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Forum (38) on the Importance of the Scholarship of John Prados

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Introduction by Malcolm Byrne, The National Security Archive

My first memory of John Prados is in the mid-1980s at my then-boss Scott Armstrong's house in Washington, DC. I was just starting out at the National Security Archive, an organization Scott had taken the lead in founding, and then becoming its first director. I had previously been Scott's researcher at the *Washington Post* on a project looking at the sausage factory that is US foreign policy. (Scott's idea had been to follow operations at two far-flung embassies—Tehran and Managua—uncannily anticipating the Iran-Contra scandal that was about to break.)

I had heard of John. He had recently written *The Soviet Estimate*.¹ He was also one of a handful of researchers Scott used to single out, along with the likes of Jeff Richelson,² as an especially prolific and adept user of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). And he was part of a small gaggle of historians, journalists, and public interest types whose occasional beer-infused bull sessions at each other's houses about access to documents, the wretched state of FOIA, and the culture of secrecy under President Ronald Reagan formed the kernel for the idea of the Archive, as an organization that could serve as a kind of public institutional memory by housing the troves of declassified sources journalists and others had unearthed with such difficulty over the years.

So, when I finally met John, it was with a little bit of awe. Decker out in ponytail, jeans, and leather jacket he was noticeable even in that mix of 1960s-and-1970s-era Washington veterans that evening. He seemed stand-offish, didn't have much to say, and mainly circled around, nodding and smiling at the wisecracks and war stories. Thinking back, he was still in his early 30s, so his diffidence in that group was totally understandable.

It was only years later, after we brought John on as a Senior Fellow at the Archive, that I got to know him better. By then he had published probably 15 more books (on his way eventually to some 27 volumes) about the U.S. intelligence community, the National Security Council, and especially the Vietnam War. *Keepers of the Keys*, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, and *Safe for Democracy*³ became standard references for me.

So the intimidation factor was still there. But it took no time at all to realize that in spite of his reputation as a ferocious researcher and scholar and all his accomplishments, including a slew of awards, he was also a genuinely modest, unassuming guy. All he wanted was to be able to keep up his extraordinary investigations into the murkier dimensions of America's role in the world, help others understand the lessons from that history, and support the Archive any way he could. Perfect.

The distinguished scholars who have graciously (and happily) agreed to create this tribute all have Prados stories to tell that give a wonderful sense of him as a scholar, activist, and person—the incredible breadth of erudition, exceptionally productive scholarship, salt-of-the-earth character, and of course bearer of that classic

¹ John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength* (New York: Dial Press, 1982).

² Jeffrey T. Richelson (1949-2017) was another prolific—and independent—scholar who later became a longtime Fellow at the Archive. Among his many volumes were several standard works, including *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (New York: HarperInformation, 1995), and currently in its ninth printing), *America's Space Sentinels: DSP Satellites and National Security* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999, four total printings), and *A Century of Spies: Intelligence in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1991); Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through the Persian Gulf War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996); Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009).

Prados “look.”⁴ As an admirer, colleague, and beneficiary of much of his wisdom, I have a few tales of my own, but this is an introduction not a full-blown appreciation, so I will offer just one anecdote that still conveys a lot about John and how he went about his craft and passion. (I’m grateful to Nate Jones for his reminder about this episode.)

One of John’s many topics of expertise—building off his extraordinary knowledge of the Vietnam War—was the history and contents of the Pentagon Papers. Most people probably forget that for 40 years around a third of the Papers remained officially classified, even after Sen. Mike Gravel (D-AK) inserted over 4,100 pages of it into the Congressional Record in 1971 and the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) released a partial version, cleared by the Defense Department, the following year. It was only in 2011 that the National Archives (NARA) announced that it would be making public what was billed as the complete version.

Just prior to the release date, however, the Archivist of the US had made it known that *eleven words* would need to stay redacted. Eleven words. John (among others) was outraged that a single syllable of such a monumentally important and widely read historical source could reasonably be considered classified after so many years.

It turned out, to the surprise of no-one inside or outside government who is familiar with the Kafka-esque world of security classification, that the HASC version had already printed the offending words. “Figures. I should have made that prediction,” wrote a senior NARA official in an internal email (later obtained through FOIA by Steve Aftergood of the Federation of American Scientists).⁵

Soon afterwards, officials at NARA determined that the 11 words could safely be released. Still, the head of the National Declassification Center (NDC) decided that the words themselves would not be divulged. “I think we can all agree,” she wrote to colleagues, “that it is unnecessary to provide any further insight into what was originally considered for redaction or which agency or agencies were suggesting those redactions.”⁶

Openness advocates like John were hardly mollified; if anything, it presented a challenge he couldn’t refuse. In short order, he came out with an e-book for the Archive entitled “Eleven Possibilities for Pentagon Papers ‘11 Words’.” In painstaking forensic detail, he laid out a string of theories for what the would-be redactions could be, backed up by 11 side-by-side-by-side triptychs of the relevant pages from the three main editions of the Papers—Gravel, HASC, and NARA.⁷

Laying bare the absurdity of the whole enterprise, he went a step further and created a contest, open to the public, soliciting submissions of candidates for the missing words.

⁴ See John’s essay on his formative years and his approach to scholarship: Prados, “Panning for Gold,” ed. Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo/ISSF Learning the Scholar’s Craft Series, 5 October 2021; <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E374.pdf>.

⁵ William Bosanko (NARA) email to Sheryl Shenberger, (Director, National Declassification Center), Subject: Pentagon Papers Page issue, June 6, 2011, 8:16 AM, released under FOIA to Steven Aftergood, Federation of American Scientists, June 24, 2011.

⁶ Sheryl Shenberger, (Director, National Declassification Center), email to various addressees, Subject: Re: 11 Word Redaction, June 6, 2011, 2:59 PM, released under FOIA to Steven Aftergood, Federation of American Scientists, June 24, 2011.

⁷ The posting is available here: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/intelligence-vietnam/2011-07-12/eleven-possibilities-pentagon-papers-11-secret-words>.

It was all John's way of drawing attention to a wholly unnecessary problem—by poking fun at it. His doggedness, not to mention his sense of humor, met with collective eye-rolling inside the archives where at least some NARA officials had a feeling something like this would be coming.

Emailing colleagues just before the decision came down to release the 11 words, an NDC division chief commented:

I just wanted to throw a couple of things to you that you can pass to the folks making this decision.

First, in speaking to the LBJ library folks, the researcher who is most aggressive in pursuing the PP, John Prados, will most likely find the "declassified" occurrence of the page pretty quickly. So please advise everyone that if they insist on maintaining the redaction, Prados will likely scope out the "declassified" page very quickly.⁸

The email ended with a dour warning: "As you can tell by his NPR appearance, Prados will parade this discovery like a politician on the 4th of July."

