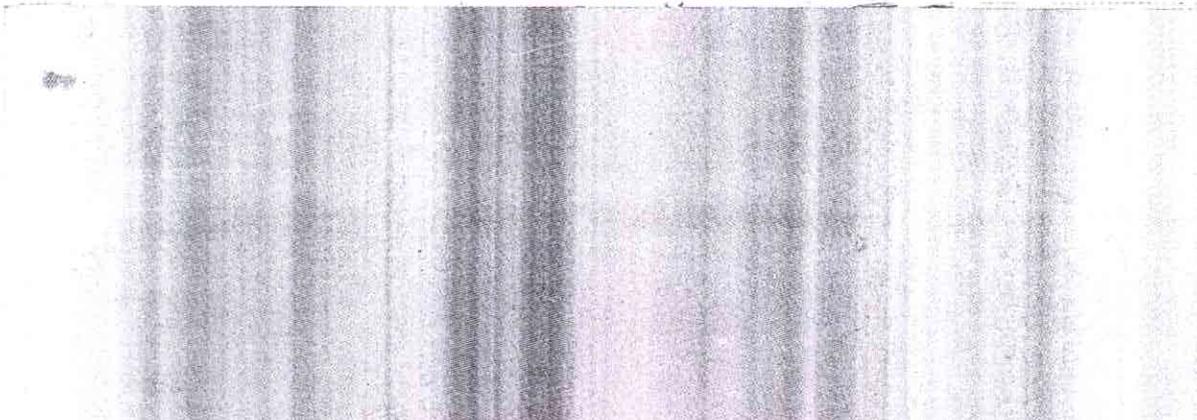


# The Rise and Fall of Richard Helms

Survival and Sudden Death in the CIA - By Thomas Powers



PHOTOGRAPH BY WIDE WORLD



**R**ICHARD MCGARRAH HELMS BELIEVED IN secrets. Of course, everyone in the American intelligence community believes in secrets in theory, but Helms really believed in secrets the way Lyman Kirkpatrick believed in secrets. At one point years ago they were rivals in the Central Intelligence Agency. But they had certain things in common and one of them was a belief in secrets. They did not like covert action operations—subsidizing politicians in Brazil, parachuting into Burma, preparing poisoned handkerchiefs for inconvenient Arab colonels, all that sleight of hand and derring-do of World War II vintage which certain veterans of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) brought into the CIA—because covert action operations had a built-in uncertainty factor. They tended to go wrong, and even when they succeeded they tended to get out. Too many people knew about them. You couldn't keep them secret; not just confidential for the life of the administration, like so many secrets in Washington, but secret, in Lyman Kirkpatrick's phrase, "from inception to eternity."

As Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) from June 1966 until February 1973, Helms was as close to anonymous as a senior government official can be. In political memoirs of the period Helms is often in the index, but when you check the text he is only a walk-on, one of those names in sentences which begin, "Also at the meeting were..." If it were not for a little... bad luck... Helms would be as faintly remembered now as Rear Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter or General Hoyt Vandenberg, two early DCIs.

No one tells stories about Richard Helms. He had allies within the CIA, of course, and friends, and there are men who still admire his professional skill in running a traditional intelligence service, and there are even more who learned to respect his bureaucratic talents. He lost some battles within the CIA but he won all the wars and no one who worked with him ever doubted for long that Helms was a formidable opponent when it came to office politics. But Helms did not win people, as Allen Dulles, Frank Wisner, Bissell, Tracey Barnes and Thomas Karamessines all did. His fires were banked; he kept his own counsel and his distance, and even the men who knew him best find themselves hard pressed when they are asked what Richard Helms was like.

The only genuine anecdote I heard about Helms came from a man who did not like him, and he had to think a long time before he could come up with it. Before the Director's daily meeting, the man said, Helms would read an intelligence brief describing what had come in overnight. The names of all agents, intelligence officers, operations and the like were replaced by code words, of course, but for the Director's convenience there were little tags attached at the edge of the page providing the true identities. One day there was an item from the Chief of Station (COS) in Frankfurt and the tag beside the code name for the COS said, "Ray Kline."

Helms allowed himself to smile broadly at this, according to the man who told me the story, because the officer in charge of the brief had misspelled the name of a man who had once been something of a Helms rival, an important CIA official, Ray Cline, with a C. Helms paused, and said, "Poor Ray. How soon they forget, how soon they forget."

A man has been stepping very lightly indeed, who does not leave deeper tracks than that.

Helms' personal background was atypical of the CIA in two ways. He went to school in Europe (Le Rosey in Switzerland, a posh social institution where Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, later shah of Iran, also went) and he had no money of his own. The practical importance of this fact was that Helms, unlike many early CIA people, needed his job. He could not afford to resign if he got mad and he knew it. In all other respects—race, politics and social background—Helms was typical of the Eastern, old family, old money, WASP patricians who ran the great financial institutions, the Wall Street law firms, the Foreign Service and the CIA.

At Williams College, where he was graduated in 1935, Helms was one of those young men, assured beyond their years, who are voted most popular and most likely to succeed. He was Phi Beta Kappa, which meant he knew how to write papers and take exams with effect, but he had none of the intellectual fire and passion which make teachers value students. Helms' roommate was the son of Hugh Baillie, president of United Press at the time, and after leaving Williams, Helms paid his own way to Europe and went to work for UP in Berlin under Fred Oechsner, a UP journalist who later joined the State Department.

In 1937, after a couple of routine years with UP, Helms left Europe and joined the business staff of the *Indianapolis Times*. In 1942 he

*Thomas Powers, Pulitzer Prize winner for national reporting in 1971, last appeared in these pages with an article on the Mideast.*

moved to Washington with the U.S. Naval Reserve where he spent some time in a routine office job. By this time Fred Oechsner had joined the OSS and he tried to recruit Helms. Helms said no, he thought not, which did not surprise Oechsner. The Navy, after all, was an established service with plenty of opportunities for an ambitious young man, while the OSS was new and unknown. Later Helms was approached by someone more persuasive—Oechsner thinks it may have been by Dulles himself—and this time Helms said yes.

For the next 30 years, all but four of them in Washington, Helms worked for the OSS and the intelligence services which succeeded it, and he remained a mostly anonymous figure.

If it had not been for Watergate, which opened up the American government like an archaeologist's trench, Helms would have retired and remained unknown by the general public. Even now he remains an elusive figure, despite dozens of congressional hearings. He does not give interviews, his friends are cautious in discussing him, his enemies found him hard to fathom even when they worked down the hall, and nobody connected with an intelligence agency really believes in letting facts speak for themselves.

This is not to say that Richard Helms was a retiring public servant, one of those gray men who washes his own socks. Far from it. He was personable and good-looking in a dark, brilliant sort of way, and he got about a good deal socially. He even dated Barbara Howar, and he was never at a loss for a luncheon partner. But lunch was part of the job. The CIA lives on a kind of sufferance and it was Helms' job to see that the Agency's fragile charter survived intact. So he often lunched with the kind of men—senators, senior government officials, important journalists—whose good will, whose trust, in fact, gave the Agency the freedom from scrutiny it needed to do its job.

One of the men Helms used to see regularly in this way was C.L. Sulzberger, the diplomatic correspondent for the *New York Times*. They would lunch at Helms' regular table at the Occidental and talk about Soviet strategic capabilities, Greece and Cyprus (in which Sulzberger took a special interest), why the North Vietnamese failed to stage an offensive during Nixon's trip to Peking, things like that.

"You know," Helms told Sulzberger once, "I tell you almost anything."

Helms' reputation in official Washington—as opposed to his broader public reputation, which is more recent, more sinister and less precise—is that of an able, honest man, with the emphasis on honesty. The journalists who talked to him and the congressmen he briefed over the years trusted Helms implicitly. Even at the height of the war in Vietnam, when Lyndon Johnson was calling for "progress" reports as a patriotic duty, Helms would go into an executive session with Senator Fulbright's committee and tell them the bad news. Like Sulzberger, the senators convinced themselves that Helms told them just about anything. They did not grasp the extent to which he answered questions narrowly, or phrased himself exactly, or volunteered nothing.

