

John Prados



January 9, 1951 – November 29, 2022

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John Prados, Master of Uncovering Government Secrets, Dies at 71

An “archives rat,” he was expert at digging through declassified materials to tell new stories about America’s military history.



By Clay Risen

Published Dec. 3, 2022 Updated Dec. 12, 2022

John Prados, a military historian whose dogged pursuit of classified government material led him to write dozens of books upsetting accepted truths about the Cold War, Vietnam and the American intelligence community, while also achieving renown as an award-winning board-game designer, died on Tuesday in Silver Spring, Md. He was 71.

His partner, Ellen Pinzur, said the cause of death, at a hospital, was cancer.

A self-described product of the 1960s who, with his ropy ponytail and bushy mustache, certainly looked the part, Dr. Prados was both a scholar and an activist.

As a historian, he wrote thick, deeply researched books on subjects as varied as the Battle of Leyte Gulf during World War II, the success of the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Vietnam War, and the White House’s maneuverings before the 2003 Iraq war.

Running through all his work was the contention that records of intelligence and covert activities represented a sort of historical dark matter: a vast amount of material that, while invisible in conventional narratives, could, if revealed, radically shift our understanding of the past.

Across several books about the Pacific Theater in World War II, for example, he demonstrated that the American command of everyday intelligence – where Japanese forces were, where they were going – was just as important as the sheer firepower the United States brought to the fight.

His goal, he wrote in “Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II” (1995), was to “reassess the outcomes of battles and campaigns in terms not just of troops or ships but of how the secret war played out.”

For decades after World War II, such information was virtually impossible to access. Dr. Prados was still a graduate student at Columbia University when, in the 1970s, historians and journalists began taking advantage of the Freedom of Information Act to crack open government archives.

But going through the material was a slog, especially before digitization. Only a few people had the fortitude for it. Dr. Prados was one.

“He was an archives rat,” said Thomas Blanton, the director of the National Security Archive, where Dr. Prados was a senior fellow. “He was the ultimate prospector in the primary-source gold mine.”



Dr. Prados at a conference in an undated photo. Though he earned a doctorate, he never held a full-time academic position. He was accepted by academic historians all the same. The National Security Archive

Though he held a doctorate from Columbia, Dr. Prados never held a full-time academic position. Still, he was respected by academic historians and accepted into professional organizations, including the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

“John was astonishingly productive, but what stands out in his work is the attention to detail,” Fredrik Logevall, a historian at Harvard, said in an email. “He was ever on the hunt for new sources, for the latest declassified documents, and he put them to expert use in his books.”

Dr. Prados was driven by more than intellectual curiosity. As a young man in the early 1970s he had been shocked by the extent of official perfidy revealed by documents like the Pentagon Papers and events like the Watergate scandal, and he believed that democracy hinged on the public’s access to government secrets.

Like other scholars and journalists who utilized the Freedom of Information Act, he worried that the lessons learned by his generation, coming out of the 1960s, were being forgotten in the 1980s, just as the Reagan administration was pushing secret wars in Central America and illegal deals like the one revealed by the Iran-contra affair.

“The American people not only have a need but a right to know their history,” he told *The New York Times* in 1993.

John Frederick Prados was born in Queens on Jan. 9, 1951 – the same birthday as President Richard M. Nixon, he often noted, with a mix of humor and horror. When he was in middle school his father, Jose Prados-Herrero, moved the family to San Juan, P.R., where he took a job with a sports arena. John’s mother, Betty Lou (McGuire) Prados, taught English as a second language.

John graduated from high school in Puerto Rico, then returned to New York to attend Columbia. He received a bachelor’s degree in political science and international affairs in 1973 and a doctorate in political science in 1982.

His dissertation, about the successes and failures of American intelligence assessments of Soviet military power, became his first book,

“*The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Soviet Strategic Forces*,” published in 1982.

His marriage to Jill Gay ended in divorce. Along with his partner, he is survived by his daughters from his marriage, Dani and Tasha Prados; his brother, Joe; and his sister, Mary Prados.

After years spent collaborating with the National Security Archive, he joined the organization as a senior fellow in 1997. He soon became its most visible and vocal figure, quick with a quotation or research tip for a like-minded journalist, especially after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 and the Iraq war, events that he feared would herald a new era of government secrecy.

Dr. Prados liked to say that his love for researching and writing was closely related to his second passion: designing board games that intricately simulated historical military conflicts. He created more than 30 such games, with titles involving the Napoleonic Wars, World War II and, of course, Vietnam.

Many of his games have come to be regarded as classics of their genre, none more so than “*The Rise and Decline of the Third Reich*” (1974), a globe-spanning strategy contest in which players, as the different warring nations, balance economic and military resources against the chance of a dice roll. The game won a Charlie award, the top honor in war game design.

Fans of the game were legion, and far-flung: The Chilean author Roberto Bolaño created a character who mastered it in his novel “*The Third Reich*.”

John Prados, miner of declassified documents, dies at 71

He wrote more than two dozen works of military and intelligence history as an independent scholar and senior fellow at the nonprofit National Security Archive



By [Emily Langer](#)

December 5, 2022 at 10:53 p.m. EST

John Prados, an independent scholar who pried reams of classified documents from government vaults, publishing his findings in more than two dozen books that broadened and sometimes challenged the known history of World War II, the Vietnam War, the Cold War and the CIA, died Nov. 29 at a hospital in Silver Spring, Md. He was 71.

The cause was cancer, said his partner, Ellen Pinzur. Dr. Prados's death was announced by the National Security Archive, a research institute at George Washington University where he had been a senior fellow for 25 years. The organization [described him](#) in a tribute as "the ultimate prospector in the gullies of the documentary gold rush," ever in search of treasure yet to be mined from U.S. government archives.

Dr. Prados came of professional age amid the ferment of the 1970s, when revelations of government scandal and subterfuge caused many Americans to question their leaders in ways they never had before.

He was a history student at Columbia University when the Watergate affair began to unfold, ultimately ensnaring President Richard M. Nixon and driving him from office. Dr. Prados completed his first graduate degree in 1975, the year Saigon fell to communist forces, marking the end of the Vietnam War, in which nearly 60,000 American troops lost their lives.

An antiwar activist during those years, Dr. Prados devoted his scholarly career to ferreting out government secrets, he [once told the New York Times](#), because "the American people not only have a need but a right to know their history."

Tom Blanton, the director of the National Security Archive, observed in an interview that Dr. Prados "almost invented and certainly personified the identity of an independent scholar." He held no official title until Blanton persuaded him to join the institution in 1997.

In his scholarly work, Dr. Prados explored the Pacific theater of World War II in the volume "Combined Fleet Decoded" (1995) and the European theater in "Normandy Crucible" (2011).

One of his best-known volumes was “Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975” (2009), offering what historian Arthur Herman, reviewing the book in the Wall Street Journal, described as “a detailed picture of a U.S. government unwilling to confront its mistakes and an American military baffled by a guerrilla insurgency.”

Dr. Prados developed a particular expertise in intelligence matters, examining the National Security Council in “Keepers of the Keys” (1991) and the CIA in volumes including “Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA” (2006) and “The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness” (2017).

Reviewing the minutes of a secret NSC meeting in 1975, he discovered Secretary of State and national security adviser Henry Kissinger grouching to President Gerald Ford that “it is an act of insanity and national humiliation to have a law prohibiting the President from ordering assassination.”

Dr. Prados relied heavily on the Freedom of Information Act, a 1967 law that allows citizens to request access to government documents, and displayed by all accounts heroic stamina in reviewing the mountains of material that such requests often yield. Celebrated among many anti-secrecy activists, he was also an occasional annoyance to government officials.

As the National Archives prepared to formally release the Pentagon Papers in 2011, four decades after the 7,000-page secret history of the Vietnam War was first published by newspapers including the New York Times and The Washington Post, federal officials initially announced that 11 words would be redacted from the release.

They reversed course after realizing that the passage in question had already appeared in a version of the papers released years earlier, and that any redaction would only draw attention to whatever matter they wished to conceal.

In an internal email at the time, a declassification official remarked that Dr. Prados had been the researcher “most aggressive in pursuing” the Pentagon Papers and predicted that he would “likely scope out the ‘declassified’ page very quickly” and “parade this discovery like a politician on the 4th of July.” In the end, the Pentagon Papers were released with no redaction, leaving readers – including Dr. Prados – to guess at the identity of the 11 words.

Dr. Prados wagered that the contents had something to do with electronic surveillance in the Gulf of Tonkin in February 1965. But in any case, “the most distressing aspect of the 11 words episode,” he told the Times, “is that anyone at all felt a need to try and put toothpaste back into the tube after the passage of four decades’ time.”

John Frederick Prados was born in Queens on Jan. 9, 1951. When he was in middle school, his family moved to Puerto Rico, where his father was born, and where he managed an athletic stadium. Dr. Prados’s mother was from Kansas and taught English as another language.

His father had served in the military, and Dr. Prados at one point aspired to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. “War games and my whole interest in the subject is a sublimation of that,” he told The Post.

Instead, he entered Columbia University, where he received a bachelor’s degree in 1973. He remained at Columbia for his graduate studies, receiving his first master’s degree in 1975, his second master’s in 1977 and a doctorate in 1982, all in political science.

Dr. Prados sought to calculate the extent of Soviet strategic forces during the Cold War in his dissertation, which became his first book, “The Soviet Estimate” (1982). He returned to the contest between the superpowers in volumes including “How the Cold War Ended” (2011).

Dr. Prados’s marriage to Jill Gay ended in divorce. Survivors include his partner of 25 years, Ellen Pinzur of Silver Spring; two daughters from his marriage, Dani Prados of Granite Falls, Minn., and Tasha Prados of Takoma Park, Md.; a brother; and a sister.

In the early years of his career, Dr. Prados earned much of his livelihood designing board games that pitted players against each other amid historical events including the Napoleonic wars, the Civil War, World War II and the Vietnam War. His board game “Rise and Decline of the Third Reich,” released in 1974, became one of the most popular strategy contests of its kind.

Although they might have seemed like separate ventures – one grounded in history, the other an invitation to alternative history – Dr. Prados saw his archival work and the design of his board games as inextricably linked.

With his games, he said, he had no interest in “breeding militarism,” he remarked. Their purpose, rather, was to reveal at the safety of a gaming table “the difficulty of conducting war” – and its “horrendous costs.”

Nate Jones contributed to this report.

H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

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My first memory of John Prados is in the mid-1980s at my then-boss Scott Armstrong's house in Washington, DC. I was just starting out at the National Security Archive, an organization Scott had taken the lead in founding, and then becoming its first director. I had previously been Scott's researcher at the *Washington Post* on a project looking at the sausage factory that is US foreign policy. (Scott's idea had been to follow operations at two far-flung embassies—Tehran and Managua—uncannily anticipating the Iran-Contra scandal that was about to break.)

I had heard of John. He had recently written *The Soviet Estimate*.¹ He was also one of a handful of researchers Scott used to single out, along with the likes of Jeff Richelson,² as an especially prolific and adept user of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). And he was part of a small gaggle of historians, journalists, and public interest types whose occasional beer-infused bull sessions at each other's houses about access to documents, the wretched state of FOIA, and the culture of secrecy under President Ronald Reagan formed the kernel for the idea of the Archive, as an organization that could serve as a kind of public institutional memory by housing the troves of declassified sources journalists and others had unearthed with such difficulty over the years.

So, when I finally met John, it was with a little bit of awe. Decker out in ponytail, jeans, and leather jacket he was noticeable even in that mix of 1960s-and-1970s-era Washington veterans that evening. He seemed stand-offish, didn't have much to say, and mainly circled around, nodding and smiling at the wisecracks and war stories. Thinking back, he was still in his early 30s, so his diffidence in that group was totally understandable.

It was only years later, after we brought John on as a Senior Fellow at the Archive, that I got to know him better. By then he had published probably 15 more books (on his way eventually to some 27 volumes) about the U.S. intelligence community, the National Security Council, and especially the Vietnam War. *Keepers of the Keys*, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, and *Safe for Democracy*³ became standard references for me.

So the intimidation factor was still there. But it took no time at all to realize that in spite of his reputation as a ferocious researcher and scholar and all his accomplishments, including a slew of awards, he was also a genuinely modest, unassuming guy. All he wanted was to be able to keep up his extraordinary investigations into the murkier dimensions of America's role in the world, help others understand the lessons from that history, and support the Archive any way he could. Perfect.

