

Circle of Friends Supports Helms

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By William Greider

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For that small circle of influential people, the ones who help shape America's foreign policy and share national secrets, the intimate dinner party the other night in honor of Richard Helms was an especially tender moment.

"Touching and moving," said one who was there.

Assembled in the Chevy Chase house of columnist Tom Braden and his wife Joan were some perennial notables:

Averell Harriman, the patrician statesman; Stuart Symington, the senator from Missouri; Robert S. McNamara, who once ran the Pentagon and now runs the World Bank; Henry A. Kissinger, whom everybody knows. Even the outsiders were prominent ones: NBC's Barbara Walters and Israel's Ambassador Simcha Dinitz, among others.

They were gathered to cheer up an old friend, a comrade wounded by recent events, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, who is now confronted with embarrassing

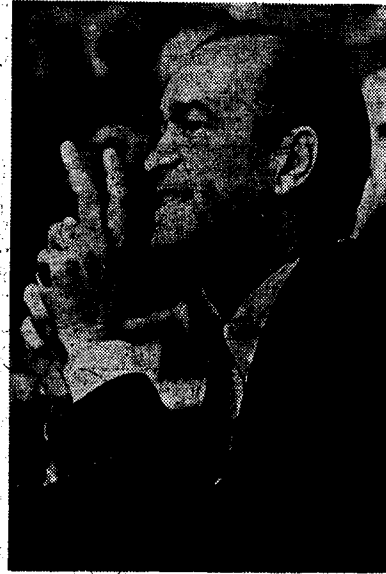
questions about the secret agency's domestic surveillance activities.

After the smoked salmon and crown roast of lamb, the glasses of rich red wine were raised in his honor. Symington toasted the "splendid job" which Helms had done in seven years as America's intelligence chief. Harriman seconded those sentiments.

But the high point was the brief and melodramatic speech of Robert McNamara, Defense Secretary during the long struggle in Vietnam, a man who shared with Helms the anguish of the Johnson years.

McNamara wanted all in the room to know: whatever Dick Helms did, whether it was over the line or not, the former Secretary of Defense supported him fully. That moment of fraternity moistened some eyes around the table.

According to the etiquette of important dinner parties, no one is supposed to speak afterward of what was said by whom, especially to the press. Yet, somehow, the story of McNamara's toast is circulating, confirming what many already suspected—that Richard Helms has been shaken by the current



RICHARD HELMS

... apparently shaken

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controversy and that the established circle is drawing the wagons up close in his defense.

That message was already whispering around Washington, in part because the Secretary of State was telling friends and associates on the dinner-party circuit that he was dismayed by what has happened to Helms.

"An honorable man," Kissinger says solemnly, then he adds a word or two of private rebuke for the present CIA Director William E. Colby, who made the public disclosures of CIA domestic spying, and even for Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, who investigated the subject when he held the CIA job briefly before Colby.

These are glimpses of the private

and almost visceral political currents which now surround the CIA controversy, a struggle as intangible as smoke, yet with real significance for the players. Helms is in foremost jeopardy, not simply because most of the activities of debatable legality happened during his tenure, but also for what he said or didn't say about CIA activities while under oath before various congressional committees.

On a political level, the situation is perilous for Colby too, who now must answer the agency's critics more fully at forthcoming hearings without totally alienating the CIA's traditional friends or his own troops within the agency. In a secondary sense, the struggle threatens Kissinger and Schlesinger too, who now represent the natural institutional rivalry between the Defense and State departments, who both played a direct hand in the CIA's past.

As one close partisan described it:

"A fairly byzantine happening by some fairly byzantine people."

Helms' difficulties stem from his bland assurances, given regularly in recent years to congressional inquiries, that the CIA did not do such things as penetrating domestic political organizations or spying on radicals. Then, after the New York Times account of domestic spying was published Dec. 22, Colby eventually made a public recitation on the subject, acknowledging what Helms seemed to have denied.

According to close friends, Helms is not so concerned about the arguable illegality of any surveillance activities which occurred under his direction or even by his recorded statements denying that the CIA conducted domestic spying. Those questions are loaded with ambiguities, they point out, which would make any legal action difficult to pursue.