But not even that covers it. There are some secrets you just flat-out lie to protect, and Helms knew a lot of them. Until he became DCI, Helms' entire career had been in the Deputy Directorate for Plans. He had lived through every bureaucratic battle in Washington and he knew the details of every operation abroad, not just the routine agent-running but Cold War exotica involving Ukrainian émigrés penetrating the "denied areas" of Russia, Polish undergrounds, counterintelligence operations in Latin America, the acquisition of the Gehlen organization from Nazi Germany at the end of the war. The world looked quite different in the early years of the Cold War, and things that seem demented or criminal now sometimes looked plausible then.

Helms knew every crazy, crack-brained scheme dreamed up over drinks late at night—or meticulously, in committee, where men were sometimes crazier still—and he knew what would happen if those things ever got out. It was bad enough having Jean-Paul Sartre and half of black Africa think the CIA had killed Lumumba. What would happen if the *New York Times* found out about secret drug testing, links to the Mafia, poison-pen devices...? Helms knew secrets which could wreck the whole CIA and leave the United States with a crippled intelligence agency, or no intelligence agency at all.

There is only one man with a right to ask questions about such things: the president. If the president were to ask, clearly and unmistakably, Dick, what about this story the CIA tried to kill Castro with the help of the Mafia? Is this true?

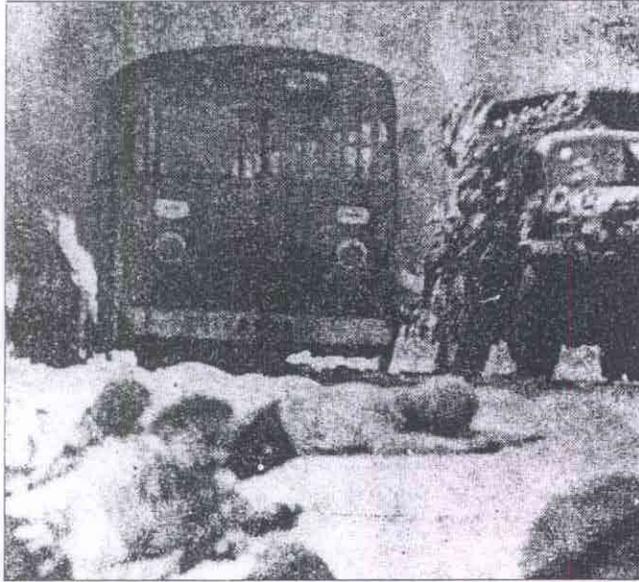
Helms would have to answer a question like that. But God forbid the president should ever ask. Once you began to look into such matters there was no telling what you would find, or what would follow, or where it would end.

**Helms knew secrets which could wreck the whole CIA and leave the United States with a crippled intelligence agency or no intelligence agency at all.**

Sam Ervin swears in Richard Helms at the Watergate hearings, August 1973 (opposite).

## Assassination plans did not originate with Helms but there is no record that he ever opposed one either.

The 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion meant a turning point in Helms' career.



PHOTOGRAPH BY WIDE WORLD

**T**HERE IS NO WAY TO RISE TO THE TOP OF A BUREAUCRATIC structure like the Central Intelligence Agency without a combination of ability and luck. Helms' abilities were narrow and conventional; he was a man of lean gifts. He was a first-rate administrator, for example, quite unlike Dulles, who would call for a briefing from one of his top men and then keep him waiting outside his office for an hour while he chatted on his intercom with Robert Amory, the deputy director for intelligence. Helms was also a great manager of men. He always dealt with people with what one colleague called a "perceptive courtesy," and it is easy to collect stories of Helms' consideration and regard where personal relations were concerned.

Helms also knew a great deal about running agents, the most delicate work in the field of intelligence and, before the introduction of the U-2 and reconnaissance satellites, potentially the most valuable. But even this talent probably did not have so much to do with Helms' rise in the CIA as plain luck.

Some of his luck was of the traditional sort—being in the right job at the right time—but occasionally Helms' luck required something close to an act of God. His rise to the top of the Deputy Directorate for Plans (DDP), for example, required the departure of three men his own age and at least his equal in ability, who could have been expected to remain right where they were.

The first to go was Lyman Kirkpatrick, something of a protégé of an early DCI named Walter Bedell Smith. In the summer of 1952 Kirkpatrick, an ambitious man who was then Helms' immediate superior, came down with infantile paralysis during a trip to the Far East. Eventually he returned to the Agency in a wheelchair, but by that time he was no longer blocking Helms' path.

The second was Frank Wisner, a charming and intelligent Southerner of independent means who was the first head of the Deputy Directorate for Plans. In the fall of 1956, probably sparked by the Hungarian uprising which he witnessed from Vienna, Wisner suffered a nervous breakdown. Helms was appointed the acting DDP while Wisner was on leave, and then reappointed after Wisner suffered a relapse and permanently left the DDP in late 1958.

Helms was not alone in thinking Dulles would appoint him the next DDP after Wisner's departure.

He had been Wisner's deputy since 1952, he was widely considered a protégé of Dulles', and he had a group of CIA friends—one former colleague described Helms as a cardinal surrounded by his bishops—who were backing him for the job.

Dulles appointed Richard Bissell.

Helms was so disappointed that for a while in late '58 he even

thought about leaving the Agency, or perhaps taking a post abroad. The foreign assignments were the most interesting in the CIA but they were off the upward path, away from the centers of bureaucratic power where careers are made and unmade. Helms' career seemed to have been unmade in late 1958 and if it had not been for some personal troubles (according to one of his colleagues at the time) he probably would have left the country. Instead, he accepted a job as Bissell's deputy.

The true explanation of Bissell's promotion was probably not so much Helms' failings as the fact that Dulles had great respect for Bissell's brilliance, and that he liked him. Dulles was a talker and storyteller, a man who liked knowing people, and who appreciated flair, energy, wit and imagination. Bissell had worked on the Marshall Plan before joining the CIA at Dulles' request in 1954, he was well-known on the Hill, he had a wide social acquaintance, and he was a man of ideas.

The first major assignment Dulles gave Bissell when he joined the CIA was to find some way of penetrating the so-called "denied areas" of Eastern Europe and Russia, something Helms and the clandestine foreign intelligence side of the DDP had largely failed to do. Bissell had come up with the U-2, which provided huge quantities of intelligence, and later he developed the satellite reconnaissance program, which produced even more. This was without question the CIA's greatest single achievement, an intelligence gain which has been directly responsible for the arms-limitation agreement reached with the Soviet Union by Nixon and Kissinger in May 1972. The Russians have always refused on-site inspections, and without satellite reconnaissance such arms agreements would have been impossible, because the sine qua non of trust—exact knowledge that an opponent is in fact keeping his promises—would have been lacking. After an achievement of that magnitude it is only natural that Dulles would have given Bissell the best job available, which turned out to be the one Helms thought he deserved. The result, equally naturally, was that Helms and Bissell did not get along.

One reason for their cool relationship—Bissell cannot remember ever having had a general conversation with Helms—was that Bissell was openly skeptical of the value of traditional intelligence agents. Even with Oleg Penkovskiy, who delivered more than 10,000 pages of documents to Britain's MI-6 and CIA between April 1961 and August 1962, Bissell was doubtful. "How do you know this guy is on the level?" he would ask John Maury, head of the DDP's Soviet division at the time. Maury pointed out that no intelligence agency in its right mind would hand over material of that quality solely in order to prove the bona fides of an agent. Later Penkovskiy's information would be of critical importance during the Cuban missile crisis when it showed, among other things, that the missiles in Cuba could hit every major city in the United States except Seattle. But Bissell was skeptical anyway and Helms resented it.

These and other differences created a little cold war within the DDP. "Take it up with Wonder Boy next door," Helms would sometimes say in answer to a request. His allies started what amounted to a whispering campaign against Bissell's professionalism where spies were concerned (he thought a lot of them were a plain waste of time and money) and his administrative ability, which was as erratic as Dulles'. He got results, as the U-2 showed, but his methods caused a lot of confusion along the way. The little war simmered just beneath the DDP's surface (Helms' secretary used to say, "Well, we all know Dick really should have been DDP") until the Bay of Pigs. At that time their differences—expressed bureaucratically, as always—reached a point of such heat that Helms came within a hairsbreadth of being banished from Washington.