The distinguished scholars who have graciously (and happily) agreed to create this tribute all have Prados stories to tell that give a wonderful sense of him as a scholar, activist, and person—the incredible breadth of erudition, exceptionally productive scholarship, salt-of-the-earth character, and of course bearer of that classic

¹ John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength* (New York: Dial Press, 1982).

² Jeffrey T. Richelson (1949-2017) was another prolific—and independent—scholar who later became a longtime Fellow at the Archive. Among his many volumes were several standard works, including *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (New York: HarperInformation, 1995), and currently in its ninth printing), *America's Space Sentinels: DSP Satellites and National Security* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999, four total printings), and *A Century of Spies: Intelligence in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1991); Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through the Persian Gulf War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996); Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009).

Prados “look.”⁴ As an admirer, colleague, and beneficiary of much of his wisdom, I have a few tales of my own, but this is an introduction not a full-blown appreciation, so I will offer just one anecdote that still conveys a lot about John and how he went about his craft and passion. (I’m grateful to Nate Jones for his reminder about this episode.)

One of John’s many topics of expertise—building off his extraordinary knowledge of the Vietnam War—was the history and contents of the Pentagon Papers. Most people probably forget that for 40 years around a third of the Papers remained officially classified, even after Sen. Mike Gravel (D-AK) inserted over 4,100 pages of it into the Congressional Record in 1971 and the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) released a partial version, cleared by the Defense Department, the following year. It was only in 2011 that the National Archives (NARA) announced that it would be making public what was billed as the complete version.

Just prior to the release date, however, the Archivist of the US had made it known that *eleven words* would need to stay redacted. Eleven words. John (among others) was outraged that a single syllable of such a monumentally important and widely read historical source could reasonably be considered classified after so many years.

It turned out, to the surprise of no-one inside or outside government who is familiar with the Kafka-esque world of security classification, that the HASC version had already printed the offending words. “Figures. I should have made that prediction,” wrote a senior NARA official in an internal email (later obtained through FOIA by Steve Aftergood of the Federation of American Scientists).⁵

Soon afterwards, officials at NARA determined that the 11 words could safely be released. Still, the head of the National Declassification Center (NDC) decided that the words themselves would not be divulged. “I think we can all agree,” she wrote to colleagues, “that it is unnecessary to provide any further insight into what was originally considered for redaction or which agency or agencies were suggesting those redactions.”⁶

Openness advocates like John were hardly mollified; if anything, it presented a challenge he couldn’t refuse. In short order, he came out with an e-book for the Archive entitled “Eleven Possibilities for Pentagon Papers ‘11 Words’.” In painstaking forensic detail, he laid out a string of theories for what the would-be redactions could be, backed up by 11 side-by-side-by-side triptychs of the relevant pages from the three main editions of the Papers—Gravel, HASC, and NARA.⁷

Laying bare the absurdity of the whole enterprise, he went a step further and created a contest, open to the public, soliciting submissions of candidates for the missing words.

⁴ See John’s essay on his formative years and his approach to scholarship: Prados, “Panning for Gold,” ed. Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo/ISSF Learning the Scholar’s Craft Series, 5 October 2021; <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E374.pdf>.

⁵ William Bosanko (NARA) email to Sheryl Shenberger, (Director, National Declassification Center), Subject: Pentagon Papers Page issue, June 6, 2011, 8:16 AM, released under FOIA to Steven Aftergood, Federation of American Scientists, June 24, 2011.

⁶ Sheryl Shenberger, (Director, National Declassification Center), email to various addressees, Subject: Re: 11 Word Redaction, June 6, 2011, 2:59 PM, released under FOIA to Steven Aftergood, Federation of American Scientists, June 24, 2011.

⁷ The posting is available here: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/intelligence-vietnam/2011-07-12/eleven-possibilities-pentagon-papers-11-secret-words>.

It was all John's way of drawing attention to a wholly unnecessary problem—by poking fun at it. His doggedness, not to mention his sense of humor, met with collective eye-rolling inside the archives where at least some NARA officials had a feeling something like this would be coming.

Emailing colleagues just before the decision came down to release the 11 words, an NDC division chief commented:

I just wanted to throw a couple of things to you that you can pass to the folks making this decision.

First, in speaking to the LBJ library folks, the researcher who is most aggressive in pursuing the PP, John Prados, will most likely find the "declassified" occurrence of the page pretty quickly. So please advise everyone that if they insist on maintaining the redaction, Prados will likely scope out the "declassified" page very quickly.⁸

The email ended with a dour warning: "As you can tell by his NPR appearance, Prados will parade this discovery like a politician on the 4th of July."

It was quintessentially John Prados. The unparalleled expertise and detail-obsessiveness, the tenacity, the outrage at official obtuseness, and the wry humor in the face of it all.

John was truly an 'independent historian;' a daunting advocate for honesty, integrity, and accountability; a gifted communicator of complex ideas and simple truths; and a generous colleague, mentor, and friend.

Participants:

Malcolm Byrne is Deputy Director and Research Director at the nongovernmental National Security Archive based at The George Washington University. His most recent books are *Republics of Myth: National Narratives and the US-Iran Conflict*, with Hussein Banai and John Tirman (Johns Hopkins 2022) and *Worlds Apart: A Documentary History of US-Iranian Relations, 1978-2018*, with Kian Byrne (Cambridge, 2021).

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam* (W.W. Norton, 1988), *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995), and *The War on Leakers* (The New Press, 2016). He has been president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Affairs

James G. Hershberg is Professor of History and International Affairs at George Washington University; former director of the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; and author of *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993; pb: Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995; e-book: Plunkett Lake Press, 2018) and *Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C./Stanford: Wilson Center Press/Stanford University Press, 2012). He is currently working on a book on Cuba, Brazil, and the Cold War.

Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi is an Assistant Professor in International Relations at the School for Interdisciplinary and Global Studies at the University of South Florida. He has a PhD in Political Science

⁸ Like the previous NARA emails cited, this one was dated June 6, 2011; it was sent at 7:44 AM (obtained by Steve Aftergood under FOIA, see previous citations).

from the University of California, Irvine. He is currently working on a project on secret law. His latest publications are “The Double Life of Uncle Sam: The United States and the International Laws Banning Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment,” in Lucrecia García Iommi and Richard W. Maass, eds., *The United States and International Law: Paradoxes of Support across Contemporary Issues*. (University of Michigan Press, 2022), and “Drone Warfare and International Humanitarian Law: The U.S., the I.C.R.C, and the Contest over Global Legal Order,” in Paul Lushenko, Srinjoy Bose, and William Maley, eds., *Drones and Global Order: Implications of Remote Warfare on International Society*. Routledge, 2022).

Robert J. McMahon is the Ralph Mershon Professor of History emeritus at Ohio State University and the author, most recently, of *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (2nd rev. ed., Oxford University Press, 2021).

Leopoldo Nuti is Professor of History of International Relations at Roma Tre University and Co-Director of the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project. From 2014 to 2018 he was President of the Italian Society of International History. Among his most recent publications are, as an editor, *The Euromissiles Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), and as an author “The Making of the Nuclear Order and the Historiography on the 1970s,” in *The International History Review* 40:5 (2018), “Italy as a Hedging State? The Problematic Ratification of the Non-Proliferation Treaty,” in Joseph F. Pilat, ed., *Nuclear Latency and Hedging: Concepts, History and Issues* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center Press, 2019), and “NATO's Role in Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Arms Control: A (Critical) History,” *Documenti LAI* 21/03, January 2021.

“John Prados: Indispensable Chronicler of Our Times.”¹

I don’t remember when I first met John Prados. Now as I look back on it, it seems to me he was always there—at professional conventions, but also at specialized conferences. He was always there with notebook and pen, taking careful notes on each presentation. No one I have ever known had such a dedicated research agenda. He found almost everything to be useful to his inquiring mind. It was a strong asset to him as a historian because he always found the devil hidden in the details. Only once did I ever see him leave a session early. It was at a SHAFR (Society for the History of American Foreign Relations) luncheon and the speaker was retired General David Petraeus for a question and answer session. John was frustrated that there was an intermediary who fielded the questions for the general, sorting out what was asked from the pieces of paper that were passed up to the guest speaker.

John’s particular specialty was intelligence spelled with a capital *I* when he wrote about the Central Intelligence Agency and its leaders through the years, and with a small *i* when he wrote about the supposed Vietnam ‘Best and Brightest’ or those later policymakers in waiting who founded the Project for the New American Century that urged President George W. Bush to remove the supposed threat of Iraq’s ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ and its president, Saddam Hussein. No one was better than John Prados in digging out pieces of archival information in support of his thesis. And no one put together the links between figures in the policymaking community any better. In a sense he was a historical sociologist in the manner of C. Wright Mills, writing about *The Power Elite*.²

I wrote Ivan Dee, who had edited and published three of John’s books to confirm what I thought about the strengths of his style. He wrote back: “He was a pleasure to work with—fierce on details and with a clear narrative style and a sense of the dramatic.”³ He also confirmed what all of John’s readers knew, that he was an “archival rat,” who sussed out the crucial details of policy decisions others had missed or had disregarded. John wrote books about famous campaigns in World War II, but he is best known for his work on American intelligence operations from the OSS days into the Cold War years of the CIA. These became a mosaic revealing the overall structure of American Cold War policymaking. His collective portraits of American policymakers displayed all the interconnections these leaders brought with them from the higher perches amongst the nation’s economic and legal elites. He wrote about the big questions in a way that the reader became acquainted in an empathetic way with an individual policymaker even while wrestling with the results of that policy.

This trait was on display in several of his books. His portrait of Allen Dulles in, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness*, is surely one of the best treatments of this Founding Father of the Intelligence Agency as it was recreated after the disbanding of “Wild Bill” Donovan’s wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS).⁴ Even its title, which is taken in part from Joseph Conrad’s famous novel about a colonel gone rogue is suggestive of how Prados would work outward from individuals to policy. Allen Dulles was like T.S. Eliot’s famous imagination of the “concrete universal,”⁵ who began life steeped in a family heritage of government service in foreign policy operations and decisions. His grandfather, John Watts Foster had been a secretary of

¹ I would like to thank Ivan Dee, Richard Immerman, and Paul Miles for reading and commenting on this essay, and adding to my appreciation for John’s work

² C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

³ Ivan Dee to Lloyd Gardner, January 2, 2023. Published by *Quadrangle Books* in Chicago, these were *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (1995), *America Confronts Terrorism*, ed. (2002), and *Safe for Democracy* (2009).

⁴ John Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

⁵ Eliot used the term “concrete universal” about poets who draw on tradition but add their own imprint. It fits John Prados’s contributions. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood*, (New York: Knopf, 1921).

state in the late-nineteenth century, and an uncle by marriage, Robert Lansing, had served as Woodrow Wilson's second secretary of state during the First World War. Allen Dulles's first real experience was at a listening post in Bern, Switzerland, during World War II.

Donovan had sent him there to learn all he could about any Germans who were not tainted too much with Nazi ideology and might be useful after the war. He already had a reputation as the Great White Case Officer because of a story he told about himself that went back to an earlier tour in Bern during World War I. He had been sent there by 'Uncle Bert' to organize espionage activities at the American Embassy. At the time he was seeing a woman who was the daughter of a Swiss industrialist. They had made a date for a tennis match when a telephone call came for him from a Russian. The caller was anxious to see someone from the embassy. But Dulles had no intention of missing the tennis date. And so, as he would confess, he missed seeing Vladimir Ilyich Lenin who was about to leave exile for Russia "on his way to igniting the Russian Revolution. Allen W. Dulles dined out on that for decades."⁶

Prados spotted many a story like that one as he stalked the halls of the American heart of darkness, bringing out for readers not only such anecdotes but the story, for example, of those whom Dulles claimed were the good Germans. This was of course highly useful as the Cold War began and German scientists and spies he had identified in Bern were imported into the Free World. Dulles padded his credentials as the author of several books. Prados noted especially *Germany's Underground* (1947)⁷ as a starting point for the rehabilitation of Germany (part of it at least) into the Western bloc in the early Cold War. He had already written an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* on World War II Operation Sunrise secret negotiations. All this, Prados argued, fitted into a campaign led by former OSS chief Donovan who was not unhappy with such revelations "so long as the articles and books lamented the absence of a robust peacetime agency."⁸ It was natural then that Dulles climbed the intelligence ladder until in 1950 he became a key aide to Walter Bedell Smith at the CIA, where his talents concerning the intellectual Cold War in Europe were put to good use as Deputy Director for Plans at the Directorate of Plans, which put together the remnants of post-World War II agencies. It was his dream job, despite the original location in one of the wartime temporary buildings along the Reflecting Pool on the Mall. The buildings were drafty and cold in winter, Prados noted, and dreadfully hot in the summer. And then with his acute sense of irony, he wrote, "They also blocked the view to the Lincoln Memorial."⁹

All this led to Dulles's nomination by President Dwight Eisenhower to be director of the whole agency. This was another moment of irony, Prados wrote, because Bill Donovan wanted the job and had to settle for an ambassadorship to Thailand. Thus he could entitle his chapter on Allen Dulles and the CIA, "The House That Allen Built." Under Dulles's leadership covert operations flourished. Because of a clause in the Central Intelligence Agency Act, Dulles as director had the mission to protect sources and methods. And therein was the license to kill, to put it in Bondian terms. A 2011 internal history looked back under these terms to celebrate CIA interventions. "It concluded that nearly *80 percent* [Prados's italics] of CIA interventions had had the goal of promoting and protecting democracy." But in reality. "Both the Iran and Guatemala operations—Allen Dulles's signal successes—produced dictatorships. The half-assed Congo intervention also led to dictatorship. No CIA action on Dulles's watch installed a democratic system."¹⁰

All this caught up with him in 1961 and the Bay of Pigs with the disastrous attempt by the CIA to launch an intervention in Cuba that would repeat the 1954 Guatemalan 'success' story when the agency overthrew a leftist regime that threatened American investments and declared itself something of a Marxist-Socialist state. Cuban President Fidel Castro not only survived, he found Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev willing to install

⁶ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 34.