But Helms has been more worried about his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on CIA involvement in Chile, back when he was confirmed as ambassador to Iran in 1973. Sen. Symington, a member of that committee, asked Helms then: "Did you try in the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow the government of Chile?"

"No, sir," said Helms.

"Did you have any money passed to the opponents of Allende?"

"No, sir," said Helms.

"So," Symington asked, "the stories you were involved in that war are wrong?"

"Yes, sir," Helms answered. "I said to Sen. Fulbright many months ago that if the agency had really gotten in behind the other candidates and spent a lot of money and so forth the elec-

tion might have come out differently."

When Colby appeared in private last spring before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence, he told a different story—that the CIA had provided \$11 million for "covert action" in Chile aimed at blocking Salvador Allende's election in 1964 and 1970, as well as "destablizing" the government in 1973 when a military coup toppled the Allende government.

Helms appeared again before the Foreign Relations Committee two weeks ago to explain the discrepancy. Now on his way back to Iran, he is convinced, according to friends, that he satisfied the committee members that no perjury had been committed. The various issues, however, must still be explored by others. The circus now has three rings—select committees on intelligence in both the House and Senate, plus the presidential CIA commission.

The difference between Helms and Colby is partly a question of personal styles, but it is also the changed climate in post-Watergate Washington, where both Congress and the press pursue hints of scandal more zealously than when Helms was director from 1966 to early 1973.

In broad outline, their careers seem quite similar—Ivy League educations, veterans in World War II, lifetimes devoted to climbing the secret career ladder inside the "Company," as the CIA is sometimes called among friends.

But, though both served in "Clandestine Services" and both held the post of deputy director of operations, Helms and Colby came from different sides of the spy shop. Helms was educated in the

"intelligence end," Colby was a "political action" man, two subspecies with an inherited distrust of one another. The intelligence folks collect and analyze, while the "political operations" men run secret guerrilla wars and "covert action" against foreign governments. They tend to regard the intelligence types as ivory tower tenants, removed from the real world; while the intelligence people often look on them as a bunch of wild men. In any case, the personal relationship between Colby and Helms over the years was correct and cordial, never more than that, according to associates.

When old colleagues describe Helms, he emerges as a man of deeper intellect, more flexible, more cynical, quite skilled at crossing the sliding sands of Washington's bureaucratic struggles. Colby is more obvious, more straight-ahead and even moralistic, according to friends and nonfriends. Helms is the urbanity of the Chevy Chase Country Club; Colby is the Boy Scouts in Springfield, Va., where he lives.

"Dick is resentful," said one ex-officer. "He resents the change in performance with regard to Congress, to the press, to openness which he never engaged except in the ciziest way."

While Colby opts for on-the-record interviews with the news magazines, Helms' style was, more often, a friendly off-the-record lunch at the old Occidental Restaurant. On Capitol Hill, Helms left behind a reputation as masterful at salving both hawks and doves during the war in Vietnam, as well as never revealing too much about what the CIA was doing.

When the House subcommittee was

questioning him privately on Watergate in 1973, Helms displayed the charm which won such praise. After a lot of back-and-forth about what was legal or illegal for the CIA, Helms finally closed the subject with this appeal to personal faith:

"Gentlemen, don't you honestly believe, all of you, as I do, that you've got to be honorable men to run anything like this, particularly an intelligence operation?"

The notion that "honorable men" could be trusted to run the CIA, without much questioning from Congress, was badly shaken in the Watergate episode, when it was disclosed that the CIA under Helms alternately went along with and resisted various questionable demands from the Nixon White House. Rumors lingered and the traditional secrecy of the agency helped them grow.

Helms, for instance, has been dogged by stories that somehow a closer link existed between him and E. Howard Hunt, Jr. one of the Watergate burglars, including the yarn that the CIA director personally lent Hunt \$20,000 or \$30,000. As it happens, Helms explained that in secret testimony at the time:

"The guy was in very serious financial straits. In an organization like CIA, particularly in the clandestine side of it, anybody who gets in debt constitutes a vulnerability. I mean for a recruitment from the other side, if nothing else. All drunks are a threat. Drug people are a threat. Homosexuals are a threat. Anybody who has a really distinctive blackmail possibility.