It was quintessentially John Prados. The unparalleled expertise and detail-obsessiveness, the tenacity, the outrage at official obtuseness, and the wry humor in the face of it all.

John was truly an 'independent historian;' a daunting advocate for honesty, integrity, and accountability; a gifted communicator of complex ideas and simple truths; and a generous colleague, mentor, and friend.

Participants:

Malcolm Byrne is Deputy Director and Research Director at the nongovernmental National Security Archive based at The George Washington University. His most recent books are *Republics of Myth: National Narratives and the US-Iran Conflict*, with Hussein Banai and John Tirman (Johns Hopkins 2022) and *Worlds Apart: A Documentary History of US-Iranian Relations, 1978-2018*, with Kian Byrne (Cambridge, 2021).

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam* (W.W. Norton, 1988), *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995), and *The War on Leakers* (The New Press, 2016). He has been president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Affairs

James G. Hershberg is Professor of History and International Affairs at George Washington University; former director of the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; and author of *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993; pb: Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995; e-book: Plunkett Lake Press, 2018) and *Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C./Stanford: Wilson Center Press/Stanford University Press, 2012). He is currently working on a book on Cuba, Brazil, and the Cold War.

Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi is an Assistant Professor in International Relations at the School for Interdisciplinary and Global Studies at the University of South Florida. He has a PhD in Political Science

⁸ Like the previous NARA emails cited, this one was dated June 6, 2011; it was sent at 7:44 AM (obtained by Steve Aftergood under FOIA, see previous citations).

from the University of California, Irvine. He is currently working on a project on secret law. His latest publications are “The Double Life of Uncle Sam: The United States and the International Laws Banning Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment,” in Lucrecia García Iommi and Richard W. Maass, eds., *The United States and International Law: Paradoxes of Support across Contemporary Issues*. (University of Michigan Press, 2022), and “Drone Warfare and International Humanitarian Law: The U.S., the I.C.R.C, and the Contest over Global Legal Order,” in Paul Lushenko, Srinjoy Bose, and William Maley, eds., *Drones and Global Order: Implications of Remote Warfare on International Society*. Routledge, 2022).

Robert J. McMahan is the Ralph Mershon Professor of History emeritus at Ohio State University and the author, most recently, of *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (2nd rev. ed., Oxford University Press, 2021).

Leopoldo Nuti is Professor of History of International Relations at Roma Tre University and Co-Director of the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project. From 2014 to 2018 he was President of the Italian Society of International History. Among his most recent publications are, as an editor, *The Euromissiles Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), and as an author “The Making of the Nuclear Order and the Historiography on the 1970s,” in *The International History Review* 40:5 (2018), “Italy as a Hedging State? The Problematic Ratification of the Non-Proliferation Treaty,” in Joseph F. Pilat, ed., *Nuclear Latency and Hedging: Concepts, History and Issues* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center Press, 2019), and “NATO's Role in Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Arms Control: A (Critical) History,” *Documenti LAI* 21/03, January 2021.

 Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University, emeritus

“John Prados: Indispensable Chronicler of Our Times.”¹

I don’t remember when I first met John Prados. Now as I look back on it, it seems to me he was always there—at professional conventions, but also at specialized conferences. He was always there with notebook and pen, taking careful notes on each presentation. No one I have ever known had such a dedicated research agenda. He found almost everything to be useful to his inquiring mind. It was a strong asset to him as a historian because he always found the devil hidden in the details. Only once did I ever see him leave a session early. It was at a SHAFR (Society for the History of American Foreign Relations) luncheon and the speaker was retired General David Petraeus for a question and answer session. John was frustrated that there was an intermediary who fielded the questions for the general, sorting out what was asked from the pieces of paper that were passed up to the guest speaker.

John’s particular specialty was intelligence spelled with a capital *I* when he wrote about the Central Intelligence Agency and its leaders through the years, and with a small *i* when he wrote about the supposed Vietnam ‘Best and Brightest’ or those later policymakers in waiting who founded the Project for the New American Century that urged President George W. Bush to remove the supposed threat of Iraq’s ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ and its president, Saddam Hussein. No one was better than John Prados in digging out pieces of archival information in support of his thesis. And no one put together the links between figures in the policymaking community any better. In a sense he was a historical sociologist in the manner of C. Wright Mills, writing about *The Power Elite*.²

I wrote Ivan Dee, who had edited and published three of John’s books to confirm what I thought about the strengths of his style. He wrote back: “He was a pleasure to work with—fierce on details and with a clear narrative style and a sense of the dramatic.”³ He also confirmed what all of John’s readers knew, that he was an “archival rat,” who sussed out the crucial details of policy decisions others had missed or had disregarded. John wrote books about famous campaigns in World War II, but he is best known for his work on American intelligence operations from the OSS days into the Cold War years of the CIA. These became a mosaic revealing the overall structure of American Cold War policymaking. His collective portraits of American policymakers displayed all the interconnections these leaders brought with them from the higher perches amongst the nation’s economic and legal elites. He wrote about the big questions in a way that the reader became acquainted in an empathetic way with an individual policymaker even while wrestling with the results of that policy.

This trait was on display in several of his books. His portrait of Allen Dulles in, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness*, is surely one of the best treatments of this Founding Father of the Intelligence Agency as it was recreated after the disbanding of “Wild Bill” Donovan’s wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS).⁴ Even its title, which is taken in part from Joseph Conrad’s famous novel about a colonel gone rogue is suggestive of how Prados would work outward from individuals to policy. Allen Dulles was like T.S. Eliot’s famous imagination of the “concrete universal,”⁵ who began life steeped in a family heritage of government service in foreign policy operations and decisions. His grandfather, John Watts Foster had been a secretary of

¹ I would like to thank Ivan Dee, Richard Immerman, and Paul Miles for reading and commenting on this essay, and adding to my appreciation for John’s work

² C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

³ Ivan Dee to Lloyd Gardner, January 2, 2023. Published by *Quadrangle Books* in Chicago, these were *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (1995), *America Confronts Terrorism*, ed. (2002), and *Safe for Democracy* (2009).

⁴ John Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

⁵ Eliot used the term “concrete universal” about poets who draw on tradition but add their own imprint. It fits John Prados’s contributions. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood*, (New York: Knopf, 1921).

state in the late-nineteenth century, and an uncle by marriage, Robert Lansing, had served as Woodrow Wilson's second secretary of state during the First World War. Allen Dulles's first real experience was at a listening post in Bern, Switzerland, during World War II.

