

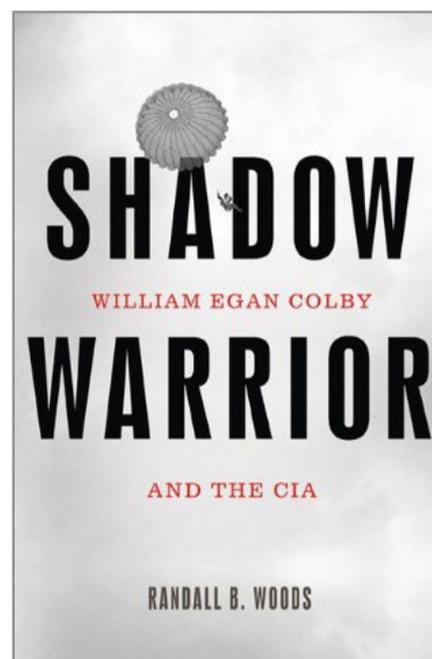
Divided Loyalties

SHADOW WARRIOR:

WILLIAM EGAN COLBY AND THE CIA

REVIEWED BY MARTIN WALKER

HENRY KISSINGER ONCE NOTED THAT President Richard Nixon believed the Central Intelligence Agency was “a refuge for Ivy League intellectuals opposed to him.” In the case of William Colby, who rose to become the director of central intelligence in 1973, Nixon was almost right. But this excellent and thorough biography by Randall Woods, a noted University of Arkansas historian of the Vietnam era in American politics whose biography of Senator William Fulbright was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, gives a more subtle and sympathetic analysis. Woods argues that Colby, a Boy Scout and devout Catholic who hated totalitarians of any stripe, was always loyal to the Constitution and to the president of the day. His loyalties were his undoing, driving him to pursue doomed counterinsurgency policies in Vietnam, which made him appear a villain to liberals, and then to disclose the CIA’s long-guarded embarrassments



By Randall B. Woods

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during congressional probes, which made him abhorrent to conservatives and many CIA veterans.

It is not easy to write a good biography without some respect or affection for the subject, and Woods holds Colby in considerable esteem. He stresses the sense of mission and commitment Colby felt about his work, which finally helped to end his first marriage after it had endured for three unhappy decades. And he concludes that Colby’s revelations of CIA scandals were in the long run beneficial to the agency, clearing out its cobwebs (and some of its cowboys) and finally reining in the disruptive and morale-destroying role of the counterespionage division, which caught few moles but sowed



HORST FAAS / AP IMAGES

William Colby, then head of the U.S. pacification program in South Vietnam, inspects the shotgun of a rural villager in Thua Thien province in 1969.

widespread internal distrust. Above all, Woods crafts a fascinating tale of an American life that was shaped by World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, and the challenge of remaining a decent and liberal human being while fighting these conflicts ruthlessly.

Colby had become a passionate supporter of the New Deal while an undergraduate in the 1930s at Princeton, where

one of his favorite professors was Edwin Corwin, an adviser to the Public Works Administration. After graduating, Colby attended Columbia Law School for a year before serving in the Office of Strategic Services in World War II, operating bravely with local resistance movements behind enemy lines in France and Norway. Colby then suggested to his superiors that he should be parachuted into Spain

to complete the antifascist campaigns by organizing the overthrow of the Franco regime. They demurred. After the war, armed with a newly fledged law degree from Columbia, Colby worked for the National Labor Relations Board, helping garment workers to unionize, before joining the CIA, which had just been formed.

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The Agency “attracted what nowadays we would call the best and the brightest, the politically liberal young men and women from the finest Ivy League campuses and with the most impeccable social and establishment backgrounds,” Colby later wrote in a memoir, *Honorable Men* (1978). They were “young people with ‘vigor’ and adventuresome spirits who believed fervently that the communist threat had to be met aggressively, innovatively, and courageously.” (Change the word “communist” to “terrorist,” and the same might be said of the generation that joined the CIA after 9/11, and

doubtlessly will face similar disillusion.)

