

Declassified and Approved For Release 2012/11/21 : CIA-RDP99-00418R000100100029-0

The National Broadcasting Company Presents



MEET THE PRESS

America's Press Conference of the Air

Produced by LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK

Guest: WILLIAM E. COLBY
Director of Central Intelligence

VOLUME 19

SUNDAY, JUNE 29, 1975

NUMBER 26

Merkle Press Inc.

Printers and Periodical Publishers

Subsidiary of Pubco Corporation

Box 2111, Washington, D. C. 20013

25 cents per copy

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M E E T T H E P R E S S

MR. SPIVAK: Our guest today on MEET THE PRESS is the Director of Central Intelligence, William E. Colby. Mr. Colby began his career as an intelligence officer with the OSS during World War II. He later joined the CIA where he held a number of major posts before becoming Director in September, 1973. We will have the first questions now from Ford Rowan of NBC News.

MR. ROWAN: Mr. Colby, in May of 1973 the Inspector General of the CIA compiled a report which showed illegal and improper activities on the part of the CIA. You did not at that time inform the White House or the Department of Justice; instead, you began the destruction of records, including several collections of names which were part of the domestic surveillance program.

My first question is, on behalf of the agency, were you attempting to obstruct justice?

MR. COLBY: No, Mr. Rowan, I was not. I was attempting to change the procedures of the agency to make sure that they complied with the law in the future and to eliminate any holdings we had that we should not have had.

MR. ROWAN: Why was the White House not informed?

MR. COLBY: I think there was just a misunderstanding as to why that wasn't done. We did inform the then Chairmen—acting Chairman—of our Oversight Committees in the Congress; we then issued a series of directives very specifically instructing our people how to conduct their affairs in the future so there would be no further violation of law, and in that situation I thought it best to let the misdeeds of the past sit quietly. I did not see that there was anything serious enough in there to warrant prosecution against any individual.

MR. ROWAN: You mentioned informing members of Congress. Did they take any substantive action or did they let the matter just lie?

MR. COLBY: At least one of them asked a lot of additional questions and sought further assurances no further action would be taken.

MR. ROWAN: You indicated that on your own you decided there should be no prosecution. Under which authorities did you act?

MR. COLBY: I did not see enough that warranted, to me, a request to the Department of Justice to prosecute. The question never came up in a direct form.

(Announcements)

MR. KILPATRICK: Under the 1949 act, the CIA is exempt from the usual accounting procedures that apply to the budget and personnel of every other agency of the government. Is there really any point in maintaining such absolute secrecy over public funds being spent by your agency?

MR. COLBY: Earlier in the history of CIA we exposed about half of our budget to GAO audit. Later on the GAO determined that it felt it could not conduct an adequate audit of half of it, if they did not know the whole. There are certain things, of course, in our clandestine activity that must be kept from public exposure and even the risk of public exposure.

MR. KILPATRICK: I can understand why the details of your budget might well be kept secret, but why is it necessary to conceal from the American people whether you are spending one billion, two billion, five billion or whatever the sum is?

MR. COLBY: In 1947 the weapons expenditures of the Atomic Energy Commission consisted of a one line item. Last year they consisted of 15 pages of detailed explanation. I think it is inevitable that if you expose a single figure, you will immediately get a debate as to what it includes, what it does not include, why did it go up, why did it go down, and you will very shortly get into a description of the details of our activities.

MR. KILPATRICK: It is a political reason, is it not, sir, that your budget would be especially vulnerable to being cut by members of the Congress who oppose the agency?

MR. COLBY: I don't think so. I think the responsible members of the Congress would support a good intelligence service and a good intelligence program, and I think we have the best in the world.

MR. GELB: Would the 1947 act that established the CIA prohibit the CIA from collecting intelligence or providing support to collect intelligence within the United States on domestic individuals or groups?

MR. COLBY: Yes. The act says clearly that the Agency will have no subpoena, police, law enforcement powers or internal security function. That does not mean that the Agency can do nothing in the United States. It can do certain things related to foreign intelligence within the United States.

MR. GELB: When you appeared before various congressional committees—

MR. COLBY: Many.

MR. GELB: Many is right. In the wake of the disclosures about CIA collection of ten thousand or more dossiers of bugging and surveillance and what-not, you did not refer to these activities as illegal; in fact, you said they were not illegal, they were

merely missteps. How do you reconcile that congressional testimony with what you just said now?

MR. COLBY: I have said that they were wrong. I think wrong is a word that covers those few missteps and misdeeds that CIA has conducted over 28 years.

MR. GELB: Does wrong mean illegal?

MR. COLBY: Sometimes it does; sometimes it merely means we were outside our charter, although there is nothing otherwise illegal about the activity.