The basis of their disagreement was the old one—the distrust of the Foreign Intelligence specialist for covert paramilitary operations that balloon to such a size that the hand behind them can no longer be hidden. The Bay of Pigs was the biggest operation of all, expanding from a proposal for a limited landing of guerrillas to a full-blown invasion force with ships, an air force and well over a thousand fighting men.

Helms knew how to disguise and mute his role, which makes it difficult to reconstruct just exactly what he did to anger Bissell. As assistant DDP he had control of the money, the people and the directives going out to the field, all of which gave him a vantage from which to subtly impede, frustrate and harass the Bay of Pigs planning. One former colleague and rival "imagines" (CIA people often tell you things elliptically) that Helms must have tried to protect his own assets, refused to assign his best people to the project, advised those involved not to back it too strongly. Others say he discussed it quietly with the DDP's division chiefs, encouraged a consensus of doubt and opposition, argued (but not insistently) with Dulles that experienced operators doubted the CIA's role could be hidden and so on. He would not have said, "This is foolish and wrong," but he might have said it was unworkable, impractical, unwieldy, a threat

to CIA assets built up over the years, and more properly the work of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

It was arguments of this sort, at any rate, which Helms took to Roger Hilsman at the State Department. Early in 1961 he told Hilsman he did not know exactly what was going on, that he disagreed with what he knew, that Bissell was running off on his own without a word of advice from the Office of National Estimates (ONE) or Robert Amory, the Deputy Director of Intelligence (DDI). He told Hilsman he had argued with Bissell and Dulles without effect, and Hilsman, alarmed, "put in my two cents' worth with Rusk," also without effect.

Bissell, characteristically, says that to the extent he knew of Helms' opposition at the time he "probably" resented it. Others say he was angered by Helms' disloyalty in even raising the issue with CIA people like James Angleton, not to mention outsiders like Hilsman.

Whatever the exact cause of Bissell's anger, he went to Dulles early in 1961 and said he could no longer work with Helms. Dulles disliked personal conflicts of this sort but finally steeled himself and gave Helms a bleak ultimatum—London Chief of Station or resignation.

Bissell says he does not remember this version of events, which is based on an explicit account by a CIA official who was in a position to know what happened, and that he thinks the story is "probably apocryphal," although he "believes" his deputy did make some such request of Dulles, and that Dulles "probably" felt Helms would be better off in London.

As things turned out, Helms was not required to make the painful choice Dulles had offered him. On April 15th, 1961, the Bay of Pigs invasion was launched, and three days later it ended with the surrender of the entire surviving invasion force. It was not Helms who left Washington or the CIA, but Dulles (in November 1961) and Bissell (the following February). The new director, a conservative Republican businessman named John McCone, appointed Helms DDP.

Helms had reached the CIA's top level, and had even been mentioned for the first time outside the Agency as a potential Director, Hilsman having suggested to Rusk that Helms be appointed to replace Dulles. The suggestion didn't get anywhere—Kennedy had political problems on his right, and McCone's appointment served as a buffer—but Helms, all the same, was on the upward path. He was in charge of the CIA's most important branch, in a position of real authority for the first time, but he also was, as he learned, in charge of the secrets, and when Dulles and Bissell left the CIA, they left plenty.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY WIDE WORLD; COMPEX (TRUJILLO)

**T**HE BIGGEST SECRET, KNOWN TO ONLY A HANDFUL of CIA officials, was assassination. If it were not for a little-noticed Drew Pearson column on March 7th, 1967, the assassination plots might never have been revealed at all. But on that day, or soon after, President Johnson saw the story and two weeks later, in a White House meeting on the evening of March 22nd, Johnson personally asked Richard Helms about it. By that time Johnson had a preliminary FBI report on the matter and he apparently put his questions to Helms with a directness which could not be evaded.

Johnson told Helms he wanted a full report, not only about Castro but about Trujillo and Diem as well. On March 23rd Helms—however reluctantly, after years of resisting just such inquiries—asked CIA Inspector General Gordon Stewart to conduct an investigation.

Helms did not like covert action operations and assassination is the most dangerous of them all. Skeptics may say this was only a deceptive mask, when you consider all the operations with which he was involved, but the available evidence supports his reputation among CIA people as a foreign intelligence man first, last and always. He was skeptical of the underground stay-behind nets organized for Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s; he was happy to turn over the Meo army in Laos and the pacification program in Vietnam to the Pentagon in the late 1960s, and throughout his career he was known as a man who would quietly discourage just about every covert action proposal brought up in his presence.

In a typical instance in the summer of 1964 Helms defused proposals for some sort of dramatic operation to rescue five American officials held by Simba rebels in Stanleyville, a provincial capital of the former Belgian Congo. Fear for the officials was intense since the Simbas were less a revolutionary army than an atavistic mob of bush warriors; after capturing Stanleyville and the foreigners stranded there in August 1964, for example, they killed a group of Italians, butchered them, and hung them up for sale in local shops.

At that time a meeting was held in the office of the DCI, John McCone, to consider a rescue operation. All sorts of ideas were batted around, according to one of those at the meeting—bombing raids, parachute drops, a helicopter assault, sending a paramilitary team in through the jungle. Ray Cline, the Deputy Director for Intelligence, wanted some sort of strong, dramatic action: these were the lowest sort of bush rebels, disorganized, badly led, a rabble. The thing to do was go in like gangbusters.

Helms did not say much, but when he did he quietly attacked every proposal on practical grounds. No one knew where the American officials were being held. They were in Stanleyville, but where? How would a team of rescuers find them? The officials would be in immediate danger as soon as the shooting started; the rescue team would be running about erratically. In the end McCone, who had initially favored some sort of immediate rescue operation, was brought around by Helms' arguments. Plans for a quick operation were dropped and the officials remained prisoner until a combined parachute assault and ground attack recaptured the city in November.

If Helms was doubtful about the utility of most paramilitary and covert action programs, he was doubly skeptical of assassinations, which were hard to organize, harder to keep secret, and all but impossible to justify or explain away once revealed. But this does not mean that he opposed them in principle or refused to contribute to carrying them out. Either would have been out of character. Helms is often described by CIA people as a "good soldier," by which they mean someone who will argue with a policy until it is adopted, but not afterward. Assassination plans did not originate with Helms, and he did not encourage or push or support them with energy, but there is no record that he ever opposed one either, and he had been Director of Central Intelligence for five years before he issued an explicit order that assassination was forbidden. Helms' private policy on assassinations was purely pragmatic, but for a while more effective: he tried only to keep them secret.

There are only three known plots by the CIA to deliberately kill specific foreign leaders—an Iraqi colonel, Patrice Lumumba and Fidel Castro. The first plot did not get very far. The plot against Lumumba was extensive and energetic but superseded by events when Lumumba was abducted by his Congolese enemies and murdered by them, probably on January 17th, 1961, according to a United Nations investigation conducted at the time. The plot, or plots, against Castro were first proposed in late 1959 and were actively pursued from 1960 until 1965 when Lyndon Johnson, preoccupied with the Dominican Republic and Vietnam, called off all covert action operations against Cuba.

The ultimate responsibility for the assassination plots is uncertain. It is hard to imagine that Dulles, DCI during the initiation of all of them, would have acted without at least indirect authority from the



Targets of the CIA: Castro, Trujillo, Diem, Allende, Lumumba (left: after his overthrow in 1960).

president. But Dulles, and the presidents he served, are dead, next to nothing about assassination is mentioned in the minutes of official meetings, and the aides of Eisenhower and Kennedy still swear their men would never stoop to murder.

Richard Bissell told the Senate Select Committee that he assumed Dulles was acting with presidential authority, and that he, Bissell, was certainly acting with Dulles' authority. While Bissell was DDP Helms remained in the background. A CIA intelligence officer asked by Bissell to take over the faltering Lumumba plot in October 1960 protested vigorously and went to several CIA officials, including Lyman Kirkpatrick, the Inspector General, and Helms. Kirkpatrick went to Dulles and protested that the plan was absolutely crazy. Dulles thanked him for his opinion. Helms simply listened to the intelligence officer's protest, told him he was "absolutely right," and did nothing else whatever. He did not protest to Bissell, Dulles or Kirkpatrick, and when he was asked about it by the Senate Select Committee 15 years later he conceded it was "likely" he had discussed the Lumumba plot with the intelligence officer asked to carry it out, that the officer's version of their conversation was probably correct, but that he did not remember anything else about the plan or what happened to it.