Colby himself did not quite fit this mold. His father, Elbridge Colby, who was descended from a long line of Massachusetts Puritans and seafarers, had converted to Catholicism and taught English literature at the University of Minnesota, where he met and married Mary Margaret Egan, the Catholic daughter of an Irish immigrant. After volunteering with the Red Cross in Serbia during World War I, he joined the U.S. Army when his country declared war in 1917. To his dismay he was posted to the Panama Canal, not to the battlefield in France. After the war, he returned to the university to complete his doctorate but soon rejoined the Army to provide for his wife and newborn son, William, who was born in 1920. Fatefully, Elbridge Colby was posted to Fort Benning, Georgia, where a black soldier was shot and killed for failing to yield the sidewalk to a white civilian; after an all-white jury acquitted the shooter, Lieutenant Colby wrote an outraged letter to the base newspaper that was republished in *The Nation*, an event that blighted his military career. He was later posted to Tianjin, which meant that William spent part of his boyhood in China, developing what his CIA file described as a “fair” grasp of

the language along with an affinity with Asia that would shape his future.

This was not the conventional WASP background of CIA legend. Nor was Colby to join the aristocracy of the CIA, its intelligence and counterintelligence sections focused on the Soviet Union and Europe. Instead, he was a paramilitary type who specialized in covert action and raising and training secret armies. In the alleged words of James Jesus Angleton, head of CIA counterintelligence for more than 20 years (whom Colby would later fire), the future leader of the CIA was “just a paratrooper.” As Colby himself later wrote, “The spymasters and counterspies feared that the high-risk, flamboyant operations of ‘the cowboys’ jeopardized the security and cover of their carefully constructed clandestine networks.”

Colby’s first assignment for the CIA was in 1950 in Sweden, where he was to set up secret arms dumps and recruit volunteers who would go underground to fight in the event of a Soviet invasion. In the early years of the Cold War, organizing such stay-behind forces was a major part of the CIA’s work. Colby then moved to Italy, where he took to the political aspect of covert operations like a duck to water, seeking to ensure that the Communists, Italy’s largest political par-

ty, would never come to power. Running the largest political action program in the CIA’s history, Colby had a budget of some \$30 million a year. One of his colleagues later recalled that their biggest problem was finding Italian cars with trunks big enough to hold the stacks of lire they were funneling to the non-Communist parties, politicians, and newspapers.

Colby’s New Deal sympathies put him at odds with the woman known as “La Signora,” the celebrated, influential, and very conservative U.S. ambassador in Rome, Clare Boothe Luce—although Colby’s second wife was later convinced that La Signora and Colby had an affair in the dolce vita atmosphere of Rome in the 1950s. Luce hated Socialists almost as much as Communists; Colby believed that they and the Social Democrats were potential allies in the anti-Communist

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struggle. Moreover, Colby's New Deal beliefs led him to support the Vanoni Plan, a Keynesian-style economic policy that was also, Colby reported to Washington, a way to rally Socialist and working-class support. Luce opposed it bitterly, warning that it would become a Trojan horse for Moscow. (Colby's strategy proved to be correct; the Italian Socialist Party ended its pact with the Communists in 1963 and joined the Christian Democrats in a coalition government.)

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Colby's Asian affinities ensured that in 1956 he was invited to succeed the legendary Edward Lansdale in running the CIA station and its effective counterinsurgency operation in the Philippines. He declined, saying he wanted to secure the defeat of the Communists in Italy's 1958 election. Once that was achieved, Colby was appointed deputy station chief in Saigon (he quickly rose to

chief of station), where he arrived in the waning days of that brief interlude between the end of French rule in 1954 and the start of America's increasingly bloody involvement. It was sufficiently peaceful at first for Colby to have time to run a Boy Scout troop. That soon changed, and the next 17 years of the Vietnam engagement take up half of this book.

When Colby arrived in Saigon, opinion within the U.S. mission was already divided between Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. and his staff, who were trying to withhold military aid in order to force President Ngo Dinh Diem's regime to make democratic reforms, and the military staff and the Pentagon, which rejected any such condition. The election in 1960 of John F. Kennedy, who was fascinated by the spread of the Cold War to the developing world and by counterinsurgency and covert operations of the kind Colby knew well, gave Indochina a new prominence. Colby found himself running secret armies of mountain tribesmen in Laos, operating CIA-backed airlines, dispatching guerillas to North Vietnam, and trying in vain to dissuade the Kennedy administration from Operation Switchback, which gave the Pentagon prime responsibility for U.S. counterinsurgency policy in South Vietnam. "Mr. Secretary, it won't work,"

he told Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, referring to a Pentagon plan to insert commandos and saboteurs into North Vietnam, even as Ambassador Lodge was trying to get the CIA to run a coup against President Diem.