"So the logical thing to do was to make available those institutions in

the Central Intelligence Agency to help out employees who unintentionally get in some kind of financial difficulty and one of the ways of doing this is something we call the Public Service Aid Society, which contains a fund of money administered by some directors into which people give voluntarily to build up a fund so that people in a jam can get this stuff without paying interest and so forth."

The members of Congress also learned something of the intrigues involved in operating the agency, like the tape recording systems in Helms's office and the "French Room" next door where conferences were held and another in the deputy director's office. Helms had that one dismantled when Gen. Vernon Walters, a Nixon man, became deputy director because "I thought at the time I didn't know Gen. Walters very well. I wouldn't have any control over it."

When Helms was cleaning out his files after 25 years in the agency, he destroyed all of the non-Watergate tapes, including one conversation he recorded with President Johnson.

"I do recall at one time having a very active conversation with President Johnson about a whole lot of things he wanted me to do about Vietnam," Helms told the subcommittee, "and my finally, in desperation, pushing this button in order to get straight what he was trying to tell me to do."

After Helms was abruptly fired by President Nixon a month after the 1972 election, the popular assumption was that his resistance to letting the CIA take the rap for Watergate was a special motive. It was also widely as-

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sumed that Henry Kissinger approved the move or at least acquiesced in it, particularly the subsequent shake-up of the agency which was carried out by Schlesinger.

Helms professes not to know what the motives were for his abrupt dismissal. (His friends say he has never blamed Kissinger.) But he did tell the Armed Services subcommittee this much:

"I was never on the team. I was left-over from President Johnson's administration and I had served in four years in President Nixon's and I rather gather they wanted their fellow on the job. I put the 'their' in quotes."

At this point, the plot gets much too byzantine to explain fully. Schlesinger, an outsider, took charge of the CIA with expressed orders to "shake it up," which he did. The personnel level was trimmed sharply ("brutally," according to some old hands), and, among other things, Schlesinger ordered a full audit of the CIA's domestic activities. That produced the documentation which through no apparent fault of his, eventually surfaced in public.

When Colby succeeded Schlesinger in the fall of 1973, he inherited the new leaner look which Schlesinger

gave the agency, plus its new problems of public relations. When Rep. Lucien Nedzi, chairman of the House Intelligence subcommittee, called Colby for an examination on Chile, the new CIA director told all. When it leaked out, Helms was the embarrassed one.

Now, however, Colby is presiding over a sharp division within his own ranks, not to mention the hostile politicians outside. As one associate put it: "A lot of people think he's gone too far already. He's made a lot of concessions which will be very hard to reverse later on. Worse, there's a great disillusionment within the agency. They all feel unappreciated and exposed."

On the other hand, many see Colby as a skillful CIA "political operator," trying to navigate through the treacherous waters, to ameliorate the new pressures from Congress and the press, without sacrificing the agency's essential powers.

"He is the essence of a political operator who goes to a country overseas and tries to find the levers of power and hopes to influence them," said one former colleague. "He's very much a realist. He asks: who's running the country? It's not the President and the White House — it's Congress and the press. Well, how do you influence them? You can't do it with the old

Cold War rhetoric or by telling the press it has no business knowing about intelligence activities. So Colby is trying to get a handle on these political and social realities. He's operating on the same principle he would in Afghanistan."

Even Colby's admirers, however, can envision an unhappy ending for the director if he misreads the pressures, if he tells so much to the inquiring members of Congress on Capitol Hill that his own bureaucratic strength is exhausted downtown.

Among other questions, for instance, the investigators will pursue whether Kissinger, as Nixon's national security affairs adviser, had any part in ordering the CIA to spy on reporters in 1971 and 1972 because of national-security leaks.

Schlesinger, as Defense Secretary, has been standing back from the fray but his department, the Pentagon, has an important stake in what Congress winds up doing to the CIA and the "intelligence community" generally.

In short, while the dinner-party chatter enlivens the struggle, it is a defensive game at this point. One former CIA official described the situation:

"Everyone, to use one of Helms' phrases, is hunkering down and looking out for himself."