The plots to kill Castro were far more extensive, beginning with a plan in 1960 to retain two Mafia figures, John Rosselli and Sam Giancana, both of whom were later murdered after the assassination story finally got out. Their interests in Cuban resorts and gambling casinos gave them a private motive for killing Castro, not to mention the \$150,000 offered them by the CIA. Helms apparently had nothing to do with the early stages of the plots, but after the departure of Dulles and Bissell he inherited Operation Mongoose, an anti-Castro effort which had the strong support of the Kennedy brothers.

Later plots sometimes bordered on the bizarre and included one plan to give Castro a poisoned wet-suit for skin diving, and another to place a gorgeous but booby-trapped seashell on the ocean floor where Castro liked to go diving. When the CIA's operational officer in charge of the Castro plots came to Helms he routinely approved their plans for contacts with the Mafia or the provision of poison-pen devices and sniper rifles to a dissident member of Castro's government—whatever, in fact, those in charge of the plots thought they needed—but he does not appear to have believed the plots were going anywhere, and he deliberately avoided telling John McCone, the new DCI, anything about them.

Despite this initial evasion when Helms became DDP he only narrowly managed to keep the facts from McCone three months later, in May 1962, during a complicated writap case involving the FBI, the CIA's liaison with the Mafia, Robert Maheu, and the attorney general. After an initial briefing, Robert Kennedy requested a written memorandum on the CIA's involvement in the matter and one was submitted on May 14th, 1962. The memorandum, with Helms' approval, admitted an early CIA-Mafia plot to kill Castro but deliberately left out the fact that the assassination attempts were still going on—Rosselli, in fact, had been given poison pills only a few weeks earlier—and implied that the operation had been terminated "approximately" in May 1961. Despite the involvement of many high CIA officials, Helms again managed to avoid telling McCone anything about it.

Helms dealt with Bobby Kennedy and McCone in the same way.

He would tell them nothing about assassination plots if that were possible, and he would minimize them if he had to say something. The last thing he would admit was the fact they were continuing, because that would incriminate him.

Bissell, among others, said that Helms' characteristic way of dealing with an inherited operation he didn't like was to cut off its funds, ask skeptical questions, delay its paper work—in effect, to starve it to death quietly. To kill it quickly would only make enemies of its supporters. Helms seems to have treated the ongoing assassination plots in precisely this way, letting them die of their own inertia, and perhaps thinking that if one somehow worked—if some Havana busboy really did manage to slip botulin into Castro's beans—well, who would object? Whatever the truth, there is no question Helms did everything he could to keep it to himself.

A second close call occurred the following year, in June 1963, when the CIA officer in charge of the Mafia connection was transferred to another job. Before he left, the officer, William Harvey, had a farewell dinner in Miami with Rosselli. The FBI somehow "observed" their meeting and through Sam Papich, the Bureau's liaison with the CIA, Harvey was warned that Hoover would be told. Harvey asked Papich to tell him if Hoover planned to inform McCone, and then went to Helms. As they had on two earlier occasions, according to Harvey's testimony, he and Helms agreed not to tell McCone anything about the matter unless it became apparent McCone would learn of it directly from Hoover.

Two months later Helms ran out of luck. On August 16th, 1963, a *Chicago Sun Times* article stated that "Justice Department sources" reported a claim of CIA involvement by Sam Giancana, although the sources suggested that Giancana had not, in fact, done anything for the CIA. As soon as McCone read the article he asked Helms for an immediate report. Later the same day Helms handed him a laconic memorandum, saying the attached document—of which Helms had been "vaguely aware"—was the only "written" information in the Agency on the Giancana matter.

Helms told McCone orally—nothing on paper!—that the matter referred to in the document was assassination, and McCone gathered as much on his own when he read in the document that Giancana was to have been paid \$150,000 for carrying out the operation.

"Well," said McCone, according to an aide present at the meeting, "this did not happen during my tenure."

That was McCone's first knowledge of the Castro assassination plots. He did not know about those still going on—a poison-pen device was to be given to a Cuban agent in Paris later that year, on November 22nd, 1963, to be exact—and he did not learn about them or about other CIA assassination plots until the Senate Select Committee's investigation 12 years later. The document Helms had given to McCone was a copy—the only copy in the Agency—of the memorandum given to Bobby Kennedy more than a year earlier, a memorandum which Helms knew to have been deliberately incomplete and misleading.

There are many other examples of Helms' continuing and determined effort to conceal or minimize the CIA's attempts to carry out assassinations. In 1966 Dean Rusk somehow learned of one of them, but Helms denied it flatly in a memo which he later admitted was "inaccurate." In 1964 Helms avoided all mention of anti-Castro plots in front of the Warren Commission (as did Allen Dulles, a member of the commission, and J. Edgar Hoover, who had by this time a fairly complete knowledge of the Giancana-Rosselli plot).

But on March 22nd, 1967, Helms was asked a question by President Johnson which he could not evade. He ordered the CIA's Inspector General to make a full investigation and over the following nine weeks the IG did so. When he first began to receive sections of the IG report on April 24th, 1967, Helms' reaction must have been one of queasy horror. Everything was there, every plan to shoot Castro or poison him or blow him up; the CIA's provision of arms to the men who eventually assassinated Trujillo in the Dominican Republic in 1961; the CIA's intimate foreknowledge and encouragement of the coup which resulted in Diem's assassination in 1963; the continuing Castro plots and Helms' efforts to hide them from John McCone; the fact that the CIA had gone on trying to kill Castro after Johnson became president, and did not finally give up the attempt once and for all—so far as we know—until 1965.

Helms read the report as it came in and then, on the day it was completed, May 23rd, 1967, he ordered Gordon Stewart to destroy every piece of paper connected with the investigation, every last interview and internal memo and working draft. Stewart did as he was ordered. By that time—it is not known exactly when, but it was between April 24th and May 23rd—Helms had already gone to see Johnson to tell him the secrets which he, Helms, had been trying to suppress since the beginning of the decade.

Johnson was apparently shocked by what he learned. He later told a journalist that "we had been operating a damned Murder

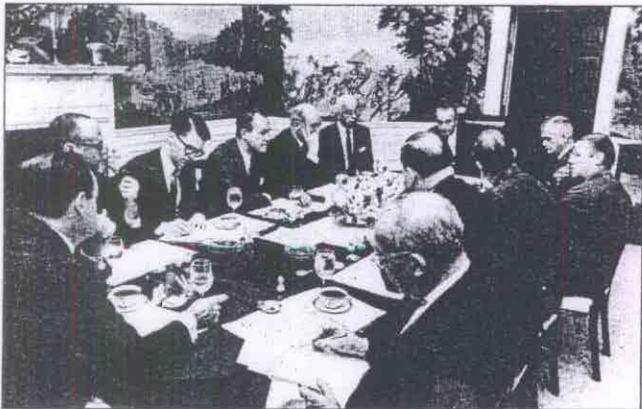


Kennedy appoints John McCone head of the CIA, November 1961.



Kennedy awards Richard Bissell the National Security Medal, April 1962.

Vietnam war council, November 1967: As DCI Helms provided Johnson with information as factually accurate as the CIA could make it.





The president is the sun in the CIA's universe. If he does not trust the CIA's product, the Agency might as well unplug its copiers.

Outside the CIA complex in Langley, Virginia, March 1969; Helms' relationship with Nixon was perhaps the strangest of his life.

Inc. in the Caribbean." He even concluded that Castro must have arranged Kennedy's murder in retaliation for the CIA's plots to kill him. "I'll tell you something that will rock you," Johnson said to Howard K. Smith, the television newsmen, before leaving the White House 18 months after Helms' briefing. "Kennedy was trying to get Castro, but Castro got to him first."

The IG's report makes no such bald claim, but then again Johnson did not see the report. Helms gave Johnson an oral briefing instead, leaving out a great many details—it is not hard to guess which ones—and halting his account in 1963—the year Johnson took over. Even in *extremis* as he was, responding to a direct presidential request, Helms managed to keep some of the secrets.