⁷ Allen Welsh Dulles, *Germany's Underground* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

⁸ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 40.

⁹ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 50.

¹⁰ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 61.

missiles to defend his regime, leading to the most dangerous crisis in the Cold War. By that time, of course, Dulles was out. President John F. Kennedy not only fired him but appointed Dulles to sit on a review panel about what went wrong. He wanted to ensure that CIA concerns were considered, wrote Prados, “but also to require Dulles to redo his sums, to sit through an exhaustive waltz through every imaginable aspect of this horror.” After the CIA’s new house was actually built in Langley, Virginia, with both Kennedy and Dulles in attendance for the opening ceremony, along with the new director John McCone, “Allen Dulles took home the National Security Medal as consolation prize.”¹¹

The fallout from the Bay of Pigs did not end with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, but continued with a series of hailstorms that Prados detailed with his usual acumen in a book length study of one of Allen Dulles’s successors, William Colby. Colby was a career intelligence officer who headed the pacification programs in Vietnam, including the infamous Phoenix assassination teams. That role followed him all the rest of his career in the CIA, hanging like the ancient mariner’s albatross around his neck as the stories and evidence of major assassination plots became front page material. Prados detailed Colby’s continuing (up to the end of his life) belief that the Vietnam War had not been lost but thrown away: “Only a couple of months before his death, Colby maintained in one talk that if [South Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh] Diem had been left in power he would have achieved total victory within two years.”¹²

The truth was, Prados continued, that the United States fought the wrong war at the wrong time. Colby had it backwards. The United States fought a military war “when the adversary was a people in arms, and [it] shifted to oppose a people’s war when the enemy had transitioned to a conventional strategy.”¹³ But, still, Prados estimated that Colby “saved” the agency he worked for all his years in government when the days of reckoning came not simply for the reputation of the Phoenix program, but for assassination attempts on major figures and the infiltration of domestic protest groups during the Vietnam War. For his efforts to establish a new charter for the CIA that would bring it in tune with the Constitution and traditions of American democracy, he was roundly scourged by the old hands going back to the Dulles era, and by the Lord Castlereagh figure of the Nixon-Ford years, National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was forever living as if in the post-Napoleonic age of the Concert of Europe. Colby’s testimony about CIA misdeeds before Congressional Committees in what Prados, with his usual ironic *double entendre*, called “The Year of Intelligence” (1975-76), sought to put such behavior in the context of a noble effort to insure the nation’s capability to meet Cold War challenges. It was not a success either with stalwarts or critics of the agency, and eventually led to his dismissal.

Prados well summed up the contending forces arrayed against Colby’s final efforts in two quotations. The first came from Kissinger upon hearing that Colby had told a National Security Council meeting that the United States needed a law which prohibited assassinations in time of peace—a reference to the problem of reconciling attempts like those made on Fidel Castro’s life to American responsibilities for a decent respect for the opinions of mankind. The problem, as he saw it, went back to the original 1947 law establishing the CIA with all its ambiguities about such dangerous avenues as “plausible deniability.” Hearing of Colby’s call for such a law dumbfounded the combined National Security Adviser/ Secretary of State in both his roles. “‘It is an act of insanity and humiliation,’ Henry Kissinger interjected, ‘to have a law prohibiting the President from ordering assassinations.’”¹⁴

The second quotation came from an account of a conversation Colby had with an old friend who was teaching a course on Greek Tragedy at George Washington University. The professor, Bernard Knox, gave a lecture on *Antigone* to his class that Colby attended during “The Year of Intelligence.” The story unfolds

¹¹ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 75.

¹² Prados, *William Colby and the CIA: The Secret Wars of a Controversial Spymaster* (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas Press, 2009), 339.

¹³ Prados, *William Colby and the CIA*, 339.

¹⁴ Prados, *William Colby and the CIA*, 314.

around Antigone, the niece of King Creon, who defies her uncle by burying the body of her brother who had waged war against the home city. She is condemned to death, but her action pleases the gods, and brings down the curses of Creon's son, and Creon's wife, who commit suicide. Creon repents and tries to save Antigone's life, but it is too late. As the class discussion ensued about the play, two dark-suited security men entered the classroom to survey it, relates Prados, to listen to "this commentary on moral choices." The professor later recalled in a eulogy at Colby's funeral that he had said, "Bill, you certainly chanced on the right lecture to come to."

"'Oh, I knew what you were going to talk about,' Colby replied, 'And I wanted to hear what you had to say'."¹⁵

John's entire career had really been about moral choices. He was known as a historian of intelligence, its uses, misuses, and the outcomes for national security—and what it meant to have small groups of elite 'specialists' managing the nation's foreign policy often, as with Dulles and Colby, pursuing different means to that end. With Vietnam (which John would spend much of his career understanding) it was "The Wise Men," with the two Iraq wars, it would be the authors of "The New American Century," who set out in the George H. W. Bush administration and the Bill Clinton years to demonstrate something that came to full force in the George W. Bush Administration: sometimes called "Muscular Wilsonianism."

Instead, the muscular Wilsonians would set loose a swarm of evils that made Pandora's Box seem like a picnic basket. John wrote about this in an article, "Wise Guys, Rough Business: Iraq and the Tonkin Gulf," for the book, *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam, Or, How NOT to Learn from the Past*.¹⁶ He began the essay with a discussion of Donald Rumsfeld's presumed vote for the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as a Republican member of Congress. A minor officials then, he, like the others who advised the president, became the determiners of policy in the George W. Bush administration. In both cases war was launched on the basis of "deceptive measures to obtain . . . [Congressional] approvals." Despite all the similarities between Vietnam and Iraq War II, however, there was one big distinction. The United States took up a position in an ongoing war in Vietnam, while no such involvement existed in Iraq. Prados concluded that "triggering a war involved not only conjuring a casus belli but inducing Americans to subscribe to the Bush administration's interpretation of the situation."¹⁷

Prados wrote that while Iraq's possession of WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) was highly questionable at the time of the terrorist al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the now Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his lieutenants immediately put forth the proposition of taking out Iraq's President Saddam Hussein as a major component of the retaliation. Indeed, this preoccupation with the Iraqi leader crowded out almost everything else at the summit of American power. The fixation on Saddam Hussein far outreached the attention to North Vietnamese leaders Ho Chi Minh in the Vietnam War. The "cabal," as Prados labels the war authors around Rumsfeld and Vice President Richard Cheney, put relentless pressure on the reluctant CIA leadership to confirm rumors about nuclear weapons in Saddam Hussein's possession. When United Nations arms inspector Hans Blix visited Washington in January 2002, Rice told him that she did not think it would be beyond Saddam Hussein "to use or transfer weapons of mass destruction." This talk with Blix took place before Bush excoriated the Iraqi dictator as a leader of the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union message to Congress.¹⁸

¹⁵ Prados, *William Colby and the CIA*, 307.

¹⁶ Prados, "Wise Guys, Rough Business: Iraq and the Tonkin Gulf," Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam, Or, How NOT to Learn from the Past* (New York: New Press, 2008): 106-23.

¹⁷ Prados, "Wise Guys, Rough Business," *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam*, 109.

¹⁸ Prados, "Wise Guys, Rough Business," 111.

But the campaign engineered by the cabal did not have immediate success in Europe outside of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and some minor East European powers that Rumsfeld would label “the New Europe,” thereby opening a fissure that has existed in some thinking about questions like the expansion of NATO down to the present time. But far worse was to come at home, writes Prados, with the defection of highly honored retired General Brent Scowcroft, a close friend to the first President Bush and a former national security adviser. During the Colby years at CIA, Prados noted, Scowcroft once said that it was the fall-out from the director’s determination to bring the agency into line with American law and traditions that had caused him to lose his hair. Scowcroft now wrote in a *The Wall Street Journal* opinion piece that the central argument against an attack on Iraq would “divert us for some indefinite period from our war on terrorism. Worse, there is a virtual consensus in the world against an attack on Iraq at this time. . . [requiring] the U.S. to pursue a go-it-alone strategy.”¹⁹

Once again with his acute sense of irony, Prados noted in this essay a final deception in the Vietnam War. In March 1975, the White House announced that all Americans had left the country, while in reality over one hundred marines were still on the ground awaiting helicopter airlifts. Kissinger blamed the Pentagon for the snafu, which had happened because the US ambassador had been evacuated and he believed that this meant that all Americans were safely out before the end came. Rumsfeld objected. “‘his war has been marked by so many lies and evasions,’ he was quoted as saying, ‘that it is not right to have the war end with one last lie.’ It would have been good if Rumsfeld had applied that Vietnam lesson to Iraq policy in the Bush administration.”²⁰

John Prados was a master historian. He taught us that not only was the Devil in the details, but enlightenment and understanding. All through his books one constantly comes across such illustrations that cement his big arguments. I have not read all of his books; it would take almost another lifetime to do so. He was perhaps the most prolific historian of our time (or any time), and yet managed other careers at the National Security Archive and as a board game author. And beyond all these individual attributes, and summing them up, he wrote with passion. He was a great friend as well, unstinting in his helpfulness. I never had a conversation with John in which I did not learn something new, whether it was a correction or an overlooked fact. We will all miss him terribly.

As Ivan Dee noted in his email to me, away from his work John was “relaxed and cheerful, and a fine baseball fan. He had a liking for the [Chicago] Cubs—I’m not exactly sure why. He once gave me a miniature replica of Wrigley Field, a paperweight of sorrows.”²¹ Even in jesting he was the apostle of irony. Prados once described himself as an “army brat,” one who originally hoped to gain an appointment to West Point, the United States Military Academy. It was Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 intervention in the Dominican Republic that first cast doubts on his previous understanding, and support of, American policy in Vietnam, and launched the young scholar on a career dedicated to illuminating the forces and exploring the connections of elite policymakers.²² It was also a dedication to optimism about the possibilities of the search for what my long-ago colleague at Rutgers, Warren Susman, called a ‘useful past,’ not one tied down to another endless war in the Heart of Darkness.

¹⁹ Prados, “Wise Guys, Rough Business,” 113.

²⁰ Prados, “Wise Guys, Rough Business,” 122.

²¹ Dee to Gardner, January 2, 2023.

²² Prados, “A Note to Readers,” *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2009), xxii.

“Remembering a Prolific, Passionate ‘Archives Rat’”

In the first years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, in the early 1980s, the nuclear issue surged back to the forefront of American political discourse for the first time in almost two decades. The 1963 Limited Test-Ban Treaty literally drove the US-Soviet nuclear arms race underground, and, soon afterwards, Americans turned their attention to a real war in Vietnam, which was broadcast in living (and dying) color on TV screens, rather than a theoretical apocalypse. In June 1982, more than half a million people thronged Manhattan’s Central Park to demand nuclear disarmament, or at least a nuclear arms reduction, ‘freeze,’ or ‘no first use’ policy that some ex-officials were advocating. A return trip to the brink, an acute superpower crisis like that over Cuba 20 years earlier, seemed a real possibility.