Donovan had sent him there to learn all he could about any Germans who were not tainted too much with Nazi ideology and might be useful after the war. He already had a reputation as the Great White Case Officer because of a story he told about himself that went back to an earlier tour in Bern during World War I. He had been sent there by 'Uncle Bert' to organize espionage activities at the American Embassy. At the time he was seeing a woman who was the daughter of a Swiss industrialist. They had made a date for a tennis match when a telephone call came for him from a Russian. The caller was anxious to see someone from the embassy. But Dulles had no intention of missing the tennis date. And so, as he would confess, he missed seeing Vladimir Ilyich Lenin who was about to leave exile for Russia "on his way to igniting the Russian Revolution. Allen W. Dulles dined out on that for decades."⁶

Prados spotted many a story like that one as he stalked the halls of the American heart of darkness, bringing out for readers not only such anecdotes but the story, for example, of those whom Dulles claimed were the good Germans. This was of course highly useful as the Cold War began and German scientists and spies he had identified in Bern were imported into the Free World. Dulles padded his credentials as the author of several books. Prados noted especially *Germany's Underground* (1947)⁷ as a starting point for the rehabilitation of Germany (part of it at least) into the Western bloc in the early Cold War. He had already written an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* on World War II Operation Sunrise secret negotiations. All this, Prados argued, fitted into a campaign led by former OSS chief Donovan who was not unhappy with such revelations "so long as the articles and books lamented the absence of a robust peacetime agency."⁸ It was natural then that Dulles climbed the intelligence ladder until in 1950 he became a key aide to Walter Bedell Smith at the CIA, where his talents concerning the intellectual Cold War in Europe were put to good use as Deputy Director for Plans at the Directorate of Plans, which put together the remnants of post-World War II agencies. It was his dream job, despite the original location in one of the wartime temporary buildings along the Reflecting Pool on the Mall. The buildings were drafty and cold in winter, Prados noted, and dreadfully hot in the summer. And then with his acute sense of irony, he wrote, "They also blocked the view to the Lincoln Memorial."⁹

All this led to Dulles's nomination by President Dwight Eisenhower to be director of the whole agency. This was another moment of irony, Prados wrote, because Bill Donovan wanted the job and had to settle for an ambassadorship to Thailand. Thus he could entitle his chapter on Allen Dulles and the CIA, "The House That Allen Built." Under Dulles's leadership covert operations flourished. Because of a clause in the Central Intelligence Agency Act, Dulles as director had the mission to protect sources and methods. And therein was the license to kill, to put it in Bondian terms. A 2011 internal history looked back under these terms to celebrate CIA interventions. "It concluded that nearly 80 percent [Prados's italics] of CIA interventions had had the goal of promoting and protecting democracy." But in reality. "Both the Iran and Guatemala operations—Allen Dulles's signal successes—produced dictatorships. The half-assed Congo intervention also led to dictatorship. No CIA action on Dulles's watch installed a democratic system."¹⁰

All this caught up with him in 1961 and the Bay of Pigs with the disastrous attempt by the CIA to launch an intervention in Cuba that would repeat the 1954 Guatemalan 'success' story when the agency overthrew a leftist regime that threatened American investments and declared itself something of a Marxist-Socialist state. Cuban President Fidel Castro not only survived, he found Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev willing to install

⁶ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 34.

⁷ Allen Welsh Dulles, *Germany's Underground* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

⁸ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 40.

⁹ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 50.

¹⁰ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 61.

missiles to defend his regime, leading to the most dangerous crisis in the Cold War. By that time, of course, Dulles was out. President John F. Kennedy not only fired him but appointed Dulles to sit on a review panel about what went wrong. He wanted to ensure that CIA concerns were considered, wrote Prados, “but also to require Dulles to redo his sums, to sit through an exhaustive waltz through every imaginable aspect of this horror.” After the CIA’s new house was actually built in Langley, Virginia, with both Kennedy and Dulles in attendance for the opening ceremony, along with the new director John McCone, “Allen Dulles took home the National Security Medal as consolation prize.”¹¹

The fallout from the Bay of Pigs did not end with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, but continued with a series of hailstorms that Prados detailed with his usual acumen in a book length study of one of Allen Dulles’s successors, William Colby. Colby was a career intelligence officer who headed the pacification programs in Vietnam, including the infamous Phoenix assassination teams. That role followed him all the rest of his career in the CIA, hanging like the ancient mariner’s albatross around his neck as the stories and evidence of major assassination plots became front page material. Prados detailed Colby’s continuing (up to the end of his life) belief that the Vietnam War had not been lost but thrown away: “Only a couple of months before his death, Colby maintained in one talk that if [South Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh] Diem had been left in power he would have achieved total victory within two years.”¹²

The truth was, Prados continued, that the United States fought the wrong war at the wrong time. Colby had it backwards. The United States fought a military war “when the adversary was a people in arms, and [it] shifted to oppose a people’s war when the enemy had transitioned to a conventional strategy.”¹³ But, still, Prados estimated that Colby “saved” the agency he worked for all his years in government when the days of reckoning came not simply for the reputation of the Phoenix program, but for assassination attempts on major figures and the infiltration of domestic protest groups during the Vietnam War. For his efforts to establish a new charter for the CIA that would bring it in tune with the Constitution and traditions of American democracy, he was roundly scourged by the old hands going back to the Dulles era, and by the Lord Castlereagh figure of the Nixon-Ford years, National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was forever living as if in the post-Napoleonic age of the Concert of Europe. Colby’s testimony about CIA misdeeds before Congressional Committees in what Prados, with his usual ironic *double entendre*, called “The Year of Intelligence” (1975-76), sought to put such behavior in the context of a noble effort to insure the nation’s capability to meet Cold War challenges. It was not a success either with stalwarts or critics of the agency, and eventually led to his dismissal.

Prados well summed up the contending forces arrayed against Colby’s final efforts in two quotations. The first came from Kissinger upon hearing that Colby had told a National Security Council meeting that the United States needed a law which prohibited assassinations in time of peace—a reference to the problem of reconciling attempts like those made on Fidel Castro’s life to American responsibilities for a decent respect for the opinions of mankind. The problem, as he saw it, went back to the original 1947 law establishing the CIA with all its ambiguities about such dangerous avenues as “plausible deniability.” Hearing of Colby’s call for such a law dumbfounded the combined National Security Adviser/ Secretary of State in both his roles. “‘It is an act of insanity and humiliation,’ Henry Kissinger interjected, ‘to have a law prohibiting the President from ordering assassinations.’”¹⁴

The second quotation came from an account of a conversation Colby had with an old friend who was teaching a course on Greek Tragedy at George Washington University. The professor, Bernard Knox, gave a lecture on *Antigone* to his class that Colby attended during “The Year of Intelligence.” The story unfolds

¹¹ Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley*, 75.

¹² Prados, *William Colby and the CIA: The Secret Wars of a Controversial Spymaster* (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas Press, 2009), 339.

¹³ Prados, *William Colby and the CIA*, 339.

¹⁴ Prados, *William Colby and the CIA*, 314.

around Antigone, the niece of King Creon, who defies her uncle by burying the body of her brother who had waged war against the home city. She is condemned to death, but her action pleases the gods, and brings down the curses of Creon's son, and Creon's wife, who commit suicide. Creon repents and tries to save Antigone's life, but it is too late. As the class discussion ensued about the play, two dark-suited security men entered the classroom to survey it, relates Prados, to listen to "this commentary on moral choices." The professor later recalled in a eulogy at Colby's funeral that he had said, "Bill, you certainly chanced on the right lecture to come to."

