

The CIA and Its Former Chief Miss Their Powerful Friends

By Lyle Denniston
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The whole room tells of power, of rank, of prestige; it may be one of the most impressive places in Washington.

On two walls are photographs of many of the figures who have dominated this city since World War II; many of the pictures are signed with a warm, personal note.

On another wall, there is an array of certified honors capable of stirring deep envy.

And on the fourth wall, there is the most enviable collection of all: this man's portrait on a half-dozen front covers of news magazines.

Of course, there is the man himself. If anyone in Washington can claim respect, surely he could — and does. He speaks easily, assuredly, knowingly. Behind an imposing desk, his gaze is fixed in a dominating way.

THIS IS Stuart Symington, U.S. senator from Missouri. A man who has known presidents and has been consulted by them. A man who, it

often has been assumed, ought to have been in the White House himself.

He also is one of Richard Helms' best friends in Washington.

It is probable that, time after time, Helms has been in that very office in the Russell Building, sharing with Symington secrets that never will be known publicly.

Symington doesn't reveal them; he does not even allude to them. But he is ready, even eager, to defend Helms.

"I'm just as sure that that man didn't do anything that wasn't in the national interest as I am that the sun is going to come up tomorrow morning."

It is a testimonial that, at the moment, Helms needs badly. The former director of the CIA is beleaguered, and nowhere is he in more trouble than in Congress. Day after day, accusations of CIA misdeeds come out of congressional committees and Helms gets a good share of the blame.

THE TROUBLE with Symington's support, however, is that it doesn't mean much these days. At another time, even a hint of doubt about what the CIA was up to would have been turned off with a word from a Symington or an Allen Ellender, a John Stennis or a Mendel Rivers.

A little circle of members was the only forum in Congress to which the CIA reported. It was not uncommon, apparently, for those lawmakers to decide that no one else on Capitol Hill needed to know what they had been told.

There were no leaks. There was even, now and then, the pretense or the reality of ignorance: Ellender is remembered for having said that he had not even asked about the CIA.

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running a secret war in Laos. Lately, Symington has repeated often that the Senate's CIA "oversight" committee sometimes went for a whole year without meeting.

It was within such a small community of the powerful that the CIA and Helms routinely operated — and did so with approval, at least implied approval.

BUT TIMES have changed. Powerful friends like Symington are in no position to stop the process of inquiry that is now going on, or even to shape its course. In fact, they are feeling pressed themselves to come up with some ideas of their own for reform.

The process means, for Helms individually, that his reputation and perhaps his future are very much at stake.

He is described by friends as somewhat stoic about the prospect of personal ruin, perhaps telling himself that it is the price he knew he might have to pay in his kind of profession. He is not going to take

on his critics or criticize his old contacts on the Hill, associates say. "I don't think you'll find Helms throwing a lot of mud around," says a former colleague.

But what is happening to Helms and to the CIA seems to be taking on a wider aspect, too. It may affect the whole future of the secret intelligence system.

Somewhat awkwardly and uncertainly, it seems, Congress has been trying to take over some of the power of foreign policy management. The spy business is, and always has been, directly mixed up in that.

The approval — or, at least, the easy tolerance — of what the CIA was doing was part of a well developed congressional habit of leaving the tough decisions on diplomacy and military strategy to the White House. The lawmakers chose to be very accommodating, and presidents took that to mean indifference.

THAT SYSTEM came close to collapsing with the Vietnam war, in the later stages, anyway. And it then became politic — and politically salable — for Congress to try to assert itself. That was especially true after the Pentagon Papers "leak" and then the Watergate scandals showed how far presidents felt free to go in the name of "national security." The CIA revelations followed, almost predictably.

"I believe," suggests a former colleague of Helms,

...that the combination of disgust and fatigue from Vietnam and Watergate are playing an equal role."

It is not yet clear, and won't be for months, how far Congress wants to go now to give itself control over the CIA or to put other kinds of restraints on the agency. So far, Senate and House committees have focused on a variety of CIA "dirty tricks," but it is not yet clear that Congress is prepared to put a stop to all of that.

