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21 May 1978



William Colby and Vernon Walters.

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Spy Stories

HONORABLE MEN

My Life in the CIA:
By William Colby.
Illustrated. 493 pp. New York:
Simon and Schuster. \$12.95.

SILENT MISSIONS

By Vernon A. Walters.
Illustrated. 654 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. \$12.95.

By THOMAS POWERS

When the Central Intelligence Agency's secrets began to tumble out in their melancholy profusion three years ago, veterans of the agency warned that it would not be easy to put the lid back on, more questions would be raised than answered, and the process of exposure would leave the practice of intelligence in demoralized disarray. At the time, such arguments were roughly dismissed as disingenuous, motivated less by honest concern for "national security" — fast replacing patriotism as the last refuge of scoundrels

Thomas Powers, who won a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in 1973, is completing a book on Richard Helms, former Director of the C.I.A.

— than by fear of embarrassment. But it turns out the Cassandras were absolutely right: the code-breaking computers may still be humming, the satellites clicking off their high-resolution photos and the mighty river of paper working its way toward the National Security Council, but nothing else is the same. The intelligence community is divided and confused, just as predicted, and there is probably no better place to go for a glimpse of the awful mess than the memoirs of William Colby, Director of the C.I.A. from 1973 to 1976.

It may come as a surprise to most readers to learn that the intelligence community blames Mr. Colby, not nosy reporters or the Congressional investigators of 1975, for the uglier revelations of recent years, but that is the case. Few men have suffered such dissonant reputations. The public probably remembers Mr. Colby best as the architect of the notorious Phoenix program in South Vietnam, which totted up the deaths of at least 20,000 Vietcong political cadres; or as a peripheral Watergate figure who, in his own words, "danced around the room" to avoid giving John Ehrlichman's name to the Federal prosecutors. But for C.I.A. people, Mr. Colby is the man who may have wrecked the agency with his decision to let out the "bad secrets" concerning assassination plots, domestic intelligence programs, illegal drug-testing and the like. While at least one segment of the public is inclined to see Mr. Colby as a war criminal, his former comrades think of him as a prig and snitch, a turncoat

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(or worse) who delivered secret files by the cartload to the Pike and Church committees, who told a reporter about the C.I.A.'s illegal mail-intercept program in order to engineer the removal of an archival, and who gave the Justice Department evidence that suggested that Mr. Colby's immediate predecessor but one, Richard Helms, had lied to the Senate about C.I.A. political operations in Chile. When Mr. Colby finally left the C.I.A. early in 1976, his departure was not loudly lamented.

At first, or even third, glance William Egan Colby seems an unlikely candidate for such heated controversy. His appointment as Director of Central Intelligence in mid-1973 seems to have been made in a

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fit of absent-mindedness while Richard M. Nixon was busy plugging leaks in the White House levees. Certainly there was nothing inevitable about it.

For the most part Mr. Colby's years in the C.I.A. were unexceptional, a steady climb from job to job in a manner that neither made enemies nor left much by way of anecdote among his friends. In the early 1950's he organized stay-behind nets in Scandinavia to harass Russian occupiers in the event of a third world war. A few years later, he orchestrated C.I.A. support in Italy for the Christian Democrats and backed the "opening to the left" that brought Italian Socialists into the Government, despite opposition (by the C.I.A.'s James Angleton, among others) contending that the Communists would not be far behind.

In 1959 Mr. Colby moved on to Vietnam to help gear up for the war he still feels we never should have lost. As chief of station in Saigon, chief of the Far East division in the clandestine-services section of the C.I.A. and head of the Phoenix program, Mr. Colby spent 12 years trying to do what the French had failed to achieve before him. Vietnam absorbs the largest part of his book, as it did his life, and one is tempted to linger over his astonishing (to me) inability to notice any but the most particular causes of failure.