"'Oh, I knew what you were going to talk about,' Colby replied, 'And I wanted to hear what you had to say'."¹⁵

John's entire career had really been about moral choices. He was known as a historian of intelligence, its uses, misuses, and the outcomes for national security—and what it meant to have small groups of elite 'specialists' managing the nation's foreign policy often, as with Dulles and Colby, pursuing different means to that end. With Vietnam (which John would spend much of his career understanding) it was 'The Wise Men,' with the two Iraq wars, it would be the authors of 'The New American Century,' who set out in the George H. W. Bush administration and the Bill Clinton years to demonstrate something that came to full force in the George W. Bush Administration: sometimes called "Muscular Wilsonianism."

Instead, the muscular Wilsonians would set loose a swarm of evils that made Pandora's Box seem like a picnic basket. John wrote about this in an article, "Wise Guys, Rough Business: Iraq and the Tonkin Gulf," for the book, *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam, Or, How NOT to Learn from the Past*.¹⁶ He began the essay with a discussion of Donald Rumsfeld's presumed vote for the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as a Republican member of Congress. A minor officials then, he, like the others who advised the president, became the determiners of policy in the George W. Bush administration. In both cases war was launched on the basis of "deceptive measures to obtain . . . [Congressional] approvals." Despite all the similarities between Vietnam and Iraq War II, however, there was one big distinction. The United States took up a position in an ongoing war in Vietnam, while no such involvement existed in Iraq. Prados concluded that "triggering a war involved not only conjuring a casus belli but inducing Americans to subscribe to the Bush administration's interpretation of the situation."¹⁷

Prados wrote that while Iraq's possession of WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) was highly questionable at the time of the terrorist al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the now Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his lieutenants immediately put forth the proposition of taking out Iraq's President Saddam Hussein as a major component of the retaliation. Indeed, this preoccupation with the Iraqi leader crowded out almost everything else at the summit of American power. The fixation on Saddam Hussein far outreached the attention to North Vietnamese leaders Ho Chi Minh in the Vietnam War. The "cabal," as Prados labels the war authors around Rumsfeld and Vice President Richard Cheney, put relentless pressure on the reluctant CIA leadership to confirm rumors about nuclear weapons in Saddam Hussein's possession. When United Nations arms inspector Hans Blix visited Washington in January 2002, Rice told him that she did not think it would be beyond Saddam Hussein "to use or transfer weapons of mass destruction." This talk with Blix took place before Bush excoriated the Iraqi dictator as a leader of the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union message to Congress.¹⁸

¹⁵ Prados, *William Colby and the CIA*, 307.

¹⁶ Prados, "Wise Guys, Rough Business: Iraq and the Tonkin Gulf," Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam, Or, How NOT to Learn from the Past* (New York: New Press, 2008): 106-23.

¹⁷ Prados, "Wise Guys, Rough Business," *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam*, 109.

¹⁸ Prados, "Wise Guys, Rough Business," 111.

But the campaign engineered by the cabal did not have immediate success in Europe outside of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and some minor East European powers that Rumsfeld would label “the New Europe,” thereby opening a fissure that has existed in some thinking about questions like the expansion of NATO down to the present time. But far worse was to come at home, writes Prados, with the defection of highly honored retired General Brent Scowcroft, a close friend to the first President Bush and a former national security adviser. During the Colby years at CIA, Prados noted, Scowcroft once said that it was the fall-out from the director’s determination to bring the agency into line with American law and traditions that had caused him to lose his hair. Scowcroft now wrote in a *The Wall Street Journal* opinion piece that the central argument against an attack on Iraq would “divert us for some indefinite period from our war on terrorism. Worse, there is a virtual consensus in the world against an attack on Iraq at this time. . . [requiring] the U.S. to pursue a go-it-alone strategy.”¹⁹

Once again with his acute sense of irony, Prados noted in this essay a final deception in the Vietnam War. In March 1975, the White House announced that all Americans had left the country, while in reality over one hundred marines were still on the ground awaiting helicopter airlifts. Kissinger blamed the Pentagon for the snafu, which had happened because the US ambassador had been evacuated and he believed that this meant that all Americans were safely out before the end came. Rumsfeld objected. “‘his war has been marked by so many lies and evasions,’ he was quoted as saying, ‘that it is not right to have the war end with one last lie.’ It would have been good if Rumsfeld had applied that Vietnam lesson to Iraq policy in the Bush administration.”²⁰

John Prados was a master historian. He taught us that not only was the Devil in the details, but enlightenment and understanding. All through his books one constantly comes across such illustrations that cement his big arguments. I have not read all of his books; it would take almost another lifetime to do so. He was perhaps the most prolific historian of our time (or any time), and yet managed other careers at the National Security Archive and as a board game author. And beyond all these individual attributes, and summing them up, he wrote with passion. He was a great friend as well, unstinting in his helpfulness. I never had a conversation with John in which I did not learn something new, whether it was a correction or an overlooked fact. We will all miss him terribly.

As Ivan Dee noted in his email to me, away from his work John was “relaxed and cheerful, and a fine baseball fan. He had a liking for the [Chicago] Cubs—I’m not exactly sure why. He once gave me a miniature replica of Wrigley Field, a paperweight of sorrows.”²¹ Even in jesting he was the apostle of irony. Prados once described himself as an “army brat,” one who originally hoped to gain an appointment to West Point, the United States Military Academy. It was Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 intervention in the Dominican Republic that first cast doubts on his previous understanding, and support of, American policy in Vietnam, and launched the young scholar on a career dedicated to illuminating the forces and exploring the connections of elite policymakers.²² It was also a dedication to optimism about the possibilities of the search for what my long-ago colleague at Rutgers, Warren Susman, called a ‘useful past,’ not one tied down to another endless war in the Heart of Darkness.

¹⁹ Prados, “Wise Guys, Rough Business,” 113.

²⁰ Prados, “Wise Guys, Rough Business,” 122.

²¹ Dee to Gardner, January 2, 2023.

²² Prados, “A Note to Readers,” *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2009), xxii.

 Review by James G. Hershberg, The George Washington University

“Remembering a Prolific, Passionate ‘Archives Rat’”

In the first years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, in the early 1980s, the nuclear issue surged back to the forefront of American political discourse for the first time in almost two decades. The 1963 Limited Test-Ban Treaty literally drove the US-Soviet nuclear arms race underground, and, soon afterwards, Americans turned their attention to a real war in Vietnam, which was broadcast in living (and dying) color on TV screens, rather than a theoretical apocalypse. In June 1982, more than half a million people thronged Manhattan’s Central Park to demand nuclear disarmament, or at least a nuclear arms reduction, ‘freeze,’ or ‘no first use’ policy that some ex-officials were advocating. A return trip to the brink, an acute superpower crisis like that over Cuba 20 years earlier, seemed a real possibility.