MR. GELB: Does outside the charter mean it was illegal?

MR. COLBY: It means it is wrong for CIA to do it. It was not necessarily a crime that it be done, but it was wrong for CIA to do it.

MR. GELB: Was it illegal for the CIA to develop and collect these ten thousand and more dossiers?

MR. COLBY: It was not illegal to collect them all. The allegation against CIA was that it conducted a massive illegal domestic operation during the Nixon administration. The operation began in the Johnson administration. It was not massive. As you will note, on page 149 of the Rockefeller Commission Report, it referred to three agents who were wrongly used.

There was a collection of paper also collected, mainly FBI reports and newspaper clippings. It was improper to collect some of these things, but I think that the word "wrong" covers both the actions which technically may have been illegal and the things that we had no right to do.

MR. GELB: But the Rockefeller Commission itself labeled most of these activities as unlawful. That is their word.

MR. COLBY: A number of our activities were unlawful in the past. There were a few, but not—this particular program, I think, was not labeled as unlawful.

MR. ROSS: The Murphy Commission on foreign policy has just come out with a report saying that the 40 Committee in the White House which is supposed to supervise the CIA activities, has been meeting only infrequently and informally.

Douglas Dillon, who was a member of the Rockefeller Commission, said there has never been any real oversight of the CIA. How then could a series of Presidents and a series of Directors of the Central Intelligence Agency tell the American people that the CIA was under tight control?

MR. COLBY: I think I will let the Presidents speak for themselves. The reason the 40 Committee has not met very often is because during the fifties and sixties the CIA was engaged in many activities abroad of a political and paramilitary character.

In the last few years that activity has dwindled to almost nothing. We do very little of that work today abroad, and therefore there is much less occasion for the 40 Committee to meet and discuss those activities.

MR. ROSS: When you say "little," what do you mean by "little?" How many covert operations is the agency conducting around the world right now?

MR. COLBY: I really cannot give you specifics or the figures, but I would say it is a very small percentage of our total budget at the moment.

MR. ROSS: Reverting to the control issue, John McCone said that while he was Director of the CIA he didn't know that planning was going forward to assassinate Castro. You have said that you didn't know about many things going on in the CIA, including the fact that the Justice Department gave you the authority to control your own lawbreakers. Doesn't that indicate once again that the CIA was out of control of even its own Directors?

MR. COLBY: No, I don't think so. In any large organization, and CIA is a large organization with activities all around the world, every detail will not necessarily be known.

I learned of the arrangement with the Rockefeller Commission when I was apprised of a problem which might involve that, and it looked that it was not supportable to me, and so I discussed it with the acting Attorney General who withdrew that arrangement.

MR. SPIVAK: Mr. Colby, as one who knows the CIA from long association with it and who, I assume, is dedicated to the security of this nation, will you give us your appraisal of whether the investigations have on the whole been good or bad for the country?

MR. COLBY: I think there are both goods and bads, Mr. Spivak. I think that the good is that we are in the process of updating the old image of intelligence that is carried by many Americans to the new reality of intelligence, that intelligence today is more than the old spy story or the TV spectacular on Saturday night. It now consists of an intellectual process of putting bits and pieces together, analyzing them, of collecting information from open sources wherever we can get them around the world, from technical capabilities of which we, as Americans, have developed perhaps the most impressive collection in the world, and also some clandestine activity, of course, against those closed societies that can pose a threat to our country.

On the bad side, I think, are the sensational and irresponsible leaks and discussions that go on, so that the characterization of our intelligence apparatus still does suffer that old image.

I am interested, really, in trying to focus on the 70s and 80s

and forget about the ~~50s~~ 50s and 60s, but I am having a hard time doing it.

MR. SPIVAK: Earlier this year you were reported as saying that exaggerated charges of improper conduct of the CIA had placed—and these were your words—“placed American intelligence in danger.” What do you consider the most exaggerated charges that have been made against the CIA?

MR. COLBY: The massive illegal domestic operation, and I think some other charges have been made which are totally out of context in the total picture.

I think here we have a difficulty that is perhaps a difference of profession between the journalistic profession and the intelligence profession. We try to put the jigsaw pieces together to draw from them the whole picture and present the whole thing in proportion. I think the journalistic profession, because of the nature of its media, is inclined to focus on the individual jigsaw piece and to bring that as typical of the whole, and that has given me a great deal of difficulty.

MR. SPIVAK: The charges that have been made against the CIA—and the investigations themselves have really raised so many doubts in the minds of the American people—that many people believe that the organization ought to be abolished altogether, and that if a new one is needed, why, a new one should be started. What is your reaction to that?

