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The CIA's 19 Years: Successes, Failures

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WASHINGTON—Is the CIA, as its supporters contend, a well-controlled agency dedicated to advancing the cause of freedom everywhere?

Or is it, as its critics contend, a reckless rogue trampling into forbidden fields, making America the bogeyman of the world?

Where does the truth lie?

William E. Colby stared into the winter morning outside his living room window and, like a spy in from the cold, talked wistfully of what might have been.

"I had sort of hoped," he said, "that these skeletons might remain in the family closet."

They hadn't. One by one, slowly, painfully, the skeletons were dragged from the Central Intelligence Agency's closet during Colby's three years as director.

Assassination plots. Burglaries. Mail openings. Domestic surveillance. Secret armies. Undercover cash for foreign politicans. Covert attempts to overthrow other governments.

Last month, the revelations ended Colby's quarter-century career with the CIA. He had little to do with most of the misdeeds, but he displays no visible bitterness about his ouster.

Turning from the window to lean back on a gold-colored sofa, Colby argued in quiet tones that the CIA's sins were paraded before an American public ill-prepared for the disclosures because it had "no frame of reference for intelligence, except spy novels."

So, retired to a modest and unguarded suburban home, he is writing a book—not a spy novel, but a serious book he hopes will place the agency's operations in historical perspective.

Too much of the debate raging around the agency, he said, has centered on "diddly little things" such as a "minuscule number" of burglaries committed in the United States by CIA operatives.

Instead the debate should take a broader view, "looking at the sweep ... at the strategic impact over many years," he said.

A sample of Colby's perspective:

"The Bay of Pigs obviously was a disaster, but take yourself back to the early '60s when we were concerned that the Cuban revolution would spread like wildfire through Latin America.

"That was the day of Che Guevara, the romantic, the guerrilla who would turn the whole continent hostile to the United States—there was a serious assessment that this was a possibility.

"So we put together a program, which was a political program through the OAS (Organization of American States), an economic program through the Alliance for Progress.

"There was some military aid, and there was some CIA work both in intelligence and in support of some of the forces to prevent the rise in terrorism and guerrilla activity.

"At the end of the period, in 1975, Latin America is no garden, but it hasn't been turned totally hostile to the United States under Cuban leadership ...

"You can't say it was the CIA alone, but the CIA, I think, made a contribution in a number of countries.

". . . It's been worthwhile."

Across the Potomac, in another Washington suburb, another spy in from the cold has already written a book giving his perspective of the agency's operations. Victor Marchetti, who resigned after 14 years as a CIA analyst and executive, co-authored "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence."

This is his historical perspective:

". . . The real CIA is a clandestine organization, as it has been from the very beginning. If one looks at the CIA's predecessor, the wartime Office of Strategic Services, one finds that its primary activities were covert action and counterespionage. Espionage, or spying, was relatively unimportant as the OSS concentrated on trying to create guerrilla movements in occupied territory. When the CIA was formed in 1947, the operatives—most of whom had served in OSS—quickly got control of the agency, and they have held on ever since.

"Over the years, the CIA has, of course, greatly advanced the arts of espionage, counterespionage and covert action. But it has been covert action—interference in another country's internal affairs—which has been the most highly developed . . . partly because the operatives who ran the agency were not very interested in espionage.

"These men preferred causing events to happen in foreign countries, whether 'destabilizing' leftist governments in Chile, Guatemala and Iran, or secretly strengthening repressive regimes in Vietnam, Brazil and the Dominican Republic . . . What the CIA's operatives really like to do is play 'the game of nations' . . ."

Whom to believe?

In an attempt to answer that question, The Times interviewed friends and foes of the CIA, reviewed the findings of investigating congressional committees and examined government documents dating back three decades. The result was a bundle of contradictions:

—The CIA has, in fact, committed some colossal blunders, damaging both U.S. policy and America's image abroad.

—Yet the agency has silently scored some long-term triumphs, helping build a foundation for today's uneasy detente.

—The CIA has strayed far from the limited charter envisioned by its founders, secretly expanding its scope of operations without precise legislative authority.

—Yet the agency has been responsive, perhaps too responsive, to the desires of its presidential overseers.

—The CIA has at times been plagued by waste and bureaucratic bumbling, spending millions of dollars on questionable projects.

