

Richard Helms talks about

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the days following the missile crisis of 1962, two men, one American, the other Russian, were negotiating the details of the withdrawal of Soviet weapons from Cuba.

In an informal moment, out of the earshot of others or the reach of hidden microphones, they were sitting on a fence at a Connecticut farm house and talking. It was a moment for candor, and Vasily Kuznetsov of the Soviet Union said to John McCloy of the United States:

"All right, Mr. McCloy, we withdraw the bombers, just as we've withdrawn the missiles, but I want to tell you something. This is the last time the United States is going to be able to act like this towards the Soviet Union."

A few years later, McCloy told the story to President Johnson. The third man in the room was Richard C. Helms, then director of American Central Intelligence and head of the CIA. Now retired from government service, Helms tells the story to illustrate what he regards as the central fact of danger in the world today: the relative decline of American military power.

He questions whether the United States could now force the Russians to turn back their missile-carrying ships as it did in that fearful high noon of 1962. They turned back then, he says, because the United States was first in nuclear missile and conventional military equipment, and they knew it and we knew it.

"But now that the Russians have a very large strategic force, the shoe may be on the other foot ... President Carter said he's going to see to it that the Russians don't take over the Persian Gulf, where our oil lifeline is attached. But I don't know what he's going to protect the Persian Gulf with."

Helms is quick to point out that he is "not entirely up to date on what the United States has and what the Soviet Union has." He says he has no continuing connection with the CIA (which he left in 1972), that his information these days comes from newspapers and "some friends around town."

One assumes that a man who worked in intelligence 25 years and headed it for six and also served as U.S. ambassador to Iran for five years has well-informed "friends" here and abroad. He says little about his CIA work but he projects the special, tight-lipped aura of a man who has been on the inside, who has seen the figures that could mean Armaged-

Iran and hostage

troubles

don, who has been involved in much of his country's high strategy and many of the moves and countermoves, the plots and counterplots of the Cold War.

Helms does not go public often but in a recent interview he spoke passionately about the American condition at home and abroad, the decline of strong leadership in the White House, a society fragmented by vested interests, about "false prophets" in government and industry, the weakened state of the CIA and the aborted rescue of the hostages in Iran.

The rescue, if tried at all, should have come in the first month of their captivity, he says, when much of the world was outraged, "when most governments would have understood our efforts to get them back, when even the Russians were saying it was terrible to take diplomats as hostages."

In the ensuing weeks and months, he says, we should not have made the hostages the prime preoccupation of our foreign policy every day at the White House and State Department and every night on television.

"We gave the Iranians an opportunity to bargain with us, to denigrate and humiliate and deceive us. We gave them a tool to beat us with."

"It seems to me the better way — it's hard to say but I don't know another way to say it — would have been to seem to turn our backs on the hostages, to regard them as prisoners of war and simply left them with no value to the Iranians. If they had no value, I think the

Iransians eventually would've come up with some device for letting them go."

As an example, the former CIA chief recalled the seizure of the Pueblo and its men off North Korea in 1968. "They sort of faded in the background but the government never forgot them. It continued to see what it could do quietly and finally a device was found and they were let loose and that was that. By hyping the hostage situation in Iran, we insured they'd be kept a long time."

Helms thinks the rescue attempt, while risky, might have worked, might have freed "a lot of the hostages," but some people probably were going to get killed. In such matters, said the man who specialized in clandestine operations, "you can't believe in the Immaculate Conception."

Richard McGarrah Helms is now 67, fit, tall, thin, carefully groomed, carefully controlled, a polite man who invites neither small talk nor knowing him. Master spies in fiction are frequently brooding men suffering from bad memories. This one seems content with his past and his principles. Others are not. They see him as a man of shadows and controversy, who lied to Congress.

He runs a one-man consulting firm in which he advises American companies on business prospects in the Persian Gulf area. Casting about for a name, he didn't think "Helms Associates" sounded particularly good. He called it the Safer Co., using the Arabic and Persian word for ambassador.

On the broader scale of his concerns, Helms sees the 1980s as a time when the Soviet Union will be stronger than the United States in nuclear and conventional weapons.

"And that is a period of danger, at least to those of us who have spent our lives at this and understand that that kind of primacy can be translated into aggression, movement, takeovers of countries."

No diplomacy, he says, "is worth anything unless it's backed up by military power." The United States, he says, must rearm to give the Russians reason to pause and American allies reason to feel protected.

Unless it is backed up by superior

power, he says, Carter's threat to protect the Persian Gulf with force is "worthless because in this day and age countries know what other countries have, at least in gross numbers. And they're not about to believe something that doesn't exist."

"This is the time for leadership in the real sense of the word. I don't mean the kind of thing we've had recently of leading by following, finding out what the people want through a poll and giving it to them. ... I mean leadership of concepts, of ideas, of directions, of things we should be doing."

"We're bickering with each other. We are loaded with special pleaders. ... We are dividing into bits and pieces and taking our eye off the main thing, which is our survival as the kind of society the

world envies, admires and respects. Instead, we're wallowing. We seem to have no rudder."

"We've had a bunch of false prophecies in this country. The people who tell us that if we don't rearm, the Russians won't. The people who tell us that if we're soft and nice and decent the Third World will love us. The people who say we can continue to ride around in big cars because there's going to be plenty of gasoline forever."

Helms thinks President Carter's human rights crusade is "ham-handed," futile and wrong because "we can't run our own affairs so why should we be telling other how to run theirs?"

"I think the best way to influence others is by example. I think you should

shine up the Statue of Liberty once in a while. But you don't go around telling people if you don't do such and such we won't do this for you."

But in the days that he ran the CIA, didn't the United States try more of that? Wasn't it trying to be policeman to the world?

"That's different. That is attempting to handle events in the world so they are favorable to us rather than the Soviets. I still think that's a good idea. I think that if we don't fight for our side we're not going to have any side to fight for."

Accordingly, he hopes American intelligence revives covert action abroad. "It's a useful tool. We should have it in our armory. It would help us in the control and shaping of certain events, with a little influence, a little money, a

little of this and that."

"A little of this and that" is what has troubled some members of Congress, who have tried, so far futilely, to write a charter that would keep CIA operations within proper legal limits without emasculating the agency. In the great uproar over the CIA in 1975, many of the "abuses" laid at its door were said to have occurred during Richard Helms' tenure.

In 1973, he told a Senate committee that the CIA had made no attempt to influence the Chilean elections of 1970. In 1975, it was disclosed that the CIA had supplied the opponents of Salvador Allende with \$8 million. In 1977, Helms pleaded no contest, was fined \$2,000 and given a suspended prison sentence for failing to testify fully and accurately. He

said he couldn't because of his CIA oath. He has since said he would do the same thing again if the "national security" required.

Helms thinks a detailed charter would hamstring the CIA. He thinks, instead, the skeletal act of 1947 which established it should be amended "as necessary." Beyond that, he thinks we should rely on the president of the United States to keep the agency within bounds. "You've got to trust somebody in your government. If you don't, what kind of government have you got?"