The Rise and Fall of Richard Helms
Survival and Sudden Death in the CIA · By Thomas Powers
In 1973, Richard Helms moved to Washington with the U.S. Naval Reserve where he spent some time in a routine office job. By this time Fred Oechsler had joined the OIS and he tried to recruit Helms. Helms said no, but he thought not, and did not surprise Oechsler. 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—Oechsler. It may have been by Dallen 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 anthropologist'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 assail 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 personal and good-looking in a dour, totalitarian sort of way, and he got about a good deal socially. He even dated Barbara Honeur, 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 suffrage and it was Helms' job to see that the Agency's fragile charter survived intact. 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 Helms 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 one, "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 precious—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 Vietnam war in 1968, when Lyndon Johnson was calling for "progress" reports as a patriotic duty, Helms would go into an executive briefing and tell them just about anything. They did not grasp the alacrity to which he answered questions narrowly, or phrased himself exactly, in fact, gave the Agency the freedom from scrutiny it needed to do its job.

But 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).
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 AARON, THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR INTELLIGENCE. HELMS WAS ALSO A GREAT MANAGER OF MEN. HE ALWAYS DEALT WITH PEOPLE WITH WHAT ONE COLLEAGUE CALLED A "PERSPECTIVE COURTESY," AND IT IS IN COLLECTIVE HISTORY OF HELMS' CONSIDERATION AND REGARD WHERE PERSONAL RELATIONS WERE CONCERNED.

HELMS ALSO MENTIONS HIS DEACONSHIP AS ONE OF THE SIGNIFICANT PHASES OF HIS LIFE. DURING THE FIRST YEARS OF THE CIA, HELMS' WORK WAS OFTEN ASKED TO DISGUISE AND MUTE HIS TRUESELF, WHICH MADE IT HARD FOR HIM TO DISCLOSE HIS TRUESELF TO OTHERS. HE WANTED TO BE KNOWN AS A MAN WHO KNEW HOW TO DISGUISE AND MUTE HIS ROLE, WHICH MADE IT HARD FOR HIM TO DISCLOSE HIS TRUESELF TO OTHERS.

HEIM'S DISAPPOINTMENT IN THE CIA WAS THAT DULLES HAD GREAT RESPECT FOR BISSELL'S BRILLIANCE, AND THAT HE LIKED HIM. DULLES WAS A TALENTED AND INTELLIGENT MAN, WHOM HELMS LIKED AS A MAN WHO KNEW THE RULES OF THE GAME. DULLES WAS ALSO A MAN WHO KNEW HOW TO DISGUISE AND MUTE HIS ROLE, WHICH MADE IT HARD FOR HIM TO DISCLOSE HIS TRUESELF TO OTHERS.

HELMS' RISE IN THE CIA AS PLAIN LUCK. SOME OF HIS LUCK WANTS TO BE REMEMBRED AS THE "DISCIPLE" OF DULLES OR WISNER. HE HAD BEEN WISNER'S DEPUTY SINCE 1952, AND HE WAS WIDELY CONSIDERED A PRODIGY 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.

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 TALENTED AND INTELLIGENT MAN, WHOM HELMS LIKED AS A MAN WHO KNEW THE RULES OF THE GAME. DULLES WAS ALSO A MAN WHO KNEW HOW TO DISGUISE AND MUTE HIS ROLE, WHICH MADE IT HARD FOR HIM TO DISCLOSE HIS TRUESELF TO OTHERS.
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, that Helms took to Roger Hilsman at the State Department. Early in 1964 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" maintained 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 steered himself and gave Helms a blank slipram—London Chief of Station or redesignation.

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 DDI.

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 did not 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 secret, and when Dulles and Bissell left the CIA, they left plenty.

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 defensive move, 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 Meno 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 proposal brought up in the intelligence area.

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 ad hoc 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 bandied 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 was doubtful about the utility of most paramilitary and covert action programs, he was doubly skeptical of assassination, 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
He would tell them nothing about assassination plots if that were possible, and he would minimize it 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 barbary really did manage to slip bullets into Castro’s beam—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 summer—indeed, 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 Roselli. The FBI somehow “observed” their meeting and through Sam Papich, the Bureau’s liaison with the CIA, Harvey warned Hoover that he would tell. 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 this ‘Justice Department source’ 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 three-page memorandum, saying the attacked 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, in May 1963, during a complicated wrestling case involving the FBI, the CIA’s liaison with the Mafia, Robert Mahem, 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 18th, 1963. The memorandum, with Helms’ approval, admitted an early CIA-Mafia plot to kill Castro but also left out the fact that the assassination attempts were still going on—Roselli, 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.
Johnson was trying to get Castro, but Castro got to him first."

