligence on the state of the world. His impact on policymaking was thus at best indirect; Kissinger remained in effect the President's DCI, as well as Secretary of State and National Security Adviser. That Colby turned out to be more his own man and less a yes-man than the administration had

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For that matter, it was perhaps a mistake for the Nixon administration to have chosen a professional intelligence officer as DCI; by mid-1973 the Watergate-beset Presidency would have been better buttressed by a DCI from outside, some known public figure who could have lent the White House some political status of his own. Once in office, moreover, Colby's performance as DCI did not dispel much of the disdain with which the White House had long viewed CIA. Indeed, in spite of being an experienced, deft operator, Colby's failure to alert his superiors to certain coming public storms concerning alleged past illegal activities (the “family jewels”), journalist Seymour Hersh's charges of such activities, and past CIA dalliance with assassination planning fatally damaged his standing with the White House.

Nor did Colby succeed in gaining widespread support from the public at large. He assumed that his own good intentions would be recognized and welcomed. Many of the key actors in the country, however, did not consider it in their interest to respond positively to Colby's efforts

toward greater openness. He never received general appreciation as the officer who had uncovered and outlawed certain questionable CIA practices. On the contrary, to a large degree the television cameras buttressed the public's impression that its concerns about continuing CIA illegalities were legitimate.

Colby's own background also hurt him, especially his earlier involvement in the PHOENIX program in Vietnam. Correctly or not, that operation was widely viewed as having involved numerous excesses. Many would not take Colby's protestations of good intentions at face value, especially because he was now confirming to Congress and the American public the reality of certain questionable earlier CIA activities. Moreover, his own rather formal manner did not help him sell his reforms.

Other, broader factors also limited Colby's chances of success. He had been dealt a weak hand from the outset of his tenure. By that time, mid-1973, public attitudes with respect to US intelligence had begun to shift, and some past practices, particularly those relating to covert operations, no longer enjoyed wide support. Rightly or wrongly, a certain euphoria about détente signified to many that there was now a less overriding need for continuing covert operations as a ready, effective weapon in our country's Cold War arsenal. Public support waned further when Colby himself confirmed existing suspicions about certain past CIA practices. Public dismay about Watergate had rubbed off on CIA as well, in light of the many allegations that the Agency had been involved in that scandal. At the same time, the days of coziness between a DCI and

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Capitol Hill mandarins were coming to an end, and new initiatives were afoot to create more thorough Congressional oversight of CIA.

Throughout, Colby found he could not count on Nixon, Ford, or Kissinger for much-needed support on Capitol Hill.

In short, Colby's effort to strengthen US intelligence through candor was seriously constrained from many sides. His revelations fueled the excesses of the Church and Pike committees, fed the public's misconceptions about the purposes of US intelligence, and weakened the country's support of intelligence—at least for some time thereafter.

Nonetheless, I believe that while one may criticize certain aspects of William Colby's stewardship as DCI, it is his positive accomplishments that deserve emphasis. Above all, Colby brought to the Directorship a sophisticated vision of what US intelligence should be about, and he was creative in his efforts to so transform CIA. He was unique—especially as one who had come out of a wholly clandestine background in intelligence—in realizing that the DCI position he inherited in the mid-1970s involved responsibilities far beyond those traditionally championed by the DO. He also appreciated the changes in those Cold War attitudes that for more than two decades had so strongly fashioned CIA's character and conduct.

As a former lawyer, Colby was determined that a DCI and CIA must respect the rule of law, must try to better fit the secret arms of government into the open patterns and values of American political life, and must respond to meaningful oversight by the Congress. Accordingly, he believed that he had to play it straight with Congress and the White House, reserving CIA's skills at conning

adversaries for legitimate intelligence targets abroad. Even though his own earlier career had been almost wholly in covert action, Colby realized that such operations were limited in their applicability and should no longer be considered the central contribution of US intelligence to national life.

