

# How Late DCI William Colby Saved the CIA, and What That Can Teach Us Today

by **Martin Edwin Andersen**

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The day after the Jan. 3 U.S. killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani marked the centennial of the birth of the late Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) William E. Colby. By disclosing some of the country's darkest and dirtiest secrets in the wake of the presidential excesses of Watergate and the Vietnam War, it was Colby who saved the CIA he loved from its own destruction. In the process, he became possibly the most important national security whistleblower in modern American history. His willingness to tell truth to power and the challenges that this "soldier-priest" of a superpower's clandestine service faced in overseeing previously unimagined institutional reforms offer important lessons at this momentous juncture in the national debate.

On the day Soleimani was killed, former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul, a prominent critic of the current White House occupant, noted on Twitter: President Donald Trump "has spent three years telling us that our Intelligence Community (IC) can't be trusted, does bad work, is part of the 'deep state,' etc. But today, he's now all good with the IC's work, which has helped to save American lives?"

Five days later, on Jan. 8, Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah) scorched a [classified briefing](#) on the Iran crisis as "unacceptable." The meeting, attended by Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and CIA Director Gina Haspel was, he said, "probably the worst briefing I've seen, at least on a military issue, in the nine years I've served in the United States Senate...I find it demeaning." Noting that the administration officials who briefed members of Congress on the operation said senators could not debate the merits of the administration's actions, Lee said. "It's un-American, it's unconstitutional, and it's wrong."

Colby's CIA directorship of 2 ½ years began as his predecessor, fellow veteran of the CIA predecessor Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and later Ambassador to Iran Richard M. Helms, was [accused](#) of perjury in his own testimony before Congress on agency covert operations in Chile. As biographer John Prados [noted](#), it was on Colby's watch that the Vietnam War ended, détente with the Soviet Union collapsed, and investigative reporting on CIA "dirty laundry" overseas and illegal domestic spying prompted not only two congressional committee investigations but also the Rockefeller Commission inquiry on its activities within the United States. The allegations amounted to a massive abuse of power fueled in part by venal corruption. The period was, Prados wrote, "the most serious political crisis in United States intelligence history."

In the July 1978 [edition](#) of Playboy magazine, the then-former DCI was asked: "If you are our protector, who is going to protect us from you?" Colby answered: "The separate constitutional structure, the separation of powers. That's what's going to protect you from me." To which he added, "And the press."

## Truth Will Out in a Democracy

William Egan Colby's life and career offer a Rorschach test, a revealing assessment of personal beliefs about institutional missions and structures, on issues today, ranging from competing institutional demands in national security and the role of a free press, to the need to respect human rights and human dignity, as well as the crucial importance of keeping intelligence agencies' analytical work apart from political pressure.

Perhaps most importantly in the current milieu of politicized and partisan mission creep, it was Colby who, even as the CIA reached a public and institutional nadir, navigated issues concerning the Constitutional separation of powers, while at the same time protecting the CIA's essential mission and sources, if not methods. This he did while critics and sometimes allies in Congress and in the press pushed for the vigorous exercise of long-standing federal statutes that grant the legislative branch the absolute right to investigate government affairs.

The Colby Rorschach extends to the assassination of foreign leaders as well as the personal conduct of political, military and intelligence leaders. In testimony before Congress that resonates today after the Soleimani killing, Colby, a veteran of World War II, [told Congress](#), "I am against assassination. I think it's counter-productive and I've issued directives against it. But I confess in the dark reaches of my mind I would have very cheerfully helped carry the bomb into Hitler's bunker in 1944."

Following a bureaucratic reshuffle in November 1975 known as the "Halloween Massacre," President Gerald Ford in January 1976 replaced Colby as agency director with a more compliant and professionally calculating George H.W. Bush. According to one [account](#) in the liberal magazine *The Nation*, the initial reaction of Idaho Democrat Frank Church, chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, to Colby's

firing and the naming of Bush “was to complain that it was part of a pattern of attempts by ... Ford ... to impede the Church committee’s nearly concluded investigation into CIA assassination plots, with which Colby was cooperating but which Ford was trying vainly to keep secret.”

