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IN FOCUS

Lyle Denniston

Washington Star Staff Writer

It is somewhat after 10 in the morning, June 23, 1972. In the Oval Office at the White House, presidential assistant H.R. Haldeman is talking — quite excitedly — to President Richard M. Nixon.

"You seem to think the thing to do is to get them to stop?" Haldeman asks, referring to the FBI investigation of the Watergate burglary just six days before.

"Right, fine," Nixon answers.

"They say," Haldeman says, "the only way to do that is from White House instructions. And it's got to be to Helms and to — ah, what's his name — ? Walters." He goes on:

"And the proposal would be that Ehrlichman and I call them in, and say, ah —"

He doesn't finish the scenario. Nixon interrupts: "All right, fine. How do you call him in — I mean you just — well, we protected Helms from one hell of a lot of things."

Haldeman agrees. "That's what Ehrlichman says."

THE "HELMS" they say has been protected is Richard Helms, at the time the director of the CIA.

His name comes up again that day at the White House, a few hours later. Again, Haldeman is talking about the plan to get the FBI to stop the Watergate investigation, relying on Helms to do it.

The President says: "If it gets out that this is all involved, the Cuba thing would be a fiasco. It would make the CIA look bad, it's going to make Hunt look bad, and it is likely to blow the whole Bay of Pigs thing which we think would be very unfortunate — both for CIA, and for the country, at this time, and for American foreign policy. Just tell him to lay off. Don't you?"

Haldeman agrees, and seems satisfied with the solution. "Yep. That's the basis to do it on. Just leave it at that."

As that part of the conversation closes, Nixon again mentions Helms in a cryptic way: "Helms is not one to (unintelligible) . . ."

THE REFERENCES to Helms meant little when that day's transcript came out in the late summer of 1974. The mentions of Helms, in fact, were largely passed over then amid the sensational revelation of Nixon's own early role in the "Watergate cover-up" — the revelation that

On Tape: 'We Protected Helms,' Nixon Told Haldeman

The charmed life of Richard Helms — Part 3

forced the president to resign.

But the references to Helms may have meant something significant then. If ever explained fully, they may mean something significant in the future.

For the time being, however, they are merely in the record of history, posing still lingering questions about Richard Helms and the Watergate scandals.

Those scandals included, of course, not only the burglary at the Democratic Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex, and the "cover-up" of the White House role in trying to stop the FBI probe, but also the use of the White House "Plumbers" team for a 1971 break-in at a California psychiatrist's office during the White House-led investigation of the Pentagon Papers leak.

It is one of the ironies of Helms' current problems that he and his associates believe that he was fired as CIA chief, and sent off to be ambassador to Iran, solely because he would not cooperate with Nixon and his aides on those scandals.

"The word was passed around at the time," recalls a friend of Helms, "that Helms had not been able to get along with (Henry) Kissinger. That is totally false. The real reason is that Helms had stood up against Nixon on the Watergate cover-up."

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PART OF the proof that persuades Helms' associates that he was punished for being "obstructionist" on Watergate is that, on leaving the CIA, he did not get the National Security Medal — something that a retired CIA chief might normally expect. The idea was suggested, but never acted upon at the White House.

Helms' conduct in each of the scandals has been

probed by a variety of congressional committees.

Pages upon pages of committee hearings track back and forth over the Plumbers incident, CIA sponsorship of some of former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt's adventures, meetings that Helms attended at the White House as the Watergate case began to unfold, and the variety of ways in which top Nixon aides leaned on the CIA.

Still, it is uncertain that everything there is to be known about any of that has been disclosed. Some of the CIA's own tape recordings have been destroyed. Not all of the White House tape recordings have been disclosed.

There is no indication, though, that Helms faces legal problems because of the scandals beyond the potential difficulty in the Justice Department's year-old perjury investigation of some of his congressional testimony. The whole matter seems largely closed.

WHAT HAS come out publicly has raised, but not answered, at least these questions about Helms and the scandals:

- What did Nixon mean about having "protected" Helms?
- Why was Nixon confident that Helms would go along with the idea of using a "national security" ruse to stop the FBI investigation of Watergate?
- Why did neither Helms nor any other CIA official tell Watergate prosecutors about these pressures or about past associations with Howard Hunt when they

first learned he was tied to the Watergate burglary?

- Why didn't they tell the prosecutors about Nixon campaign aide James W. McCord's attempts to warn the CIA that the White House was trying to make Watergate look like a CIA plot in order to protect its secrecy?
- Did anyone at the CIA know, in advance, about the Watergate break-in?
- What does it mean that Howard Hunt, an ex-CIA officer, was involved in both the Plumbers incident and in the Watergate burglary?
- Why did the CIA try to head off FBI inquiries into White House aide John D. Ehrlichman's dealings with the CIA over the Plumbers incident a year before Watergate?
- What is the full story behind Helms' firing as CIA director?

THOSE QUESTIONS, in turn, lead to others, broader in scope and perhaps harder to answer, about Helms and the CIA in the Nixon era.