I had just finished college, writing my undergraduate history thesis on the birth and early years of the nuclear arms race, and was searching for a serious work of history to help me understand how the US-Soviet competition in devising and stockpiling means of mass destruction had reached such heights and threatened to spiral out of control. There were, then, only a handful of books on the nuclear rivalry that could be truly called ‘history’ as opposed to journalism, or technical or political science studies of the weapons, nuclear strategy, or US-Soviet arms control negotiations—“bean-counting,” harrumphed my thesis advisor, Martin J. Sherwin, whose *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (1975), was one of the pioneering histories of the bomb’s creation; Gregg Herken’s *The Winning Weapon* (1981) at least brought the story up to 1950.¹

Then I stumbled upon a just-published book by an author new to me: John Prados’ *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength*.² Based on an extensive array of sources, the book incisively probed the superpower contest for nuclear supremacy after World War II. Though focused on the CIA, it was a spy thriller of a different sort, analyzing intelligence evaluations and controversies—more Franz Kafka than John le Carré, as one reviewer put it.³ Filling a “virtual information vacuum,” Prados ranged from the Manhattan Project and the first Soviet atomic blast (“Joe One”) to the missile gap claims of the late ‘50s to convoluted detente-era disputes over MAD, SALT, ABM, and projections of the nuclear balance. Based on his Columbia University dissertation, *The Soviet Estimate* was Prados’s first book. Experts immediately recognized the arrival of a uniquely, ferociously tenacious researcher. In *The Atlantic*, Thomas Powers (who himself had recently authored a crucial work on the CIA, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*⁴) not only praised the book (“certain to become a standard work in the field”) but recognized the author’s singular qualities. “How Prados survived his ordeal in the library I do not know,” he wrote, in those years before Googling. “It must have involved years of stupefying tedium. But the result has justified his devoted efforts. Well-thumbed copies of *The Soviet Estimate* will be at the right hand of everyone who tries to understand why the United States and the Soviet Union elected to build enough nuclear weapons to break the back of our civilization.”⁵

The Soviet Estimate launched a stupendously prolific and productive career. Over the next four decades, Prados authored and edited (and co-authored and co-edited) an estimated twenty-seven books (counts vary) dealing with mid-twentieth to early twenty-first century history (World War II to Cold War to Iraq Wars and beyond)

¹ Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975); Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945-1950* (New York: Random House, 1981).

² John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength* (New York: Dial Press, 1982).

³ Lenny Glynn, “Red Scares,” *Newsweek*, 12 July 1982, p. 74A.

⁴ Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1979).

⁵ Thomas Powers, “But Never Danger Today,” *The Atlantic*, April 1982

along with a vast array of journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, and the like, along with special projects involving wargaming, declassified document collections, historical reenactments, and more. Major, overlapping topics included the Vietnam War (Dien Bien Phu, the “streetcar named Pleiku,” the Ho Chi Minh trail, the siege of Khe Sanh, and the Pentagon Papers, to the magisterial *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*⁶), intelligence (e.g., probes of the CIA's “family jewels,” a biography of William Colby, and *President's Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through the Persian Gulf*, followed by *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* and *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA's Heart of Darkness*⁷), national security (e.g., his Pulitzer-nominated *Keeper of the Keys* on the National Security Council⁸), World War II (from Normandy in Europe to the Solomons and Leyte Gulf in the Pacific⁹), and post-9/11 foreign policy¹⁰. For John's own itemization of his *oeuvre*, with commentary, see <http://johnprados.com/books/>

I'm ashamed to admit that I've only read a fraction of Prados' works in full, leaving a large stack to work through in my dotage. As a historian both of the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War, I especially appreciated *Operation Vulture: America's Dien Bien Phu*, his study of the still-murky secret US consideration of using tactical nuclear weapons (or letting France borrow a few to employ themselves) in the spring of 1954 to rescue the besieged French forces. Originally published in the early 1980s, and then in an updated edition in 2014, it remains, so far as I know, the only serious inquiry, at least in English, into this mysterious episode with important nuclear ramifications.¹¹

Although unapologetically a man of the left, broadly speaking, who was often intensely critical of US foreign policy and hypocrisy—from unjustified interventions and covert operations to overclassification—Prados refused to let his political or ideological inclinations interfere with his scholarly, evidence-based rigor and fairness. For instance, in *The Soviet Estimate*, he sharply criticized exaggeration of the Soviet rocket capabilities during the so-called “missile gap” of the late 1950s, yet, pointedly, also did not refrain from chiding the CIA for *underestimating* Soviet military progress two decades later, during the “detente” years of the early-mid 1970s; “objective, comprehensive, and balanced in its judgments,” judged the *Naval War College Review* critic.¹²

⁶ Prados, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991); John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1998); Prados and Margaret Pratt Porter, eds., *Inside the Pentagon Papers* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Prados, *A Streetcar Named Pleiku* (Kindle, 2015)

⁷ Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Prados, *President's Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II* (New York: Morrow & Co., 1986); Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009); Prados, *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013); Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA's Heart of Darkness* (New York: New Press, 2017).

⁸ Prados, *Keeper of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: Morrow & Co., 1991).

⁹ Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1995); Prados, *Normandy Crucible: The Decisive Battle That Shaped World War II in Europe* (New York: New American Library, 2011); Prados, *Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Rising Sun* (New York: New American Library, 2012); Prados, *Storm Over Leyte: The Philippine Invasion and the Destruction of the Japanese Navy* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2016).

¹⁰ Prados, *America Confronts Terrorism* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002); Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents That Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War* (New York: New Press, 2004)

¹¹ Prados, *The Sky Would Fall: Operation Vulture, The Secret US Bombing Mission to Vietnam, 1954* (New York: Dial Press, 1983); Prados, *Operation Vulture: America's Dien Bien Phu* (e-book: DCA, 2014)

¹² Henry M. Schreiber (Naval War College) review, *Naval War College Review* 33:4 (1982): 112-114

Yet he could be unabashedly passionate in his views. I remember two instances in particular, both of which were connected to Vietnam. John was one of the group of historians that were part of the project, organized by Jim Blight and Janet Lang, to bring Robert S. McNamara, after the appearance of the former defense secretary's memoir, *In Retrospect*, to Vietnam in 1997 for a conference with senior North Vietnamese civilian and military officials on whether the war might have been avoided or ended earlier. Though an intense opponent of the war since his youth, Prados always interacted with him in a scholarly, professional manner—which did not preclude forthright disagreement. One moment stands out in memory. At a preparatory meeting before the conference, held in the ersatz gothic castle on the National Mall that then housed the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, McNamara, in the course of a longer presentation, advanced a particular interpretation of one aspect of the war (I believe it concerned the feasibility of interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail). John disagreed, requested a chance to comment—and proceeded to completely demolish McNamara's case and the supposed factual basis for it, in clinical detail. His interjection was so compelling that McNamara, uncharacteristically, retreated, implicitly conceded the point, and moved on.

A few years later, John was on a panel on the Vietnam War at a symposium on Cold War history for college and university professors I helped organize at George Washington University. When the Franco-Viet Minh War arose, John contended ardently that that conflict should be understood *not* as a *Cold War* struggle but as an *anti-colonial* confrontation, a key triumph of decolonization after World War II. As the panel's chair, I meekly suggested that it was both, but John was having none of it and sternly insisted on his view.

Despite his Columbia University PhD (in political science), John eschewed the academic stepladder and instead found an ideal institutional home at the National Security Archive, the non-governmental declassified documents repository and lobbyist for openness since the mid-1980s, both in the United States, using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and worldwide. It was a perfect match. Since both Prados and the Archive (from its founder, Scott Armstrong, to its longtime director, Tom Blanton, and key analysts like Malcolm Byrne, William Burr, and Peter Kornbluh) epitomized the never-ending struggle against excessive government secrecy and putting the results to good use in understanding modern, and contemporary, history. Reviewing Prados' career, the Archive's director, Thomas S. Blanton, called him a “man of the ‘60s,” an “independent scholar,” and an “archives rat,” with all phrases capturing crucial aspects of his character and career.¹³

¹³ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/news/intelligence-vietnam/2022-11-30/memorial-john-prados-1951-2022>.

“John Prados’s Quest for Accountability.”

I was fortunate enough to be mentored by John Prados at the National Security Archive where we co-authored eight Electronic Briefing Books and collaborated on two Digital National Security Archive document collections focusing on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).¹ This article seeks to highlight a recurring theme in much of John’s work: the pursuit of accountability for abuses of power. Scholars distinguish between two main types of government accountability. The first is criminal accountability, where government officials alleged to have ordered or committed criminal acts are investigated, charged, and convicted. The second is sometimes referred to as “answerability,” or the requirement that public officials and agencies are transparent with the public, explain their actions, and suffer political consequences when mistakes or abuse—legal, ethical, or otherwise—are uncovered.² John’s work has significantly contributed to our understanding of government accountability—especially for intelligence operations—by explaining the different types of accountability mechanisms that emerged in the post-World War Two period, how they evolved, and assessing their relative strengths as well as the gaps that remain.³ In his efforts to understand government accountability, John became an active participant in the very same process he studied. He emerged as one of the leading “external overseers” of the powerful, constantly challenging their desire to remain unaccountable. The rest of this essay will focus on some of John Prados’s recent contributions to our understanding of intra-branch, inter-branch, and external accountability of CIA covert actions.

The False Promise of Intra-Branch Accountability

On December 22, 1974, another external overseer, Seymour Hersh began to publish a series of newspaper articles alleging various CIA illegal operations.⁴ These revelations set off the “Year of Intelligence”—1975—when a series of investigations into CIA activities opened the first sustained period of accountability for the

¹ John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 522* (2015); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“Gerald Ford White House Altered Rockefeller Commission Report in 1975; Removed Section on CIA Assassination Plots,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 543* (2016); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“The White House, the CIA and the Pike Committee, 1975; Ford Administration Nearly Triggered Constitutional Crisis Over Congressional Access to Intelligence Community Records,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 596* (2017); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“What the CIA Tells Congress \(Or Doesn’t\) about Covert Operations,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 659* (2019); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“Kennedy and Cuba: Operation Mongoose,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 687* (2019); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“Understanding the CIA: How Covert \(and Overt\) Operations were Proposed and Approved during the Cold War,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 667*. (2019); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“CIA Covert Operations: The 1964 Overthrow of Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book* (2020); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, [“Che Guevara and the CIA in the Mountains of Bolivia,”](#) *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 725* (2020). Digital National Security Archive, [“CIA Covert Operations II: The Year of Intelligence, 1975”](#); Digital National Security Archive, [“CIA Covert Operations III: From Kennedy to Nixon, 1961-1974.”](#)

² Andreas Schedler, Larry Jay Diamond, and Marc F Plattner, *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 13-14.

³ John’s work was especially thorough in explaining the approval, review, oversight, and accountability processes within the executive branch. See for example, John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: Morrow, 1991); John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the C.I.A.* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2006); John Prados, *The Family Jewels: the CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013); John Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness* (The New Press, 2017).

⁴ Prados, *The Family Jewels*, 9.

intelligence agency.⁵ In the midst of the season of inquiry, Senator Frank Church declared that the CIA had acted like a “rogue elephant” beyond presidential control.⁶ John spent years trying to dispel the myth of the rogue elephant and document how “intelligence agencies operated under presidential control at all times.”⁷ This did not mean that presidents ordered or knew everything that the CIA did, but that they made clear what they wanted to get done. At the same time, John showed that the executive branch developed a culture of internal plausible deniability where agencies and political appointees sought to “insulate presidents from charges they had had a hand in, or had even approved, covert operations.”⁸ To remedy the paradoxical goals of presidential control and distance from covert actions, a “high command” for America’s secret wars was established within the National Security Council to coordinate, propose, approve, and review covert projects.⁹ Presidents were intimately involved in operations they deemed especially important and set the tone and placed trusted advisers to oversee the others.¹⁰ Throughout his career, John meticulously documented the covert action approval process, shining a light on the key bodies and players that preferred to remain in the shadows or claimed ignorance.¹¹ John’s works unequivocally show that intelligence abuses are presidential abuses, a problem that remains to this day.

After the abuses unearthed during the Year of Intelligence, reforms to the executive branch followed. Presidents were required to sign findings or Memorandums of Notification (MON) before a covert action was initiated; general counsels and inspectors general were empowered to review the legality and propriety of covert actions before, during, and after their implementation; new internal investigatory bodies such as the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board were created; potentially criminal behavior by CIA officers had to be referred to the Department of Justice. John’s earlier work was optimistic about these reforms, but as intelligence abuses and scandals continued, he grew much more skeptical of the prospects of intra-branch or executive accountability mechanisms.¹² Much of John’s work also focused on assessing the strengths and weaknesses of inter-branch accountability by paying special attention to congressional oversight of the intelligence community.