MR. COLBY: I think the CIA today—as I said, it may have done some things in the past which were either mistakes or wrong, but the CIA today is the best intelligence service in the world; it has the most dedicated and talented group of people working for it of any intelligence service in the world. It is the envy of the foreign nations.

I think that any attempt to disband it would leave our nation vulnerable in a world in which we now sit 30 minutes away from a nuclear missile aimed and cocked as us in a world in which our economic resources can be throttled by hostile foreign nations in a world in which nuclear proliferation can pose a danger to all of us.

I think we need good intelligence. I think we have got it, and I think we should continue.

MR. ROWAN: I'd like to ask you something about, not the CIA, which you administer, but in your role as Director of Central Intelligence, you oversee the entire intelligence community, and I would like to ask you if the National Security Agency regularly monitors telephone calls between foreign—between American citizens and citizens in foreign countries?

MR. COLBY: I think the National Security Agency's activities are known to include the following of foreign communications. I think that is all I would like to say about that.

MR. ROWAN: What I am trying to get at is to find out if, in the course of their activities involving foreigners, massive records are kept on the number of calls, the places calls are made to from this country by American citizens.

MR. COLBY: I would defer to the Department of Defense for the answer to that.

MR. KILPATRICK: But pursuing that for just a moment, sir, the Rockefeller Commission talked about Communist intelligence efforts within the United States and said that the Soviet Union, we gather, is making extraordinary use of electronic technology, monitoring and recording thousands of private telephone conversations within the United States. Could you amplify that?

MR. COLBY: The Soviet Union does have a very extensive communications intelligence/effort around the world. You have seen their trawlers off our coast; they follow our fleets when they move. They have an extensive effort of that kind.

MR. KILPATRICK: Are they monitoring domestic telephone conversations to your knowledge?

MR. COLBY: There are an awful lot of antenna on top of the Soviet Embassy, and I think they are there for a purpose.

MR. KILPATRICK: The estimate was 500,000 intelligence operatives in the Communist bloc nations; that was the estimate of the Rockefeller Commission. Is that your estimate also, sir?

MR. COLBY: I think that is a close figure.

MR. GELB: The Rockefeller Commission seems to describe the chaos operation of the CIA, the collection of the files, bugging, surveillance and so forth, as large, illegal, and domestic.

Let me quote from their report. They said, "The CIA exceeded its statutory authority in these operations." It said the operations were a repository for large quantities of information on domestic activities of Americans. It talked about the large number of activities and the veritable mountain of material.

Wouldn't this substantiate a charge of massive, illegal, domestic operations?

MR. COLBY: I don't think so. I think the word "illegal" obviously does apply to certain of the activities, but as I indicated, the Rockefeller Commission found three/agents whose work was illegal. I don't think that is massively illegal. Those three agents were improper, there is no question about it.

With respect to the files, as the Commission found after looking at our files, most of the files consisted of FBI reports and clippings from the newspaper.

In my opinion, we should not have kept all those, but in the period of the time that this was going on, when you had a quarter of a million people demonstrating outside of the White

House, when you had 4,000 bombings occur in one year in this country, I think there was considerable concern as to whether this was indigenous or was being stimulated and supported by foreign intelligence or security services.

MR. GELB: But our own studies showed that these were not connected with foreign intelligence activities.

MR. COLBY: And it's by studying it, we found they were not connected. If we had not studied it, we could not make that finding.

MR. GELB: But you could make that argument by saying you would have to keep studying something forever to insure it didn't have a foreign connection.

MR. COLBY: No, I don't think you do. You respond to a present need, a present problem, a present danger. We terminated this operation a year and a half ago, because the problem has gone away in great part, and consequently there is not a reason for continuing that kind of an effort to identify foreign links to American dissident organizations.

MR. ROSS: Senator Church says that his intelligence committee has not been able to find evidence of an order from any President to the CIA to plan assassinations. Does that mean the CIA was acting on its own in this area?

MR. COLBY: I don't believe that I want to talk about the subject of assassinations. This is a very difficult and complex subject. Some of the facts are not well known or not well recorded, and some of the degree to which various people within and outside of the agency were a part of any such activity is not very clear.

We have reported on this fully to the committees and we will do so, but I do not think it appropriate for public discussion.

MR. ROSS: Let me turn to another area then. The CIA placed the Shah of Iran back on his throne in the mid-fifties. The Shah is now one of the principal reasons why we are paying a great deal more money for our oil. In this instance, as in others, mightn't it have been better to just allow events to take their normal course?

MR. COLBY: And allow the Communist Party of Iran to take over that country? I doubt that. I think you would have been stopped from the oil long before this.