There are even fewer indications of what Congress wants done about the entire approach to spying and intelligence in general.

Some who have spent their careers in espionage seem prepared to believe that — because of the kind of inquiry Congress is making — the CIA may simply be abolished.

"THE AGENCY," one of these professionals comments, "doesn't deserve a living from the United States. The United States can do anything it wants to the agency. . . . But if you base a decision on what, so far, the country has been given to hear, I see no reason to expect that the agency would not be dismantled."

What is the least clear about Congress' intentions at this point is whether it wants to do anything at all about the power of presidents to use the CIA.

That is where long-time professionals in U.S. spying see the most serious abuses, and that is where most of them think Helms' problems — and those of other CIA leaders — first arose.

There has been a split, for at least 25 years, in the intelligence community over the value of the so-called "cowboy" approach to espionage. That approach means all the secret techniques of disrupting the enemy, from supporting favored political factions abroad to dreaming up schemes to murder foreign leaders such as Fidel Castro.

Pressure from the very top of the government for "cowboyism" apparently began to develop heavily

during the Korean war, when the CIA's Office of Policy Coordination — the "dirty tricks department" — was formed.

"If the government hadn't been so hepped on this in the early Fifties, a lot of these problems wouldn't have arisen," says a CIA leader of that era.

PRESIDENT Dwight Eisenhower probably was the first to show a real interest in that side of the intelligence business, according to the professionals. "He had dealt with intelligence and operations, and with the Resistance, during the war," recalls one.

Within the White House, the National Security Council began working up schemes to make trouble for Communist regimes abroad: There quickly developed a tendency at the agency's OPC to plan major — and very expensive — "covert operations."

Under the pressure, the agency got sloppy about this side of its work, according to career men who were involved. "We were talking about sending 20 people where one would do spending \$20 million instead of \$1 million," recalls one professional, who adds: "Nothing so concentrates the mind of an intelligence agency as a healthy shortage of funds."

But there was no shortage, and most professionals at the CIA knew the reason: The White House was interested. "It was perfectly clear to me," says a man who was in the "operations" side of CIA then, "that the people who were giving instructions to me felt they were acting in no policy vacuum."

Another remembers: "Allen Dulles used to come back from the White House with one of these ideas, and he would say: 'Don't tell me it's crazy — we don't have any choice.'"

THE PROCESS apparently stirred deep dissension within CIA ranks. One key source of resentment, apparently, was a departure from the system of having "clandestine operations" plans work their way

up from the station chiefs abroad.

"For many years — up to the arrival of the Kennedys, perhaps it was with Eisenhower — nothing had ever been generated and put into motion that didn't originate in the operations area, and then was pushed upward for approval, at the policy area," a CIA leader recounts.

Some who did not like the idea of starting at the top with such schemes protested and, when that failed, got out. But, one professional says, "some of us

(NOTE: Helms declined, through the State Department, to be interviewed for this series. Former associates agreed to interviews, provided that their names not be used.)

used to sit around and rationalize that, if we left, someone else would just be put in to do it. Some of us felt we could keep these things under control." But he adds bluntly, "you accepted these demands or you got out."

Helms did not get out. "His primary loyalty was to the executive," an associate suggests. "That was the tradition in which he was raised as a professional. This is where you basically were going to get your orders. If you got a request from the White House, it was pretty hard to say no. What the hell were you in business for?"

Another CIA professional describes what was happening within the government and CIA:

"Since Kennedy — including Johnson and Nixon — you have had a personalized government; the government of the U.S. is run out of the White House, a strong president relying on one or two individuals.

"A LOT OF the cowboy bent in recent years stemmed from the fact that we've had frustrated presidents. They had problems they couldn't solve through the orthodox machinery of government. And they haven't been willing to use their own powers.