There is something odd about a man who can cite so many weaknesses in us — a fickle United States Congress, a gloomy American press, an ignorant American public, a fire-power-mad American military — without ever seeming to notice that American help was not the solution but the problem. I kept expecting Mr. Colby to conclude that we'd have done better if we had done less, but his style of post-mortem is maddeningly narrow. In the end, he says, the collapse of Saigon was caused by the threat of an American aid cutoff. This is like saying that the cause of a fatal air crash was harsh impact with the ground. It will not win any awards for unraveling cause and effect.

But this is ancient history, and pretty vague history at that. If you want to know what the C.I.A. did during Mr. Colby's tenure, you had better read "Decent Interval," Frank Snapp's account of the fall of Saigon, or "In Search of Enemies," John Stockwell's just-published story of the ill-fated intervention in Angola. The latter was a foolish and cynical undertaking of a sort that apparently held a special appeal for President Nixon and

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In Angola, as in Chile and Kurdistan, the C.I.A. attempted to inflate inherently weak local forces, because Mr. Kissinger had the idea it would serve United States interests elsewhere, mainly by convincing the Russians (as he thought) that we could still poke a stick in their eye, despite Vietnam. Mr. Stockwell's detailed account of the Angola debacle has the capacity to make you mad all over again, not so much at the way the C.I.A. goes about its business as at the sheer institutional enthusiasm it puts into operations that amount to whims on the part of Presidents and their foreign policy advisers. The C.I.A. just can't say no. For Mr. Colby, however, Angola was only an episode, one more embarrassment in a larger crisis of confidence that threatened to destroy the agency altogether.

From the C.I.A.'s point of view, Watergate was the foot in the door, providing Congressional investigators with their first real look at the agency's paper and tables of organization. When the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities began its investigation in 1975 the spell had been

broken: the C.I.A. was fair game, protected neither by mystique nor by President Gerald R. Ford. But despite Mr. Ford's retreat — he believed in secrets, but wouldn't fight to keep them — the consensus at C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Va., was for massive resistance. No one was using the word "stonewall," perhaps, but that was certainly what they had in mind.

It would have worked, as it had worked so often in the past, but for one fact: Mr. Colby had decided the time had come to surrender the bad secrets. To the amazement and horror of most of his colleagues in the C.I.A., he elected to cooperate with the commission headed by Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, and, later, with Senator Frank Church. If they would take care of the good secrets, he would hand over pretty much everything the investigators asked for. Mr. Ford and Mr. Kissinger were as opposed to this as most C.I.A. people, and Mr. Rockefeller, a lifelong admirer of strong executives, tried in his way to tell Mr. Colby this was a whitewash they were conducting up here, not an investigation. "Bill," Mr. Colby quotes him as saying, "do you

really have to present all this material to us?"

Mr. Colby felt he did, supporting his decision with two arguments. First, he felt that the practice of intelligence in America had to be subject to the Constitution, which he took to mean that it must be equally responsible to the President and Congress. The days of the Senate's automatic deference to the White House in foreign-policy matters were over. The C.I.A., in Mr. Colby's view, could no longer serve as the President's personal Saturday-night gun.

Second, Mr. Colby made a distinction between the "good secrets" — the names of agents, the technical details of collection systems and so on — and the "bad secrets," which involved lapses of judgment, "excesses" and outright crimes. Mr. Colby felt things had gone too far to keep the bad secrets secret any more, that it would be better to surrender them all at once and it would be better for the country to know than to imagine the worst. Once the secrets were out, he said, they would not look so bad.

Mr. Colby was alone then, and he is still almost alone. His critics in the intelligence community think his approach was

a mistake of horrendous magnitude — a kind of institutional suicide — because it betrayed the trust of intelligence officers and agents who acted in good faith; because it infected the world of intelligence with the posturing and hypocrisy of public men attacking the agency in public for what they might approve quietly in private; and because it exposed an enormous wealth of exact detail about the C.I.A. to the scrutiny of hostile intelligence agencies, who are good at nothing if not the extraction of knowledge from the scantiest facts. Letting Senator Frank Church rummage about in the C.I.A.'s past, Mr. Colby's critics felt, was the functional equivalent of giving the K.G.B. a guided tour. That these things were done was bad enough; that they were *allowed* to be done was worse, a sign of confusion, timidity, surrender and demoralization.