They involve the degree to which CIA's intelligence duties are carried out here at home, the sensitivity — or lack of it — at the White House about limits on CIA's authority, the nature of CIA-FBI dealings, the controls — or lack of them — on secret escapades by ex-CIA officers, the chain of command within the CIA and above it, the responsibility — if any — of CIA's leaders to filter out the necessary from the frivolous when they get orders from the White House, and obey only the ones that they think are compelling.

One conclusion, bearing on many of these issues, does seem to have emerged already: The CIA was treated in the Nixon administration as virtually an extension of the White House. Perhaps, as some of Helms' colleagues have suggested, that was the approach that presidents have taken for the past 20 years.

Helms' troubles and the current plight of the CIA itself are posing issues that, apparently, no one in government has ever asked seriously.

"You have to define what a president can do under the term 'national security,'" suggests one of Helms' long-time associates.

The Watergate scandals seem almost a classic case study of extreme answers to that. Very early and throughout, the one theory upon which aides — and Nixon himself — sought to justify their actions was "national security." But it is not even clear that officials felt obliged to define what they meant; merely reciting the phrase often seemed to be enough.

IT IS APPARENT, however, that when White House officials turned to the CIA, they did not bother to go into detail about security justifications. Ordering the agency into action was justification enough.

Helms, in 1973 testimony on the scandals, gave some indication of what he felt was expected of him. He described his reactions at a key White House meeting in 1972 this way:

"Here was Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman, the two most senior officials in the White House next to the president himself, giving this instruction. And I really feel like now, as I did then, that it would have been presumptuous to have pressed them any harder as to how they had come up with this, or where they had gotten the idea, or who was behind it."

Helms also has testified that he did not feel free to go around Haldeman and Ehrlichman and talk to Nixon himself about the assignment those aides were giving to the CIA.

It is not clear, yet, just what kind of relationship Helms had with Nixon. His associates say they doubt that the CIA director ever felt he could pick up the telephone and call the president, and they say he was at the White House fewer times than speculation would indicate.

Helms has said that, at that 1972 White House meeting in the week after the Watergate burglary, Haldeman passed him by and spoke directly to his deputy — Lt. Gen. Vernon

A. Walters — about the plan to "limit" the FBI probe. Helms, however, did regard that as "odd," he has testified.

SEN. STUART Symington, D-Mo., a close friend of Helms, has suggested that the Nixon administration put Walters in as Helms'

deputy to insure that one of "their men" would be in a controlling spot at CIA. Walters had been an official interpreter for Nixon during some of his foreign trips as vice president in the 1950s.

That is the same Walters, however, whose name Haldeman had trouble remembering when he talked of going to CIA officials about the FBI.

There is one fact: Helms was removed as CIA director at the end of 1972, before the Watergate scandal began to unravel publicly. Beyond that, there is his own testimony that he did fight against misuse of the CIA in the cover-up.

In May 1973, Helms told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the CIA had "totally and 100 percent resisted" attempts to get it involved in any activity inside this country. In August 1973, he told the Senate Watergate Committee he had told Walters to "hang in there" in resisting White House demands that the CIA take a role in the cover-up by paying Watergate burglars' bail fees.

But there are many gaps between those claims of non-involvement and the specific suggestions, hints and implications that come out of the mass of testimony and evidence gathered in congressional probes of Watergate.

Perhaps the most significant day in the whole period for Helms, then and now, was June 23, 1972 — six days after the Watergate burglary, and the day on which Nixon and Haldeman talked of using Helms to shut off the FBI probe of Watergate.

BETWEEN THE Oval Office sessions of Nixon and Haldeman that are recorded on the June 23 tapes, there was a meeting a little

after 1 p.m. elsewhere in the White House: in Ehrlichman's office on the second floor. This was called to put into effect the plan that the president and Haldeman had just agreed to follow.

Haldeman and Ehrlichman were there, and so were Helms and Walters.

When Helms first discussed that meeting at a congressional hearing in May 1973, he said the Watergate burglary was not discussed. However, when he next discussed it, in August 1973, after seeing a memo by Walters on the meeting, Helms said Haldeman did mention the burglary and had said that "the opposition" (presumably, the Democrats) was "capitalizing on it."

He said Haldeman made some "incoherent reference to an investigation in Mexico, or an FBI investigation, running into the Bay of Pigs."

That, as Helms said he learned later, was a reference to the fact that some money from Nixon's campaign organization had been "laundered" through Mexico before it wound up in the bank account of one of the Watergate burglars, a Cuban exile leader.

Haldeman went on to say, Helms said, that the Mexican angle could lead the FBI to discover some "covert" CIA operations, and that Walters should go to Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray and tell him to stay out of that area — that the FBI probe "should be tapered off or reduced, or something."

AS THEY LEFT the meeting, Helms testified, he walked downstairs with Walters to a waiting automobile, and told the general to say only to Gray that "if the FBI runs into any (CIA) agents or operations, it (CIA) should be immediately notified."

Four days later, according to testimony by Gen. Walters, White House aide John W. Dean began pressuring the agency to use "covert action funds" to pay bail and salaries for the Watergate burglars be-

cause they "were getting scared and were wobbling."