Inter-Branch Accountability and its Limits

For the first quarter century of the CIA’s existence, Congress largely abdicated its oversight power and responsibility. During the Year of Intelligence, with the establishment in 1975 of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee) and the parallel House Select Committee (Committee), Congress reasserted some of its constitutional prerogatives in foreign and intelligence affairs.¹³ These select committees led to the creation in 1976 of the permanent Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and in 1977 the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Yet, as John’s work shows, inter-branch oversight also failed to make the CIA fully accountable. Part of the problem lies in the structure and incentives of the intelligence committees and their members, where political and ideological divisions over the scope of presidential power and the role of the intelligence community have often hamstrung their investigations. Some congressional overseers see their roles as mere cheerleaders of the

⁵ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”

⁶ Senator Church would later revoke this characterization. Prados, *The Family Jewels*, 205, 318-19; Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: the Senate Intelligence Investigation* (Lexington, KY.: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

⁷ Prados, *The Family Jewels*, 319.

⁸ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Understanding the CIA.”

⁹ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Understanding the CIA.”

¹⁰ See for instance, Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Kennedy and Cuba: Operation Mongoose.”

¹¹ For his most thorough account see Prados, *Safe for Democracy*.

¹² Author’s conversation with John Prados. But also compare his description of reforms to the NSC process in Prados, *Keepers of the Keys* with his assessment of the shortfalls of these reforms in *The Ghosts of Langley*.

¹³ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”; Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “The White House, the CIA and the Pike Committee, 1975.”

intelligence community, others have fleeting attention spans, and staffing and budgetary limits pose challenges to genuine oversight. Yet, John revealed that an essential factor limiting congressional oversight of the intelligence community is secrecy and the executive's control of information.¹⁴

Presidents have claimed broad constitutional prerogatives to decide what, when, and how to share information with Congress.¹⁵ Even the celebrated Church Committee, which is often characterized as the model of Congressional oversight, failed to fully overcome the “political and bureaucratic obstructions” imposed by the Gerald Ford White House (and CIA).¹⁶ As John and I conclude in a 2015 article:

Rather than letting out all the secrets, what happened during the Year of Intelligence was a very carefully-contrived process in which the Ford White House asserted its prerogative to approve every release and the CIA followed suit. The Church Committee laid out its demands for information; they were reviewed and frequently denied; and the committee ended by appealing, cajoling, negotiating, or begging for data.¹⁷

The Church committee succeeded in some of its efforts to obtain information, but failed in others. In addition, some of the volumes of the Church committee report remain classified to this day, further limiting intelligence accountability. As a consequence of the limits of intra- and inter-branch accountability mechanisms, the US national security apparatus has been made more accountable due to the tireless work of external overseers like John Prados.

External Accountability: A Never-Ending (Frustrating) Process

As a founding member of the National Security Archive, and author of well over a hundred books, articles, and chapters, John made thousands of Mandatory Declassification Review and Freedom of Information Act requests. He was tireless in his constant administrative appeals of rejected declassification requests. The documents he unearthed—and those that will continue to be declassified due to his efforts—have added a layer of accountability for US intelligence operations. This is what John called ‘panning for gold’—the search for key documents that shed light on the government's most protected abuses. John's quest for accountability pushed him to research and write on topics of great interest but also on cases that had been overlooked or ignored by others. For instance, he constantly updated the history of the joint US-UK 1964 covert regime change operation against the Cheddi Jagan government of British Guiana.¹⁸ He recently brought to light the forgotten section on CIA assassinations that White House Chief of Staff Richard Cheney had excised from the final version of the Rockefeller Commission Report.¹⁹

John's mentorship of countless researchers, his body of work, and his example as a tireless advocate for transparency and accountability will continue to influence future generations of external overseers.

¹⁴ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”; Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “The White House, the CIA and the Pike Committee, 1975.”

¹⁵ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “What the CIA Tells Congress (Or Doesn't) about Covert Operations.”

¹⁶ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”

¹⁷ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”

¹⁸ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “CIA Covert Operations: The 1964 Overthrow of Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana.”

¹⁹ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Gerald Ford White House Altered Rockefeller Commission Report in 1975.”

“John Prados”

I reviewed one of John’s many books (favorably) well before I first met him. When we did finally meet, at an annual SHAFR meeting, he made a distinctly memorable impression, as anyone who knew John would doubtless readily attest. The piercing brown eyes, the passionate intensity, the seriousness-of-purpose married to a down-to-earth jocularity, the long, pony-tailed hair, the ever-present jeans, the unapologetically casual, dressed-down style: all bespoke someone whose heart remained in the idealism and insouciance of the 60s. He always looked and spoke as if he had just come from an anti-war demonstration.

As I grew to know John over the years and to become his friend, that initial impression was confirmed again and again. He was, and remained always, a 60s-era idealist, a person whose strong sense of morality and deep-seated commitment to human rights and responsible government underlay much of his scholarship. No one in our field has ever insisted with more conviction than John that policymakers must be held to the highest standards and that they must be called out when they fall short.

Reflecting those values, John organized a SHAFR session, for the June 2013 annual meeting, that he asked me to join. He titled it, “History and Moral Responsibility.” John proposed a handful of key questions to help frame what he hoped would be a lively and much-needed discussion. “Does moral judgment apply to historical analysis in diplomatic history,” read one, “and is there a single measure of moral quality?” “Does the diplomatic historian in his research and teaching,” read another, “have a responsibility to measure facts and events against moral tenets and a responsibility to convey such judgments to the audience?” The session was well-attended and highly engaging, giving John a rare chance to share with us the way that his own ethical values shaped his research and writing. Keenly attuned to the hypocrisy he often uncovered among the US decisionmakers he studied, John suggested that we should examine critically the frequently sizable gap between the moral justifications invariably put forward publicly in explaining a policy choice and the near total absence of moral considerations in the private debates among officials that led to that choice.

John followed a singular career path as a scholar. He eschewed the academy, becoming instead that rarest of beings, an independent, self-funded historian. While the field of foreign relations history is full of academic and public historians whose institutions provide regular salaries and often at least some institutional research support, I cannot think of anyone other than John who made his living solely by his pen—or, more accurately, his word processor. He supplemented his book royalty income with his second avocation as a very successful designer of strategy and battlefield games. A strong work ethic and an astounding level of scholarly productivity made it possible for him to support himself, even if it was touch and go at times. When I recruited him to write a book about the end of the Cold War for a series I was editing, he badgered and cajoled the publisher into granting him a much larger advance than any previous author had received. Seeing John’s negotiating skills at close range was a delight; it also awakened me to how hard he had to fight for each dollar.

So many of his books dealt imaginatively with different aspects of the Vietnam War that many of us eagerly anticipated his promised one-volume history. When that book appeared, in 2009, it proved well worth the wait. A panoramic, multidimensional, and deeply researched study, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*, may be the single most important book yet written on the Vietnam War.¹ Among other strengths, it paid sustained attention to crucial matters often ignored or underplayed by diplomatic historians, such as battlefield tactics and strategy, operations, intelligence, command and control, logistics, morale, organization, supply trains, and infrastructure. At the same time, he never lost sight of the war’s domestic, international,

¹ John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

social, political, and economic dimensions—elements that, in the end, proved more determinative to the outcome than any battles. The culmination of a lifetime’s study of that seminal conflict, *Unwinnable War* stands as a magnificent scholarly achievement.

I have so many warm memories of John that it is nearly impossible to select just one. But if forced to choose, it would be the evening of a conference we both attended, in San Diego, which just happened to coincide with the start of the American invasion of Iraq. Following dinner, many of the distinguished SHAFRites in attendance engaged in a free-wheeling debate about the origins, justifications for, and likely consequences of the day-old conflict. With insight and indignation, John carefully picked apart all the stated reasons for the conflict while lamenting that it would turn into a strategic and geopolitical disaster—likely the worst since Vietnam. Those views, delivered in the heat of the moment, have stood the test of time. I will always remember John that night: in his element; at the very center of the debate; reveling in intellectual combat; and presenting his positions with a characteristic blend of intelligence, perspective and morally fueled passion.

“Is Rome Burning? The Game That Never Was”

I thought I knew John Prados as a historian reasonably well. I had read some of his great books and met him several times at a number of conferences and always enjoyed my time with him. But I was not prepared for the stunning surprise I ran into one evening in the fall of 2013, when I was a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and John invited me over for dinner at his and Ellen’s place.

As I entered the dining room I was taken aback by the unmistakable view of a large gaming map, something that any wargamer in the world would immediately recognize. “John,” I asked, barely concealing my emotion at unexpectedly meeting a fellow gamer, “do you play wargames?” “Poldo,” he replied with his well-known grin, “I *make* wargames. In fact this is what I do for a living when I do not write books.”

I could not believe my ears. I had been an avid player back in my college days, then I switched to miniature gaming, but as a professional historian I thought this was something you should not mention if you did not want to be frowned upon. Here I was in a room with a professional historian I had admired for most of my adult life, finding out that not only did he share my hobby but that he was actually one of the superstars of wargame designing.

How silly of me not to have thought about this earlier— John’s meticulous precision and scrupulous attention to detail in his books should have given it away: from studying the tiniest details of a battlefield to designing historical games is a very short step. Wargamers, for those of you who are not familiar with the hobby, are more fastidious and demanding than the pickiest and nastiest peer-reviewers and they expect a good game to be painstakingly accurate down to what tiny unit was where and at what moment during a battle. John clearly mastered both the minutiae of historical research and the skills of game designing, moving with ease from one to the other.

The rest of the night was spent with me in a state of exalted trepidation as we went on and on talking about military history and gaming systems, even as I grew more hesitant to say anything as I gradually grasped the magnitude of his mastery of all the subtlest technicalities of game design, let alone his unparalleled knowledge of military history.

At that point, I secretly began to hatch a plan that I at first felt too embarrassed to disclose to John, namely that he and I design a game together. I had in mind either a Renaissance game involving the last desperate war of the gallant Republic of Siena against those dastardly Spaniards and Florentines (1552-1555), or something related to the Italian campaign in the Second World War that highlighted the role of the Italian resistance or of the regular Italian forces that fought alongside the Allies after the armistice.

What made me eventually jump the gun and go ahead was a lengthy discussion with some members of the Italian Association of Public History, when I found out that the Association has an entire section dedicated to studying how games can improve your understanding of history. This was what I needed—a scholarly legitimization to justify my passion for gaming!

With some hesitation, in June 2021 I finally proposed to John that we design a game together. Knowing his interest in the Second World War, I suggested something about Italy after the armistice. This prompted a long correspondence in which we discussed options, until we narrowed it down to the battle for Rome between the Italian regular forces and the German ones on September 9-10, 1943, together with the failed implementation of Operation *Giant II*, the deployment of the 82nd Division of US Paratroopers to defend the city.

John went ahead with some marketing inquiries and found out that the magazine he mostly worked with, *Against the Odds*, (*ATO* for its fans) had some interest in our proposal.⁶⁴ Very professionally, he then started asking me all sorts of questions about how to design the game and even drafted a private agreement, which was duly signed by both of us, about who should do what. We then followed *ATO*'s rules and wrote an abstract of our proposal which was to be posted on the magazine's web page. This would allow readers to vote for it and, eventually, if we received a substantial number of votes, we would be given the green light by the editors.

I still regard seeing that abstract with John's name next to mine as a fantastic achievement. We went on doing additional research about the units involved and finding some original maps of Rome from the early 1940s, then started debating what game system would work best for what we had in mind, *Fortress Berlin* or *Monty's D-day* (two of John's previous signature games). Our abstract inched its way forward on *ATO*'s web page, doing reasonably well compared to some other game proposals but clearly not being a knockout.

As the months went by, we continued our correspondence, but my hopes dimmed as I was not sure we would ever reach the necessary number of supporting votes. John was much more optimistic, comforted me saying that we would eventually make it—and I kept wondering whether he was simply being his natural gracious self, too kind to let me know we did not stand a chance.

