

William Sloane Coffin, Jr.:
A Holy Impatience
(Hardcover)
by Warren Goldstein "
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- William Sloane Coffin

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"Bill Coffin is an American knight, stranger to fear, the visionary's best companion, a joyfully embattled Christian, his life the richest imaginable. This book is a worthy and moving introduction to his grand transcendent spirit." *Arthur Miller*, playwright and author

"Warren Goldstein has given us a brilliantly insightful, richly detailed portrait of one of America's larger-than-life heroes—a man who, despite terrible blind spots and flaws, managed to breathe passion back into Christianity and high moral purpose into the political struggles of the sixties." *Barbara Ehrenreich*

"Such was Coffin's stature, so robust and powerful his ministry, Yale students could be forgiven for assuming he was part of the physical plant. Without him, the very air would have lost its charge. With him, we were forever changed." *Garry Trudeau*, creator of *Doonesbury*

"In an era when religious faith and religious fundamentalism seem more and more interchangeable, Warren Goldstein's *William Sloane Coffin Jr.* is a vivid reminder that things don't have to be that way. This admiring but surprisingly candid portrait of William Sloane Coffin Jr. shows what one determined minister managed to do for the great causes of his time and ours—peace and civil rights." *Geoffrey C. Ward*, author of *A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of FDR*

"This is an elegantly written biography, a portrait of a complex man negotiating complex times, written by a scholar equal to the task. In many ways this is the best way to see post-World War II America—from the inside out—through the eyes of a flawed humanitarian and restless searcher." *Ken Burns*

"History will record Bill Coffin as one of the greatest hearts, great souls, great men of the Western world. Warren Goldstein brilliantly beats history to the punch."
Norman Lear

"Warren Goldstein has written a remarkably sensitive biography of a controversial, difficult, and admirable man. William Sloane Coffin comes alive in these pages—reminding us that religion is not merely the refuge of the far right, and that the dream of social justice is at the core of the gospel of Christ." *Jackson Lears*, author of

home.) An extant photograph of a noose attached to a top bunk in a Dachau barrack may have made its way into Coffin's memory. Rusanowsky recalled that Coffin did witness a suicide attempt but that no one died.

A little over a week afterwards, Coffin described and defended the operation—which he called “far too interesting and important not to do it well”—at some length to his mother. “The only hitch was” that these “poor guys,” many of whom were “terrifically smart,” also had “the flaw of the fanatic in their reasoning.” Coffin liked many of them but felt they had been “compromised by their ties with the Germans—far more than the NKVD [Soviet secret police] compromised Stalin's constitution.” He then mused on the “potential menace of these Russians, Poles, Yugoslavs, Balts and others who refuse to go home. They are going to be a terrible nuisance, poor people.” Coffin was writing in full emotional retreat from what he had just witnessed. Even if he had seen no suicides, no desperate men pleading for an early end to their lives, he knew that he had helped send men to prison and worse.

Two months later he expressed occasional pointed sarcasm about the episode, as when he wrote to his mother about “these super army jobs which by now are quite repulsive (lying your head off so you can ship people back to Russia without giving them a chance to slit their throats).” Rusanowsky explained Coffin's shallow analysis of the Plattling operation as “trying to justify that we were doing the right thing.”²⁸

Coffin's superiors, on the other hand, put him up for the Army Commendation Ribbon. According to the official recommendation, Coffin displayed “tact and keen intelligence in a delicate situation” and was able “to thoroughly instruct the necessary personnel in all phases of the confused background” of the POWs at Plattling. Apparently, Coffin supervised the “anti-communist displaced person interpreters” as well, doing “a superb job in preventing them from influencing the judgment proceedings adversely to the USSR.” No wonder Coffin and Rusanowsky felt uneasy about the medals. “Lt. Coffin,” Colonel Edward Fickett concluded, “was in large measure responsible for the good relations which prevailed between Red Army and US Army personnel throughout the entire repatriation proceedings.”²⁹

Like so many young men faced with wartime ironies, Coffin did his best to ignore them. In early March he wrote home telling the funny story of a Russian lieutenant colonel who, staying overnight in Coffin's quarters, managed to pull “a fast one” and bed down with his secretary, a fact announced by the

erating parachute jumping instruction. Then they had to memorize their missions, their cover stories, and how to respond to interrogators if they were caught. Finally, they were “dropped”: parachuted in at night from low-flying planes based in U.S. airfields hours from the Soviet border, planes that frequently returned full of bullet holes.

Because the training was so long and arduous (Coffin trained only three teams in two years) and the missions so dangerous, the would-be agents’ morale counted enormously. The case officer not only had to be an effective teacher; he also had to be a friend and leader, capable of inspiring his men. Coffin performed this task superbly. “We were infinitely more successful than anybody else in terms of . . . getting guys all the way through,” reported Karpovich. “They’d lose most of them in training.” Much of the credit went to Coffin, “one of the most charismatic” people he’d ever known. Murphy concurred; Coffin was “outstanding—he was the tops.” He could “radiate this sense of conviction and this sense of strength, a real preacher in many respects.” The whole Coffin persona came into play. As Murphy recalled, “I mean, Bill’s singing was incredible. His ability to get them to sing when they were down. All of this was fantastic.” For his part, Coffin loved the “physically demanding” nature of the work, but it was also “fun because it was . . . a very tight knit group. And the morale was always very high. That was part of my function, to make sure it stayed that way.”