Colby felt strongly that the primary purpose of US intelligence must be to enrich the knowledge of policymakers, enabling them to deal better with the world threats and opportunities facing the United States. He realized that there was increasing need for wholly new types of collection systems, intelligence analysis, and intelligence interest. Finally, knowing that greater public support was necessary in order to finance the rising costs of tomorrow's Intelligence Community, he appreciated the importance of educating the American public about the central purposes of intelligence—another reason for greater openness on the part of the DCI and the CIA.

These insights and Colby's mixed record of achievements add up to more than just good intentions gone awry. His contribution reflected broad, statesmanlike appreciations and efforts. It is a pity that his overall tenure as DCI had overtones of a Greek tragedy, inasmuch as it was his fate to be buried beneath the cumulative effect of certain past CIA illegalities, a hostile White House, irresponsible Congressional commit-

tees, a sensationalist press, a suspicious public, and many CIA colleagues tied more to the past than to appreciation of what Colby was about.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after he left office, Colby himself offered perhaps one of the most accurate assessments of his DCI tenure and its significance for America:

*Did something new emerge? Yes, intelligence has traditionally existed in a shadowy field outside the law. This year's excitement has made clear that the rule of law applies to all parts of the American Government, including intelligence....Its secrets will be understood to be necessary ones for the protection of our democracy in tomorrow's world, not covers for mistake or misdeed....The costs of the past year were high, but they will be exceeded by the value of this strengthening of what was already the best intelligence service in the world.<sup>5</sup>*

### Postscript

While Colby took a lot of flak over the years about his DCI performance, he could find some consolation in a belated compliment from his principal boss, Henry Kissinger, a tough critic not known for compassion or confessions of error. As Colby recalled, one day late in 1975, Kissinger took him aside in the Oval Office and told him, "Bill, I feel required to say this to you. For the longest time I believed that what you were doing was wrong, that what you should have done was to cry havoc over the investigations in the name of national security. But I have come around to believe that your strategy was really correct."<sup>6</sup>

### William E. Colby's CIA Career

<i>November 1950</i>	<i>Joins CIA. First assignment: Western European Division, Office of Policy Coordination (OPC)</i>
<i>1951</i>	<i>OPC's representative in Stockholm</i>
<i>1953</i>	<i>Deputy Directorate for Plans (DDP) political action officer, Rome</i>
<i>1959</i>	<i>Deputy Chief of Station, Saigon</i>
<i>1960</i>	<i>Chief of Station, Saigon</i>
<i>1962</i>	<i>Deputy Chief, Far East Division, DDP</i>
<i>1962</i>	<i>Chief, Far East Division, DDP</i>
<i>1968</i>	<i>Assigned to Agency for International Development as Deputy Director of Civil Operations and Rural Development (CORDS), Saigon</i>
<i>1968</i>	<i>Director, CORDS (with the rank of Ambassador), Vietnam</i>
<i>1972</i>	<i>CIA's Executive Director-Comptroller</i>
<i>1973</i>	<i>Deputy Director for Operations (DDO)</i>
<i>10 May 1973</i>	<i>Nominated as DCI by President Nixon</i>
<i>4 September 1973— 30 January 1976</i>	<i>Director of Central Intelligence</i>

## NOTES

1. Daniel Schorr, CBS television interview with William Colby, Washington, DC, 21 January 1976.
2. R. Jack Smith, interview by John Ranelagh, as cited in Ranelagh, *The Agency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 558. Smith had earlier served successively as a member of the Board in the Office of National Estimates, Director of the Office of Current Intelligence, and CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence.
3. Senator Charles Percy, remarks made to William Colby during hearing of the Senate Government Operations Committee, 23 January 1976, as aired that evening on WETA TV.
4. Interviews and available documentary evidence indicate that, among intelligence officers, many of the severest critics of Colby tend to be operations officers. Other intelligence officers—from such worlds as Congressional liaison, analysis, science and technology, General Counsel, Inspector General, and non-CIA intelligence organizations—tend to give Colby higher marks.
5. William Colby, article in *The New York Times*, 26 February 1976.
6. Colby, *Honorable Men*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), p. 450.