I had just finished college, writing my undergraduate history thesis on the birth and early years of the nuclear arms race, and was searching for a serious work of history to help me understand how the US-Soviet competition in devising and stockpiling means of mass destruction had reached such heights and threatened to spiral out of control. There were, then, only a handful of books on the nuclear rivalry that could be truly called ‘history’ as opposed to journalism, or technical or political science studies of the weapons, nuclear strategy, or US-Soviet arms control negotiations—“bean-counting,” harrumphed my thesis advisor, Martin J. Sherwin, whose *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (1975), was one of the pioneering histories of the bomb’s creation; Gregg Herken’s *The Winning Weapon* (1981) at least brought the story up to 1950.¹

Then I stumbled upon a just-published book by an author new to me: John Prados’ *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength*.² Based on an extensive array of sources, the book incisively probed the superpower contest for nuclear supremacy after World War II. Though focused on the CIA, it was a spy thriller of a different sort, analyzing intelligence evaluations and controversies—more Franz Kafka than John le Carré, as one reviewer put it.³ Filling a “virtual information vacuum,” Prados ranged from the Manhattan Project and the first Soviet atomic blast (“Joe One”) to the missile gap claims of the late ‘50s to convoluted detente-era disputes over MAD, SALT, ABM, and projections of the nuclear balance. Based on his Columbia University dissertation, *The Soviet Estimate* was Prados’s first book. Experts immediately recognized the arrival of a uniquely, ferociously tenacious researcher. In *The Atlantic*, Thomas Powers (who himself had recently authored a crucial work on the CIA, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*⁴) not only praised the book (“certain to become a standard work in the field”) but recognized the author’s singular qualities. “How Prados survived his ordeal in the library I do not know,” he wrote, in those years before Googling. “It must have involved years of stupefying tedium. But the result has justified his devoted efforts. Well-thumbed copies of *The Soviet Estimate* will be at the right hand of everyone who tries to understand why the United States and the Soviet Union elected to build enough nuclear weapons to break the back of our civilization.”⁵

The Soviet Estimate launched a stupendously prolific and productive career. Over the next four decades, Prados authored and edited (and co-authored and co-edited) an estimated twenty-seven books (counts vary) dealing with mid-twentieth to early twenty-first century history (World War II to Cold War to Iraq Wars and beyond)

¹ Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975); Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945-1950* (New York: Random House, 1981).

² John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength* (New York: Dial Press, 1982).

³ Lenny Glynn, “Red Scares,” *Newsweek*, 12 July 1982, p. 74A.

⁴ Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1979).

⁵ Thomas Powers, “But Never Danger Today,” *The Atlantic*, April 1982

along with a vast array of journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, and the like, along with special projects involving wargaming, declassified document collections, historical reenactments, and more. Major, overlapping topics included the Vietnam War (Dien Bien Phu, the “streetcar named Pleiku,” the Ho Chi Minh trail, the siege of Khe Sanh, and the Pentagon Papers, to the magisterial *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*⁶), intelligence (e.g., probes of the CIA's “family jewels,” a biography of William Colby, and *President's Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through the Persian Gulf*, followed by *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* and *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA's Heart of Darkness*⁷), national security (e.g., his Pulitzer-nominated *Keeper of the Keys* on the National Security Council⁸), World War II (from Normandy in Europe to the Solomons and Leyte Gulf in the Pacific⁹), and post-9/11 foreign policy¹⁰. For John's own itemization of his *oeuvre*, with commentary, see <http://johnprados.com/books/>

I'm ashamed to admit that I've only read a fraction of Prados' works in full, leaving a large stack to work through in my dotage. As a historian both of the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War, I especially appreciated *Operation Vulture: America's Dien Bien Phu*, his study of the still-murky secret US consideration of using tactical nuclear weapons (or letting France borrow a few to employ themselves) in the spring of 1954 to rescue the besieged French forces. Originally published in the early 1980s, and then in an updated edition in 2014, it remains, so far as I know, the only serious inquiry, at least in English, into this mysterious episode with important nuclear ramifications.¹¹

Although unapologetically a man of the left, broadly speaking, who was often intensely critical of US foreign policy and hypocrisy—from unjustified interventions and covert operations to overclassification—Prados refused to let his political or ideological inclinations interfere with his scholarly, evidence-based rigor and fairness. For instance, in *The Soviet Estimate*, he sharply criticized exaggeration of the Soviet rocket capabilities during the so-called “missile gap” of the late 1950s, yet, pointedly, also did not refrain from chiding the CIA for *underestimating* Soviet military progress two decades later, during the “detente” years of the early-mid 1970s; “objective, comprehensive, and balanced in its judgments,” judged the *Naval War College Review* critic.¹²

⁶ Prados, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991); John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1998); Prados and Margaret Pratt Porter, eds., *Inside the Pentagon Papers* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Prados, *A Streetcar Named Pleiku* (Kindle, 2015)

⁷ Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Prados, *President's Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II* (New York: Morrow & Co., 1986); Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009); Prados, *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013); Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA's Heart of Darkness* (New York: New Press, 2017).

⁸ Prados, *Keeper of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: Morrow & Co., 1991).

⁹ Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1995); Prados, *Normandy Crucible: The Decisive Battle That Shaped World War II in Europe* (New York: New American Library, 2011); Prados, *Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Rising Sun* (New York: New American Library, 2012); Prados, *Storm Over Leyte: The Philippine Invasion and the Destruction of the Japanese Navy* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2016).

¹⁰ Prados, *America Confronts Terrorism* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002); Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents That Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War* (New York: New Press, 2004)

¹¹ Prados, *The Sky Would Fall: Operation Vulture, The Secret US Bombing Mission to Vietnam, 1954* (New York: Dial Press, 1983); Prados, *Operation Vulture: America's Dien Bien Phu* (e-book: DCA, 2014)

¹² Henry M. Schreiber (Naval War College) review, *Naval War College Review* 33:4 (1982): 112-114

Yet he could be unabashedly passionate in his views. I remember two instances in particular, both of which were connected to Vietnam. John was one of the group of historians that were part of the project, organized by Jim Blight and Janet Lang, to bring Robert S. McNamara, after the appearance of the former defense secretary's memoir, *In Retrospect*, to Vietnam in 1997 for a conference with senior North Vietnamese civilian and military officials on whether the war might have been avoided or ended earlier. Though an intense opponent of the war since his youth, Prados always interacted with him in a scholarly, professional manner—which did not preclude forthright disagreement. One moment stands out in memory. At a preparatory meeting before the conference, held in the ersatz gothic castle on the National Mall that then housed the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, McNamara, in the course of a longer presentation, advanced a particular interpretation of one aspect of the war (I believe it concerned the feasibility of interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail). John disagreed, requested a chance to comment—and proceeded to completely demolish McNamara's case and the supposed factual basis for it, in clinical detail. His interjection was so compelling that McNamara, uncharacteristically, retreated, implicitly conceded the point, and moved on.