Yet less than a month after Colby was shown the door, President Ford signed Executive Order 11905. Part of a weakened yet important attempt to reform the intelligence community, the order sought to improve non-executive branch oversight of foreign intelligence activities and to ban political assassination as a policy tool.

At the time, the order was intended to curb assassination attempts against Cuba’s then-dictator Fidel Castro and other foreign political leaders. With the killing of Soleimani, Trump critics now wield its language: “No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government,” it reads, “shall engaged in, or conspire to engage in, assassination.”

### **The Vietnam Years and the Aftermath**

The CIA’s station chief in Vietnam from 1959 to 1962, as the United States became mired in what was earlier a disastrous French colonial war, Colby was responsible for all agency covert operations in Asia from 1962 to 1967. From 1968 to 1971, as director of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support in Saigon for the U.S. Agency for International Development (with the rank of ambassador), Colby ran Operation Phoenix, a program seeking to destroy a Vietcong infrastructure largely made up of civilian political cadres.

Later exposés showed that more than 20,000 Vietnamese died as a result of the program. Critics such as former intelligence officer K. Barton Osborn [called it](#) “sterile, depersonalized murder.” In 1971, Colby testified before Congress that “some unjustifiable abuses” occurred, including “illegal killing,” although he insisted that torture during interrogation and execution after capture were not part of the Phoenix program as a matter of policy. The historical debate continues even as the lessons learned by Colby and others continue until today to shape and inform U.S. counterinsurgency efforts.

By the time Colby assumed the top slot at Langley in September 1973, the disdain with which Nixon viewed the agency and its analytical products was well-established (the 37th president was a “hostile audience” for CIA material, the [chief historian at Langley later noted](#)). The United States was reeling from humiliation in Southeast Asia, the Watergate scandal, and the fact the Soviet Union appeared on the ascendancy. The roles of Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in helping create the conditions for the vicious Sept. 11, 1973 Chilean military overthrow of an elected democratic government were also soon to be revealed by the press and a congressional inquiry.

Thus when Colby became DCI, his freedom of action was hobbled both by outside probes and exposés and by White House efforts to cover up wrongdoing. Both Watergate and the Vietnam disaster strengthened congressional efforts to impose accountability. At the same time, Colby quickly found he had little if any support from Nixon, Kissinger or unelected post-Watergate President Ford. Congress had conducted little oversight of the CIA since its creation in 1947. Many inside the agency as well as its most ardent critics believed a top-down review of its operations would be a gargantuan effort likely to yield meager bureaucratic change.

### **The Family Jewels’ on CIA Abuses at Home and Abroad**

It was left to incoming DCI Colby to give Congress – voluntarily – a list of 693 single-spaced pages known as “the family jewels,” or “the skeletons,” that showed how the agency had violated its charter for 25 years by spying on Americans, reading their tax returns, tapping their telephones, and opening their mail. Not only had it plotted to murder foreign leaders such as Castro; it also conducted LSD “mind control” experiments on both unwitting and willing American human guinea pigs. On Dec. 31, 1974, [Colby’s briefing](#) about the scandals to the Justice Department included 18 issues deemed to be of legal concern. These, he reported, were due to a very “compartmentalized” organizational structure used by his predecessor, Richard Helms, in which it was possible for units within the agency to have no knowledge about what other units were doing.

Colby died in an apparent canoeing accident in April 1996. It was not revealed until two decades later, that, in a June 1975 telephone conversation, Kissinger, who was worried about the CIA director’s willingness to cooperate with congressional investigations of past agency malpractice and misdeeds, [referred to him](#) as a “psychopath.”

Colby’s son, Carl, [remembered](#), “He would come home and I’d say, ‘You’re spilling the beans! You’re volunteering information they’re not even asking you for!’ He said, ‘So they’ll learn about these secrets. Place needs a housecleaning.’ He ended up taking the heat and falling on his sword, but he saved the agency.”

Opposition to Colby’s increasingly robust reform efforts was [rife](#) inside the agency as well. Some senior officers called him a traitor while others darkly suggested he was a Soviet agent. At the same time, as CIA historian Harold P. Ford would later write, not uncritically, Colby retained both a distance and professional posture in an effort to keep the intelligence agency’s analytical work from distortions created by

political pressure.