I will never find out, unfortunately. But I am still grateful I had the privilege to know this fantastic side of John's life and that we were lucky enough to exchange our thoughts and ideas about how to recreate a dramatic moment in my country's history on the tabletop. Here is our proposal for *ATO*, which I immensely enjoyed crafting with John:

Is Rome Burning? Operation Alaric and the Fate of Italy

September 7, 1943. Tomorrow, General Eisenhower intends to announce that the government of Italy has secretly surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. Hitler feared this, so the Germans have long been preparing, and will launch, Operation Alaric to take over as much of Italy as possible. The Italian government led by King Vittorio Emanuele III and Marshal Badoglio, on the other hand, are not expecting the Allied announcement so soon. They have barely begun preparing their units for the most difficult battle of the war—turning against the old ally while awaiting an Allied landing somewhere in Southern Italy—without knowing when and where. The fate of the Eternal City hangs in the balance, and *you* must decide its future. Designed by John Prados and Leopoldo Nuti, this game will utilize the tactical system popularized in *Monty's D-Day* and *Fortress Berlin*. A city fight set among the glories of classical history. Will you be able to use Italian divisions deployed around Rome to halt the German onslaught? How much will the Roman citizens count in the fight? Will any member of the Royal Family lead the resistance while the King and Government head South to shelter among the Allies? And above all, will US paratroopers, which Eisenhower promised Badoglio, arrive in time to help the Italians protect their patrimony? ***Is Rome Burning?*** gives you the opportunity to relive this dramatic moment of World War II, when the fate of Italy and its capital are in your hands. The game will have one map and 280 counters. There will be two major scenarios, one pitting the Italians alone against German reaction forces, the second (Operation "*Giant IP*") featuring the airdrop of an American parachute division into central Italy—a gambit actually prepared by the Allied high command and which was cancelled at the last minute when the Dakotas of the 82nd Division were being prepared to takeoff!

⁶⁴ <https://www.atomagazine.com/>



Written for The VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) *Veteran*
by Ellen Pinzur

John's death was reported on line by a moving tribute on the National Security Archive and with extensive obituaries at the New York Times and the Washington Post.

But one of the most important aspects of John's life was not mentioned in any of those tributes – and that was his life membership in and full support of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

John worked out of the New York branch office and participated as a draft counselor and activist, including the march to Valley Forge in 1971, the protests at the trial of the Gainesville 8 in 1973, the protest in front of the Whitehall Selective Service Induction Building, and the myriad anti-war protests in the New York and Washington, DC, area. He also was heartbroken to learn that there were FBI informants among those he considered his friends at VVAW.

John was very proud that he attended many of the VVAW reunions over the years. He never got over the fact that he never got to hear Country Joe McDonald during the 25th Reunion in New York (he was nursing an inebriated friend) nor at the 35th in Milwaukee (when he, Brian Matarrese and I were in a car accident on our way to the festivities – we weren't hurt but we were delayed!).

John knew and lived by the principle that you cannot kill for peace.

In Memoriam: John Prados

In April 1982, CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence Robert Gates sent a memo to his boss, Director William Casey, with copies to the agency's deputy director and half a dozen heads of key analytical offices. The subject was "John Prados Book *The Soviet Estimate*." Gates reminded everyone that he had previously referred the book to several of them. Calling it a "reasonably fair minded account—and at times an insightful one," Gates urged his colleagues to study it "for whatever lessons we might take from it in terms of improving our record with respect to predicting Soviet force capabilities."

Attached to the DDI's memo was a letter, eight pages in length, from veteran Soviet strategic forces watcher Howard Stoertz, whom Gates had asked to assess the book. Stoertz had the same reaction: "it should be recommended reading for all analysts and estimators working the field of Soviet military affairs; and it would be of interest to those involved with Soviet affairs and estimating in general."

Stoertz had his criticisms. He pointed out some flaws in information and argument and balked at the author's "troubling tendency to mix excellent insights with dark suspicions about the motives and actions of intelligence officials involved in the estimative process." Overall, though, John had pegged the 25-year history of CIA estimating "about right," including identifying "substantial overestimates and underestimates on critical issues." Stoertz admitted it was "a humbling experience to read at one sitting."

Even if Gates had just been trying to light a fire under the agency's Soviet analysts by comparing their output to that of an outsider with no access to classified material, it was an unusual compliment for a budding scholar who had just turned 31 and didn't yet have his doctorate.

I don't know if John ever saw these presumably grudging tributes, but since they were declassified in 2007 and are now posted in the CIA's electronic Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, it's likely that he did. If so, it's easy to imagine him reacting, a quarter century or more after the fact, with a mix of pride at having turned a few heads at the top levels of the CIA, and frustration (though surely not surprise) at how little had changed inside that community.

John Prados died on November 29, 2022, after four decades of investigating, assessing, and enlightening the public about the world of intelligence and other, often hidden dimensions of U.S. foreign policy, as well as the impact and implications of United States power. He was a true character, an iconoclast, especially within the domains he chose to study, who left a record of accomplishment that is hard to convey in a single appreciation.

Fortunately, he was well known to many readers of this newsletter, which makes the task far easier. Many of his fellow SHAFR members have already registered their admiration. Lloyd Gardner saw him as "a master historian." Jim Hershberg called him "stupendously prolific" and Bob McMahon praised his "astounding level of scholarly productivity."

John was born in Queens, New York, on January 9, 1951—sharing his birthdate with Richard Nixon, as John's *New York Times* obit pointed out. His family moved to Puerto Rico where his father had been from originally, but he came back to New York after high school to enroll at Columbia

University. Whether or not he went there *because* it was one of the epicenters of student upheaval over Vietnam, CIA abuses, and Watergate, it undoubtedly helped shape his intellectual thinking and moral sensibilities in those tumultuous times. As Bob McMahon wrote in his tribute for H-Diplo:

He was, and remained always, a 60s-era idealist, a person whose strong sense of morality and deep-seated commitment to human rights and responsible government underlay much of his scholarship. No one in our field has ever insisted with more conviction than John that policy makers must be held to the highest standards and that they must be called out when they fall short.

I got to know John starting in the late 1990s when he joined my organization, the National Security Archive, as a senior fellow. I had first met him in the mid-1980s when I was new to the Archive myself and he was part of a rarified (to me) circle of scholars, journalists, and information advocates whose shared frustration at perpetually being stifled by the federal government in their attempts to pry open the documentary record (primarily through FOIA) helped lead to the idea for the Archive, spearheaded by former *Washington Post* reporter Scott Armstrong, as a public repository of declassified documentation.

The Archive opened its doors just a few years after the *Soviet Estimate* became semi-required reading at CIA. By the time he formally signed on with us he had several more publications, each notable in its own right. By the time he died, he had written 27 books, some translated into other languages, plus many dozens of articles and book chapters.

The sweep of his scholarship was truly impressive, including deeply researched treatments of key moments in World War II, the Vietnam War, and later the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Mostly he concentrated on the intelligence aspects of U.S. policy, but the military and diplomatic dimensions were always prominently featured. Some of his books are high-altitude analyses, for instance his surveys of CIA and Pentagon operations (*President's Secret Wars* and *Safe for Democracy*) and the history of the National Security Council (*Keepers of the Keys*), which are still classic references. Others are big picture accounts designed to give context to events that suffer from being misleadingly viewed in isolation (e.g., *America Confronts Terrorism*).

Still other works are microscopically detailed studies of events and issues whose significance John believed was underappreciated by scholars. *Islands of Destiny* argued that while most people assumed that the leadup to the Battle of Midway was a turning point in the Pacific War, it was ultimately not as decisive as the chipping away of Japanese control of the Solomon Islands. *A Streetcar Named Pleiku* delved into a National Liberation Front attack in South Vietnam's Central Plateau in early 1965 – believed by Washington to have been planned in Hanoi to coincide with a visit by national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, but in reality an almost random strike ordered by local commanders – which prompted the initiation of the U.S. bombing campaign of the North. The catchy title played off a remark by Bundy suggesting that flashpoints like Pleiku are always coming down the line and will take you (or U.S.

policy) wherever you want (it) to go.

Vietnam was also the subject of one of John's most acclaimed books, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*, a formidable piece of research and analysis that many of his fellow Vietnam specialists agree has been one of the most important volumes yet produced on the conflict. It put many of John's skills on display – the deep exploration of archives, detailed argumentation, and vivid style. It also was an archetype of his drive – if not mission – to dispel erroneous accounts or interpretations that cloud our understanding of events of global importance. In this case, he was clinically precise in building the still unassailable argument that, in part because of realities such as the limited number of ports and landing fields in South Vietnam capable of handling the supplies needed to feed the U.S. war effort, “the factors necessary to achieve victory simply were not present.”

John was a master at detecting patterns and following threads from earlier periods to modern times in ways that threw new explanatory light on complex topics like battlefield strategies and tactics, the intelligence process, and the dynamics of presidential decision-making. Just in the intelligence sphere, *The Ghosts of Langley*, *William Colby and the CIA*, and *Family Jewels* are prime examples.

For his accomplishments, he won many accolades. His awards include the Henry Adams prize from the Society for History in the Federal Government (*Unwinnable War*), the annual book prize of the New York Military Affairs Symposium (*Combined Fleet Decoded*), the book prize of the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence (Soviet Estimate), and two selections by the U.S. Naval Institute as a Notable Naval Book of the Year. His publishers submitted four of his books for the Pulitzer Prize.

His colleagues in the field were equally fulsome. In the pages of this newsletter, Richard Immerman counted him “among the very few US historians” responsible for laying the ground for the study of intelligence history. Kathryn Olmsted and Hugh Wilford agreed, Wilford calling him “extraordinarily prolific.” In addition to the previously cited tributes on H-Diplo, scholars and a fair share of government information professionals—despite his thousands of access requests over the years – have sent warm messages and recollections to John's family and to the Archive.

John aspired to do more than just write credible history. He had what amounted to a calling to impart meaningful lessons to his readers about the epic events (and, frequently, catastrophes) that were his subjects. Describing his purpose in publishing *The Ghosts of Langley*, he wrote that thanks to a compliant President Obama, the CIA was able to commit “excesses [that] have only been exceeded by its efforts to evade responsibility for what it did. This was the really important story.”

He also had a passion for creating teachable moments and providing students in particular with the raw materials to study and learn from history. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know* and *How the Cold War Ended: Debating and Doing History* stand out. The latter was as much a how-to guide for future scholars as it was an effort to tackle a complicated and contentious historical debate – something else John loved to do and excelled at.

Virtually every project he took on at the National Security Archive had a strong educational component to it as well. He produced seven major document collections as part of the Digital National Security Archive series—large-scale publications averaging 2,500 records apiece that represent major resources for students and scholars. Two more sets featuring mostly previously unpublished records on the management of CIA clandestine operations are in the queue. His many “e-books”—annotated primary source compilations on our website that professors love to assign—covered events from the Diem coup of November

1963, to the official release of the “full” Pentagon Papers in 2011, to the JFK-approved plot to oust Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana in 1964, to the Bush-43 propaganda campaign surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (also the subject of his widely applauded volume *Hoodwinked*). John even turned his essay for H-Diplo's excellent “Scholar's Craft” series into a mini-seminar on methodology.

A side of John that many people were not aware of was that he was a hard-core “wargamer.” He didn't just play them, he designed them—and he was phenomenal at it. Well before he raised eyebrows at Langley with his historiography, he was inventing and publishing wargames that have made him a shining star in the gaming community to this day. Among dozens of titles reflecting the expected Prados breadth are a Roman-era battle game set in the forests of Germany called “The Victory of Arminius;” “Look Away, the Fall of Atlanta, 1864;” “Khe Sanh, 1968;” “Crisis Sinai: The Yom Kippur War, 1973;” and “Panzerkrieg.” He won more than half a dozen awards, including for his most celebrated design, “Third Reich,” published when he was just 23 years old. It remains one of the best-selling wargames of all time. Remarkable.

As with his bibliography, John's gaming achievements brought admiration from his peers. (For one appreciation, by fellow historian and wargame enthusiast Leopoldo Nuti, see the H-Diplo tribute.) Emblematic of the sentiment among pure gamers, the publisher Against the Odds sent out a notice in January 2023 announcing John's passing but also declaring January to be “JOHN-uary” in his honor, noting that he had published more games with ATO than any other company. “We are proud of that,” the message added. How many of us can boast that kind of distinction?

The missing dimension so far in this column is John's personal side, which offers some insights into his approach to his profession. His family was of course extremely important in his life. His partner of 25 years, Ellen Pinzur, shared a passion with him for the experiences of Vietnam war veterans. He had two daughters, Dani and Tasha, from an earlier marriage to Jill Gay.