A few years later, John was on a panel on the Vietnam War at a symposium on Cold War history for college and university professors I helped organize at George Washington University. When the Franco-Viet Minh War arose, John contended ardently that that conflict should be understood *not* as a *Cold War* struggle but as an *anti-colonial* confrontation, a key triumph of decolonization after World War II. As the panel's chair, I meekly suggested that it was both, but John was having none of it and sternly insisted on his view.

Despite his Columbia University PhD (in political science), John eschewed the academic stepladder and instead found an ideal institutional home at the National Security Archive, the non-governmental declassified documents repository and lobbyist for openness since the mid-1980s, both in the United States, using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and worldwide. It was a perfect match. Since both Prados and the Archive (from its founder, Scott Armstrong, to its longtime director, Tom Blanton, and key analysts like Malcolm Byrne, William Burr, and Peter Kornbluh) epitomized the never-ending struggle against excessive government secrecy and putting the results to good use in understanding modern, and contemporary, history. Reviewing Prados' career, the Archive's director, Thomas S. Blanton, called him a “man of the ‘60s,” an “independent scholar,” and an “archives rat,” with all phrases capturing crucial aspects of his character and career.¹³

¹³ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/news/intelligence-vietnam/2022-11-30/memorial-john-prados-1951-2022>.

“John Prados’s Quest for Accountability.”

I was fortunate enough to be mentored by John Prados at the National Security Archive where we co-authored eight Electronic Briefing Books and collaborated on two Digital National Security Archive document collections focusing on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).¹ This article seeks to highlight a recurring theme in much of John’s work: the pursuit of accountability for abuses of power. Scholars distinguish between two main types of government accountability. The first is criminal accountability, where government officials alleged to have ordered or committed criminal acts are investigated, charged, and convicted. The second is sometimes referred to as “answerability,” or the requirement that public officials and agencies are transparent with the public, explain their actions, and suffer political consequences when mistakes or abuse—legal, ethical, or otherwise—are uncovered.² John’s work has significantly contributed to our understanding of government accountability—especially for intelligence operations—by explaining the different types of accountability mechanisms that emerged in the post-World War Two period, how they evolved, and assessing their relative strengths as well as the gaps that remain.³ In his efforts to understand government accountability, John became an active participant in the very same process he studied. He emerged as one of the leading “external overseers” of the powerful, constantly challenging their desire to remain unaccountable. The rest of this essay will focus on some of John Prados’s recent contributions to our understanding of intra-branch, inter-branch, and external accountability of CIA covert actions.

The False Promise of Intra-Branch Accountability

On December 22, 1974, another external overseer, Seymour Hersh began to publish a series of newspaper articles alleging various CIA illegal operations.⁴ These revelations set off the “Year of Intelligence”—1975—when a series of investigations into CIA activities opened the first sustained period of accountability for the

¹ John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 522* (2015); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[Gerald Ford White House Altered Rockefeller Commission Report in 1975; Removed Section on CIA Assassination Plots](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 543* (2016); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[The White House, the CIA and the Pike Committee, 1975; Ford Administration Nearly Triggered Constitutional Crisis Over Congressional Access to Intelligence Community Records](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 596* (2017); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[What the CIA Tells Congress \(Or Doesn’t\) about Covert Operations](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 659* (2019); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[Kennedy and Cuba: Operation Mongoose](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 687* (2019); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[Understanding the CIA: How Covert \(and Overt\) Operations were Proposed and Approved during the Cold War](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 667* (2019); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[CIA Covert Operations: The 1964 Overthrow of Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book* (2020); John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “[Che Guevara and the CIA in the Mountains of Bolivia](#),” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 725* (2020). Digital National Security Archive, “[CIA Covert Operations II: The Year of Intelligence, 1975](#)”; Digital National Security Archive, “[CIA Covert Operations III: From Kennedy to Nixon, 1961-1974](#).”

² Andreas Schedler, Larry Jay Diamond, and Marc F Plattner, *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 13-14.

³ John’s work was especially thorough in explaining the approval, review, oversight, and accountability processes within the executive branch. See for example, John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: Morrow, 1991); John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the C.I.A.* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2006); John Prados, *The Family Jewels: the CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013); John Prados, *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness* (The New Press, 2017).

⁴ Prados, *The Family Jewels*, 9.

intelligence agency.⁵ In the midst of the season of inquiry, Senator Frank Church declared that the CIA had acted like a “rogue elephant” beyond presidential control.⁶ John spent years trying to dispel the myth of the rogue elephant and document how “intelligence agencies operated under presidential control at all times.”⁷ This did not mean that presidents ordered or knew everything that the CIA did, but that they made clear what they wanted to get done. At the same time, John showed that the executive branch developed a culture of internal plausible deniability where agencies and political appointees sought to “insulate presidents from charges they had had a hand in, or had even approved, covert operations.”⁸ To remedy the paradoxical goals of presidential control and distance from covert actions, a “high command” for America’s secret wars was established within the National Security Council to coordinate, propose, approve, and review covert projects.⁹ Presidents were intimately involved in operations they deemed especially important and set the tone and placed trusted advisers to oversee the others.¹⁰ Throughout his career, John meticulously documented the covert action approval process, shining a light on the key bodies and players that preferred to remain in the shadows or claimed ignorance.¹¹ John’s works unequivocally show that intelligence abuses are presidential abuses, a problem that remains to this day.

After the abuses unearthed during the Year of Intelligence, reforms to the executive branch followed. Presidents were required to sign findings or Memorandums of Notification (MON) before a covert action was initiated; general counsels and inspectors general were empowered to review the legality and propriety of covert actions before, during, and after their implementation; new internal investigatory bodies such as the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board were created; potentially criminal behavior by CIA officers had to be referred to the Department of Justice. John’s earlier work was optimistic about these reforms, but as intelligence abuses and scandals continued, he grew much more skeptical of the prospects of intra-branch or executive accountability mechanisms.¹² Much of John’s work also focused on assessing the strengths and weaknesses of inter-branch accountability by paying special attention to congressional oversight of the intelligence community.

Inter-Branch Accountability and its Limits

For the first quarter century of the CIA’s existence, Congress largely abdicated its oversight power and responsibility. During the Year of Intelligence, with the establishment in 1975 of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee) and the parallel House Select Committee (Committee), Congress reasserted some of its constitutional prerogatives in foreign and intelligence affairs.¹³ These select committees led to the creation in 1976 of the permanent Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and in 1977 the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Yet, as John’s work shows, inter-branch oversight also failed to make the CIA fully accountable. Part of the problem lies in the structure and incentives of the intelligence committees and their members, where political and ideological divisions over the scope of presidential power and the role of the intelligence community have often hamstrung their investigations. Some congressional overseers see their roles as mere cheerleaders of the

⁵ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”

⁶ Senator Church would later revoke this characterization. Prados, *The Family Jewels*, 205, 318-19; Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: the Senate Intelligence Investigation* (Lexington, KY.: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

⁷ Prados, *The Family Jewels*, 319.

