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'SHOULD HAVE CORKED IT'

Helms Regrets Mafia Aid in Plot Against Castro

From Times Wire Services

WASHINGTON—Former CIA Director Richard Helms, breaking a long silence, said Wednesday the agency's decision to enlist the Mafia in plotting against Cuban President Fidel Castro "is one of the greatest regrets of my life."

"When I found out about it, I should have corked it off and stopped it right then and there, and I am genuinely sorry that I didn't, and I can't do any more than say that," Helms said in a taped television interview with David Frost on NBC.

"I am sorry. It was a mistake. It was a case of poor judgment."

Helms said the agency was under great pressure to "make contacts to Cuba," and he let the pressure "get the better of my judgment."

In 1975, West Coast mob leader John Rosselli told Congress that he and Sam Giancana, a Chicago Mafia figure, were recruited in late 1960 on behalf of the CIA to attempt to assassinate Castro, his brother Raul and revolutionary Che Guevara by putting poison pellets in their food.

Giancana was slain in his suburban Chicago home in what was called a Mafia "hit" before he could testify to Congress. Rosselli was murdered in Florida before he could be questioned in detail on the alleged murder plot.

Helms said there was "not the slightest evidence" that any poison pellets ever even got to Havana.

"We have the word of a gangster (Rosselli) that they did, but we have no record, no evidence, no nothing, and I don't believe it, and I think he and his case officer grossly exaggerated what they had accomplished or were trying to accomplish," Helms said.

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At another point he said: "As far as the Mafia bit was concerned, that is one of the greatest regrets of my life—that I had anything to do with that."

He said the only thing he had authorized was an operation under which the Mafia would try to make contact with organized crime elements in Cuba and "I shouldn't have even authorized that."

Questioned further by Frost on whether the CIA or any American agency should consider assassination as a political tool, he said: "Assassination is not a way for the American government. It is not a way for the CIA.

"I was never in favor of it. Murder will out. It will always, eventually, leak around in some fashion that it was done."

Helms commented publicly for the first time since he pleaded no contest last fall to a misdemeanor charge of lying to a Senate subcommittee about the CIA's covert attempts to subvert Chile's 1970 presidential election. He was given a six-month, suspended jail sentence.

In the interview, Helms also:

—Accused his successor, William Colby, and former President Gerald R. Ford of weakening the CIA by opening up secret documents to the public and Congress. He said the Ford administration should have gone all the way to the Supreme Court before giving up the documents.

—Said he had warned former FBI Director L. Patrick Gray III at the time of the Watergate break-in that the burglars "may have some connection with (John) Ehrlichman," a top presidential adviser later convicted in the Watergate coverup. Helms said: "I don't know why it was . . . that Gray didn't believe me . . . I knew Ehrlichman was the one who had arranged for the hiring of Howard Hunt."

—Scoffed at Frost's suggestion that he had "blackmailed" President Richard M. Nixon into naming him U.S. ambassador to Iran when he was replaced as CIA director in 1973. Helms said that "whole theory is laughable," adding: "I never by word, deed, action or innuendo, threatened President Nixon with anything ever."

Nixon named Helms to be ambassador to Iran in what was depicted as a retirement from the CIA for Helms, who was then 60. There were reports, however, that Helms might have been forced out of his post. There were later disclosures that Helms had declined to cooperate with the White House in some domestic operations.

Asked by a Senate committee in 1973 why he was being moved from the CIA to the ambassadorship, he said, "I do not know."