Neither the camaraderie nor the sense of **mission**, however, could hide what slowly became clear: that the operation was in most respects failing. Coffin’s first agent sent back one “all’s well” signal the night he parachuted into the Soviet Union—and then no more. Coffin thought the second training cycle had also been a complete failure; his CIA colleagues hinted otherwise. About the third group, the largest he trained, there was no doubt. Soviet authorities captured the men, and *Pravda* ran a front-page story with their real names, the location of the CIA safe house, and the cover names of the CIA training team. Coffin’s unit barely had time to flee the house before reporters arrived. They assumed, quite reasonably, that most of those captured were executed.²²

Coffin concluded, probably correctly (given the history of Cold War intelligence), that there had been a leak in the organization. But even failure meant

cially, supposedly, to try and mend the rift in the marriage. 17

Stopping in Greece on the way, Eva and Bill took a bus tour of classical sites and ended up at Delphi, home of the oracle but near the location of the ancient Olympics as well. Coffin recalled being urged by Eva to enter the town's daily race over the original two-hundred-meter course. She recalled him challenging two twenty-year-old traveling companions to the race: "He beat the hell out of them," of course, "and I remember making a crown out of some leaves and placing it on his head. Everybody thought it was adorable." Coffin wrote that "word spread" that a forty-year-old had won, and "that night I was a hero all over town." The experience, he wrote later, "helped me through the trauma of turning forty." Eva only marveled retrospectively. "He had to win! He had to win all the time."¹⁸

Winning the race proved far easier than relating to Eva, for his attentions lay elsewhere. On the way to India their plane stopped briefly in Teheran. While Eva slept, Coffin sneaked off the plane and scrawled a note he gave to a French officer to deliver to Manya Stromberg (by then widowed but still working in the French embassy and well-known to the French community), suggesting a rendezvous in Paris at the end of the summer. Unaware of this remarkable maneuver, Eva wondered all during the trip why her husband seemed even more distant than usual. They visited temples with erotic sculptures and she would go in while "he would sit on a wall and talk to the coconut gatherers or something." Instead of mending the rift, "there was almost nothing going on between us that whole time." When she finally read Coffin's account of this episode in his memoir, the summer finally made sense. "For a forty-year-old man," he had concluded accurately, "I might be fleet of foot but I was also very confused." He did see Manya in Paris. He had "carefully" planned to see her only with Bailey. At "the last moment, however," he went "an hour early,

when Harriet found him in the middle of one night, Coffin snapped. Unable to respond verbally, and feeling himself at the end of his emotional rope, he reacted primitively, physically. "I used to be a big judo guy," he explained twenty years later. "In the army I taught judo. So I know that the easiest way to take somebody out is to hit them very nicely right across here [indicating the center of the forehead, just above the bridge of the nose]—a nice sharp blow like that." He referred to this as "a gentle way of taking them out." "I felt absolutely miserable," he remembered. "Then I carried her back and put her in bed and went out in the woods. . . . And she felt very penitent about it all" in the morning. But Bill Coffin had crossed a dangerous line.

Back at Yale that fall Harriet gave him very astute criticism on his manuscript. She pushed him to make certain emotional themes more explicit, particularly the conflict in his life between the WASP expectations of the Coffin side of the family, symbolized, she thought, by Uncle Henry, and the more emotionally expressive side symbolized by Russian and Manya and Chingis Guirey. Harriet easily got inside her husband's emotions. The problem for her was that he did not want inside hers.³³

Late one night in November 1974, they clashed again: "I said 'Bill, I am scared tonight. Please talk to me.' 'I will not talk to you.' 'Just sit and listen.' But I was hitting right at his most vulnerable spot. I said I wanted to talk, and I wanted to talk about how I felt, and so forth and so on. And I pestered him. 'Please, please talk to me. Please, please talk to me.' And he went in the other room. And I came in and woke him up again and I said, 'Please, talk to me.' . . . I was pretty persistent. I mean, I can't say that I wasn't provoking."

They had been scheduled to see a counselor the following day, Harriet remembered, "And he refused. And that's when he clobbered me."

He remembers that it was about three in the morning, that she was drunk, and that "she broke a door down to a room where I was trying to sleep. . . . So I said, 'What the hell, I've got to do this again.' Only this time it was dark, and I guess I didn't take quite enough aim." He understated. He took her to the hospital in the morning. His one judo chop had given her "a huge black eye," she remembered. "My whole face was swollen." He had also given her a **hairline** skull fracture.

Coffin told his friend Arnold Wolf; he told Ron Evans; he told others. Wolf, who could not stand Harriet, said, "We all wanted to hit her. My then wife wanted to hit her." But when he and Coffin talked, he said, "Coffin, you can't hit anybody but you certainly can't hit your wife. You've got to get out of the marriage if that's the way you feel. Divorce yes. Abuse no." But Coffin did not fully understand the gravity of the situation. He did not think Harriet needed to go to the hospital. "I didn't hit her very hard," Wolf remembered

him saying in his own defense.³⁴ To Ron Evans, he was “so terribly remorseful that he had allowed this . . . to get to a point where he’d struck out.”

It was a measure of the loyalty Bill Coffin inspired in his friends—and Harriet’s isolation—that some were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. For Miriam Horowitz, the question was simple: “When I said, ‘How did this happen?’ She said, ‘I asked for it.’”³⁵ When Janet Evans heard about it, her first reaction was, “If Bill had hit Harriet I’m sure he had good reason.” She had seen Harriet “in some situations where . . . if somebody has had a lot to drink and they’re being impossible and difficult you just say tchew, you know, out of here! So that’s my fantasy.” But the complicity of friends could not hide the fact that Bill and Harriet Coffin were in deep trouble.