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The Colby Case

Anybody who wants to know where it's at in Washington these days should pay close attention to William Colby, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency. For Mr. Colby is the model of the modern bureaucrat.

In dealing with the Congress and the press he has been openness personified — often to the disadvantage of his colleagues and superiors in the government. His case shows that the sensational revelations about domestic spying by the CIA, while connected with what used to be wrong here, have nothing to do with what is presently the trouble in Washington.

Mr. Colby is a symbolic figure in many ways. He is typical of the highly professional men (Princeton and Columbia Law School) who could have made it in private life but chose government after the war because it offered more interesting jobs.

His service with the government led to a distinct institutional loyalty. Mr. Colby has been with intelligence services since World War II, and with the CIA for a score of years. He is totally aware of the agency's bureaucratic interest. If the word did not have such a very bad connotation, he could fairly be called an *apparatchik*.

Finally, Mr. Colby has experienced firsthand two blows shattering to the American bureaucracy. He was a leading figure in the Vietnam War—both out in Vietnam and here in Washington. He was also involved in picking up the pieces in CIA after the agency's role in Watergate (notably the Ellsberg break-in) began to surface.

In the light of that experience, Mr. Colby's record is fascinating. He has broken with the tradition which made the top intelligence man a close-mouthed bad guy who took the rap for his bosses. On the contrary, Mr. Colby has made himself regularly available for speeches and questioning by congressional committees and interested citizens' groups including newspapermen.

In dealing with the Congress, Mr. Colby has not merely talked to the select number of senior senators and



representatives grouped together in an "oversight committee." He has talked to the regular committees on foreign relations, appropriations, atomic energy and economic policy. He has indicated that he would welcome a new oversight committee, and would accept any membership on the committee the Congress chose to impose.

In dealing with citizens' groups, he does not merely talk to friends of the CIA. He met with over a hundred journalists during his first year in office, and spoke to the Nieman Fellows at Harvard. He even exposed himself to a group which has as its stock-in-trade hostility to the CIA—the Center for National Security Studies, which staged a program that included an encounter between Mr. Colby and Daniel Ellsberg.

One inevitable result of such openness is the circulation of stories very prejudicial to officials for whom directors of the CIA normally show an exaggerated respect. For example, Mr. Colby—without being obliged to—told a congressional committee a lot of things about CIA activities in Chile which put egg all over the faces of former director Richard Helms, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and eventually President Ford.

Another indirect consequence, given the tenor of the times, is that a great many other intelligence officers are spilling the beans about past operations. Such sources have combined with a notable case of journalist overplay to yield the current crop of stories about CIA spying on domestic dissidents in the Nixon years.

I do not mean to minimize such actions. If what actually took place was as advertised in the New York Times by Seymour Hersh, then there were grave violations of the laws governing CIA operations.

But no one should be under the impression that the spirit of the Nixon presidency is still dominant in Washington. There is no present threat to individual liberties from an all-powerful Executive.

The reverse is true. The real danger is weakness at the center, bureaucrats playing to the press and the Congress, and demoralization all along the line. So those who take upon themselves to be investigators and judges of government behavior have all the more reason to be careful and responsible, to note the present as well as the past, and to avoid the hunt for scapegoats which now seems to be shaping up.