

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby

By John Prados. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 380 pages.

Reviewed by David S. Robarge

Memoirs and biographies of Directors of Central Intelligence and senior operations officers comprise an increasingly prominent part of the growing bibliography of intelligence history. One of the latest in the genre, John Prados's *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby*, exemplifies the challenge that confronts historians of intelligence activities and institutions who try their hand at writing biography: Not everyone who lives a professional life amid the excitement and danger of espionage, covert action, and counterintelligence is an interesting person.

That generalization poses a singular test for any biographer of Colby, the DCI during the CIA's so-called "time of troubles" from 1973 to 1976. Colby had spent a quarter century at the CIA, laboring in bureaucracies at home and abroad, devoted to carrying out programs that others devised to accomplish the Agency's Cold War mission. He had been a smart, brave, and dutiful operations officer, but also a quintessential intellocrat with a few fixed ideas and a quiet, at times aloof, personality. How can a biographer make the career of such a "gray flannel executive" seem interesting, let alone live up to the expectations that the title *Lost Crusader* suggests? That difficulty, more than a lack of declassified research material, may explain why Colby's CIA years have received so little attention. Until Prados's book, Colby had written more about himself than others had penned.¹

Colby is most remembered for his beleaguered effort as DCI to rescue the Agency from the political tempests of the mid-1970s and to regain some of its lost prestige through his policy of controlled cooperation with congressional investigators and termination of illegal or unethical Agency undertakings. Earlier parts of his life in intelligence work deserve recounting, however, and Prados does so comprehensively: OSS commando in World War II; covert

¹ Besides the work under review and a still-classified study by longtime CIA analyst Harold Ford, the only extended discussion of Colby is in the context of his dismissal of the Agency's controversial counterintelligence chief, James Angleton: Edward Jay Epstein, "The War Within the CIA," *Commentary*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (August 1978), pp. 35-39. Colby wrote a fair-minded memoir—*Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978)—and a somewhat tendentious account of the Vietnam War, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, 1989).

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action operator with the Office of Policy Coordination; head of Agency activities in Italy and Vietnam; chief of the Far East Division; director of pacification programs in Vietnam (including the notorious PHOENIX program²); Executive Director/Comptroller; and Deputy Director for Operations.

Surviving contentious confirmation hearings that highlighted his association with PHOENIX, Colby replaced James Schlesinger in the Seventh Floor hotseat in September 1973. It was one of the worst times in the Agency's history to become DCI. The Democrat-controlled Congress was reasserting itself against weakened President Nixon, and the CIA—always a convenient whipping boy—was itself vulnerable because of its tenuous connection to Watergate. Colby started his tenure with a limited mandate: to use his experience at the CIA to reorganize the Agency's bureaucracy and redirect its activities. Colby's management was basically defensive and reactive: He sought to defuse and avoid controversy rather than risk creating or perpetuating it through dynamic leadership. He tinkered with some of the Agency's structure and processes, mostly to good effect, but he scarcely could be called an innovator or a visionary. And although the White House and the NSC encouraged him to be a more assertive chief of the Intelligence Community, they did not provide him with the authorities and political backing that he needed to accomplish much in that area.

The larger history of Colby's directorship reads like a tragedy. It opened with a disastrous intelligence failure (the unpredicted war between Egypt and Israel); included a potential intelligence windfall that brought mostly disappointment (the GLOMAR project³) and a major internal dust-up (the firing of counterintelligence chief James Angleton); suffered through the collapse of South Vietnam and the loss of uncounted intelligence assets; and climaxed in the turmoil of the Senate and House investigations (prompted by revelations of Agency misdeeds, particularly spying on American radicals and intercepting US mail sent to and from the Soviet Union).

² PHOENIX was a covert action program run from 1967 to 1971 by the CIA, the US Army, and South Vietnamese policy and intelligence organizations to identify and destroy Viet Cong leadership cadre in the South. Its activities included intelligence collection, paramilitary operations, and psychological warfare. PHOENIX became infamous for the capture or killing of nearly 50,000 suspected communists in roundups conducted by local security forces. Colby ran PHOENIX in his cover role as director of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) for the Agency for International Development. He always maintained that abuses in the program were not widespread and were contrary to official policy, and that most Viet Cong were killed during combat operations and not while in South Vietnamese custody. The best published account of PHOENIX is Dale Andrade's *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1990).