⁸ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Understanding the CIA.”

⁹ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Understanding the CIA.”

¹⁰ See for instance, Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Kennedy and Cuba: Operation Mongoose.”

¹¹ For his most thorough account see Prados, *Safe for Democracy*.

¹² Author’s conversation with John Prados. But also compare his description of reforms to the NSC process in Prados, *Keepers of the Keys* with his assessment of the shortfalls of these reforms in *The Ghosts of Langley*.

¹³ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”; Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “The White House, the CIA and the Pike Committee, 1975.”

intelligence community, others have fleeting attention spans, and staffing and budgetary limits pose challenges to genuine oversight. Yet, John revealed that an essential factor limiting congressional oversight of the intelligence community is secrecy and the executive's control of information.¹⁴

Presidents have claimed broad constitutional prerogatives to decide what, when, and how to share information with Congress.¹⁵ Even the celebrated Church Committee, which is often characterized as the model of Congressional oversight, failed to fully overcome the “political and bureaucratic obstructions” imposed by the Gerald Ford White House (and CIA).¹⁶ As John and I conclude in a 2015 article:

Rather than letting out all the secrets, what happened during the Year of Intelligence was a very carefully-contrived process in which the Ford White House asserted its prerogative to approve every release and the CIA followed suit. The Church Committee laid out its demands for information; they were reviewed and frequently denied; and the committee ended by appealing, cajoling, negotiating, or begging for data.¹⁷

The Church committee succeeded in some of its efforts to obtain information, but failed in others. In addition, some of the volumes of the Church committee report remain classified to this day, further limiting intelligence accountability. As a consequence of the limits of intra- and inter-branch accountability mechanisms, the US national security apparatus has been made more accountable due to the tireless work of external overseers like John Prados.

External Accountability: A Never-Ending (Frustrating) Process

As a founding member of the National Security Archive, and author of well over a hundred books, articles, and chapters, John made thousands of Mandatory Declassification Review and Freedom of Information Act requests. He was tireless in his constant administrative appeals of rejected declassification requests. The documents he unearthed—and those that will continue to be declassified due to his efforts—have added a layer of accountability for US intelligence operations. This is what John called ‘panning for gold’—the search for key documents that shed light on the government's most protected abuses. John's quest for accountability pushed him to research and write on topics of great interest but also on cases that had been overlooked or ignored by others. For instance, he constantly updated the history of the joint US-UK 1964 covert regime change operation against the Cheddi Jagan government of British Guiana.¹⁸ He recently brought to light the forgotten section on CIA assassinations that White House Chief of Staff Richard Cheney had excised from the final version of the Rockefeller Commission Report.¹⁹

John's mentorship of countless researchers, his body of work, and his example as a tireless advocate for transparency and accountability will continue to influence future generations of external overseers.

¹⁴ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”; Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “The White House, the CIA and the Pike Committee, 1975.”

¹⁵ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “What the CIA Tells Congress (Or Doesn't) about Covert Operations.”

¹⁶ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”

¹⁷ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “White House Efforts to Blunt 1975 Church Committee Investigation into CIA Abuses Foreshadowed Executive-Congressional Battles after 9/11.”

¹⁸ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “CIA Covert Operations: The 1964 Overthrow of Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana.”

¹⁹ Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, “Gerald Ford White House Altered Rockefeller Commission Report in 1975.”

“John Prados”

I reviewed one of John’s many books (favorably) well before I first met him. When we did finally meet, at an annual SHAFR meeting, he made a distinctly memorable impression, as anyone who knew John would doubtless readily attest. The piercing brown eyes, the passionate intensity, the seriousness-of-purpose married to a down-to-earth jocularity, the long, pony-tailed hair, the ever-present jeans, the unapologetically casual, dressed-down style: all bespoke someone whose heart remained in the idealism and insouciance of the 60s. He always looked and spoke as if he had just come from an anti-war demonstration.

As I grew to know John over the years and to become his friend, that initial impression was confirmed again and again. He was, and remained always, a 60s-era idealist, a person whose strong sense of morality and deep-seated commitment to human rights and responsible government underlay much of his scholarship. No one in our field has ever insisted with more conviction than John that policymakers must be held to the highest standards and that they must be called out when they fall short.

Reflecting those values, John organized a SHAFR session, for the June 2013 annual meeting, that he asked me to join. He titled it, “History and Moral Responsibility.” John proposed a handful of key questions to help frame what he hoped would be a lively and much-needed discussion. “Does moral judgment apply to historical analysis in diplomatic history,” read one, “and is there a single measure of moral quality?” “Does the diplomatic historian in his research and teaching,” read another, “have a responsibility to measure facts and events against moral tenets and a responsibility to convey such judgments to the audience?” The session was well-attended and highly engaging, giving John a rare chance to share with us the way that his own ethical values shaped his research and writing. Keenly attuned to the hypocrisy he often uncovered among the US decisionmakers he studied, John suggested that we should examine critically the frequently sizable gap between the moral justifications invariably put forward publicly in explaining a policy choice and the near total absence of moral considerations in the private debates among officials that led to that choice.

John followed a singular career path as a scholar. He eschewed the academy, becoming instead that rarest of beings, an independent, self-funded historian. While the field of foreign relations history is full of academic and public historians whose institutions provide regular salaries and often at least some institutional research support, I cannot think of anyone other than John who made his living solely by his pen—or, more accurately, his word processor. He supplemented his book royalty income with his second avocation as a very successful designer of strategy and battlefield games. A strong work ethic and an astounding level of scholarly productivity made it possible for him to support himself, even if it was touch and go at times. When I recruited him to write a book about the end of the Cold War for a series I was editing, he badgered and cajoled the publisher into granting him a much larger advance than any previous author had received. Seeing John’s negotiating skills at close range was a delight; it also awakened me to how hard he had to fight for each dollar.

So many of his books dealt imaginatively with different aspects of the Vietnam War that many of us eagerly anticipated his promised one-volume history. When that book appeared, in 2009, it proved well worth the wait. A panoramic, multidimensional, and deeply researched study, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*, may be the single most important book yet written on the Vietnam War.¹ Among other strengths, it paid sustained attention to crucial matters often ignored or underplayed by diplomatic historians, such as battlefield tactics and strategy, operations, intelligence, command and control, logistics, morale, organization, supply trains, and infrastructure. At the same time, he never lost sight of the war’s domestic, international,

¹ John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

social, political, and economic dimensions—elements that, in the end, proved more determinative to the outcome than any battles. The culmination of a lifetime’s study of that seminal conflict, *Unwinnable War* stands as a magnificent scholarly achievement.