**T**HE PRESIDENT IS THE SUN IN THE CIA'S UNIVERSE. The cabinet secretaries all have constituencies of their own with interests which sometimes conflict with the president's, but the Central Intelligence Agency and its Director serve the president alone. If he does not trust or value the CIA's product, then the paper it produces ceases to have meaning or weight in government councils and the Agency might as well unplug its copiers, since it is talking only to itself. The first duty of the DCI, then, not by statute but as a matter of practical reality, is to win the trust, the confidence and the ear of the president. Allen Dulles had Eisenhower's but lost Kennedy's. John McCone had Kennedy's but lost Johnson's, and Richard Helms was close enough to the top during McCone's tenure to watch it happen.

There are various explanations for McCone's failure with Johnson. He irritated Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara with frequent pleas for support in intelligence community battles with the Defense Intelligence Agency. He irritated Johnson with his skepticism about the president's War on Poverty. He once said, for example, that he had some poor relatives himself, but what they needed was a little hard work, not another government program. Johnson was not amused. Far more important, however, was the fact that McCone slipped out of phase with Johnson on Vietnam.

Throughout 1964 and 1965 McCone argued that the United States should neither bomb the North nor send troops to the South unless the president were willing to bomb heavily and send a lot of troops. But Johnson was preoccupied with the politics of the war;

he wanted to slip around his critics by moving slowly. McCone argued that it was better to do nothing than too little, touching the president's rawest nerve, the soft point in his consensus.

In the past McCone had talked privately with Kennedy once a week, a source of great bureaucratic authority. Now McCone found it hard to see Johnson at all, even in groups. He was pointedly dropped from the Tuesday lunch, Johnson's main foreign-policy-making group, and he was told the president was no longer reading the CIA's paper. McCone never quite knew why he couldn't get along with Johnson but for one brief moment, when Johnson invited him to fly up to New York on the presidential plane for Herbert Hoover's funeral, McCone hoped that perhaps he was getting through at last. One CIA colleague said McCone was as happy with his invitation as a kid with a new toy, but it turned out to mean nothing. Johnson apparently had assumed that since Hoover was a conservative Republican, and McCone was a conservative Republican, it was only right to take one to the funeral of the other. Early in 1965 McCone told an aide, "I've been trying to get Johnson to sit down and read these papers [Soviet strategic estimates] and he won't do it. When I can't get the president to read even the summaries, it's time for me to leave."

The search for McCone's successor lasted for months before settling improbably on Johnson's prominent supporter and fellow Texan in 1964, Admiral William F. Raborn Jr. Raborn had a reputation as a management whiz and was the father of the Polaris program and champion of the PERT system—Program Evaluation Review Technique. Raborn's tenure as DCI was unhappy and short. He did everything wrong, such as calling up the CIA's Office of Current Intelligence during the Dominican crisis to ask how all the secret agents were getting along. The OCI was amazed; didn't Raborn understand need-to-know? The OCI didn't know any more about secret agents than the Department of Agriculture. "Sorry," said Raborn. "I get confused by all these buttons on the phone."

The principal beneficiary of Raborn's failure was Richard Helms, appointed by Johnson as Raborn's Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. In the spring of 1966 Johnson told reporters on one of his walking press conferences about the White House grounds that Raborn had been only an interim choice. He, Johnson, always told Raborn to bring Helms with him when he came to the White



Helms with Johnson and Raborn, 1965; being groomed for DCI.

**Helms had no objection to the Vietnam war. He thought the choice of enemy was fine, the choice of a means to fight him something else again.**



When Nixon decided to invade Cambodia in the spring of 1970, Helms backed out of the way.

House because Helms was being groomed for the DCI's job. In June he got it.

Under Johnson and Nixon the central preoccupation of Helms' tenure as DCI was Vietnam, and its theme was the contradictory demand it placed on him for intelligence which accurately reflected what was happening in Vietnam, but which at the same time did not challenge the president's right—perhaps willingness is a better word, since who gave him the right?—to do as he liked in Vietnam. McCone told Johnson he was going about things in a way bound to fail. McCone was right. Johnson got rid of him. Helms did not miss the point. He provided Johnson and, later, Nixon with information which was as factually accurate—for the most part; we shall note some exceptions—as the CIA could make it. But the CIA phrased its questions in a narrow way, and Helms himself, during six and a half years as DCI, apparently never once told a president or anyone else that American policy was not working and was not going to work. He stood on punctilio. The CIA is an intelligence-gathering, not a policy-making body. Helms did not presume to advise on policy. Pressed, he would give an opinion, but he was never insistent, his fist never came down on the table, his voice did not rise. Dulles once told a friend that Helms had two great qualities: he knew how to keep his mouth shut, and he knew how to make himself useful. Helms, like the Agency he directed, was purely an instrument, and the two presidents he served found him useful.

It is almost impossible now to determine what Helms, himself, thought about Vietnam. "We just can't fight this kind of war," one colleague remembers him saying in a staff meeting, "not against a fanatically committed bunch of guys who don't need anything except a bag of rice on their backs." Helms had a fairly realistic idea of how we were doing, in other words—the CIA never said we were winning, unlike Walt Rostow, who always said we were winning—but Helms had no objection to the war. He thought the choice of enemy was fine, the choice of a means to fight him something else again.

In September 1966, Helms appointed a young analyst named George Carver as his Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs. "I can worry about Indochina or I can worry about the rest of the world," Helms told Carver at the time of his appointment. "I want you to worry about Indochina."

For at least 15 years Vietnam was the principal preoccupation of the CIA, and the DDP never ran larger foreign operations than it did there. A huge secret army was created in Laos which eventually totaled more than 30,000 men, and in Vietnam a country-wide program to route out the Vietcong infrastructure called Operation Phoenix eventually resulted in the death of at least 20,000 South Vietnamese and perhaps as many as 40,000.

The CIA was right about a lot of things involving Vietnam under Johnson and Nixon. It warned Johnson that bombing North Vietnam's oil-storage system in 1966 would not cripple Hanoi's war effort. It warned both presidents that bombing would never by itself break Hanoi's will to resist. It warned Nixon in 1972 that mining Haiphong harbor would only mean the diversion of military supplies to the rail lines from China. But the CIA was sometimes wrong, too.

In May 1971, for example, the CIA told the White House that the North Vietnamese did not have sufficient reserves in Laos to put up more than light resistance to a South Vietnamese foray across the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It turned out they had reserves aplenty. More than 600 American helicopters were hit. A hundred were shot down outright, and the South Vietnamese came back in wild disorder holding on to the helicopter skids.

In early 1972 the CIA predicted a North Vietnamese show of force, a "high point," probably in February when Nixon was in China, and probably in the Central Highlands. On March 27th Helms had lunch with C.L. Sulzberger and Sulzberger asked what had happened to the February offensive.

"We are absolutely positive it was intended," Helms told him. "And everything is still there, whenever they want to go. But we anticipated it and our bombing has been very intensive."

Three days later the North Vietnamese army came crashing through the Demilitarized Zone and swept down into the northern provinces of South Vietnam, threatening at one point to take Hue. Nixon felt challenged as never before; at the end of April he decided to mine Haiphong harbor and for a while it looked as if the offensive, and Nixon's reaction to it, would wreck the Moscow summit scheduled for the end of May, when a major U.S.-U.S.S.R. arms-control treaty was to be signed. As it turned out, the summit was not canceled, but Nixon did not appreciate the CIA's mistake, however difficult the job of such prediction, and however honest the error.

Some of the CIA's errors, however, were not quite so honest. It is not that they constitute outright lying or deception, but rather a degree of cynical weariness, an overrefined sense of audience, a

realistic caution about telling certain men things they don't want to hear.

By temperament and from an instinct for survival Helms shrank from battles; he would argue but not insist, and after a lifetime of softening differences in the interest of bureaucratic peace, compromise had become part of his nature. On major issues he began speaking only when spoken to, and when Nixon or Kissinger had decided to go ahead and do something, like invade Cambodia, Helms backed right out of the way.

