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Farewell, My Lovely

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 5—On Sunday afternoon William E. Colby, who had just lost his job as director of Central Intelligence, stopped in at the home of James R. Schlesinger, who had just lost his as Secretary of Defense, to commiserate. "You know," Mr. Schlesinger said, "Dick Helms outlasted us both."

There was more to that remark than the mild irony doubtless intended. Richard Helms was the C.I.A. director under whom many of the now-disclosed illegalities and outrages took place. He did his best to prevent their disclosure and correction, among other things answering Congressional questions about activities in Chile in a way that was deliberately deceptive and perhaps perjurious.

When Mr. Helms left the C.I.A. to become Ambassador to Iran, Mr. Schlesinger took over. He soon discovered the rot and took vigorous action, ordering the internal inquiry that has been the basis for much of the subsequent public disclosure. Mr. Colby, succeeding him, carried on the cleansing operation and cooperated to a significant degree with Congressional investigations.

The man who had the agency illegally wiretapping and opening mail at home, and destabilizing governments and possibly trying to assassinate their leaders abroad—and who worked to cover all that up—remains a United States ambassador. The two men who tried to bring the C.I.A. within minimum standards of the American Constitution, laws and ideals have been fired. As the saying goes, those facts carry a message.

The intelligence shift may be the most interesting aspect of the weekend massacre. The politics of the affair can already be seen as another example of President Ford's dimness and penchant for stumbling. At his unfortunate press conference, he put on a labored semblance of decisiveness as he said again and again that he wanted his own "team." It was the picture of a man trying to convince himself that he is somebody.

In dismissing Mr. Colby, the President was surely reflecting the discomfort and annoyance caused to him by the continuing intelligence investigations. Mr. Colby would hardly expect personal sympathy for being made to carry the can. His pale blue eyes have seen much horror, in a lifetime of his own and others' clandestine activities. The questions are of policy, not sympathy.

Mr. Colby has been trying to steer the C.I.A. through an extraordinary crisis of public confidence. His aim is to have the informed public accept, in the end, that this country must have an effective intelligence service. He

thinks the only way to do that is to convince people that the days of massive C.I.A. illegalities are over.

To that end, Mr. Colby accepts the idea of public accountability for the agency. That does not mean publishing intelligence secrets—far from it; Mr. Colby wants legislation to help the C.I.A. keep secrets. He has made clear he would welcome real Congressional oversight, by a permanent joint committee with a professional staff.

Over the last year or so Mr. Colby has gone so public that many veteran C.I.A.-watchers were bewildered. He replied to newspaper disclosures, and he bought citizens' groups in for lectures like the local Chamber of Commerce. All that upset some officials, possibly including the President. Mr. Colby's view was that the days of pretending that the agency did not exist were over.

As a veteran of the old gung-ho spying days, Mr. Colby could never be an altogether convincing person to lead the agency into a new, more accountable age. When asked about that, he said he recognized the difficulty but hoped to guide the transition through the investigations and the resulting legislation before a new, more independent figure took over.

Whatever one thinks of Mr. Colby, it can hardly create confidence in President Ford's commitment to reform of the C.I.A. to have him fired in the middle of the investigation process. It is equally unconvincing for the President to choose as his successor a former chairman of the Republican National Committee. If there is anything the agency does not need at this point, it is an ambitious partisan figure such as George Bush.

President Ford's belated request that Mr. Colby stay on until Mr. Bush is confirmed—if he is—represents an attempt to recover from some effects of the crude and hasty dismissal. But the hope of reform now plainly rests in Congress rather than in the Presidency.

Unhappily, neither the House nor the Senate C.I.A. inquiry offers much ground for optimism at this point. Senator Church has seemingly been running for President a good deal of the time, with headline-grabbing hearings on trivial subjects while the tough problems are ignored. The House committee has sought brave confrontations with the Executive over access to information and then backed off.

The issue that cries out for study, both factual and philosophical, is whether the C.I.A. should have any function except intelligence-gathering. In short, can it gain and hold public confidence if it goes on engaging in covert acts? That issue will require the committees to ask hard and public questions about Chile and other places, and about the role of Secretary of State Kissinger.