Everyone who knew John likely has a vivid mental image of some classic moment involving John. Before anything else, visually, there was ... the ponytail—tightly bound with two rubber bands—paired with the bushy mustache. As noted, a child of the 60s. He preferred jeans and maybe a leather vest though he had no problem putting on a tie and jacket when required. But he always stood out thanks to that signature haircut. So prominent was it that Robert McNamara, a frequent object of John's critical attention, and with whom he participated in an extraordinary conference in Hanoi in 1997, took to calling him simply “That Ponytail Guy.”

Most of the personal recollections sent to the Archive since last November focus on his lighter side: his fondness of conversation—from baseball to almost anything else—preferably with a beer in hand, but even more so his enjoyment for what could be described as shop talk—virtually any political or historical topic, current events, research methods, the state of FOIA, you name it. If you wanted to argue, he was perfectly fine with that, too. Fred Logevall said (half-jokingly) that he sometimes found him intimidating, especially as a questioner at a panel discussion, but that there was always a warmth to him that came out easily. While he was passionate about his principles, supremely confident in his point of view, proud of his achievements, and ready to defend them—sometimes to the point of stubbornness—one could also regularly witness his genuine modesty, his willingness to hear out an alternative theory (but in the end it better be sound), even his desire to know about any mistakes that might have crept into his writings. He was unfailingly generous with his time and expertise, whether with a senior colleague or an intern, and as an Archive standard bearer he was tireless.

Other colleagues remember John's commendable intolerance of "unpleasantries" like gratuitous displays of superiority, political obtuseness, or willful ignorance. His impatience extended to any hint of condescension or disrespect, especially from anyone in a position of influence or power.

In that connection, I recently received a vignette that beautifully epitomizes this facet of John. It came in an email from longtime mutual friends and colleagues Jim Blight and Janet Lang, who invented the concept of "critical oral history," an innovative methodology that has produced stupendous evidentiary results (and which the Archive and others have adopted often) in reexamining world-changing episodes such as the Cuban missile crisis, the American war in Vietnam, Carter-Brezhnev and the collapse of détente, and the thorny U.S.-Iran relationship.

It was at the aforesaid 1997 conference in Hanoi that McNamara and Prados made their awkward acquaintance. Jim and Janet got to know McNamara intimately over the course of several retrospective projects. During his years in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the former whiz kid was known as the "Electronic Brain," but to those of us who were part of the Vietnam project he was always "Maximum Bob." Here are J & J's recollection of that memorable encounter.

Bob wasn't just bad with names, he had some sort of cognitive tic that made non-standard, non-Anglo names difficult for him to remember. He tried a couple of times to use JP's name, but it came out something like, "Pray-dose." So in addition to JP's status, in McNamara-ese as "Ponytail Guy," JP became "the eccentric." The problem was that Bob for some reason couldn't say "eccentric." It always came out "ass-entric." At some point, we alerted JP to his elevated status as "ass-entric." We remember once in particular in Hanoi when Bob was feeling in an expansive mood, he invited JP to come into a side conversation we were having with him. To break the ice, Bob the diplomat said something along the lines of, "you're the ass-entric guy on our team, you know." JP raised an eyebrow, looked toward us for clarification and, receiving none, replied, "you're pretty ass-entric yourself." Well, after all, one of us said, it takes one to know one, doesn't it? Three of us knew why that exchange was funny; one did not. It was a beautiful thing.

Great stuff.

What stands out for me about John is that despite his unabashedly lefty political outlook and the adamance of his convictions—opprobrium for militarism, for the avoidable tragedies of Vietnam and Iraq, for the excesses of the powerful—he had the genuine respect of all sides. He won awards from U.S. military organizations and government historians, glowing reviews from establishment conservatives and liberals alike—not to mention a measure of deference at the CIA.

Even the likes of Bob McNamara, once he got past the ponytail, appreciated the value John added to the proceedings. John managed that feat through his distinctive skills as a historian, unquestioned seriousness of purpose, commitment to the truth and to following the evidence, his ability to set aside personal politics, and his utter fearlessness in standing up for principle.

John has left a profound impact on the field and a high personal and professional standard to follow.

Malcolm Byrne

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Panning for Gold

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ESSAY BY JOHN PRADOS, NATIONAL SECURITY ARCHIVE

Many of my colleagues have contributed essays revisiting their graduate school days, full of commendations to friends and collaborators. I could do that too—and, in fact, my friends include many of the very authors of these essays—but I thought it more useful to spend this time on tools and methods. As I sit to write this, Athan Theoharis, a friend, just passed away after encountering crazy complications from a semi-routine medical procedure.¹ That reminds me of how ephemeral we are. Also, so many of these essays concern academic careers, which is not where we all end up. As I think back on my doctoral cohort (admittedly, in international relations, or IR), not one of us ended up in academia. Some went to the State Department or other government agencies. One taught in private school. I guess he came closest to academe, but ended up at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Others went to oil companies or beltway bandits. I am a working historian. My experience shows that it is possible to train in this discipline and branch out far afield.

First, a few words on fashion. There are always fashions, both in subject and in methodology. National security was in fashion when I was in grad school, and diplomatic history well established. My history department rebelled against that to the degree that it gave me the impression that history ended in 1945 (or even 1914). If students wanted to study the contemporary era that meant political science. In that field “bureaucratic politics” was in fashion. I proposed a dissertation on the origins of the Cold War. One of my advisers challenged me, “Tell me, what would be the political science contribution here?” Of course, we were debating the origins of the Cold War almost every day at that time. The objection seemed nonsensical. So I went off and, instead of writing some detailed dissertation proposal, outlined five different possible topics, including applying bureaucratic politics to the Peacemaker ICBM basing decision, or to CIA estimates of Soviet strategic forces. I wanted my adviser to agree on “political science value” before I went to the trouble of the full proposal. When I presented the outlines at office hours, my other adviser popped into the room, a mischievous grin on his face. “You MIRVed him!” he exclaimed. The adviser let me pick any one I wanted, so I chose the CIA. That paper became my first book, *The Soviet Estimate*.²

This example is not selected at random. At the time there was a huge debate going on in national security circles—almost of the dimensions of the “Missile Gap” of the 1950s—as to whether the CIA routinely underestimated the size of Soviet nuclear forces. Strategic analyst Albert Wohlstetter had published a series of papers (overly influential in my view) that

¹ Harrison Smith, “Athan Theoharis, historian who exposed FBI misconduct, dies at 84” (Obituary), *Washington Post*, 12 July 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/athan-theoharis-dead/2021/07/12/69c35bdc-e31a-11eb-a41e-c8442c213fa8_story.html.

² John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence and Soviet Strategic Forces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986 [1982]).

made the charges in the then new journals *Foreign Policy* and *Strategic Review*.³ Here's the point for a scholar: start out with a question that merits an answer. It is true that the Soviets built 1,518 ICBM silos, more than predicted in the CIA estimates. But did that matter? On the issue of technological development the estimates were exactly right in predicting when the Russians might field a MIRVed missile. On Soviet missile defenses, bomber forces and much else too, the estimates were on the money.

Another question. Authors need to find the data to fuel their inquiries. I knew where to put my fingers on the data set Wohlstetter had used—the Pentagon had recently declassified a set of “classified posture statements” from the years when Robert McNamara had headed it. For older years a few documents were starting to become available. Then we had the tool of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and other declassification procedures that could be applied to documents in the archives. Opening up the records, like making use of someone's private papers, offers new perspectives on whole histories. This became a feature of my research endeavor, to the extent that there were subjects I selected for books not just for questions that needed answers, but for records which needed to be opened.

A case in point would be my study of America's near-intervention in Vietnam at the time of Dien Bien Phu, originally published as *The Sky Would Fall* (1983), but which I have more recently restored, expanded and revised as an e-book titled *Operation Vulture: America's Dien Bien Phu*.⁴ When I looked at the records there were huge gaps representing stuff that remained top secret. What was in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* was not complete. Then I noticed that many of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's diplomatic documents of the period had been sequestered in an inner file set called “Project Clean Up.” I made it my business to apply for the declassification of everything related to this crisis. A lesson of this project is that time and patience are required. I began this study in 1977 and published *Sky Would Fall* with many of the important documents yet to be released, and my own requests still languishing. Many of them were only declassified in the 1990s. It was worth it. The documents turn this story on its head. The original spin had been that Eisenhower labored to keep the U.S. out of war in Indochina in 1954. The true story is that he labored to make intervention possible but was stymied at every turn. In 1983 I argued that premise on limited evidence. By 2014 the evidence was authoritative. The takeaway for researchers should be: *always* look at the file labelled “miscellaneous,” and always work to perfect the evidence.

Every project opens the door to expanding our universe of source material. Think of it that way. Whether the material is papers never seen or underutilized, piles of unopened files, or stacks of documents awaiting declassification, opportunity is there. Projects can be configured that way, much as was *Operation Vulture*. It's like panning for gold. In 1991 I published a history of the National Security Council (NSC) staff called *Keepers of the Keys*.⁵ (6) That afforded the possibility of lining up the records of presidents from Harry Truman to the first President Bush and framing presidents' use of these NSC staffs as policy tools. Plenty of documents were declassified along the way. David Rothkopf may have gotten more word of mouth for his version of NSC history,⁶ but I don't think his work did as much to widen the field for research. Panning for gold, both in the form of neglected or fresh sources and declassified documents, is what matters. *William Colby and the CIA*

³ Albert Wohlstetter, “Optimal Ways to Confuse Ourselves,” *Foreign Policy* no. 20, Fall 1975; Wohlstetter, “Legends of the Strategic Arms Race, United States Strategic Institute, USSI Report 75-1, 1975.

⁴ Prados, *The Sky Would Fall: The Secret U.S. Bombing Mission to Vietnam* (New York: The Dial Press, 1983). Revised as *Operation Vulture* (New York: iBooks, 2002). Restored as *Operation Vulture: America's Dien Bien Phu* (New York: Don Congdon Associates, 2014).

⁵ Prados, *A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).

⁶ David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2005).

(originally, *The Lost Crusader* in 2003)⁷ showed that it was possible to write intelligible biography of a denizen of the secret world. Randall B. Woods, also author of a Colby biography,⁸ admits he could not have written his book without the benefit of *Lost Crusader*. *The Ghosts of Langley* began as an overview CIA history but morphed into a device for understanding why agency covert operations kept spiraling out of control.⁹ Whether one's field is gender studies, ethnic studies, or diplomacy, the well-aimed project has better chances.

There are fashions in research approaches. One current one is the multinational history, in which the scholar uses archives in different lands to tell parts of the story. This is a great addition to scholarly practice—and it has advantages in overcoming secrecy strictures in different countries—but I would argue that the sense there *are* different sides to a story is equally if not more important. My first “book,” if you could call it that, came in the sixth grade. I filled one of those green-and-white speckled composition books with a treatise on the Russo-Japanese war. Perhaps it was that America did not figure in the story, but I learned that sides matter. At that time popular history was full of World War II. I was struck with how much of it—particularly histories of the Pacific war—focused on the U.S. (or the ‘friendly’ side). That got me involved in researching the other sides of those events. In the 1970s, starting with revelations of how the Allies were reading German codes, the secret history of the war began to unspool. In the next decade the National Security Agency and other stewards of that material yielded up original sources on codebreaking. For the Pacific war a little bit of this had been in the public domain since the investigations of the Pearl Harbor disaster back in 1945-46, but in the 1980s the trickle became a tsunami. For me, this material illuminated the other side in unprecedented detail. Raw access to assorted nations’ archives proved much less important than the actual content of the source material. It also pointed to a new need in history—conventional accounts of battles and campaigns need to be rewritten to integrate the role of and insights from intelligence. I have so far written four books (*Combined Fleet Decoded*, 1995; *Normandy Crucible*, 2011; *Islands of Destiny*, 2012; and *Storm Over Leyte*, 2016) to contribute to this endeavor.¹⁰

The Vietnam War was going on as I went through school. At one point I thought I would be part of it, later that I would write its history. Many concerns came together there. From an early date I accumulated material on both Vietnamese sides of the war, and from the late 1970s I began using declassification regulations to open the records of the war. For Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers early on offered a window into the inner workings of U.S. decision-making, and for a long time historians relied upon them for their works on that conflict. But the Papers were limited by the way they were compiled—to avoid White House scrutiny and President Lyndon Johnson’s anger, analysts deliberately avoided any effort to access presidential records. Histories based exclusively on Pentagon Papers material were therefore limited, especially because four volumes of the Papers that centered on peace feelers had been left out when Dan Ellsberg originally leaked them.

