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A son points his camera at ex-CIA chief William Colby

In Carl Colby's 'The Man Nobody Knew,' William Colby seems emotionally aloof, never hinting at his role in U.S. intelligence gathering.

October 15, 2011 | By Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times

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William Colby wore many guises: intrepid Cold Warrior, cool technocrat, international man of mystery and, to critics of the deadly covert operations he ran in Vietnam, "war criminal."

The maker of a penetrating new documentary, "The Man Nobody Knew," which Friday opened in Los Angeles, had a less formal epithet for the former CIA head: Dad. But Carl Colby, an Emmy Award-winning director and producer, admits that even his father's wife and children often were at pains to decipher him.

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To his family, William Colby was a ghost-like presence, a man who led the exotic, dangerous life of a **John le Carré** master-spook but projected the image of a mild-mannered bow-tied bureaucrat. For years, his son avoided digging beneath the multiple aliases, unsure of what he'd find.

"I thought, 'Why wouldn't I turn the cameras onto my own father?'" Carl Colby, 60, said by phone last week. "I never did it because whenever I would talk to him about anything meaningful or personal or revealing he would just sort of cloud over and become opaque, and give me that kind of wan smile, and just say, 'That's your department.'"

In "The Man Nobody Knew," Colby lays out his father's remarkable career ascent, detailing his daredevil paratrooping into Nazi-occupied Europe, his stints with the CIA subverting Italy's communist party and his stewardship of the notorious Phoenix Program of enemy "pacification" in Vietnam. Colby remembers protesters comparing his father to Gestapo head Heinrich Himmler.

As the movie spins forward, Colby's evenhanded narration evolves from the wide-eyed effusions of a young boy — "My father was always the coolest character I ever knew" — to more measured assessments: "He didn't have a lot of romantic ideas about spying. He saw it for what it was: dirty business."

The elder Colby ended his public career running the CIA under Presidents Nixon and Ford, amid tense encounters with Congressional committees determined to wrest back the powers they'd lost to the Executive branch. He died in 1996.

Colby said his inspiration for making "The Man Nobody Knew" arrived on the morning of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He was watching CNN's live coverage as journalist Wolf Blitzer asked the former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker how such a debacle could have happened. Baker, according to the filmmaker, traced the attacks back to William Colby's disclosures to Congress and the alleged subsequent weakening of the U.S. intelligence network.

"I thought, well, wow, that's a pretty harsh statement, very biting remark," Colby recalled. "And I saw that ...maybe my father has some relevance again.... I started thinking, well, maybe there's a story here."

Colby previously had tackled a wide range of subjects before turning to his father. He produced a TV version of the Obie Award-winning musical "One Mo' Time!" produced and directed the space-exploration film "Voyager: The Grand Tour" and has made documentaries about numerous artists and architects as well as legendary members of the CIA and FBI.

"The Man Nobody Knew" includes interviews with a microcosm of the Washington political and foreign policy establishment of the 1970s and '80s, including Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, James Schlesinger and Donald Rumsfeld. Also on hand, proffering background and context, are journalists Bob Woodward, Seymour Hersh, Tim Weiner and the late Daniel Schorr.

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However, Colby credits David Johnson, the film's producer and founder of the politically progressive Act 4 Entertainment new media company, with pushing him to confront his conflicted feelings.

"I think it was really important to have Carl focus on his personal feelings, both on the way his father treated his family, but also on what his father did professionally, both on the heroic side and on the dark side," Johnson said.

The filmmaker concedes that father-son bonding was difficult with a man who almost never revealed his emotions. Instead, Colby bonded with his mother, Barbara Colby, who appears in the film as a genteel and sympathetic figure of staunch Roman Catholic belief, devoted to her family and husband although he remained an enigma throughout their long marriage.

"She's kind of like Barbara Stanwyck with an Ivy League education," Colby said. "She took on the burdens, she took on what was given to her, in a very dignified way, and I always respected that."

Colby would like "The Man Nobody Knew" to lead Americans to more honest and informed exchanges about our government's sub-rosa activities in contemporary hot spots like the Middle East.

"I just don't want another repeat of somebody like my father being shot down in flames," he said. "Dozens of operations are lifting off, tonight. People are leaving Tampa, Fla., Fort Hood, Fort Campbell, tonight, forward deployments. This is not 15 or 20 people. This is hundreds, thousands. So to be completely unaware of it is a little dangerous, I think."

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