I have so many warm memories of John that it is nearly impossible to select just one. But if forced to choose, it would be the evening of a conference we both attended, in San Diego, which just happened to coincide with the start of the American invasion of Iraq. Following dinner, many of the distinguished SHAFRites in attendance engaged in a free-wheeling debate about the origins, justifications for, and likely consequences of the day-old conflict. With insight and indignation, John carefully picked apart all the stated reasons for the conflict while lamenting that it would turn into a strategic and geopolitical disaster—likely the worst since Vietnam. Those views, delivered in the heat of the moment, have stood the test of time. I will always remember John that night: in his element; at the very center of the debate; reveling in intellectual combat; and presenting his positions with a characteristic blend of intelligence, perspective and morally fueled passion.

Review by Leopoldo Nuti, Roma Tre University

“Is Rome Burning? The Game That Never Was”

I thought I knew John Prados as a historian reasonably well. I had read some of his great books and met him several times at a number of conferences and always enjoyed my time with him. But I was not prepared for the stunning surprise I ran into one evening in the fall of 2013, when I was a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and John invited me over for dinner at his and Ellen’s place.

As I entered the dining room I was taken aback by the unmistakable view of a large gaming map, something that any wargamer in the world would immediately recognize. “John,” I asked, barely concealing my emotion at unexpectedly meeting a fellow gamer, “do you play wargames?” “Poldo,” he replied with his well-known grin, “I *make* wargames. In fact this is what I do for a living when I do not write books.”

I could not believe my ears. I had been an avid player back in my college days, then I switched to miniature gaming, but as a professional historian I thought this was something you should not mention if you did not want to be frowned upon. Here I was in a room with a professional historian I had admired for most of my adult life, finding out that not only did he share my hobby but that he was actually one of the superstars of wargame designing.

How silly of me not to have thought about this earlier— John’s meticulous precision and scrupulous attention to detail in his books should have given it away: from studying the tiniest details of a battlefield to designing historical games is a very short step. Wargamers, for those of you who are not familiar with the hobby, are more fastidious and demanding than the pickiest and nastiest peer-reviewers and they expect a good game to be painstakingly accurate down to what tiny unit was where and at what moment during a battle. John clearly mastered both the minutiae of historical research and the skills of game designing, moving with ease from one to the other.

The rest of the night was spent with me in a state of exalted trepidation as we went on and on talking about military history and gaming systems, even as I grew more hesitant to say anything as I gradually grasped the magnitude of his mastery of all the subtlest technicalities of game design, let alone his unparalleled knowledge of military history.

At that point, I secretly began to hatch a plan that I at first felt too embarrassed to disclose to John, namely that he and I design a game together. I had in mind either a Renaissance game involving the last desperate war of the gallant Republic of Siena against those dastardly Spaniards and Florentines (1552-1555), or something related to the Italian campaign in the Second World War that highlighted the role of the Italian resistance or of the regular Italian forces that fought alongside the Allies after the armistice.

What made me eventually jump the gun and go ahead was a lengthy discussion with some members of the Italian Association of Public History, when I found out that the Association has an entire section dedicated to studying how games can improve your understanding of history. This was what I needed—a scholarly legitimization to justify my passion for gaming!

With some hesitation, in June 2021 I finally proposed to John that we design a game together. Knowing his interest in the Second World War, I suggested something about Italy after the armistice. This prompted a long correspondence in which we discussed options, until we narrowed it down to the battle for Rome between the Italian regular forces and the German ones on September 9-10, 1943, together with the failed implementation of Operation *Giant II*, the deployment of the 82nd Division of US Paratroopers to defend the city.

John went ahead with some marketing inquiries and found out that the magazine he mostly worked with, *Against the Odds*, (*ATO* for its fans) had some interest in our proposal.⁶⁴ Very professionally, he then started asking me all sorts of questions about how to design the game and even drafted a private agreement, which was duly signed by both of us, about who should do what. We then followed *ATO*'s rules and wrote an abstract of our proposal which was to be posted on the magazine's web page. This would allow readers to vote for it and, eventually, if we received a substantial number of votes, we would be given the green light by the editors.

I still regard seeing that abstract with John's name next to mine as a fantastic achievement. We went on doing additional research about the units involved and finding some original maps of Rome from the early 1940s, then started debating what game system would work best for what we had in mind, *Fortress Berlin* or *Monty's D-day* (two of John's previous signature games). Our abstract inched its way forward on *ATO*'s web page, doing reasonably well compared to some other game proposals but clearly not being a knockout.

As the months went by, we continued our correspondence, but my hopes dimmed as I was not sure we would ever reach the necessary number of supporting votes. John was much more optimistic, comforted me saying that we would eventually make it—and I kept wondering whether he was simply being his natural gracious self, too kind to let me know we did not stand a chance.

I will never find out, unfortunately. But I am still grateful I had the privilege to know this fantastic side of John's life and that we were lucky enough to exchange our thoughts and ideas about how to recreate a dramatic moment in my country's history on the tabletop. Here is our proposal for *ATO*, which I immensely enjoyed crafting with John:

Is Rome Burning? Operation Alaric and the Fate of Italy

September 7, 1943. Tomorrow, General Eisenhower intends to announce that the government of Italy has secretly surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. Hitler feared this, so the Germans have long been preparing, and will launch, Operation Alaric to take over as much of Italy as possible. The Italian government led by King Vittorio Emanuele III and Marshal Badoglio, on the other hand, are not expecting the Allied announcement so soon. They have barely begun preparing their units for the most difficult battle of the war—turning against the old ally while awaiting an Allied landing somewhere in Southern Italy—without knowing when and where. The fate of the Eternal City hangs in the balance, and *you* must decide its future. Designed by John Prados and Leopoldo Nuti, this game will utilize the tactical system popularized in *Monty's D-Day* and *Fortress Berlin*. A city fight set among the glories of classical history. Will you be able to use Italian divisions deployed around Rome to halt the German onslaught? How much will the Roman citizens count in the fight? Will any member of the Royal Family lead the resistance while the King and Government head South to shelter among the Allies? And above all, will US paratroopers, which Eisenhower promised Badoglio, arrive in time to help the Italians protect their patrimony? *Is Rome Burning?* gives you the opportunity to relive this dramatic moment of World War II, when the fate of Italy and its capital are in your hands. The game will have one map and 280 counters. There will be two major scenarios, one pitting the Italians alone against German reaction forces, the second (Operation "*Giant IP*") featuring the airdrop of an American parachute division into central Italy—a gambit actually prepared by the Allied high command and which was cancelled at the last minute when the Dakotas of the 82nd Division were being prepared to takeoff!

⁶⁴ <https://www.atomagazine.com/>