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Views Of Colby

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I used to lean toward the view that William Colby was a starry-eyed idealist so shocked by what he discovered on becoming head of the CIA that he spilled the beans in an indiscriminate and damaging way. But that charitable theory does not survive a reading of Colby's book, "Honorable Men," still less the self-promotional performance he put in Sunday on the CBS show "60 Minutes."

Colby emerges from those self-portraits as the supersharp bureaucrat. He anticipated the storm breaking over the CIA and disclosed to the press and Congress more than strictly required in the hopes of winning points that would limit the damage done to himself and the agency.

The good-guy view of Colby rested on a mixture of character and history. As a person, Colby is as far as possible from being what Mike Wallace, the superb questioner on "60 minutes," called in a rare lapse into TV jargon an "elitist."

Colby was Princeton but not a golden boy. On the contrary, he was a hard-working, true-believing son of an Irish Catholic army officer. Instead of having fancy, aristocratically insouciant ambitions to be a writer or poet, he chose the humdrum life of a government labor lawyer. To this day he lacks the glamor and cynicism of those intellectuals who made a cult of intelligence. He always strikes me as totally bland—and straightforward.

The record shows him to have been at all times on the side of the good guys. He was for labor in the era when

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the unions stood unambiguously for social progress. He fought daringly against the Nazis in World War II, and successfully against the communists in the cold war.

Except for a five-year stint in the

middle '60s, he served in posts abroad throughout his CIA career. He became director overnight when James Schlesinger was sent to the Defense Department to succeed Elliot Richardson, who was moved to Justice in one of Richard Nixon's desperate lurches to save himself from Watergate. The first thing that hit Colby's desk after he became director was a report by the inspector general ordered up by Schlesinger.

The inspector general's report laid out in full detail the CIA horrors that

have since seen the light of day. It seemed likely to me that Colby was horrified by what he learned. It seemed plausible that he then became determined to force out the truth almost as an act of contrition.

But that theory is shattered by the most salient feature of Colby's book. The book centers on relations between Colby and senior people in the Nixon and Ford administrations. As director of CIA, Colby enjoyed their implicit trust, and they said many unguarded things to him.

Now he reveals those tidbits, to show that he was far more forthcoming when it came to making public CIA horror stories than such people as President Ford, Vice President Rockefeller and Secretary of State Kissinger. Thus he writes that Rockefeller wanted him to "take the traditional stance of fending off investigators by drawing the cloak of secrecy around the agency, in the name of national security."

There was no intrinsic need for Colby to finger the personalities who wanted him to stonewall the Congress and the press. Doing so—especially for the head of a secret intelligence agency—is an act of bad faith.

It not only repudiates the theory of Colby as a starry-eyed idealist. It also lays bare his true motive. He sought—and still seeks—to calibrate the CIA on the issue of full disclosure. He wants to be better than others, on the side of the angels. Why? Because that way he could escape the worst blame of all, blame for a coverup. He could get good marks for cooperation with Congress and the press, and perhaps save some of his own skin and the reputation of the agency.

Those tactics, of course, did not succeed in saving the CIA. Colby, in his book, blames the Congress and the press for irresponsible sensationalism in airing deeds that could have been handled in a more balanced way.

But those complaints come ill from Colby's lips. He knew something about the Congress and was especially wise to the press and its bent for sensationalism. Probably no high official connected with Vietnam saw more of the press than Colby. So injured innocence about the media sounds bogus to me.

I do not criticize Colby for his performance as director of CIA. After Vietnam and Watergate a storm was sure to break over the agency. He had difficult choices to make. In the end it didn't make much difference whether Colby cooperated with the press or the Congress or not. What came out was bound to come out. The damage done to the agency could not have been avoided.

What I don't understand is why Colby now feels obliged to wash the dirty linen all over again. In doing so he comes close to being that signal thing: a man who has lost everything, including honor.

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