The same question has risen with a vengeance over President Trump's expansive views on both executive branch power and impunity. Colby, the historian Ford [noted](#), "never became a confidante of Kissinger, Nixon, or President Ford. With them, Colby remained a senior staff officer, speaking when he was spoken to and offering the views of US intelligence on the state of the world," and no more. "That Colby turned out to be more his own man and less a yes-man than the administration had initially expected simply aggravated his relationships with Kissinger, Nixon, and Ford."

### **Innovations and Respect for Oversight**

Through all this, Colby was responsible for key innovations and managerial accomplishments inside the CIA. He fought, as agency historian Ford later [recalled](#), "ingrained institutional drag throughout the intelligence community." For example, it was Colby who established the [National Intelligence Officers](#) system, the intelligence community's senior experts on a range of regional and functional issues that remains today a crucial part of the intelligence analysis behemoth. Creation of the highly praised National Intelligence Daily focusing on finished, all-source national intelligence on U.S. foreign policy issues for a select readership, was another of Colby's contributions, as was the process for putting together systematic postmortems on key episodes as part of an ongoing career learning process.

When he had become director, the CIA faced the real danger of being rendered completely ineffective or even placed on the bureaucratic trash heap. Colby oversaw a period in agency history in which the CIA and other intelligence agencies were required to function under real civilian oversight by the congressional intelligence committees as well as, eventually, independent inspectors general.

Colby shed the shopworn 'plausible denials' of his predecessors and showed unmatched frankness in owning up, as an institution, to what were feared could be a Pandora's box of misdeeds. In doing so, Colby sought to keep agency employees out of the line of fire, preserving sources and legitimate methods. "The agency's survival," Colby [wrote](#) in his memoirs, "could only come from understanding, not hostility, built on knowledge, not faith."

In "throwing the cloak off the cloak-and-dagger business," the *New York Times* later [reported](#), the "end result of his decision was a permanent system of congressional oversight of the agency — and a public understanding that the C.I.A. was a tool of Presidential power, not a rogue elephant." As noted in an [op-ed](#) last year entitled "Trump is prepared to go to war against U.S. intelligence agencies," written by former senior CIA analyst Kent Harrington about the Ukraine scandal, "Colby used to carry a miniature copy of the U.S. Constitution with him wherever he went. In his view, the CIA was an integral part of American democracy, which relies on checks and balances."

### **The Search for Honorable Leaders Continues**

Colby's professional self-immolation in support of what he understood to be essential American values, institutional propriety and fundamental U.S. interests stands in contrast to the all-too-frequently self-absorbed, feel-good definitions of public service that came after his generation and that of other veterans of World War II. By disclosing some of America's darkest secrets, and ensuring meaningful congressional oversight, Colby was able to save an agency that became once again to be seen as vital after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks on the United States.

In the more sexist age in which he lived, one of Colby's heroes was Joan of Arc, the medieval peasant girl who was burned at the stake and later canonized by the Catholic Church after leading the French army in momentary victory against English invaders. As a proponent of inclusion inside the agency, Colby would in some ways have applauded the naming of Gina Haspel, a 35-year veteran of the clandestine service, as the CIA's first female director. Until the Jan. 8 briefing on Capitol Hill, Haspel won [high marks](#) for providing the president with straight-forward intelligence assessments while avoiding the overt politicization of agency senior ranks.

Likely [less favorable](#) would have been Colby's assessment of [her known role](#) in the CIA's post-9/11 Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation program based on torture, and the [toughening and/or expansion](#) of a 1982 law making it a crime to identify a covert intelligence agent or confidential informant working overseas. One of the two known uses of the federal Intelligence Identities Protection Act was to prosecute [John Kiriakou](#), the whistleblowing former CIA officer convicted of providing a reporter with the name of an undercover agency operative allegedly involved in torture during the George W. Bush administration. Kiriakou is the only CIA officer to go to jail [in connection with](#) the torture affair.

With the fate of American democracy and the thorniest of constitutional questions now part of the daily headlines following revelations of Vladimir Putin's direct involvement in trying to subvert the American democratic process, never in this century is a robust intelligence community that judiciously respects its charter more needed. Current intelligence officers and their elected overseers can find few better models of public service at a time of upheaval than those offered by DCI William E. Colby.

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