But that was not Mr. Colby's worst crime, in the view of some of his old colleagues. The worst was an act so egregious and ill-advised, so destructive and disarming (in the literal sense) that C.I.A. people will tell you in a level voice that Mr. Colby's decisions as Director of Central Intelligence were completely

consistent with those one might expect of an enemy agent. The silence that follows this bald observation, generally delivered with direct eye contact, indicates it is intended absolutely seriously, which I take to be evidence of just what awful shape the C.I.A. is in. What did Mr. Colby do to invite such hostility and suspicion? He junked counterintelligence.

This is a subject — alluded to but not elaborated upon in Mr. Colby's memoirs — about which two things might be said: it is complicated and it does not lend itself to clear formulation or answer, especially by outsiders. Nevertheless, here, in extreme summary, is what the argument is about:

The first job of an intelligence agency is to protect itself from penetration, lest it fall under the control of an enemy. For nearly 20 years, until Mr. Colby discharged him in 1975, counterintelligence in the C.I.A. was in the hands of James Angleton. A man with brains, tenacity and appetite for detail, Mr. Angleton was also characterized by a degree of intellectual arrogance that made it hard for him to admit he'd been wrong about anything, from the motives of an agent to a prediction of the weather.

Over the years, Mr. Angleton developed a profound respect for K.G.B. scheming and devilish strategem. He detected Russian string-pulling everywhere, scoffed at just about every bit of hard-won secret intelligence as being a clever Russian plant, and argued that a long-term Russian master plan was gradually putting its agents into every government and intelligence service of the non-Communist world. Pretty soon, only Mr. Angleton would be left on "our" side. His skepticism was so deep that many of his colleagues, including Mr. Colby, concluded that he'd lost his grip and turned into a paranoid nut.

Mr. Angleton's argument in his own defense, according to those who have heard bits and pieces of it, is of a sort that simply cannot be summarized. One can say only that it is heavily factual in nature, that it is based on an intimate knowledge of Soviet-bloc intelligence services, that it is plausible in many particulars, that it is possible he may be completely right and that we are never going to know. Here the awful mess cited above threatens to transcend itself, to rise to a higher plane on which it becomes the Platonic ideal of

messiness, a mess of metaphysical intractability.

Bewildering to outsiders, the Angleton-Colby dispute nevertheless lies near the heart of the current disarray of American intelligence.

Counterintelligence is to intelligence as epistemology is to philosophy. The problems have to do with ways of knowing, are fundamental to the discipline and offer heavy advantage in debate to those who are skeptical of appearances. Mr. Angleton, in fact, might be called the Bishop Berkeley of intelligence, a man who insists that how we know things is a problem slipperier than it seems.

Debate of this sort does not appeal to Mr. Colby's temperament. Years of experience in the business of intelligence — although not, for the most part, on the classic agent-running end of it — convinced Mr. Colby that Mr. Angleton's obsession with counterintelligence was without profit. Tired of wrangling, Mr. Colby simply got rid of it, pretty much in the mood of Samuel Johnson, who kicked a stone and pronounced, "Thus I refute Berkeley!" Of course, Mr. Colby did not excise counterintelligence entirely; but his critics say he reorganized the life out of it.

At the heart of the current intelligence mess, then, are two questions posed by Mr. Colby: Can American intelligence be conducted successfully within a constitutional framework — that is, with a dual responsibility to both the President and the Congress? And can it safely dispense with the melodramatics of counterintelligence?

The heat with which these questions are debated in intelligence circles has to do with the fact that a "no" in either instance means Americans will pretty much have to get along without any secret intelligence service at all, as we did before World War II. I'm inclined to think Mr. Colby was right on both counts — a C.I.A. working exclusively for the President is bound to produce as much trouble as benefit; and the K.G.B.'s master plan will turn out a Potemkin village — but both questions are very far from being settled.