Always the loyal soldier, Colby put his heart into a U.S. program known as CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), which promoted rural development and sought to secure Vietnamese hamlets from Communist infiltration. CORDS also included the infamous Phoenix Program, the CIA-led covert war against Viet Cong cadres who routinely terrorized villages seen as loyal to the Saigon regime, often killing village leaders. The corrupt military regime in Saigon undermined Colby's best efforts to strengthen the hamlets. And despite strong evidence to the contrary, Colby always maintained that the Phoenix Program was designed to identify, arrest, and convert local Viet Cong leaders, rather than assassinate them; Woods, however, estimates that more than 5,000 Viet Cong operatives and supporters were killed and more than 10,000 others were captured.

Revelations of the CIA's role in the program were an important factor in discrediting the Vietnam War in the eyes of the American public. Colby, a serious

student of the special characteristics of peoples' wars and the lessons from the French and British experiences in Malaya, Vietnam, and elsewhere, believed that the war would be won or lost in the villages. But at a time when the U.S. Air Force was sowing Agent Orange to poison crops and defoliate jungles giving cover to enemy combatants, and increasingly demoralized U.S. Army conscripts were staging crude search-and-destroy missions, Colby's stubborn belief in rural development became quixotic. In 1975, welcoming back the bedraggled CIA teams after the fall of Saigon, he outraged many and startled more by insisting that the peoples' war had been almost won when the Nixon administration began its slow withdrawal. Perhaps the most charitable explanation is that one has to believe in something to maintain morale, and Colby believed that he and the CIA alone in the U.S. bureaucracy understood this kind of war.

But it was too late. By then, Colby's Phoenix Program had become notorious for torture and assassinations, and his beloved CIA was being discredited, in Congress as well as on college campuses. Its reputation was even lower at the White House, where Nixon and national security adviser Kissinger were outraged that they had received no

warning of the 1973 Egyptian attack that precipitated the Yom Kippur War. (Knowing their communications had been compromised, the Egyptians had sent false radio messages and hand-delivered the real orders.)

Colby had taken the helm of the CIA in May 1973, just before this deluge. The Watergate scandal was unfurling, the Nixon White House was swinging between panic and paranoia, and Congress would soon be investigating events revealed in a series of secret internal CIA reports that became known as the “family jewels.” The documents described botched assassination attempts, links to the Mafia, and illegal spying on Americans. The Justice Department was preparing charges against Colby’s predecessor, Richard Helms, who had misled Congress on such matters and become known among CIA loyalists as what a later book title would call *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*. Throughout his own book, Woods makes the case that in instances such as the CIA’s activities in Vietnam and its illegal domestic intelligence gathering, the agency was left taking responsibility for policy disasters that were really the result of presidential decisions.

Ever the lawyer, Colby followed the law and the Constitution and came clean to Congress. He believed this was the only

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way to save an institution that remained vital to American security, even as he firmly supported the arms control and détente policies of the Nixon-Ford administrations that were easing Cold War tensions. He was finally sacked by President Gerald Ford in November 1975, remaining in office three months until replaced by future president George H. W. Bush. Colby turned down Ford’s offer to become ambassador to NATO, and retired into private life and law practice.

Some in the CIA never forgave him for his forthrightness, and his death in a supposed canoe accident in southern Maryland in 1996 sparked rumors of a revenge killing. Local watermen were left wondering how Colby’s body, which showed few signs of water immersion, could have ended up on one side of a sandbank while his sand-filled canoe was found on the other. If he was murdered, and Woods explains the

evidence thoroughly, the vengeance took 20 years to be exacted.

By that time, the Cold War was over and the CIA had not only survived but remained at the heart of the vast U.S. intelligence empire. To that extent, Colby was vindicated, even though his heirs at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, would have to relearn all the hard lessons of counterinsurgency warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan. Woods casts Colby as a flawed hero in an impossible time, an honorable man fighting a series of vicious wars, in Washington as well as abroad, during a period of American

self-questioning and political division. Colby sought to remain loyal both to his CIA and to the Machiavellian court of the Nixon White House, and for that, many contemporaries judged him harshly. Wood's solid and intriguing biography suggests that history may be kinder. ■

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