—Yet the agency's staff includes the world's foremost experts in fields from architecture to zoology, a quiet corps sincerely dedicated to furthering America's interests.

—The CIA is such a mass of contradictions that it is little wonder that pollster Louis Harris last month found "much doubt and confusion among the American people" questioned about recent intelligence revelations.

"On the one hand, it is clear that the public no longer trusts the CIA and FBI to operate on their own, for fear that they will engage in excesses of the kind that have been revealed," Harris reported. "On the other hand, people are aware that the two agencies need to conduct their activities in a reasonable amount of secrecy."

"Somehow," he observed, "the contradiction will have to be worked out."

But how?

President Ford offered his answer last week, proposing a mild set of reforms such as a new oversight committee within the executive branch, a legislative ban on peacetime assassination of foreign leaders and on domestic snooping, and tougher laws against leaking official secrets.

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The Senate Intelligence Committee, chaired by Sen. Frank Church (D-Ida.), will make its recommendations next month, probably calling for much tighter controls of the intelligence Establishment. Tightened controls were urged by the House Intelligence Committee headed by Rep. Otis G. Pike (D-N.Y.) before it died this month in a blaze of controversy over who leaked its yet-to-be-formally-released final report.

Debate on intelligence operations will continue for months, perhaps years. As it does, a study of the still-unfolding saga of the CIA offers clues to how the agency became such an enigma.

Harry S Truman was unhappy and in a hurry. His 90-year-old mother was lingering near death in Missouri, but he was stuck at Washington National Airport, waiting for aides to bring him just-passed legislation he wanted to sign before take-off.

Minutes ticked by that sultry, 86-degree July afternoon. Finally, nearly half an hour late, the aides arrived with the National Security Act of 1947. Truman hurriedly signed it, and his DC-3, "The Sacred Cow," rumbled down the runway.

The President's mother died before he reached her bedside the day the CIA was born.

The idea of a central agency for intelligence-gathering was conceived in the ashes of Pearl Harbor—which would not have been such a surprise if a single government agency had then existed to piece together the bits of pre-attack intelligence collected by several agencies.

Its gestation period was World War II, when men of the OSS proved the value of a unified intelligence operation.

In January, 1946, Truman replaced the OSS with a National Intelligence Authority, which would make policy, and a Central Intelligence Group, which would carry it out.

The arrangement did not work. The CIG was run jointly by the departments of State, War and Navy, and before long it was beset by bureaucratic strife.

Truman asked aides for suggestions and eventually settled on a plan for a Central Intelligence Agency, responsible to the President and a new National Security Council. The plan was not universally hailed—Secretary of State George C. Marshall bluntly warned the President that "the powers of the proposed agency seem almost unlimited and need clarification."

Nevertheless, Truman sent the proposed National Security Act to Congress in February, 1947. His legislation was devoid of details on the CIA's duties, stating merely that it would take over the functions, personnel and property of the CIG.

Some members of Congress were skeptical.

Rep. Clarence J. Brown (R-Ohio) said he didn't want any President "to have a Gestapo of his own." He asked at a committee hearing whether the new agency "might possibly affect the rights and privileges of the people of the United States."

"No, sir," answered Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, director of the interim intelligence body. "I do not think there is anything in the bill, since it is all foreign intelligence, that can possibly affect any of the privileges of the people of the United States."

"There is no danger of that," added Vannevar Bush, chairman of the Joint Research and Development Board. "The bill provides clearly that (the CIA) is not concerned with intelligence on internal affairs, and I think that is a safeguard against its becoming an empire."

Congress decided to specify that the CIA "shall have no police, subpoena, law enforcement powers, or internal security functions." But another provision of the act—that the CIA was to "perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting national security" as might be directed by higher authority—left open the door for the CIA to engage in foreign political action and clandestine political warfare, operations never mentioned in the congressional debate.

"Probably no other organization of the federal government has taken such liberties in interpreting its legally assigned functions as the CIA," says Prof. Harry Howe Ransom of Vanderbilt University, one of academia's top experts on intelligence.

"Only by seriously distorting the meaning of the term 'intelligence' is it possible to find statutory justification for the wide range of strategic services that CIA has come to perform," Ransom added.