Mr. Colby's book is important, a serious treatment of a serious subject, but at the same time it is flavorless. This is almost certainly not the fault of Mr. Colby's collaborator, Peter Forbath, an able writer whose recent book, "The River

Congo," shows he has a fine capacity for rich narrative and evocative description, given his rein. In this instance he has been held in pretty tightly. By all accounts, including Mr. Colby's, the first version of his book set a record for soporific opacity. Mr. Forbath has rescued it from the deep camouflage of bureaucratise, but beyond that not even talent could take him.

This is partly the result of his readers' jaded appetites: we have grown used to revelations. But if Mr. Colby's book ever had any, they were excised by the C.I.A. before publication. Even the color of men's eyes seems to have been treated as a state secret. But we are all adults now, and ought to be able to make our meals of solid, honest stuff, without condiment, if necessary. More damaging to the book, however, is the impassive, almost muffled quality to Mr. Colby's voice — the fact that he approaches his main points in a guarded manner — as well as a certain confusion of purpose. His memoirs are addressed to the public, but they are aimed at his one-time friends and colleagues, in



particular Richard Helms. The title is borrowed from Mr. Helms's 1971 remark — "The nation must to a degree take it on faith that we too are honorable men, devoted to her service" — and Mr. Colby is at pains to explain why he felt compelled to tell the Justice Department that Mr. Helms might have been guilty of perjury. Mr. Helms is not likely to accept the explanation, but it shows every sign of being earnestly intended.

If Mr. Colby's memoirs must be read in a dutiful spirit, the autobiography of Maj. Gen. Vernon A. Walters, "Silent Missions," can be approached with no other purpose in mind than sheer pleasure. General Walters was a bit-player in Water-

gate — Deputy Director of the C.I.A. when Mr. Nixon tried to pressure the agency into pinching off the F.B.I.'s investigation — but that only takes up a single chapter, most of it familiar, with one or two exceptions of detail and nuance. It is the rest of General Walters's unexpected life that makes his great block of a book worth reading.

General Walters is a man easy to misjudge. To begin with, he does not appear ever to have commanded so much as a detail of kitchen police, but instead built his military career on a facility for languages, surefootedness and discretion, and an appealing personality. A lifelong bachelor with a self-confessed taste for medals, promotion and

candy, he writes almost entirely in simple declarative sentences. There are as few commas in his book as there are doubts about the utility of military strength, or the iniquity of Communists. Not a promising mix.

But, as it turns out, General Walters is the Shakespeare of the simple declarative sentence. He has a shrewd eye for character and a prodigious memory, aided by the diaries that he began when young and now has mined for his book. By now these diaries must be staggeringly voluminous; I hope they will be carefully protected, as they deserve — not only for the fund of historical and personal detail they contain, but for a more elusive quality: General Walters is a very funny man. His chapters on General Mark Clark and former Premier Mohammad Mossadegh of Iran achieve a comic intensity that is rare in official memoirs, or anywhere else. W. Averell Harriman, Mr. Nixon in Venezuela, Charles de Gaulle, Henry Kissinger and a rich cast of lesser figures have probably been captured more vividly by General

Walters than they will ever be again. He may not say everything there is to say about his subjects, but what he says brings them to life.

But the best thing about the book is the character of the man himself. He is honest and unpretentious, loyal to his religion and his country, steadfast in his faith in free societies, proud of his achievements, respectful and admiring of greatness in men he has known. It is General Walters's special gift to make the world seem straightforward and comprehensible. The character of the man seems to redeem his most outrageous opinions, which are infrequent but uncompromising. At one point he describes a conversation with a Chinese official in Paris about the proper remedy for heroin addiction. General Walters says that if it were up to him, he would execute the traffickers. The Chinese official solemnly agrees. This is the sort of opinion that normally would make me surly; coming from General Walters, it is positively reassuring. Exactly how he achieves this remarkable effect, I cannot say. ■