The IC's report makes no such bald claim, but then again Johnson didn’t need to 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 secrecy as he was, responding to a direct presidential request, Helms managed to keep some of the secrets.

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 1965: Helms' relationship with Nixon was perhaps the strangest of his life. 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.

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 demands 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 he 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 was in a dilemma, Helms was to lose his job. He provided Johnson and, later, Nixon with information which was often inaccurate—often 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 stuck on point. The CIA is an intelligence-gathering, not a policy-making body. Helms did not presume to advise on policy matters; he would give an opinion, but he was not consistent, 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 notion that a South Vietnamese foray across the border would be met by South Vietnamese and perhaps as many as 40,000. More than light resistance to a South Vietnamese foray across the border—some would say outright, and the South Vietnamese came back in wild disorder. More than 600 American helicopters were hit. A hundred were shot down. The planning was largely conducted in the White House under conditions of “incredible secrecy,” according to one member of the Central Intelligence Advisory Board, but Helms stood by Walsh, supporting his estimate of the relative unimportance of Shonsonville.

In May 1973, 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 50,000 American helicopters were hit. A hundred were shot down, and the South Vietnamese came back in wild disorder holding on to the helicopter skills.

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 Fuchrak 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 in the meetings which led up to cease-fires of South Vietnam, threatening at one point to take Hue. Nixon felt challenged, but before the end of April he decided to move Hanoi’s 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 predictions, and however honest the effort. 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 wishfulness, an overweening 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 avoiding difference in an interest of harmonic 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 depposing Prince Norodom Sihanouk on March 18th, 1970. The military had long proposed regular Operation by the South Vietnamese into the areas of Cambodia known as the Fishhook and the Perret’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’s figures, saying it was closer to 18,000 tons.

Then, early in 1970, an unspoken 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 materiel down the Ho Chi Minh Trail; the AK-47s must have come through Sihanoukville. The CIA said, no, there was an express route, and pointed to an aerial photograph showing a road—it looked more like a cow path to the military—from Phnom Penh down toward the Delta. CIA said the guns must have come that way. The military said we are kidding, this isn’t a truck route; how could some peasant supply courier haul a 200-pound crate of machine guns all the way down from Phnom Penh?

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 sided with Walsh, supporting his estimate of the relative unimportance of Sihanoukville.

In late March and April 1970, Henry Kissinger, who was supposed to coordinate it within the Agency. But in the end I want a good answer to the question of an American invasion, purely hypothetically. He did not argue against the invasion, and he did not unfair to the analysts, since they had not known about the invasion until after the invasion. Kissinger to his regular morning meeting with the president. It was, or soon after, that Helms learned the president was planning some sort of invasion of Cambodia to disrupt the sanctuaries, perhaps by South Vietnamese forces. Kissinger was by then the man to go to. He was also ordered to keep the plans secret, and in particular not to inform the CIA’s BNE or Indochina analysis.

A week or so earlier the Office of National Estimates had begun work on a major paper, “Stocktaking in Indochina: Longer Term Prospects.” On April 7th, Helms had reviewed an early draft of the paper to the chairman of the GNE, Abbot Smith, with the following note: “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 we have to make the controversial judgments myself. I 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 doing some 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 author of the president’s invasion plans.

The planning was taking place 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 know the paper on Indochina which Kissinger or Nixon, who had been steeling himself for his decision by watching the movie Patton, had displayed to him. Kissinger had not even told him he was doing so; the president had his mind made up, and he 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 26th, 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.
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 DCl, the CIA was gathering material in Saigon and Paris in an effort to determine why the South Vietnamese had been balk ing, 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 insomuch 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 DCl.

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 arranged the delay? It was better not to know than to know and do nothing. But while the investigation lasted Helms had his part, according to new colleague, for the reason he was 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.

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 shredding 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, leading slips and the like showed they had indeed been using liason officers to bring supplies. The true figure wasn't the 8,000 tons since December 1968: claimed by the CIA, or the 10,000 tons claimed by the military; it was 21,000 tons and Nixon wanted an explanation.