The general has testified that he felt this approach was wrong, and said he told Dean he "would have no part in this and was quite prepared to resign on this issue." Helms said he advised Walters not to "yield an inch" in his resistance.

Thus, within 10 days after the burglary, Helms was aware that the White House was heavily involved with the Watergate incident, and that the CIA was being pressured to take a role.

In fact, however, he knew — two days after the burglary — that the incident was somehow related to Nixon's campaign organization. On Monday, June 19, Helms talked with CIA aides about the involvement of McCord, one of those arrested that Saturday morning. McCord was a former CIA officer and Helms apparently knew right away that McCord was working as chief of Nixon's campaign security staff.

The role of Helms and the CIA in the Watergate affair has been probed at length by Sen. Howard Baker, R-Tenn., who was a member of the Senate Watergate Committee, and his staff aide on that panel, Fred D. Thompson.

THEY HAVE explored the activities of Robert F. Bennett, whose public relations firm had hired Howard Hunt after he retired from the CIA in 1970. Bennett's firm was serving as a CIA "cover" at the time.

Just before the break-in at the Watergate, Bennett had learned that Hunt had been planning to wiretap the telephones at Democratic candidate George McGovern's headquarters here. Two days after the Watergate burglary — before Hunt's name was mentioned by the press as having been tied to that incident — Bennett talked with Hunt and apparently all but confirmed his strong suspicion that Hunt was deeply involved with Watergate.

Bennett told a CIA case officer with whom he had been dealing about his suspicions of Hunt, but not

until July 10. A memo on that conversation supposedly was given to Helms.

Watergate prosecutors had learned before then from Bennett himself that he thought Hunt was involved. But the CIA itself reportedly did not relate any of this either to prosecutors or to the FBI.

The agency also did not pass along word that a CIA employe, Lee R. Pennington Jr., had gone to visit McCord's home shortly after the burglary, and may have destroyed some records. That data also was withheld, for a time, from the Senate Watergate Committee.

Much of the testimony and evidence that raises questions about Helms and the whole series of scandals during the Nixon administration bears on the role of Hunt, and CIA officials' awareness of that.

One of Helms' own associates criticizes the Helms-Hunt relationship: "As a personal weakness, Helms tolerated some prima donnas — like E. Howard Hunt — beyond the time he should have."

Aside from the Bennett memo showing his suspicion that Hunt may have been involved in the break-in plot, the Baker-Thompson investigation turned up evidence that in March 1972 — three months before the Watergate burglary — a CIA officer in Miami was told that "Hunt was employed by the White House." At the time, Hunt was recruiting Cuban exiles, apparently for the burglary.

Helms' associates insist that the White House did not check with the CIA before putting Hunt on its payroll, and that, if it had, a "derogatory" reply would have been given.

ANOTHER ITEM that figured in the Baker-Thompson probe was a transcript of a CIA tape recording of a telephone call that Ehrlichman had made to the CIA on July 7, 1971, asking that help be provided for Hunt for an investigation he was doing.

That call, made to the then-CIA deputy director,

the source of the leak of the documents.

The Ehrlichman-Cushman transcript about Hunt reportedly was discussed by CIA officials at a meeting June 19, 1972 — two days after the Watergate burglary, and three months after the agency is said to have learned that Hunt was working for the White House. (Whether it is a coincidence or not, that is the same day on which Helms talked with aides about McCord and the Watergate break-in.)

THE ACTUAL tape recording of the Ehrlichman call in 1971 was destroyed in January 1973. Congressional probes were told this was done on Helms' direct orders. Helms was then in the process of leaving the CIA post. He has testified that everything the agency had on any of the scandals had been turned over to the FBI.

Helms also has said, at various committee hearings, that he was unaware that Hunt was doing anything in this country. In early 1973, he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "nobody knew he (Hunt) was going to be involved in any domestic activity." However, the House Judiciary Committee in 1974 published a memo showing that CIA aide Karl Wagner — the one who knew about the Ehrlichman-Hunt tie — had broken off contact with Hunt in 1972 because "his requests appeared to involve the agency in domestic clandestine operations," which are illegal.

The CIA director himself had a part in the decision to go along with the agency's help for Hunt in 1971, as Ehrlichman asked.

"I recall," he has testified, "that Gen. Cushman informed me that he had authorized giving to Howard Hunt a tape recorder and a camera, and I asked for what purpose and he said he wanted to conduct a one-time interview and that he had been properly au-

thenticated by the White House and that he was working at their behest.

Hunt actually was given a wig, hidden camera, a recorder and other items for use as a physician's disguise. The camera, hidden in a tobacco pouch, was used by Hunt to photograph the offices of Dr. Fielder

IN ANOTHER face the Plumbers case, Hunt authorized the preparation — at White House request — of a psychological profile on Ellsberg. He testified later that he had "great regrets" about that.

Helms has said he did not believe in the Plumbers incident agency's dealing with Hunt had anything to do with the Watergate scandal.

"Nobody had given slightest indication anything underhanded," he said in

(NOTE: Helms through the statement, to be in this series. Footnotes agreed to provided that not be used.)

Tomorrow: H
"home front"