"They have been inclined more to turn to the agency for capabilities they didn't really understand. They would go to State and go to the Pentagon, then someone would say: 'Oh, what about those boys over there (at CIA)?' Allen Dulles would be sent for, and told he's got to save Iran, or save Jordan, or save Italy, or save France. He would say, 'Yes sir!' and then he would come back and say 'Save Italy!'"

It is because of such recollections that CIA professionals angrily dispute the remark of Chairman Frank Church, D-Idaho, of the Senate Intelligence Committee that the CIA has acted as "a rogue elephant" and that it treated the presidency "almost as an irrelevancy."

Some of these men also think that one defense made by Helms himself — that presidents have been shielded from knowing embarrassing things, so they could deny them if the United States got caught — has been heavily overdone.

That, one ex-CIA official says, "is a complete red herring." Another, while conceding that there have been times "where the link between policy and carrying it out has become fuzzy over a period of time," adds that "most of these have not been because of a determination of Helms that he was going to run the show."

These professionals are just as sure that Helms, and others, did not operate without telling Congress what they were doing. They dispute Sen. Symington's comment that "the CIA wasn't watched; they could do anything they wanted."

ONE FORMER CIA officer recalls: "You would go up there and brief two or three guys. Then you might be called before the full committee in an open hearing, and there sat those boys who know all about this, looking up at the ceiling."

There is, among the men who served along with Helms, a growing skepticism that Congress and the White House will now do

much more than they ever have to provide solutions for the problems now being uncovered.

"The question is," says one of these professionals, "can Congress and the executive arrange their affairs in such a way that the agency can conduct operations with proper guidance?"

Another adds: "This is not so much a problem for the agency. God damn it, the country's faced with the problem. I don't think it's important what happens to the agency. But I would have thought the first thing we would want to do was to study the United States as it is today, and decide what it needs, what an agency like the CIA needs to be and do."

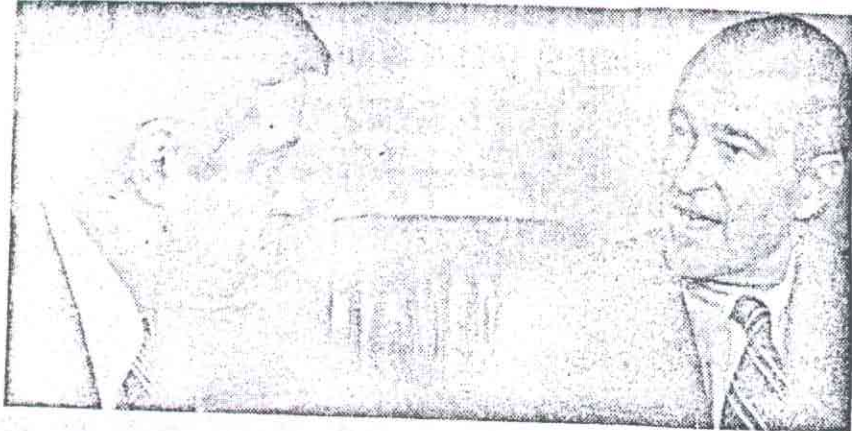
Helms' former colleagues see a possibility that, after the focus on CIA's misdeeds in secret military or political adventures, Congress may decide to wipe out "the clandestine side of the business." That would include intelligence-gathering and protection of the U.S. espionage network itself, as well as "dirty tricks" operations.

"IF THE UNITED States is to be asked to forgo any covert means of obtaining intelligence, we certainly would get less intelligence. The amount of hard fact which emerges from clandestine intelligence is a small part of the total information available at any one time — but it very often is priceless. Very often, it is the missing link."

There appears to be major concern, in fact, that a loss of secret information-gathering could hamper the process of developing the "intelligence estimates" upon which much U.S. military and diplomatic policy is based.

The future of the "estimates" system has not figured significantly in congressional probes of the CIA.

Tomorrow: Helms and the Watergate scandals



Sen. Frank Church (left) talks with former CIA Director Richard Helms prior to a closed hearing of the Senate Intelligence Committee last June. —Associated Press