Helms appointed a committee to make a post-mortem on the seemingly simple affair. The chairman was Paul Walsh, the CIA analyst responsible for the original mistake. His committee concluded that 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.

RICHT 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 so 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 side of the same Byzantine intrigue and divided loyalties 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 DCl and he hoped for reappointment. Sometimes 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 DCl, and of course Helms was gratified. He had made quite a point of this—Helms was not to fall 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 of his 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 influence 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 nothing, 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 Parcs were slowly working out an agreement with the North Vietnamese for a complete bombing halt and removal of American troops from Vietnam. Johnson opened peace talks among all interested parties, meaning the Vietcong as well as Saigon. On October 16th, 1968, Johnson told him he was close enough to an agreement to call the candidate—Humphrey, Nixon and George Wallace—to ask for their endorsement of the peace. Nixon agreed along with the others but later told him he was suspicious that the whole thing was a fishy, but not so convenient in its timing. Nixon then issued the statement that Saigon began to drag its feet; he didn't like the agreement, he gave away too much for too little and he didn't want to sign it. And that day, enough positive from his point of view, but Johnson was in no mood to take his reasons of a man standing in his way. Now he began to smell something fishy, but the president fatigue was a bit too convenient in its timing.

On Thursday, October 31st, Johnson announced a bombing halt in order to give the Vietnamese a chance to look at the peace talks in Paris. The next day he called Nixon, said: 'I think there is something fishy about this—I think there is something that is not quite right about this.' Nixon, however, was under drat when you leave the Agency you cannot talk about your work for the previous agency. 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 new colleague, for the reason he was so often cited when the interests of one president clashed with another's: he worked for only one president at a time.

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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 state what you have been doing in 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 that 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...

Mr. Helms: 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.

S O S T E N E D, HE L M S W A S T ELL ING, J ohnson. There can have been few senior government officials who more completely won the trust of congress men. 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 are honor able men devoted to our 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 an almost credible witness. They knew how often he had gone out on a limb, even jeopardising 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 Nolivs Laird, the secretary of defense, concerning the Soviet Union's huge 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
The members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had insisted that General Alexander Haig, then an assistant to the secretary of defense, testify before the Senate about his duties during the Nixon administration. The committee wanted to know about his role in the Allende overthrow and the Watergate affair. Haig testified that he had been asked to consider an assassination plot against Allende in Chile, but he had refused to pursue it. He also testified that he had been involved in the Watergate break-in, but he had not been aware of its significance.

Haig's testimony was a subject of general speculation in Kissinger's office, but it was never made public. The members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had insisted that Haig testify, but they did not press him for details. They were more interested in learning about the nature of the relationship between the CIA and the White House during the Nixon administration. Haig's testimony was a subject of general speculation in Kissinger's office, but it was never made public.

The committee was not satisfied with Haig's testimony, and they continued to investigate the matter. They eventually learned that Haig had been involved in the Watergate break-in, and they were able to get a confession from him. However, the committee was unable to get a confession from Helms, and they were forced to rely on his testimony.

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Sometime during his last week as DCI, probably on January 24th, Helms systematically obliterated a huge volume of material, including tape transcriptions (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, 1973, "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."

BUT IT WAS TOO LATE. A TENUOUS CHAIN OF EVENTS was already gathering momentum. Back in 1971 Helms had—reluctantly, so always—agreed to prepare a psychological profile of Daniel Ellsberg for the White House. In April 1971, the break-in of his psychiatrist's office and the existence of the profile both became public. As a lot of people seem mad, including the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which called Helms back again, this time to question him about possible perjury. The embarrassing material 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 might 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 compile the abuse report it contained 693 items. Colby, by then DCI, had already briefed him on "all" CIA-Watergate masters, meaning 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 might 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.

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As at 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 IO's 1967 assassination report. In January Ford met with the judicial board of the New York Times and, incredibly, he told them, off the record, he was quite concerned about CIA programs of doubtful legality. When the IO had compiled the abuse report it contained 693 items. Colby, by then DCI, had already briefed him on "all" CIA-Watergate masters, meaning 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 might 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.

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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.

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. He was the mildest mannered of men. He was the mildest mannered of men. Had he known 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.)

Richard 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.

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