

Richard Helms:

BY PRISCILLA JOHNSON McMILLAN

Richard Helms, former director of the CIA, is a tall, tanned man in his early 60s who looks elegant in his dark pinstripe suit. Most people agree that Helms is elegant, but they add that he is arrogant, too, and they cite his recent testimony before the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations as proof.

Helms sometimes was mocking and ironic, and at other times barely able to suppress his anger. To one who listened to him all day in the House caucus room, he sounded weary and shaken. He often slurred his words. At one point he said that in 1964, the CIA sent an agent who "spooked" (he meant "spoke") Russian to Geneva to interview a Soviet defector. Throughout his testimony Helms, who pleaded "no contest" last year to a charge that he committed perjury during a previous congressional inquiry, was uncomfortably aware that he might be accused of perjury again.

But mostly, Helms' discomfort comes from being caught outside his era—caught in the tragedy of retroactive responsibility and thus becoming fair game.

During the just-concluded House hearings, Helms had reason to feel both offended and threatened. In what seems to have been a calculated insult, members of the committee departed from their custom of questioning former high government officials themselves and allowed the interrogation—Helms called it an "inquisition"—of Helms to be led by a 27-year-old lawyer for the committee.

The situation was colored by irony. The present committee has access to information previously barred to congressmen and the public alike. The 1975 Freedom of Information Act changed all that, and as a result much that was never intended for the eyes of outsiders—interoffice memos, confidential correspondence and secret orders—was pulled from CIA files for public scrutiny.

This year's committee, therefore, had more concrete evidence to sort through than the Warren Commission did, but unlike the earlier investigative body it was operating out of the context of the times. Thus, much of what was discussed and probed no longer seems real to those who did not live through it. So a generational communication gap was obvious throughout the committee's investigation. It was most painfully apparent during the questioning of Richard Helms.

The young attorney and the former leader of spies who faced each other were shaped by different realities. As acting committee chairman Rep. Richardson Preyer (D-N.C.) reminded those in the hearing room, there was a consensus in the country 15 years ago that the "national security" was endangered by tiny Communist Cuba, 90 miles from U.S. shores.

Thus Helms was faced with the frustrating task of explaining, across the seemingly impassable gulf of generations, the mood of the United States 15 years ago to a hostile and contemptuous attorney who was only 12 years old in 1963, the year President John F. Kennedy died.

So it was hard—perhaps impossible—for that young man to understand the atmosphere of real or supposed danger in which Helms conspired to unseat the Cuban government and, if necessary, to murder its leader Fidel Castro.

Helms, then deputy director of the CIA in charge of covert operations (also known as "dirty tricks") was not alone. He claimed that "the whole U.S. government was behind this one." Thus, several other high-ranking CIA officials knew about the plot to "get rid" of Castro. So did then-Sec. of Defense Robert McNamara, now head of the World Bank; former Sec. of State Dean Rusk, now a law professor at the University of Georgia; the late FBI chief,

Victim of Our

L.A. Times 10/16/78

Retroactive Morality

J. Edgar Hoover, and the late Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy. In the most sensational revelation of the House committee's month-long hearings, Helms disclosed for the first time that President Kennedy also knew of the plans to kill Castro.

Indeed, from the time he ran for office, Kennedy followed a two-pronged policy toward Castro. First, he owed his election partly to the fact that during the famous 1960 television campaign debates, he sounded more anti-Castro than Nixon. Then, in April 1961, just after he took office, Kennedy implemented the Eisenhower administration's plan against Cuba—the abortive Bay of Pigs landing by Cuban exiles.

However, following that disaster, Kennedy refrained from going in with full American military force and destroying Cuba. He restrained Cuban exiles who wanted to

invade again, and he resisted Republican pressures to pursue a "tougher" policy toward Castro. And, in fact, on Nov. 22, 1963, at the very hour the President was shot, Castro was meeting with French journalist Jean Daniel, in Cuba on an unofficial mission for Kennedy, who wanted better relations with Castro.

On the other hand, a 1967 report of the CIA inspector general, which was partially declassified on Sept. 20 of this year, two days before Helms testified, said that during the Kennedy years CIA officials felt they were under "severe" and "intense" pressure to "do something" about Castro. "Doing something," the report made clear, meant either killing Castro outright or else overthrowing him—an act which might have led to his death.

So intense was the fear for national security that during the Kennedy period the CIA recruited gangland figures

Priscilla Johnson McMillan, an associate of the Russian Research Center at Harvard and author of the biography, "Marina and Lee," testified recently before the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

and engaged in two attempts to murder Castro. Even President Kennedy himself appeared at times angry and frustrated with Castro.

Clearly, the leaders of nations, and those men who conduct their intelligence operations, inhabit a world of secrets where they must choose between black and gray, almost never between black and white. Not only does responsibility for such secrets and decisions make men sad and isolated from their countrymen, it also robs them of their innocence. And in the end, operating in a secret world bends their character and gives all those involved—even those in the opposing countries—more in common with each other than with the ordinary men and women they seek to protect.

Thus, Helms, asked whether Castro knew that the United States was plotting to get rid of him, answered airily, "Well, if he didn't know, he could have guessed."

And Fidel Castro responds in kind. In a recent interview with members of the House assassinations committee, Cas-

tra confirmed that he had known from the beginning about the plots against him, but that he was far from holding them against Kennedy. Such plots, said Castro, echoing Helms, are merely "part of everyday life."

Still, secrets are at the heart of the problem. Helms devoted much of his life to clandestine operations, and like many who inhabit that private world he became an elitist. He believed it was his right—and that of a few others like him—to decide which secrets the rest of us should know. Moreover, like most people in the CIA, he believed that the Soviet Union was a deadly and very nearly infallible foe. Hence "national security" became sacrosanct and the CIA the bulwark that must be protected at any cost.

It was this thinking, this imperative, that had caused Richard Helms to lie in 1973 when he was asked by the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate whether the CIA helped overthrow the Marxist government of Salvador Allende in Chile, hence last year's court proceeding against him for perjury.

But Richard Helms did not create the reality of intrigue and suspicion through which he was called upon to navigate. It is the American people who demand that others take responsibility they themselves do not wish to carry. They pay public servants like Helms and Kennedy to possess secrets they themselves do not want to know. They honor leaders who take actions they themselves would not engage in. Fifteen years ago most Americans, deeply concerned about national security, wanted to be rid of Castro.

Years later, in altered circumstances and in a greatly changed national mood, Americans hold their former leaders responsible in a way that does not always measure fairly the spirit of the times during which these leaders assumed the responsibility for which they are to be judged.

So it is that a 27-year-old American lawyer and a 60-year-old American who sees himself as every inch a patriot can share a common language and still fail to communicate across time.

Thus Helms, the servant, is today the retroactive scapegoat of policies which virtually everyone approved 15 years ago. Meanwhile, his dead boss, President Kennedy, who authorized those policies and bore responsibility for them, is missed and continues to be revered as a martyr.