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Colby's Body Found Along River Shore; Ex-CIA Director Guided Spy Agency In Turbulent Time: [FINAL Edition]

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▣ Abstract (summary)

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▣ Full Text

Police recovered the body of former CIA director William E. Colby yesterday in knee-deep water near his Southern Maryland vacation home, nine days after he disappeared and apparently drowned while canoeing.

The body floated ashore overnight and came to rest in a clump of aquatic grass in the two-mile-wide Wicomico River near Rock Point, about 200 yards from where Colby's vacant canoe was found April 28.

The clothed body bore no life jacket, and authorities said it showed no signs of trauma or foul play, leading them to believe that Colby, 76, had drowned after struggling to stay afloat in chilly waters. Colby's body was sent to the Maryland medical examiner's office for an autopsy, and results are expected today.

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Sally Shelton-Colby, who remained at the couple's Cobb Neck retreat about 40 miles south of Washington during the search for her husband, said yesterday that he had a "magnificent" life in an espionage career that spanned World War II and the Vietnam War, including a two-year stint as CIA director in the 1970s.

"He fought the fascists, and he fought the communists, and he lived to see democracy take hold around the world," Shelton-Colby said. "He was just thrilled."

In a statement, President Clinton said: "Throughout a quarter of a century at the CIA, William Colby played a pivotal role in shaping our nation's intelligence community. . . . He made tough decisions when necessary, and he was always guided by the core values of the country he loved."

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Although Colby said he had tried to halt such abuses, he staunchly defended Operation Phoenix as part of a political war. He said, however, that he regretted the furor it caused in the United States.

His leadership of the agency, from 1973 to 1975, coincided with the final months of the Vietnam War and the Watergate crisis that led to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, and it also was one of the most stormy periods in the CIA's history.

As the CIA's top officer, Colby was called before congressional investigating panels 56 times to answer questions about alleged wrongdoing, ranging from assassination plots against foreign leaders to intercepting and opening mail of U.S. citizens and illegal domestic spying.

He elected to cooperate with the investigators, turning over, among other items, a 693-page list of CIA secrets, sometimes called the "family jewels." This earned him the antipathy of some CIA loyalists who believed he had betrayed his colleagues. It may also have cost him his job.

The White House described his dismissal as essential to a reorganization of the agency.

But in his 1978 memoirs, "Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA," Colby said he was fired for refusing "to stonewall" congressional and executive branch investigations into CIA wrongdoing.

As director of central intelligence, he had fired one of the CIA's most controversial officers, the counterintelligence chief James Jesus Angleton, who had become notorious for his aggressive pursuit of what he believed to be Soviet "moles" operating throughout the U.S. intelligence system.

Reliable CIA officers' careers were being damaged and destroyed as a result of these theories, Colby said, declaring Angleton to have had an "ultraconspiratorial turn of mind." The firing of Angleton brought accusations from the hard-line right that Colby was himself a Soviet mole.

Friends and colleagues of Colby's remembered him as a down-to-earth man. The Silver Star medal he won in World War II hung out of view on a back wall at the Colbys' Georgetown home. He called it his "good conduct medal." When he was CIA director, he never had a guard with him. Colby told Alan Alocke, an Arlington business associate, that if people wanted to harm him, they'd find a way. He saw no sense in putting anyone else in danger.

In retirement, Colby was an accessible and continuously busy presence on the Washington scene.

Two weeks ago, he returned from a trip to Mongolia, where he was promoting new business ventures, the staple of his professional life in the last decade. He wrote a newsletter, spoke at seminars across the country, met with business officials, practiced law with a New York firm and was a regular guest on news programs.

"At his death, he owed me an article," said Craig S. Carpel, a New York publisher of Colby's Strategic Weekly Briefings, a newsletter. "This guy was not exactly a stay-at-home type."

In 1992, he and Sally Shelton-Colby, assistant administrator for global programs at the U.S. Agency for International Development, bought a waterfront cottage in Charles County, where they loved to sail. With his wife away for the weekend in Texas, authorities believe Colby went for an evening canoe trip April 27. He was not seen alive again.

More than 100 searchers, using helicopters, patrol boats, sonar, specially trained dogs and drag lines in the days that followed, concentrated on an area of less than one square mile where Colby usually canoed.

Yesterday, Cpl. Leonard Sciukas, of the Maryland Natural Resources Police, found the body about 8 a.m. after spotting a splash of red near the Wicomico River shoreline.

Colby was wearing a red nylon windbreaker, khaki slacks, a blue and white striped polo shirt and socks but no shoes, said Charles County Sheriff Fred Davis. The missing shoes could indicate that Colby kicked off his footwear so he could swim better, said Lt. Mark Sanders, of the Natural Resources Police, a lead agency in the search.

Sanders said it appeared Colby had breathed in water. "Judging by what we've seen, it's likely" that he struggled and drowned, Sanders said.

"We still think it was a boating accident," Davis said. "We have no reason to believe otherwise."

Shelton-Colby, accompanied by two friends, identified the body on the shore, bending over to view it as police lifted a blanket.

Often described as the archetypal intelligence officer, Colby was mild mannered and unassuming, soft-spoken and conservative in dress. He was said to be a perfect match for his own description of the ideal intelligence officer, "the traditional gray man, so inconspicuous that he can never catch a waiter's eye in a restaurant."

During World War II, he served in the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor agency of the CIA and an unofficial proving ground for a cadre of its early officers. His war record included dropping by parachute into Nazi-occupied France to help organize resistance forces. Later, he parachuted into Norway to help blow up German-held rail depots.

He was born in St. Paul, Minn., the son of a career Army officer. While growing up, Colby spent three years in China when his father was posted there. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton University in 1940. After the war, he received a law degree from Columbia University in 1947, then practiced law in New York and with the National Labor Relations Board in Washington before joining the CIA in 1951.

After leaving the agency, Colby practiced law in Washington and did international business consulting and promotion.

Recently, with former KGB Gen. Oleg Kalugin, he played a starring role in an interactive CD-ROM game, "Spycraft: The Great Game."

"I'm sort of the avuncular fellow the player can turn to for advice," Colby said of his role in the game, which involves the assassination of a Russian presidential candidate, the Russian mafia, double agents and layer upon layer of betrayal.

His marriage to Barbara Heinzen Colby ended in divorce.

Survivors include his wife, Sally Shelton-Colby of Washington, and four children from his first marriage.

Staff writers Bart Barnes and Jackie Spinner contributed to this report.

Illustration

PHOTO,,Larry Morris; Map,,Dave Cook; PHOTO,,Twp CAPTION: Sally Shelton-Colby hugs Lt. Mark Sanders, of the Maryland Natural Resources Police, after her husband's body was found near where his canoe was discovered. The former CIA director is pictured below in 1975. CAPTION: Sally Shelton-Colby speaks with members of the news media. "He fought the fascists, and he fought the communists, and he lived to see democracy take hold around the world," she said of her husband.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer

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