³ GLOMAR, according to Prados (pp. 266-267), was a technically remarkable project to raise a Soviet submarine that had sunk three miles deep in the Pacific Ocean northwest of Hawaii in 1968. The operation involved the construction of a special ship—purportedly a deep-sea mining vessel—that would grab the submarine with giant claws and haul it to the surface. One of the claws broke in the attempt to lift the submarine, and a large section of its hull cracked off and fell back to the ocean floor. The costly project reportedly did not yield the intelligence bonanza that its planners had hoped for.

Throughout all this strife, Colby had no patrons at the White House, which treated him more as a senior staffer than as the President's chief intelligence officer. (His own missteps in dealing with the Ford Administration did not help.) His tenure ended clumsily, with a premature dismissal and an awkward recall to temporary service while his successor, George Bush, awaited confirmation. At the changing of the guard ceremony in the Agency auditorium in January 1976, the applause for the new DCI had barely subsided when the former one slipped away in his wife's old Buick. Colby retired, as *The Washington Post* reported at the time, "a victim of changing public attitudes and the revelations that he himself had set in motion."⁴

Prados, an independent scholar now attached to the National Security Archive, is well qualified to write a book covering the years of Colby's career, if not a biography of the man himself. Prados's previous work on Vietnam, covert actions, the NSC, US analysis of Soviet strategic weapons, intelligence in the Pacific theater during World War II, and military war games demonstrates that he is one of America's most prolific and insightful historians of national security and intelligence issues. Two hallmarks of his books are thorough, often pathbreaking, research in public records and aggressive use of declassification procedures. These qualities are evident in *Lost Crusader*, as Prados adds to the standard accounts of CIA's overseas exploits and of White House and congressional dealings with the Agency in the mid-1970s.

Prados's skills and knowledge in those areas, however, do not necessarily suit him to the task of writing biography, which requires a flair for characterization and description and an ability to strike the proper balance between the life and the times—to offer enough context to set the individual in period and place without losing sight of him. Prados handles the narrative of Colby's *curriculum vitae* in a workmanlike fashion, and some of his problem here is the bland personality of his subject. But in a biography, the less captivating attributes of the main character or lacunae in the documentary record of his career cannot be offset with lengthy accounts of Agency operations and bureaucratic developments with which, at least based on the material presented, Colby's involvement can only be discerned by inference.

In his preface, Prados writes that *Lost Crusader* "is offered for several reasons, the most important being that it is a parable for today, when the Central Intelligence Agency and US intelligence in general again stand in need of visionary leadership."⁵ Sometimes in parables, however, the characters are made to carry more literary weight than they can bear. Prados overreaches when he describes Colby in almost heroic terms, as "one man [who] had the strength to swim against the tide in the crisis of the 1970s

⁴ Laurence Stern, "CIA's Colby Makes Way for Bush," *The Washington Post*, 31 January 1976, p. A1.

⁵ *Lost Crusader*, p. xi.

despite the personal and professional costs entailed.”⁶ This conclusion also contradicts his later portrayal of Colby as a cunning damage-control artist who fended off congressional inquisitors with a carefully crafted process of partial disclosure.

Instead, it seems sufficient to assess Colby’s directorship as a story of calculated good intentions gone somewhat awry. He sought to save the CIA politically by sacrificing some of its secrets, admitting wrongdoing, and promising to be better. His lawyerly approach kept the public attention on Agency abuses that could be corrected and away from considerations of the CIA’s very existence. As Prados rightly, and more modestly, observes, “[Colby’s] cooperation proved just sufficient to dissuade Congress from more forceful action . . . [and his] careful husbanding of CIA secrets limited the inquiries in the areas Langley found most uncomfortable.”⁷ His studied openness, however, mollified few outside critics and outraged many Agency veterans, as did his firing of Angleton and his handling of perjury allegations against Richard Helms. (Some DO officers even went so far as to suggest, foolishly or scurrilously, that Colby was the Soviet mole Angleton had been hunting for.)

