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Colby backs US in El Salvador, presses freeze of nuclear arms

By Paul Aaron
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WASHINGTON - He is a devout Roman Catholic who believes the church's "just war" doctrine should help guide a nation's military conduct. Yet during the 1960s, his name became synonymous with Operation Phoenix, an attempt to destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure that critics charged led to a vast, indiscriminate campaign of political murder.

While CIA director, he delivered up the agency's secrets to the Senate's Church committee and struggled to establish a framework for permanent congressional oversight of the intelligence community. He was dismissed by President Gerald Ford and reviled as an apostate by those CIA professionals who still swore allegiance to the cult of the clandestine.

Today a successful Washington lawyer with the firm of Reid and Priest, he is a staunch supporter of the nuclear freeze, and his testimony has grown increasingly prominent as debate intensifies over the strategic balance and the nuclear arms race. At the same time, he defends US involvement in El Salvador, where the hearts and minds of peasants can be won through applying techniques that, he says, produced positive results in Vietnam.

William Colby is the man who embodies these contradictions. At the end of an interview, during which he held forth on intelligence, arms control and assassination, what seem jagged edges of sensibility and experience fit together into a smooth, even placid, character.

Collective common sense

The nuclear freeze, Colby argues, represents collective common sense mobilized against the hocus-pocus of an unaccountable elite: "My thesis is that the subject of nuclear war has been so awesome, so frightening, so complex that ordinary citizens have left it to the priesthood to handle. But the priesthood has failed, and people looking at outlandish ideas like the racetrack in the desert [the original MX basing mode], or now, dense pack, ask, 'My goodness, are the experts who designed this for real?'"

Intelligence, which began as an adjunct to military operations, has moved, Colby maintains, from a "mere contest with the enemy to helping us make decisions about the world we live in." Colby contrasts the deadlock over the 1946 Baruch Plan, the initial experiment to curb atomic weapons that failed because the United States could not persuade Stalin to authorize inspection teams, with the SALT I agreement, which both sides were able to sign and monitor thanks to satellites and other sophisticated data-retrieval systems.

"Or look at the electronic sensors in the Sinai in 1973 that buttressed a truce so that neither the Egyptians or the Israelis had to stand at their borders with their fingers on the trigger. Each side could have confidence that ample warning would be available should assembling of forces occur. That's the crucial role for intelligence: to keep the peace, not just aid in war."

Colby denies that a freeze would lead to Soviet deception or cheating. "We're going to maintain surveillance on Soviet weapons in any case. With a treaty,

stepped producing what we suspect is a new whiz bomb, and we ask the Soviets to let us take a look at it, they'll tell us to mind our own business. Under a freeze, if we think a factory is producing a new nuclear weapon, we can go to them, and say, 'You've got to reassure us you're under compliance.'"

No ironclad guarantees

Colby admits, however, that ironclad guarantees against subterfuge cannot be made. "But would it be possible for the Soviets to violate a freeze to a strategically significant degree?" he asks. "I don't think so. We have a var-

ied array of capabilities to protect against major violations."

Colby asserts any attempt by the Soviets to mount a decisive evasion of a freeze agreement would not only run risk of detection by US surveillance, but might also be jeopardized by disclosures from the Russian people themselves. A small cabal of conspirators would be inadequate to carry off a ploy so substantial as to tip the strategic balance, he said. Instead, widespread coordination would be required, thereby increasing the chance that a participant, appalled by his government's duplicity, would bring the secret to the West. "The Kremlin has to remember," Colby said, "that [Oleg] Penkovsky [a Soviet army colonel who, during the early 1960s, handed over more than 10,000 highly classified documents on Soviet missiles to the CIA] acted out of a wish to put a brake on what he felt was reckless political leadership."

Irresponsibility and the inclination to engage in an arms race, are not, in Colby's view, peculiar to the Soviet