Truman did not object to the vague "other functions and duties" clause inserted by Congress, and he later regretted it. His second thoughts were recorded by biographer Merle Miller, who quoted Truman as saying many years later:

"I think it was a mistake, and if I had known what was going to happen, I never would have done it. I needed . . . at that time a central organization that would bring all the various intelligence reports we were getting in those days, and there must have been a dozen of them, maybe more, bring them all into one organization so that the President would get one report on what was going on in various parts of the world.

"Now that made sense, and that's why I went ahead and set up what they called the Central Intelligence Agency. But it got out of hand . . . As nearly as I can make out, those fellows in the CIA don't just report on wars and the like, they go out and make their own and there's nobody to keep track of what they're up to."

Truman's comments are puzzling in light of subsequent disclosures that secret directives issued during his Presidency nudged the infant CIA into political operations abroad.

The key document approved by Truman's National Security Council, known as NSC 10-2 and dated June 18, 1948, remains classified today. But author-journalist David Wise, a leading authority on the subject, has reported that NSC 10-2 ushered in a new era of covert actions by authorizing the CIA to undertake "special operations, providing they were secret and small enough to be plausibly denied by the government."

Covert political operations were Truman's answer to a dramatic escalation in the cold war in 1948. Robert J. Donovan, an associate editor of The Times who was then reporting on the Truman Presidency, recalls the mood of the capital at the time:

". . . The Soviet Union shook Washington to its founda-

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tions in February, 1948, by seizing complete control of Czechoslovakia through a coup by the Czech Communist Party. Washington was frantic that the Communists also would gain control of Italy in forthcoming elections . . . By the end of March, Soviet forces blockaded all land and water approaches to Berlin.

"Washington was permeated with the feeling that something more had to be done to influence a dangerous situation abroad . . ."

As one cold war crisis piled upon another, the CIA became the vehicle for doing "something more" about the Communist threat. The seriousness with which U.S. officials viewed the threat is illustrated in this passage written at the height of the cold war by Allen W. Dulles, CIA director from 1952 to 1961:

"In the Soviet Union, we are faced with an antagonist who has raised the art of espionage to an unprecedented height, while developing the collateral techniques of subversion and deception into a formidable political instrument of attack. No other country has ever before attempted this on such a scale. These operations, in support of the U.S.S.R.'s overall policies, go on in time of so-called thaw and under the guise of coexistence with the same vigor as in times of acute crisis. Our intelligence has a major share of the task of neutralizing such hostile activities, which present a common danger to us and to our allies."

In this atmosphere, the CIA's expansion of covert operations was inevitable.

"During the past 25 years," Wise recounts, "there was no year in which some major secret CIA operation was not taking place in some country somewhere in the world.

"It is also safe to assume that if this many covert operations have become public knowledge, many others, both 'successful' and unsuccessful, have not."

Wise has compiled page after page on the CIA's covert operations. Add to it the latest findings of congressional committees, and the list becomes a generation-spanning chronology of clandestine activity. A partial compilation:

Burma—From 1949 to 1961, the CIA supported about 12,000 Nationalist Chinese troops who fled to Burma when the Communists gained control of mainland China. The U.S. ambassador, unaware of the CIA's involvement, repeatedly rejected Burmese protests.

China—In the early 1950s, the CIA parachuted guerrilla teams into the People's Republic of China. Two American agents were captured in November, 1952, and were held for 20 years, until the United States finally admitted they were CIA agents.

Iran—In 1953, the CIA organized and directed the coup which overthrew Premier Mohammed Mossadegh and returned the shah to the throne. Mossadegh had nationalized the Iranian oil industry, but after he was overthrown American companies for the first time were permitted to tap Iran's oil deposits.

Guatemala—In 1954, the CIA engineered the overthrow of the Communist-influenced government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. U.S. arms and a CIA-supplied air force brought Col. Carlos Castillo Armas to power.

Indonesia—In 1958, another CIA-sponsored air force based in the Philippines supported rebels in the Celebes who were trying to overthrow President Sukarno.

Congo—In 1960, the CIA plotted to assassinate President Patrice Lumumba, even sending poisons to the Congo. A few months later, Lumumba was killed by Congolese rivals, and the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded there was no evidence that the CIA was involved in his death. But the CIA remained active in the region, and in 1964 provided planes to help suppress a revolt against the government of the Congo, now known as Zaire.

