

## Taking the CIA on Faith *Box 4118/77*

Welcome indeed are CIA director Richard Helms' assurances that the quality of his agency's work "is better than it has ever been before," that "we do not target on American citizens," that "we not only have no stake in policy debates but we cannot and must not take sides," that "the elected officials of the U.S. Government watch over (CIA) extensively, intensively and continuously," and that "we understand as well as anyone the difficulties and the contradictions of conducting foreign intelligence operations on behalf of a free society." Whether his assurances are based on fact or feather-fluffing is, of course, another matter, and one which he conceded the public cannot judge. "The nation must to a degree take it on faith," he told the American Society of Newspaper Editors, "that we too are honorable men devoted to her service."

In all due respect to Mr. Helms, no one questions his honor or devotion, or that of his agency's staff. Moreover, on the basis of what little independent knowledge is available to us, we suspect that the high marks Mr. Helms gave the CIA are generally quite deserved. But that is not the point. The point is that the public has no firm or reliable basis on which to make any satisfactory judgment of the CIA at all. It is a secret agency. Mr. Helms is surely aware of the irony implicit in his plea that the nation accept on faith the CIA's devotion to democracy. For it is the essence of a democracy that matters of public policy be examined in public, not taken on faith.

Take, for instance, the one specific charge that Mr. Helms defended the agency against in his ASNE speech—that "the CIA is somehow involved

in the world drug traffic." He said: "We are not." But does the CIA have connections with others involved in drug traffic? If it does, would it not have double reason—the dirtiness of drugs and the protection of a particular intelligence operation—to deny the charge? For that matter, would a CIA confession have any more objective validity than a CIA denial?

The core of the matter lies, we believe, in Mr. Helms' observation that "the United States, as a world power, either is involved or may with little warning find itself involved in a wide range and variety of problems which require a broad and detailed base of foreign intelligence for the policy makers." As a general proposition, this is unassailable: nobody in his right mind would contend the United States does not need to collect foreign intelligence. In the specific application, however, questions arise: How much intelligence is enough? Does an able and ambitious intelligence agency's anticipation of contingencies in a given place or situation induce policy makers to posit an American interest there? Does the CIA's perception of the world as "fearsome," in Mr. Helms' word, affect its judgment of what contingencies it ought to prepare for and of what information it ought to pass on to the President?

To be sure, it is no more reasonable to expect the director of Central Intelligence to question publicly the premises of American global policy than to expect him to denounce the CIA as incompetent, imperial and anti-democratic. It is always going to be unsettling in our society, nonetheless, to be asked to take the CIA—or any other agency or operation of government—on nothing more than faith.