Plans for an invasion of Cambodia developed quickly after the coup deposing Prince Norodom Sihanouk on March 18th, 1970. The military had long proposed cross-border operations by the South Vietnamese into the areas of Cambodia known as the Fishhook and the Parrot's Beak, where the Vietcong and NVA maintained supply centers, hospitals and—somewhere—the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the military headquarters of the VC/NVA. Enemy sanctuaries had always bothered the military, but they were especially worried about the import of munitions through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville.

According to the CIA only 6000 tons of supplies had been imported through Sihanoukville since December 1966, an estimate based mostly on the sophisticated reasoning of a CIA analyst named Paul Walsh, who had made his reputation in logistics studies. The military challenged the CIA figure, saying it was closer to 18,000 tons.

Then, early in 1970, an unopened crate of Chinese-made AK-47 machine guns was captured in Vietnam. Serial numbers showed they were of recent manufacture. The military intelligence agencies argued that it took months to ship material down the Ho Chi Minh Trail; the AK-47s must have come through Sihanoukville. The CIA said no, there was also an express route, and pointed to an aerial photograph showing a road—it looked more like a cow path to the military—from Pleiku down toward the Delta. CIA said the guns must have come that way. The military said are you kidding, this isn't a truck route; how could some peasant supply courier haul a 200-pound case of machine guns all the way down from Pleiku?

The controversy over Sihanoukville raged "all over town," according to one CIA official, from the CIA's Board of National Estimates all the way up to the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, but Helms stood by Walsh, supporting his estimate of the relative unimportance of Sihanoukville.

In late March and early April intelligence discovered that four VC/NVA divisions had moved into Cambodia from South Vietnam, apparently to protect the sanctuaries there. Military pressure for some sort of action mounted, and on April 21st Helms accompanied Kissinger to his regular morning meeting with the president. It was then, or soon after, that Helms learned the president was planning some sort of invasion of Cambodia to disrupt the sanctuaries, perhaps by South Vietnamese troops, perhaps by Americans or the two together. He was also ordered to keep the plans secret, and in particular not to inform the CIA's BNE or Indochina analysts.

A few weeks earlier the Office of National Estimates had begun work on a major paper, "Stocktaking in Indochina: Longer Term Prospects." On April 7th, Helms had returned an early draft of the paper to the chairman of the ONE, Abbot Smith, with the following note: "Okay. Let's develop the paper as you suggest and do our best to coordinate it within the Agency. But in the end I want a good paper on this subject, even if I have to make the controversial judgments myself. We owe it to the policymakers I feel."

A second draft of the paper was sent to Helms on April 13th. It touched on the question of an American invasion, purely hypothetically, and concluded there was some potential for disruption of VC/NVA military efforts, but that the effect would be neither crippling nor permanent. When Helms met Nixon on the 21st he had not yet forwarded him the Indochina paper, and afterward, as ordered, he did not tell the paper's authors of the president's invasion plans.

The planning was largely conducted in the White House under conditions of "incredible secrecy," according to one member of Kissinger's staff, who resigned in protest the week before the invasion.

Helms was a participant in many of the meetings which led up to the invasion. He did not argue against the invasion, and he did not show the paper on Indochina prepared by the ONE to Kissinger or Nixon, who had been steeling himself for his decision by watching the movie *Patton*. Later Helms explained that there was no point in doing so; the president had his mind made up, and it would have been unfair to the analysts, since they had not known about the invasion plans when they wrote the paper. Instead, on the evening of April 29th, Helms returned the paper to the ONE with a note saying: "Let's take a look at this on June 1st, and see if we would keep it or make certain revisions." June 1st was the date by which Nixon had promised to withdraw all American forces from Cambodia.

This episode did not win Helms any friends. CIA analysts were so angry they wrote and circulated a petition protesting Helms' refusal to send the Indochina paper to the White House, an act of protest unprecedented in the Agency's history, and Nixon was unhappy too. He did not enjoy the discovery that COSVN was a will-o'-the-wisp, but he was also angry about another discovery made during the invasion. A cache of enemy documents, landing slips and the like showed they had indeed been using Sihanoukville to bring in supplies. The true figure wasn't the 6000 tons since December 1966 claimed by the CIA, or the 18,000 tons claimed by the military; it was 23,000 tons and Nixon wanted an explanation.

Helms appointed a committee to make a post-mortem on the Sihanoukville matter. The chairman was Paul Walsh, the CIA analyst responsible for the original mistake. His committee concluded the CIA's reasoning had been too fine; it had extrapolated too freely from evidence too thin. The Agency had gone out on a limb, perhaps, but it was an honest error. Nixon was not appeased, but then Nixon was hard to please under the best of circumstances, and impossible to know.

**R**ICHARD HELMS OFTEN SAID HE ONLY WORKED for one president at a time, and until January 20th, 1969, that president was Lyndon Johnson. But a time came when it was not easy for Helms to know where his allegiance to Johnson ended and his allegiance to Richard Nixon began. His relationship to Nixon was to be distant and elusive, perhaps the strangest of his life, and it began on the same note of Byzantine intrigue and divided loyalty with which it ended almost exactly four years later.

Helms first met the president-elect officially at the White House on Monday, November 11th, 1968, when Nixon paid a courtesy call on Johnson and received routine briefings from top administration officials. Most of them knew they would be leaving the government, of course, but Helms was in a somewhat different position as DCI and he hoped for reappointment. Sometime that week Helms was invited to come to the Hotel Pierre, Nixon's transition headquarters in New York, where he met first with John Mitchell and then was taken into Nixon's suite for a private conversation.

Nixon told Helms he would be reappointed as DCI, and of course Helms thanked him, but—Nixon made quite a point of this—Helms was not to tell anyone. This was to remain secret until Nixon chose to make a public announcement. Helms agreed, and after he returned to Washington he told only a few old friends of his tentative reappointment, stressing the need for silence. They couldn't understand Nixon's insistence on absolute secrecy; they tried to guess his motives. Rumors spread in intelligence circles as time went by without an announcement. Nixon had been clear enough with Helms, however; he was going to be reappointed. Surely there was no problem, unless... well, there was one thing, one possible problem known to Helms and very few others, and Ehrlichman was to say later that if Nixon had known about it, that would have been the end of Helms.

During the last weeks of the 1968 election campaign Johnson's representatives at the preliminary peace talks in Paris were slowly working out an agreement with the North Vietnamese for a complete bombing halt in return for expanded peace talks among all interested parties, meaning the Vietcong as well as Saigon. On October 16th Johnson felt he was close enough to an agreement to call the candidates—Humphrey, Nixon and George Wallace—to ask their forbearance on the question of the war. Nixon agreed along with the others but later told his aides he was suspicious that the whole thing was a bit fishy, a bit too convenient in its timing. Then Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon began to drag his feet; he didn't like the agreement, it gave away too much for too little and he didn't want to sign it. A reasonable enough position from his point of view, but Johnson was in no mood to see the reasons of a man standing in his way. Now he began to smell something fishy, to find Thieu's resistance a bit too convenient in its timing.

On Thursday, October 31st, Johnson announced a bombing halt on television, giving Humphrey an immediate lift in the polls, but then on Saturday, November 2nd, Thieu announced in Saigon that he would not take part in the expanded peace talks in Paris. On the same day a Johnson-ordered FBI tap of the South Vietnamese embassy in Washington picked up a call to an official from Mrs. Anna Chennault, the Chinese-born widow of the founder of the Flying Tiger Line in the Far East. She told the official to urge Saigon to hold off until after the election, when it would get better terms from Nixon.

When Johnson learned of Mrs. Chennault's call he was furious. On Sunday he called Nixon and denounced her meddling; Nixon denied any knowledge or involvement.

What Nixon did not know was that Johnson had asked Richard Helms, as well as the FBI, for an investigation of the matter, and that while he, Nixon, was telling Helms he would be reappointed as DCI, the CIA was gathering material in Saigon and Paris in an effort to determine why the South Vietnamese had been balking, and whether or not there had been collusion with Nixon or any of his representatives. George Carver had tried to reason with Walt Rostow at the White House, saying Thieu just didn't like the agreement, and that he wasn't doing anything the U.S. wouldn't do in a similar situation. Rostow wasn't having any; the White House wanted answers.