MR. ROSS: Would not oil possibly be cheaper, being bought from the Communist countries? After all, we have engaged in some sort of an attempt to negotiate for natural gas from the Soviet Union. Mightn't that be a cheaper price than we are paying out of the Persian Gulf right now?

MR. COLBY: In the mid-fifties, the problem of Communist

expansion was a very great danger around the world, and we did a lot of things to prevent it.

In the seventies we have begun the process of negotiation with a Communist world which is, itself, divided in the Sino-Soviet split. You have a totally different strategic situation we are facing today than the one we faced in the fifties.

MR. SPIVAK: The public has been deeply concerned by the stories of CIA involvement in plotting to assassinate foreign leaders. Don't you think it would be better to release the full and true story lest rumors and speculations make it seem a lot worse than it is?

MR. COLBY: No, Mr. Spivak. The instructions in the agency are quite clear, that the agency will not engage in, support or stimulate or condone assassination at this time. Those instructions have been issued by the agency for several years now.

MR. SPIVAK: We are talking about the past though.

MR. COLBY: I do not think it useful to our country to go into a great exposure of things that happened in the fifties and sixties, and I think that that subject had best be settled by adopting a firm policy at this point not to use such activity and letting the past stay quiet.

MR. SPIVAK: May I take you to one thing that is happening now? Rumors are being spread that the CIA is somehow involved in attempts to get rid of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Can you categorically state that—

MR. COLBY: I categorically deny that.

MR. SPIVAK: —is CIA not involved in any way?

MR. COLBY: I categorically deny that.

MR. ROWAN: The Rockefeller Report said that one of the CIA's computer systems had information on 300,000 Americans in it. You have testified that the CIA maintains 40 to 50 such record systems. I am wondering, can you tell us how many Americans are in the CIA's computer files or can you estimate that number?

MR. COLBY: No, I can't, Mr. Rowan. We obviously have many, many Americans in our files, applicants, people who had clearances, people who have reported to us, sources of what is going on abroad. We have large numbers of Americans in our files. There is a great overlap in them, and I am unable to come out with a total.

MR. ROWAN: One quick followup question: Has the CIA computer system been used not just to keep files but to do modeling and predicting, to try to predict the behavior of people?

MR. COLBY: I do not believe so, no. I am pretty sure that has

not been used as a prediction—we obviously use computers a great deal in our business of analyzing material, storing it, retrieving it and so forth. As to predictability of personal behavior, of human behavior, there have been some experiments I think in modeling to see whether patterns grow and whether similar behavior is followed in future times, but this is conducted under the strict rules applicable to this kind of research and development.

MR. KILPATRICK: The Murphy Commission has recommended that the CIA be renamed the Foreign Intelligence Agency. Would that help your public relations problem?

MR. COLBY: I think if you just changed the name, our friends of the press would quickly penetrate that as being sort of a cosmetic change and not a real one, although the word "foreign" I am all for. In my confirmation hearing I suggested that you add the word "foreign" before the word "intelligence" wherever it appears in the act.

MR. GELB: If you thought a member of the CIA was, say, leaking information to Mr. Spivak, would you be empowered under the law to surveil and wire tap and bug Mr. Spivak?

MR. COLBY: No, absolutely not, and I would not be empowered under even the legislation I recommend to improve our secrecy; I would not be allowed to do anything with respect to an outsider. I would be allowed to follow within the agency the activities of one of our employees that I thought was in some way misbehaving. I have the same authority in that respect as the head of any governmental organization like the Fish and Wildlife Service, to be responsible for his own employees and their behavior.

MR. ROSS: The Rockefeller Commission suggested it might not be such a good idea to have a career man as head of the CIA. Do you think that is a hint from the White House that you may be ought to resign?

MR. COLBY: I don't think that is a hint. I serve totally at the pleasure of the President, and he can turn his pleasure somewhere else any time he wishes. I will do my duty. As long as he thinks I am useful, I will stay.

MR. SPIVAK: I am sorry to interrupt, but our time is almost up and we won't be able to get in another question and certainly not another answer.

Thank you, Mr. Colby, for being with us today on MEET THE PRESS.

MR. COLBY: Thank you.

The Proceedings of

M E E T T H E P R E S S

as broadcast nationwide by the National Broadcasting Company, Inc., and printed and made available to the public to further interest in impartial discussions of questions affecting the public welfare. Transcripts may be obtained by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope and twenty-five cents for each copy to:

Monble Press Inc. Box 2111, Washington, D. C. 20013

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MEET THE PRESS is telecast every Sunday over the NBC Television Network. This program is originated from the NBC Studios in Washington, D.C.

Television Broadcast 12:30-1:00 P.M. EDT

