

# Carter's remark on Helms un

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A man who campaigns successfully for the presidency with a promise that "I will never lie to you" must expect to have his words scrutinized with care, even nit-picking care.

It should come as no surprise to President Carter, therefore, that a six-week-old statement he made about Richard Helms, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has been put under reportorial microscopes.

The aim of the exercise has been to determine whether Carter is developing the kind of credibility gap that plagued some of his predecessors.

On Sept. 29, Carter told a broadcast news conference that Attorney General Griffin Bell "has not consulted with me" about bringing possible criminal charges against Helms, whose testimony before a Senate committee about CIA intervention in Chile's internal affairs had become a subject of official inquiry.

Of the several million Americans who heard, saw or read Carter's statement, perhaps a thousand had a deep interest

in the case at the time.

Now, it is fair to assume, more thousands have at least some interest in the Helms matter, which became a front page news item last week when he pleaded no contest in federal court here to two criminal misdemeanor charges that he had failed to testify fully and accurately to the committee.

Part of the fresh interest has been prompted by a seeming contradiction between Carter's Sept. 29 statement and one made by Bell on Nov. 1.

To explore the matter chronologically, here is what happened:

At his September meeting with reporters, Carter was told that Bell had promised to consult with the president about Helms. Asked for his own views, Carter replied:

"He (Bell) has not consulted with me, nor given me any advice on the Helms question. I am familiar with it through reading the press. ..."

Last week, in an effort to defend the administration's decision to plea bargain with Helms and avoid a trial that might lead to disclosure of CIA secrets, Bell told reporters he indeed had consulted with Carter on July 25, more than two months before the president's news conference.

By Bell's account, accepted by the White House, he and Carter were joined at the July meeting by Vice President Walter F. Mondale, presidential foreign policy adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, Assistant Attorney General Benjamin R. Civiletti and one or two others.

On that occasion, Bell reported, "the

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president authorized us to determine the feasibility and possibility" of initiating plea bargaining with Helms — a statement that also is accepted as truth by White House spokesmen.

Bell's account is, on its face, difficult to square with Carter's September pronouncement that he knew about the Helms case "through reading in the press," not to mention Carter's claim that the attorney general "has not consulted with me."

For two days last week, at regular White House press briefings, Carter's deputy press secretary Rex Granum and the top spokesman, Jody Powell, labored at reconciling what might appear irreconcilable.

Granum first reported that Carter, at the time of the news conference, understood that the July 25 meeting had been disclosed publicly by Powell. Therefore, Granum argued, the president assumed the question addressed to him dealt with possible consultations with Bell subsequent to July 25.

Acknowledging that the July meeting never was announced, Granum said Powell "has a very strong recollection that he made that public in (informal) discussions with reporters. ..."

No reporter has come forward to acknowledge any such discussion with Powell, who later said he could not recall the names of any reporters in-

involved. Moreover, neither the White House nor reporters assigned there can cite any published or broadcast report concerning the July conference. If some reporters were told about it, they apparently kept it secret.

Echoing Granum's explanation, Powell told reporters, "I could be wrong about that, but that is my impression and it also was the president's impression."

Barraged with questions, Powell finally conceded, "There's no way I can prove to you beyond all reasonable question ... our good intentions in the matter."

True enough — which is why Jimmy Carter may find himself with a credibility fissure, if hardly a chasm.