Helms, it is said, was not happy with the order to investigate possible Saigon-Nixon collusion for obstruction of the peace talks. It was a legitimate request, and one the CIA was in a position to answer, at least insofar as it could be answered by CIA files or by its agents and electronic surveillance in Paris and Saigon. But the target was the man who had just been elected president, and who was about to reappoint Helms as DCI.

As it turned out, the investigation was far from thorough because Saigon agreed to join the peace talks the week after the election. Johnson cooled down, and he had time to reflect. What, after all, would be the next step, if Helms or Hoover told him that Nixon had been behind the delay? It was better not to know than to know and do nothing. But while the investigation lasted Helms did his part, according to one colleague, for the reason he so often cited when the interests of one president clashed with another's: he worked for only one president at a time.

On December 16th, 1968, Nixon announced the reappointment of J. Edgar Hoover as Director of the FBI and Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence.

*At 10 a.m. on the morning of Monday, February 5th, 1973, Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas called the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to order in Room 4221 of the Dirksen Senate Office Building for the purpose of considering the nomination of Richard Helms to be ambassador to Iran.*

*The Chairman: Mr. Helms, we are very pleased to have you this morning. Would you for the record just state what you have been doing the last 10 or 15 years?*

*Mr. Helms: I was working for the Central Intelligence Agency, Mr. Chairman.*

*The Chairman: I am glad for it to come out at last. This has all been classified. I think this is the first time you have ever appeared before this committee in open session, isn't it?*

*Mr. Helms: That is correct, sir.*

*The Chairman: In all these years.*

*Mr. Helms: All these years.*

*The Chairman: Are you sure we were wise in having them in executive session?*

*Mr. Helms: Yes, sir. . . .*

*The Chairman: Are you under the same oath that all CIA men are under that when you leave the Agency you cannot talk about your experiences there?*

*Mr. Helms: Yes, sir, I feel bound by that.*

*The Chairman: You feel bound by that, too?*

*Mr. Helms: I think it would be a very bad example for the Director to be an exception.*

**A**S SO OFTEN BEFORE, HELMS WAS TELLING the truth. There can have been few senior government officials who more completely won the trust of congressmen. In a speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 1971—one of the rare public speeches of his CIA career—Helms said, "The nation must to a degree take it on faith that we too are honorable men devoted to her service."

The senators at that hearing in February 1973, three days after Helms left CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia, for the last time, took him to be just such an honorable man. They knew how often he had gone out on a limb, even jeopardizing his career, to tell them what he took to be the truth. At a private briefing of the Foreign Relations Committee in May 1969, for example, Helms and Carl Duckett, of the CIA's Directorate for Science and Technology, had directly contradicted certain claims by Melvin Laird, the secretary of defense, concerning the Soviet Union's huge new missile called the SS-9, claims also made by Kissinger, Nixon's special assistant for national security affairs.

The result in the White House was cold fury, so much so that it

Keeping the secrets: Helms with Charles Böhlen of the State Department censoring testimony about the U-2 incident for release to the press, 1960.



Shifting fortunes: Newly appointed DCI Helms with predecessors Dulles and Raborn, 1966.



Helms with Fulbright, 1966: The senators convinced themselves that Helms told them just about anything.





Testifying before the Watergate committee: Helms was the least forthcoming of witnesses.

was a subject of general speculation in Kissinger's office whether Helms could survive as DCI. One staff member remembers thinking that if it had not been for Helms' reputation for integrity throughout government circles, he would have been sacked.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee trusted Helms to tell them the truth about the SS-9, but it wasn't traditional intelligence questions the senators had in mind when Helms testified on February 5th, 1973, and again for two hours in executive session two days later. On those occasions they wanted to know about things like the CIA's clandestine army in Laos, reports of CIA involvement in the Chilean election of 1970, a CIA program to train U.S. police departments in the right way to keep intelligence files, the CIA's alleged involvement in the heroin traffic in Southeast Asia, liaison troubles with the FBI, CIA support of Radio Free Europe, a rumored report of CIA involvement in a "1969 or 1970" White House plan to keep track of the domestic antiwar movement, and especially about the CIA's involvement in the Watergate break-in.

There were a lot of outstanding questions about the CIA in early 1973, beginning with why Helms had been fired in the first place. Later, Helms' friends would say there was only one reason: Watergate. Helms refused to kill the FBI's investigation (which one former CIA officer said could easily have been done) and Nixon fired him in revenge.

The trouble with this is that Nixon fired Helms six months after he refused to cooperate, and he did not refuse to cooperate altogether. Some evidence—letters from McCord to the CIA saying the administration was trying to blame the break-in on the Agency, for example—was withheld from the attorney general for months. Whatever the final impetus for the firing, Nixon's feud with Helms and the Agency had been going on for years.

It wasn't so much that Helms failed to win the war in Vietnam or to topple Allende or anything of that sort, as the fact that the CIA paper was bland in its conclusions, coy in concealing its sources, and too often plain wrong about things in the morning paper. According to Ehrlichman, Nixon thought the CIA was overstaffed with impractical Ivy League intellectuals. "What use are they?" he'd ask when the CIA failed to warn him about something. "They've got 40,000 people out there reading newspapers."

As early as September 1969, General Alexander Haig, then an assistant to Kissinger, retained a Rand Institute expert to study the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community. The administration did not like the CIA's product, Haig told the Rand expert; the president intended to do something. Despite Helms' efforts to meet their objections, the administration never liked the CIA's paper.

Helms was fired in the second week of November 1972, but word of it did not leak out until the end of the month.

The fact that he was fired leads to a further mystery: why did Nixon appoint Helms to be ambassador to Iran?

John Ehrlichman published a novel last spring called *The Company* in which he suggested in fictional terms that Helms blackmailed Nixon into the Iran appointment by threatening him with photographs of the Watergate break-in. Was Ehrlichman trying to tell us something?

One CIA account of Helms' departure says that at first Nixon wasn't going to give Helms another job at all because he thought Helms was a Democratic appointee and he could damn well fend for himself. But then Nixon learned Helms was a career civil servant and asked him what he'd like, and Helms picked the post in Iran. (His resignation was announced last Election Day.) Why Iran? Because the CIA put the shah in power, Iran is an important bulwark in the defense of the Persian Gulf oil states, the U.S. embassy in Tehran is huge, demanding the talents of an administrator, and the CIA runs a number of major programs in Iran such as electronic listening posts and the like. It was a congenial job of importance, in other words, and Helms may also have concluded it would not be a bad idea to get out of Washington.

This account of a gap between Helms' dismissal and his new appointment is consistent with Ehrlichman's fictionalized blackmail version, but it is inconsistent with the CIA accounts of Helms' shock and dismay at his dismissal. He liked the job and wanted to be reappointed, he had hopes of serving as DCI longer than Dulles, and if he had been in a position to blackmail Nixon and angry enough to do so, then why not blackmail him for his job as DCI?

The members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had a lot on their minds that day in February 1973.

At the beginning of the second session Senator Fulbright said, "I think Mr. Helms, in view of the nature of these questions, it would be appropriate that you be sworn as a witness, which is customary where we have investigative questions. Would you raise your hand and swear. Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

Helms raised his hand. "I do, sir," he said.

**O**N THAT DAY, AS ON SO MANY SIMILAR DAYS since, Helms testified truthfully only about matters of small consequence, or about things which had already become known. If he were asked about things which were still secret he would not betray them, not then, not ever, not to anyone.

The Watergate and Church committee investigations uncovered a great deal about Nixon, the CIA and the secret history of the last 20 years before they finally came to a halt, but as far as I know, no one ever learned anything from Helms. He testified on more than 30 separate occasions, sometimes in open hearings, more often in executive session, but the secrets which emerged did not come from him. During his testimony in February 1973, he did not tell the Foreign Relations Committee about the aid to E. Howard Hunt in 1971, or about his meeting with Ehrlichman and Haldeman on June 23rd, 1972, when he was asked to scuttle the FBI's investigation of Watergate funding. He did not mention the Ellsberg break-in, although he certainly ought to have known of it by that time, and he flatly denied CIA attempts to overthrow Allende even though one of the senators present, Stuart Symington, knew a good deal about it. He did not mention the Huston domestic intelligence plan or Nixon's request through Ehrlichman for certain CIA files which might discredit the Kennedys—files which Helms finally handed over to Nixon himself with the observation that he worked for only one president at a time. He did not tell them what explanation Nixon gave for his dismissal, if any, or suggest who might have been hired behind the Watergate break-in. Helms was, then as later, the least forthcoming of witnesses.