Much agency stuff was omitted simply because government generated so much more paper than could be taken into account. Plus the Pentagon Papers’ focus on decision-making left out or touched only lightly on a host of other Vietnam issues. The notorious “Phoenix” program, for example, does not appear in the Pentagon Papers. Yet the Johnson and Nixon Libraries contain literally tens of thousands of pages of records associated with Projects “ICEX,” “Take Off,” and the “High

⁷ Prados, *The Lost Crusader: The Secret World of CIA Director William Colby* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Republished as *William Colby and the CIA: The Secret Wars of a Controversial Spymaster* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

⁸ Randall J. Woods, *William Egan Colby and the CIA* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

⁹ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of U.S. Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1995, republished U.S. Naval Institute, 2003); Prados, *Normandy Crucible: The Decisive Battle that Shaped World War II in Europe* (New York: Penguin/Caliber, 2011); Prados, *Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Japanese Empire in World War II*. (New York: Penguin/Caliber, 2012); Prados, *Storm Over Leyte: The Philippine Invasion and the Destruction of the Japanese Navy* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

Value Detainee Rewards Program,” that were the very stuff of Phoenix. Then there were subjects like Dien Bien Phu that were passed over very quickly in the Pentagon Papers but really represented much deeper episodes in the American experience. There were, and remain today, plenty of records still to be opened on the Vietnam War. Bulk declassification programs have been largely ineffectual because agencies are reluctant to relinquish their secrets. Even with the Pentagon Papers. The U.S. government made a great show of “fully” declassifying the full Papers to mark the fortieth anniversary of the leak (in 2011), but punted and kept eleven words classified. At this writing, ten years later, that text is still secret.

Shaking loose research material proceeds in tandem with charting the history. My Vietnam book after the one on Operation Vulture was called *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh*.¹¹ This I wrote together with Ray W. Stubbe, who had been chaplain of the Marine unit that constituted the core of the defenses at Khe Sanh, where perhaps the greatest battle of the war was fought. Ray sought to erect a verbal memorial to his brave comrades, but his immense collection of notes and details needed coherence, context, and the kind of top-level perspective I had been researching. Khe Sanh was important as an entryway to South Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail—and that idea of blocking off the South from the North Vietnamese framed one of America’s key strategies. In 2018 the Office of the Director of National Intelligence made another of those showy displays of supposed transparency, with a fiftieth anniversary release of masses of material surrounding the Tet Offensive, including Khe Sanh. I commented on this collection for the National Security Archive’s online blog.¹² The holes in the documents were disturbing. There were a few that were newly whole, but looking at their Khe Sanh material I could see that some of the documents were the exact same versions, with the same declassification dates and markings, as Ray and I had gotten released for *Valley of Decision*.

Next was *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*.¹³ That work aimed at counteracting various claims as to how the U.S. would have/should have “won” the war, showing how these “perfect strategies” did not work. From the strategic perspective, victory in Vietnam required a triangulation of existing (not idealized) military and intelligence methods, South Vietnam’s capacity to absorb and utilize them (hence the importance of Vietnamese material), against an evolving threat (the Vietnamese again, this time from the other side), within the framework of rising American domestic opposition. Victory was an illusion. I returned to that theme in my 2009 book *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*,¹⁴ where I spelled out and developed in detail themes from *Hidden History*. There had been a data problem in Vietnam, the most studied conflict the U.S. had yet waged. Saigon politics still held sway, Hanoi’s determination overcame American ingenuity, and President Richard Nixon’s secret plan to end the war was to win it—which could by now be shown from documents. In my earlier NSC history *Keepers of the Keys* I had also selected U.S. Vietnam policy as one thread to follow, including being among the first studies to focus on Nixon’s war strategy.

Vietnam was a major focus in my summary study *US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*.¹⁵ Following this muse across the changing technology of books, I turned *Operation Vulture* into an e-book, and also published in 2015 *A Streetcar*

¹¹ Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 2004 [1991, 1993]).

¹² *Unredacted* at nsarchiv.gwu.edu, search for Prados articles.

¹³ Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995).

¹⁴ Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

¹⁵ Prados, *US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Named Pleiku: Vietnam 1965, A Turning Point.¹⁶ As compendium books gained popularity, for this subject I contributed *In-Country: Remembering the Vietnam War*, a collection excerpted from memoirs by veterans, in 2012.¹⁷

Meanwhile I revisited the idea of blocking off South Vietnam in *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War*.¹⁸ That study inverted the lens, using The Trail as a microscope through which to re-examine the history of the conflict. I went looking for material on the Vietnamese side. That, it turned out, existed in massive amounts in U.S. records of questioning Vietnamese prisoners—intelligence officers had a standard menu of questions asked of enemy personnel, so all of them related their stories of growing up in North Vietnam, joining or being drafted into the army, being trained and sent to South Vietnam, and so on. Combined with captured documents, North Vietnamese and Liberation Front wartime publications, and postwar memoirs and recollections, not to mention U.S. intelligence reporting, the story of The Trail could be told in considerable detail.

Another way to open up sources is to illuminate subjects with conferences that shine light on them. I've participated in many, many conferences, but there are two dealing with Vietnam that merit special mention. One was the "Missed Opportunities" meeting that took place in Hanoi in June 1997, where mixed delegations of scholars and former government officials from both the United States and North Vietnam met to discuss the war.¹⁹ General questions were discussed in advance, readings and sets of documents were assembled as references, and scholars prompted the former government officials by offering what were called "provocations." The Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute of Brown University and the Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam were the sponsors. Robert S. McNamara led the American delegation, of which I was a member. I'd compiled the document briefing book from the American side. Brown University scholars James Blight and Janet M. Lang designed the format. Vietnamese participants were restricted by their formal regulations but we did develop significant findings, including that there had been no second attack at the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, that North Vietnamese officials believed Hanoi had missed an opportunity to cooperate with a neutralized South Vietnam, and that the Pleiku shelling of February 1965 (then considered a terrorist "spectacular"), which set off the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, had been a local enterprise, not an operation ordered from Hanoi.

Speaking of the Pentagon Papers, the role of that leak as stimulant for certain Nixon administration actions, their value as historical resource, and the paucity of knowledge regarding origin and elaboration represented a lacuna in our knowledge. The Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), a veteran's association to whose magazine I've contributed dozens of historical articles—including one about the Hanoi conference—came to me with the idea of a conference on the Papers. We presented that event in Washington in June 2001, a few months before 9/11. The meeting ranged widely. We had panels on the creation of the study, with four analysts who had worked on it; on publishing the Papers, with journalists who had worked on them for both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and others who had written about them; on the court case, with legal scholars plus lawyers who had represented both newspapers. Ellsberg gave the keynote address, and Senator Mike Gravel the lunchtime talk. I edited a proceeding of this conference with VVA's Margaret Pratt Porter, adding extensive commentary, including an analysis of how Nixon had decided to try and suppress the study, plus extensive treatment of flaws in the government's specific claims to secrecy. We also sought out and transcribed Nixon's telephone

¹⁶ Prados, *A Streetcar Named Pleiku: Vietnam 1965, A Turning Point* (ebook, Now and Then Reader, 2015).

¹⁷ Prados, *In-Country: Remembering the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2012).

¹⁸ Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley, 1998).

¹⁹ Conference, "Missed Opportunities: Revisiting the Decisions of the Vietnam War, 1961-1968," Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Relations, Brown University, and Institute for International Relations, Foreign Ministry, State of Vietnam, June 1997.

records regarding the affair. VVA legal counsel Michael J. Gaffney wrote an essay putting it in the wider context of government secrecy. This strong package was published as *Inside the Pentagon Papers*.²⁰

Nixon's telephone records bring up another subject worthy of a word. A source developing most recently has been audio tapes, where various figures on the historical stage have left evidence embedded in tape recordings. This is particularly significant for the United States, where several presidents used taping systems to record telephone calls, meetings, and so forth. To furnish scholars a whiff of what was becoming available, in 2003 I published *White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the Presidents*, which was unusual in that I not only commissioned enhancements of the audiotapes but transcripts of the conversations, and covered presidents from Harry Truman to Gerald R. Ford.²¹ The actual recordings *and* the transcripts appeared as parts of the package.

Through all of this I remained a child of the Cold War, and there too, was gold to be panned. During research for my dissertation I filed FOIA requests for some of the national intelligence estimates (NIEs) from the 1950s, the era of the notorious "Missile Gap." Those documents were released almost without censorship and with blinding rapidity. Perhaps that experience gave me confidence to undertake the long struggle against secrecy that ensued. In any case, I continued to study and write on Soviet-American relations, the nuclear balance, and arms control. Those issues formed another foci for *Keepers of the Keys*. There were numerous articles for the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, a couple for *Scientific American*, papers on Cold War decisionmakers, Soviet ballistic missile defense, NIEs, the "Team B" report, intelligence as a driver for foreign policy, and other subjects, appearing in scholarly compilations or in such sources as the 2002 edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Relations*.²² I joined the debate over the Reagan administration's endeavors with my book *How the Cold War Ended*.²³ There I added value by including a selection of key documents, making a suitable reader for those seeking primary sources. In addition, there was a methodological component, wherein I dissected the 1980s as a "research project" and examined what we could learn from applying assorted types of historical analysis.

Intelligence is a wider subject than the NIEs. From an American perspective it has migrated over the years from covert operations through domestic surveillance to international terrorism. The CIA covert operations document sets I am gathering for the National Security Archive will elevate the study of U.S. intelligence to a new level. Here much gold has appeared.²⁴ The segments of the CIA collection already or about to be published by the ProQuest Corporation include nearly 8,000 documents. Among them, for example, in 2007 the CIA declassified the infamous "Family Jewels," a compendium of documents assembled for a CIA director worried about accusations of agency participation in illegal

²⁰ Prados and Margaret Pratt-Porter, eds., *Inside the Pentagon Papers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

²¹ John Prados, ed., *White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President* (New York: The New Press, 2005).

²² A few citations would include Prados, "Certainties, Doubts and Imponderables: Levels of Analysis in the Military Balance," *Intelligence & National Security* 26:6 (December 2011); Prados, "The Strategic Defense Initiative: Between Strategy, Diplomacy and U.S. Intelligence Estimates," in Leopoldo Nuti, ed., *The Crisis of Detente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985* (London: Routledge, 2009); Prados, "The National Intelligence Estimates, 1976-1988: Successes and Failures," in Malcolm Muir, ed., *From Detente to the Soviet Collapse: The Cold War from 1976 to 1991* (Lexington: Virginia Military Institute, 2006); Prados, "Team B: The Trillion Dollar Experiment," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 49:3 (April 1993); Prados, "European Nuclear Forces," with Joel S. Wit and Michael A. Zagurek, *Scientific American* 255:2 (August 1986).

²³ Prados, *How the Cold War Ended: Debating and Doing History* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books [now University of Nebraska], 2011).

²⁴ Cf. Digital National Security Archive and/or ProQuest. CIA Set IV is currently in production and Set V in preparation. Set I covered the period from President Carter to Obama, Set II the Year of Intelligence (the 1975 investigations); Set III the presidents from John F. Kennedy to Gerald R. Ford. Set IV is Dwight D. Eisenhower's era with some overlap with Kennedy.

domestic activities. The Archive circulated the documents themselves, but I included them in the CIA collection *and* wrote *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy and Presidential Power*.²⁵ On terrorism, going back to the days of 9/11, I collected the most important documents then current in *America Confronts Terrorism*.²⁶

Of course, narrative is the bread-and-butter for a historian and there I have investigated agency covert operations. In the 1980s, at the height of Iran-Contra, I published *President's Secret Wars* (republished in 1996).²⁷ I amplified that treatment in my book *Safe for Democracy*.²⁸ Bridging the era of classic covert operations and that of black prisons and counterterrorism I then wrote *The Ghosts of Langley* (2017). The ghosts theme is pursued in a work that for the first time will tell the full story of the CIA's Vietnam War. That should be the next to appear.

There is a whole other story I could tell that revolves around gaming. I published a boardgame even before graduate school. I've continued to employ history quite directly in designing strategy games, including some very well-known ones, ever since. But the gaming is about understanding and simulating real world events and physical processes. It's a tale for another day. Enough now. In the meantime, never stop panning for gold!

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²⁵ Prados, *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy and Presidential Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

²⁶ Prados, ed., *America Confronts Terrorism* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2002).

²⁷ Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995 [1986, 1988]).

²⁸ Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).