Surprisingly for a researcher of Prados’s diligence, *Lost Crusader* contains many factual errors and questionable interpretations. Prados mixes up the CIA’s supersonic reconnaissance aircraft, the A-12 Oxcart, with the Air Force’s version, the SR-71 Blackbird. He misnames an important Agency operative in Laos as Vincent, rather than J. Vinton Lawrence, and misidentifies cryptonyms as digraphs. His statement that “the agency’s analytical performance on Vietnam had played well during Lyndon Johnson’s administration” is flat wrong.⁸ The Counterintelligence Staff’s mail opening operation (HTLINGUAL) long predated its surveillance of antiwar activists (MHCHAOS) and was never directed primarily at them. Soviet operations did not halt during the molehunt, most of the “Family Jewels”⁹ were not about Counterintelligence Staff activities, and Angleton was not nicknamed “Mother.” As DCI, Richard Helms had nothing to do with giving the comptroller’s budgetary authority to the executive director—John McCone did that in 1963 when he combined the two positions.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 341-42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁹ “Family Jewels” refers to a listing of illegal and unethical CIA activities compiled at the direction of DCI James Schlesinger in early 1973. Besides MHCHAOS and HTLINGUAL, other “Jewels” included assassination plots against foreign leaders, drug testing on unwitting subjects, and security investigations of suspected “leakers” of secret information. After Colby became DCI, he told the Agency’s congressional oversight committees about the “Jewels,” and soon *New York Times* reporter Seymour Hersh was on the story. His front-page account on 24 December 1974—“Huge CIA Operation Reported In US Against Antiwar Forces, Other Dissidents in Nixon Years”—set off a firestorm of criticism of the CIA and prompted the investigations by the Rockefeller Commission and the Church and Pike committees in 1975-1976.

On the interpretive side, several dubious examples deserve mention. Prados overstates McCone's support for South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem as being founded on their shared Catholicism; McCone was politically realistic, seeing no alternatives to Diem and predicting the revolving-door military juntas that succeeded him. Prados also misjudges Colby's influence on McCone on Vietnam affairs. McCone respected and drew upon Colby's Indochina expertise frequently, but he had his own ideas about how the United States should fight the war. Prados does not mention the assassination of John F. Kennedy as the main reason why the CIA mistreated KGB defector Yuri Nosenko. If Nosenko was not bona fide—and there were reasons, in addition to fellow defector Anatoly Golitsyn's allegations, to believe that he might not be—then his claim that the Soviets had not sent Lee Harvey Oswald to kill Kennedy had to be questioned; a potential *casus belli* was involved. Prados calls the CIA's covert action in Angola in 1974 “a dismal failure,” but he does not mention that, whatever the program's merits and demerits, Congress preordained its failure by cutting off funds for it.¹⁰ Lastly, Prados deals with the congressional inquiries of 1975-1976 much too uncritically. He accuses Colby and the Ford administration of continually “stonewalling,” but he says nothing adverse about the stream of leaks and all the publicity-mongering by some members of the Church and Pike committees investigating intelligence activities (such as Frank Church's pre-presidential campaign posturing).

There is no doubt, however, as Prados shows, that for some years after Colby's directorship, US intelligence was not the same, for better and for worse. In Colby's (and Prados's) estimation, those changes were mostly for the good. Soon after he left Langley in January 1976, Colby wrote that:

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. In fact, this will strengthen American 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.¹¹

Prados suggests that Colby's example “may offer hope for those who see the need for change today.”¹² Because of our experiences with terrorism and war during the past two years, however, US intelligence is looking more like it did before Colby: greater secrecy and security, more use of espionage and covert action, congressional deference to the White House in intelligence

¹⁰ *Lost Crusader*, p. 318.

¹¹ “After Investigating US Intelligence,” *New York Times*, 26 February 1976.

¹² *Lost Crusader*, p. xi.

matters, the *de facto* lifting of the ban on assassinations, and even efforts to give the Agency authority to operate domestically. Perhaps after the war against terrorism subsides and the inevitable political recriminations begin, “America’s spies will wish William E. Colby were still with them,” as Prados predicts.¹³ That will be so mainly because, as the history of US intelligence reform shows, *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 343.