Dominican Republic—During 1960 and 1961, the CIA supported dissidents who, on May 31, 1961, assassinated dictator Rafael Trujillo. Some U.S. agents knew of the murder plans, and American officials furnished the dissidents with three pistols, although it is unknown whether they were used in the assassination.

Cuba—From 1960 through 1965, the CIA was involved in several plots to assassinate Premier Fidel Castro, at one point enlisting the aid of Mafia leaders. And in 1961, a brigade of Cuban exiles trained and supported by the CIA landed at the Bay of Pigs in an ill-founded attempt to overthrow Castro. Most of the invaders were captured or killed, and four U.S. pilots flying for the CIA died in the episode, the agency's best-known disaster.

Brazil—In 1962, the CIA spent a reported $20 million to support hundreds of gubernatorial, congressional, state and local candidates in an attempt to deny leftist President Joao Goulart control of the Brazilian Congress.

Vietnam—In 1963, the CIA had secret contacts with a group of generals who staged a coup in which President Ngo Dinh Diem was killed. Later, as U.S. involvement in Vietnam deepened, so did the CIA's role. Among the activities was the Phoenix program, designed to neutralize the Viet Cong. Colby, who headed it, later told Congress that at least 20,587 persons were killed under the program.

Chile—In 1964 and again in 1970, the CIA channeled substantial funds into Chile to oppose the presidential candidacy of Salvador Allende. Allende lost in 1964 but won in 1970. He died in a 1973 coup.

Laos—Beginning in the 1950s and continuing until 1973, the CIA was enmeshed in Laos. It equipped and directed a guerrilla army in a secret war which congressional critics charged was waged by "The king's men . . . the President's Army" without congressional authorization.

Italy—Starting after World War II, the CIA pumped millions of dollars into one Italian election campaign after another in an effort to thwart Communist candidates. In 1972 alone, the House Intelligence Committee reported, $10 million went to Italian politicians and political parties —although it was done over the objections of the CIA's station chief.

Angola—The CIA told House investigators it spent $31 million in 1975 to support pro-Western factions fighting Soviet-backed forces in the Angolan war. But the agency said none of its personnel was directly involved in the war.

Who authorized this string of secret political actions?

In many cases, the record shows, the orders came directly from the Oval Office.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, wrote in his memoirs that he personally dispatched U.S. aircraft to aid in overthrowing the leftist Guatemalan government in 1954.

President John F. Kennedy gave the final go-ahead for the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. The Church committee said it had no conclusive evidence that Kennedy personally knew of attempts to assassinate Castro. But one CIA official recalled how Richard Bissell, the agency's deputy director in 1961, was "chewed out in the Cabinet Room in the White House by both the President (John Kennedy) and the attorney general (Robert Kennedy) for, as he put it, sitting on his ass and not doing anything about getting rid of Castro and the Castro regime."

President Richard M. Nixon personally ordered the CIA's 1970 Chilean action. Richard Helms, then CIA director, said: "The President came down very hard that he wanted something done, and he didn't much care how . . ."

"This was a pretty all-inclusive order," Helms told senators last year. "If I ever carried a marshal's baton in my knapsack out of the Oval Office, it was that day."

Colby said the CIA "conducts such activities only when

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specifically authorized by the National Security Council," a body headed by the President and including such officials as the secretaries of state and defense. "Thus," he added, "CIA covert actions reflect national policy."

In practice, however, many CIA covert projects are approved at a lower level—namely by a panel of subcabinet officials known as the Forty Committee (for the number on the directive setting its membership) and earlier called the 303 Group (for the room where it met).

The House Intelligence Committee studied the Forty Committee's approval procedures and concluded that during the Watergate era the panel became a "rubber stamp" for Nixon and Henry A. Kissinger, then the President's assistant for national security affairs.

"From 1965 to 1972, a majority of approvals (for covert operations) occurred subsequent to a formal committee meeting, although many telephonic approvals also took place during this period," the congressional report said.

"In 1972, the process became quite informal, often involving mere notification to members that an operation had already been set in motion by the President . . . One formal meeting was held in 1972, none in 1973 and 1974. This process did not begin to reverse itself until 1975," it said.

