

Prosecution possible

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# Will Helms open the door?

By John Maclean

WASHINGTON—Like a continuing episode of ABC television's "Washington: Behind Closed Doors," a debate over whether to indict former CIA director Richard Helms for lying to Congress is about to reach a climax.

The television serial ended with CIA director William Martin, a thinly disguised Helms, wondering if the arrest of White House staffers as burglars wouldn't ignite a "long fuse" burning a course throughout the government.

Today, the 64-year-old Helms is the last Watergate-related figure facing prosecution. Atty. Gen. Griffin Bell has said he will decide shortly, within days or weeks, whether to indict Helms for his misleading testimony to Congress about the CIA's role in overthrowing Marxist Salvador Allende in Chile.

But the question that runs through Washington is this: What will blow up when the fuse reaches Helms?

The indictment has been pending for more than two years, many say "for reasons of national security." Helms has been quoted as threatening that Henry Kissinger would be "brought down" if he goes to trial.

A man who started work with the CIA the day it opened its doors, Helms once headed its "dirty tricks" department. He knows Washington's "power elite" on terms of equality and intimacy and might well have enough stored in his head to shock even this scandal-soaked capital.

Fears of just that may have played a role in the foot-dragging over Helms' prosecution.

BUT THE pending decision by Bell may also answer a question about the character of the man who handled the nation's secrets for more than 30 years. Was he hero or sycophant?

Helms' allies in Washington, a powerful legion, view him as a courageous truth-teller who fended off illegal White House pressures to spy on Americans at home, to perform "cowboy stunts" overseas, and to take the fall for Watergate.

These high and mighty have thrown their mantle over Helms, as only they can. When Helms left as ambassador to Iran after being fired by former President Nixon from the CIA, he was toasted at a farewell dinner with "touching and moving" sentiments by the likes of Kissinger, W. Averell Harriman, former Sen. Stuart Symington, Robert S. McNamara and others. The private party for Helms got extensive coverage in the Washington Post, owned by another Helms ally, Katherine Graham.

This social set views an indictment as "persecuting poor Dick Helms."

Others see Helms as a bureaucrat who greased his career by kow-towing to Presidents, including Nixon. He pinned his loyalties on whoever sat in the Oval Office, they say. And the only fixed star in his constellation was "keeping the company [the CIA] clean."

John Maclean is a member of The Tribune's Washington bureau.

Even now with Helms retired as ambassador and his story the stuff of television fiction, the name conjures up a feeling of menace. Nasty secrets seem to lurk about him. He has discussed the unspeakable, pondered the unthinkable.

And yet he has emerged as no crude spymaster littering the landscape with blood and broken knuckles.

HIS STYLE runs to ermine and velvet, not trench-coat cotton. He kills with a phrase fired through a cloud of unfiltered cigaret smoke, not with a Colt .45-automatic stinking of cordite.

Today Helms lives in a fashionable section of northwest Washington. On occasion he has returned to Iran. Associates say he still visits the State Department for conferences. At one time there was a rumor he was at

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work on a book about his experiences, but that has been denied.

He also has hired one of Washington's most high-powered lawyers, Edward Bennett Williams.

BORN Richard McGarrah Helms in Pennsylvania in 1913, he grew up in urbane comfort. He prepped at the posh Le Rosey school in Switzerland with the future Shah of Iran, while his father, an Alcoa executive, handled an assignment on the continent.

He returned to America and attended Williams College in the Little Ivy League, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, was voted most likely to succeed, and was elected president of the honor society.

He used influential contacts for a brief, brilliant career in newspapers. As a United Press International reporter in Berlin he scored an impressive scoop, according to his official biographies, by interviewing Adolf Hitler. Associates from those days, however, say Helms was but one of a group of newsmen granted the interview, a fact neglected in many retellings of the story.

Even as a young man he showed he could attach himself to a power source and not worry over a misleading public image.

Helms joined the Navy in World War II and immediately began a career in intelligence. He never looked back.

Helms made it to the top by steering around disasters like the Bay of Pigs, pleasing superiors and subordinates with his work, and cultivating powerful friends. He acquired support from all sides, a bridge between the East Coast Grottonians of the intelligence world, who never quite accepted his mere third-generation aristocratic credentials, and the more plebeian working stiffs.

But the testing of Helms' character went on unseen.

"This nation must to a degree take it on faith that we too are honorable men devoted to her service," he once told an audience before which he defended the CIA in a rare public appearance. Faith was not enough. Congress and the press pried secret after secret out of the CIA, finally bringing Helms into the open.

The glare of publicity only added to the impression that Helms was a box within a box. Even physically, he presents a contradiction.

The upper half of his face could belong to a handsome, well-brushed dean of an Episcopal Cathedral. The forehead is broad, the eyes intelligent.

But the lower jaw surges forward with a menacing toughness. The teeth point inward like a shark's.

On Sept. 15, 1970, that lower jaw probably jutted out as Helms sat scribbling notes of a conversation with President Nixon on the future of democracy in Chile. "Save Chile," Helms wrote on a pad as was later disclosed by Congress. "Not concerned risks involved . . . \$10 million available, more if necessary . . . make the economy scream."

During the next three years the CIA pumped more than \$8 million into covert activities in Chile.

BUT ON FEB. 7, 1973, Helms faced members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee full of apparent candor and openness.

Sen. Symington: "Did you try in the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow the government of Chile?"

Helms: "No, sir."

Symington: "Did you have an money passed to opponents of Allende?"

Helms: "No, sir."

Symington: "So the stories you were involved in that are wrong entirely?"

Helms: "Yes, sir."

Two years later Helms acknowledged in further testimony that he had made "maybe a serious mistake" in his 1973 testimony. But he still found backing from Symington.

"I'm just as sure that that man didn't do anything that wasn't in the national interest as I am that the sun is going to come up tomorrow morning," Symington told an interviewer after Helms' admission of the mistake.

IF INDICTED for those contradictions, would Helms show grace under pressure or would he lash out? That would tell much about what is inside the final box inside Helms.

But that day may be long in coming.

"How would you like to see the government go to court with a charge that Helms perjured himself before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and then watch him call three or four members of the committee as witnesses on his behalf?" one source close to the investigation has been quoted as saying.

A decision by Carter's Justice Department to drop the matter would allow Helms once again to sink into the cloak of enigma which surrounds a good spy. And he was a pro.