There are three reasons why Helms kept the secrets. Obviously, the first is that he was at the heart of a lot of them; candor would amount to self-incrimination. Helms was protecting himself.

The second is that the secrets to which Watergate led threatened to wreck the CIA by shattering that complacent trust in the Agency's honor and good sense, without which it can have no freedom of action. If Congress once insisted on real oversight of the Agency's operations the secrets would begin to get out and the CIA would be hobbled. Helms was protecting the Agency.

The third reason is harder to explain. The history of the CIA is the secret history of the Cold War. Over the last 30 years one-half of the CIA only answered questions—sometimes rightly, sometimes not—but the other half . . . did things. . . . The things it did were not all as bad as bribery, extortion and murder, etc., but they were all the sort of things which cannot work unless they are secret. If a foreign leader is known to be on the CIA's payroll he ceases to be a leader. Who would believe in the anticommunism of a newspaper which could not publish without CIA funds? How can it be argued that Allende is a threat to American security when it is known that ITT is a principal advocate of his removal? There is a chasm between what nations say and what nations do, and the CIA—or the KGB, or MI-6, or Chile's DINA, or Israel's Shin Bet, as the case may be—is the bridge across the chasm.

The CIA's belief in secrets is almost metaphysical. Intelligence officers are cynical men in most ways, but they share one unquestioned tenet of faith which reminds me of that old paradox which is as close as most people ever get to epistemology: if a tree falls in the desert, is there any sound?

The CIA would say no. The real is the known; if you can keep the secrets, you can determine the reality. If no one knows we tried to kill Castro, *then we didn't do it*. If ITT's role in Chile is never revealed, then commercial motives had nothing to do with the Allende affair. If no one knows we overthrew Premier Mossadegh, then the Iranians did it all by themselves. If no one knows we tried to poison Lumumba, it didn't happen. If no one knows how many Free World politicians had to be bribed, then we weren't friendless.

So it wasn't just himself and the CIA that Helms was protecting when he kept the secrets. It was the stability of a quarter-century of political "arrangements," the notion of a Free World, the illusion of American honor. Only Helms would not have admitted it was an illusion, perhaps not even to himself. *If no one knows what we did, he would have thought, then we aren't that sort of country.*

During his final week as DCI Richard Helms destroyed his personal records. On January 16th, 1973, Senator Mike Mansfield mailed Helms a letter asking him to preserve all materials relating to Watergate. Helms testified later that he checked everything carefully but one allows oneself to doubt.

It doesn't take much wit to guess why so secretive a man with so secretive a profession would destroy his records. If it wasn't Nixon's curiosity which Helms feared, it was the prying of the Senate, of the Watergate grand jury, of the press and even of history. Like Lyman Kirkpatrick, Helms thought secrets should be secret "from inception to eternity."

Sometime during his last week as DCI, probably on January 24th, Helms systematically obliterated a huge volume of material including tape transcripts (he had a taping system), memos, reports, notes and so on—everything he had collected as DCI for six and a half years. He also ordered the destruction of the records of a program to test LSD and other drugs which he had initiated during the 1950s, and he may have destroyed other records as well. By that time he remained loyal only to the CIA, and to his oath to keep the secrets.

"Sir," Helms volunteered at the end of his testimony on February 7th, 1975, "in an effort to sort of close this, about this Watergate business, you have asked all the relevant questions. I have no more information to convey and I know nothing about it. Honestly, I do not."

"And your people," Fulbright asked, "other than that one man who was a consultant..."

"We had nothing to do with it," Helms said, "honestly we didn't."

**B**UT IT WAS TOO LATE. A TENUOUS CHAIN OF events was already gathering momentum. Back in 1971 Helms had—reluctantly, as always—agreed to prepare a psychological profile of Daniel Ellsberg for the White House. In April 1973, the break-in of his psychiatrist's office and the existence of the profile both became public. A lot of people were mad, including the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which called Helms back again, this time to question him about possible perjury. The committee staff had prepared a list of more than 100 questions, but at the last minute Symington asked Fulbright to conduct the hearing as a public session, which meant the senators, not the well-prepared staff counsel, would be asking the questions. Helms' explanations were lame even so, and when one senator asked a question which ought to have elicited an answer about a CIA domestic operation called CHAOS, Helms simply ran the risk of a new perjury charge and said the CIA had never done anything of the sort.

The new Director of Central Intelligence, James Schlesinger, was also mad in May 1973. His principal subordinate, William Colby, had already briefed him on "all" CIA-Watergate matters, meaning the relationship with Hunt. The Ellsberg profile and break-in had not been mentioned. Schlesinger asked Colby if there were going to be any more surprises. Colby said he didn't know; the Ellsberg profile had been unknown to him too. So Schlesinger, on May 8th, 1973, sent a memo to every employee of the CIA asking them to report to the Inspector General whatever they might know concerning CIA programs of doubtful legality. When the IG had compiled the abuse report it contained 693 items. Colby, by then DCI, learned a lot of things he had never known. It was then, for example, that he first saw the IG's 1967 report on assassinations, of which there was only a single copy.

At that time Seymour Hersh of the *New York Times* was already at work on a CIA investigation, and in the wake of the abuse report Hersh eventually learned the outline of CHAOS. After his story appeared on December 22nd, 1974, President Ford asked Colby for a report. Colby told him about the material in the abuse report, and he also told him about the IG's 1967 assassination report. In January Ford met with the editorial board of the *New York Times* and, incredibly, he told them, off the record, he was quite concerned that a full-scale investigation would turn up some extremely embarrassing material. Such as what? Such as CIA involvement in assassination plots. The president told this to a newspaper. The CIA still finds it hard to believe.

Not long after that Daniel Schorr of CBS News learned of Ford's off-the-record meeting with the *Times* but he was unable to prove the CIA had, in fact, been involved in such plots. Then he stopped to consider that Ford's apprehension alone was a story. On February 28th, 1975, Schorr went on the air and, 16 years after the assassination plots began, they finally became public.

**L**ET US CONCLUDE WITH A FOOTNOTE, A FINAL small insight into the career and character of Richard Helms. He was the mildest mannered of men. Even under circumstances of stress he retained his composure and his good humor. When Sam Adams told Helms personally, in the fall of 1968, that he was trying to get him fired, Helms never expressed anger or irritation or anything but amused acceptance of Adams' temerity. Later, of course, he ran bureaucratic circles around Adams' effort to have him fired. Lyman Kirkpatrick said that as far as he knew Helms never hammered a desk or raised his voice or called anyone a name in anger, not even during the Bay of Pigs struggle when he

came so close to derailing his career. "You're not going to find out if Helms ever did that," Kirkpatrick said, "unless he tells you himself, because it's not the kind of thing he'd do in front of people."

But a time came when he did do such a thing in front of people. Once and once only. It happened on April 28th, 1975, as Helms was leaving an appearance before the Rockefeller commission in which he was asked not about Watergate, on which he had fenced so often by that time, but about assassinations, concerning which he knew so much and would say so little. (Helms' testimony on this and other matters reads like the puzzled groping of an amnesia victim, which no doubt explains his anger—shared by many other CIA people—at William Colby. They resent and put the worst construction on Colby's cooperation with the congressional investigating committees. Colby didn't have to volunteer all those secrets, they say.)

Daniel Schorr was waiting outside the hearing room and approached Helms. Others were standing there, too, not government officials who might be expected to be discreet, but wire-service reporters. No more public encounter could have been arranged, in fact, unless it were on television.

Something in Helms broke. "You son of a bitch," he yelled at the man who had revealed the biggest secret of all. "You killer! You cocksucker! Killer Schorr! That's what they should call you!"

But a few minutes later Helms regained himself, and listened to Schorr's explanation that it had not been he but the president who had revealed the assassination story, and after Schorr's explanation, Richard Helms apologized for his outburst. But as for Schorr's questions about assassination, well... Helms had nothing to say.

**'The nation must to a degree take it on faith that we too are honorable men devoted to her service.'**



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