Last week, President Ford changed the Forty Committee's name to the Operations Advisory Group and added two Cabinet members—the attorney general and the director of the Office of Management and Budget—as official observers to help guard against future abuses.

The House committee found that the number of covert operations had dwindled during the last decade. Colby has reported the same trend, saying:

"Our involvement has been reduced in many areas, in part, I might add, by the fact that many of the Communist efforts during those years (the 1950s and 1960s) were unsuccessful . . .

"I do not say that we do not now conduct such activities. I merely state that they . . . require only a small proportion of our effort at this time."

Colby said that only 5% of the CIA's effort is spent "on anything other than pure intelligence." The agency's critics dispute this. Marchetti, for instance, who was executive assistant to the agency's deputy director, contends that roughly two-thirds of the CIA's estimated 15,000 employes and two-thirds of its secret budget—believed to total about $750 million annually—"are directed toward clandestine operations and their support."

Many former CIA officials say the agency's most vital function is the condensation and analysis of the millions of bits of intelligence flowing daily into its headquarters, a park-like complex in Langley, Va.

This work, performed by political scientists, historians, linguists, engineers, physicists and other experts, "is much closer to academic research than espionage," one former official said.

From the analytical process comes "a digest of what it all means and an estimate of what its consequences could be," said John A. McCone, CIA director from 1961 to 1965.

"Preparing this body of literature in its various forms is, in my opinion, the most important activity of the agency," McCone wrote recently in TV Guide. "It is certainly the least publicized."

Sometimes, however, the CIA's estimates are wrong.

The agency was embarrassed, for instance, by its failure to predict the outbreak of the 1973 Middle East war. Afterwards, an internal CIA study found: "The principal conclusions concerning the imminence of hostilities . . . were—quite simply, obviously and starkly—wrong."

Five years earlier in Vietnam, the CIA erred in assessing enemy strength and intentions. "Warning of the Tet offensive had not fully anticipated the intensity, coordination and timing of the enemy attack," the agency said in a postmortem.

More recently, doubts have been cast on the accuracy of CIA estimates of Soviet arms spending. The Washington Star reported this month that the agency was revising upward, perhaps by 100%, its estimate of the percentage of Soviet gross national product devoted to defense spending.

Ironically, this error reportedly became apparent because of a major intelligence breakthrough. The CIA obtained, by undisclosed means, Soviet leaders' own secret estimates of their country's defense outlays. The figure was double previous CIA estimates, the Star said.

Colby, McCone and others credit the CIA with major technological advances in intelligence-gathering.

High-flying aircraft and new satellites "have been able to look down into fortress societies and record in startling detail what is actually developing," McCone said. Electronic sensing and tracking devices also make it possible to gather data on tests of nuclear devices and military equipment "beyond otherwise impenetrable frontiers," he added.

Because of these achievements, Colby said, the CIA played a major role "in laying the groundwork for the new period of detente which we pursue in our relationships with the Communist world today."

Some months ago referring to the accord limiting strategic arms, Colby told a Washington seminar, "It is clear that, thanks to some of the intelligence work of the past 10 or 15 years, we now have an agreement which depends upon the fact that we can monitor whether the Soviets are complying with it or not, which we were unable to do when our intelligence was so weak we had to ask for on-the-ground inspections."

"I think that is a triumph for intelligence," he added last week in the living room of his white brick home.

As he sipped coffee from a cup with a delicate oriental design, Colby talked of his new work as an author trying to place his past life in historical perspective.

He glanced back at the skeletons in the CIA closet.

"None of these cases should have taken place, because it wasn't right . . . but you have to understand the thought processes . . . the atmospherics . . . the pressures of those times."

"That's my major theme . . . At that time, intelligence was thought to be something somewhere outside the law, as it is in every other country. It really wasn't expected to be part of the legal system, the legal structure . . .

"Now . . . it is being said: In America nothing is going to operate outside the law. Intelligence isn't any more than anything else.

"We're in the process of working out the relationship between the law and the Constitution and the needs of intelligence."

Rising from the sofa, he straightened his rumpled blue sweater and escorted his visitors to the door. "Intelligence under the law—that's what we'll have," he said.

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