

The (Really) Quiet American

Richard McGarrah Helms

C 2 Sunday, May 20, 1973 THE WASHINGTON POST



By Trudi McC. Osborne

The author, a former Associated Press writer, is currently a Washington-based freelancer.

AT THE CLOSE of Orson Welles' landmark movie "Citizen Kane," a single word gives insight into the unfathomable character of the dying protagonist as he breathes the name of the sled he owned in boyhood: "Rosebud."

Nine more words are needed to illuminate the drives of an equally inscrutable man, Richard McGarrah Helms, U.S. ambassador to Iran and until recently head of the Central Intelligence Agency and "board chairman" of the United States' entire intelligence community. His "Rosebud" once emerged in his light response to the question of what made him tick: "I want to live in the house on the hill."

"Of course Dick Helms is ambitious," says John Maury, his former deputy for congressional affairs. "You wouldn't get to the top of this heap without ambition."

"Dick ambitious? Totally!" affirms his first wife, Julia Shields Helms.

Now, there is nothing wrong with

ambition: Without it the world would be leaderless. Its significance here is that it is the only adhesive that binds together the apparent conflicts in the nature and career of one of the country's most contradictory, most charming, at one time most valuable and still least known public men—and, unlike his counterpart in British intelligence, Helms as head of U.S. intelligence was a public man. Indeed, just last week he was in the public eye again, testifying before a Senate subcommittee on apparent White House efforts to involve the CIA in domestic political espionage.

Despite all of his public appearances, though, it has sometimes seemed that his personality and his detailed personal history have been the CIA's most closely held secret. Helms kept a profile so low—a phrase he often uses—as to be nearly submerged, pretending that he did not grant interviews, although he did to journalists of paramount reputation. From the time he became head of the CIA until April of 1971, when he broke cover by addressing the American Society of Newspaper Editors, he had not made a single speech open to journalistic coverage. He has called publicity "intoxicating," and told the congressional committee that unanimously approved his nomination as chief of the "silent service" that he thought silence should begin with him. That was in 1966, and by then ambition had carried Dick Helms a long way.

Down, Back and Up

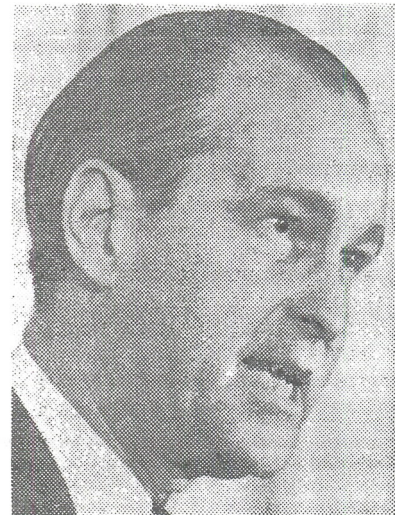
AT AGE 24, its yeast had led him to take an otherwise incomprehensible step downward and backward, and away from excitement in his already enviable journalistic career. As with all his ventures, the decision seemed to be paying off handsomely when World War II came along. That was the watershed in his life and the point at which the contradictions in his nature became visible. To understand them, it is necessary to look at the youth who was graduated from Williams College, in the Little Ivy

League, in 1935.

Not only was he Phi Beta Kappa, president of his class, president of the senior honor society, editor of the newspaper and editor of the yearbook, but he was voted the third most brilliant man in his class, third most popular, second most versatile, the one who had done most for the college and best exemplified its traditions, the best politician, the most respected and most likely to succeed. His stated goal: to run his own newspaper.

As U. S. intelligence chief, Dick Helms ran what is said to be the most expensive newspaper with the smallest circulation in the world, the President's daily top-secret intelligence report. It is the intelligence community's "quintessential end product, the final distillation" of the expenditure of \$6.2 billion, the annual total intelligence budget, according to Wisconsin's Senator William Proxmire.

This form of journalism was not, however, what the outgoing young Helms had in mind when he left Williamstown, so plainly destined for a life of prominence and visibility. That



same year—by paying his own way to Europe and with some entree provided by W. W. Hawkins, an executive of the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain and the affiliated United Press—Dick Helms landed a job with the UP in London, then went on to Berlin.

There, the foreign press corps and members of the Western diplomatic establishments made a congenial group. If they had not been congenial by inclination they would have become so by necessity.

"We didn't exactly have free social circulation," one of them recalled recently. "You have to remember that Hitler, in his June 30, 1934, proclamation, had declared that any Germans consorting with foreign correspondents and embassy personnel could be presumed to be doing it for 'treasonable reasons.'"

In 1936 Berlin, Helms—fluent in French and German—began making his mark. He interviewed, among others, ice-skating star Sonja Henie and Adolf Hitler. He worked and partied and enjoyed the excitement of time and place; and suddenly, in the fall of 1937, he tossed it all aside to go back to Depression-ridden America, to Indianapolis. He had no ties there, and he went to the most menial of advertising jobs on the old Scripps-Howard paper, The Indianapolis Times—now defunct—in a dingy office on Maryland Street. "He was selling chicken advertising . . . a few lines of classified . . . small stuff . . ."

The Unknown Midwest

DICK HELMS HAD been no stranger to Europe, where he first had chosen to work, but he was a stranger to the American Middle West. Born in Pennsylvania in 1913 and educated at Carteret Academy in Orange,



N.J., he had moved to Europe in his teens when his father — an engineer and Alcoa executive who retired early — got an assignment on the Continent. Dick attended the posh Le Rosey School (alma mater of the Shah of Persia) in Rolle/Gstaad, Switzerland, and the Realgymnasium of Freiburg/Breisgau in Germany, came back to America for college and, after graduation, returned to Europe.

If Helms' downward step puzzled his Indianapolis Times colleagues, it caused no stir that can now be recalled among his colleagues in Berlin. One, fond of the popular young Helms, had failed even to find the step extreme until questioned about it 33 years later: "Why, I suppose he wanted to learn advertising, the whole newspaper business." Extreme or not, in Indianapolis Dick Helms once again began fashioning his usual pattern of success: He joined the Literary Club and, on the basis of his interview with Hitler, he lectured ladies' clubs. Despite his capitalizing on it then, in recent years Helms' recollection of the circumstances of that interview became notably deficient. In the very spare fact sheet that the CIA releases on his career, the exploit is referred to with pride: "Mr. Helms interviewed Hitler, and his story 'Hitler and Mars Inc.' was published in The Indianapolis Times."

Although Helms never claimed that it was an exclusive interview, the impression persisted and persists that it was. Reporters who asked about it, after he became CIA chief, met with evasion. Two correspondents in Berlin with Helms, when asked about it recently, expressed astonishment that anything so rare as an interview with Hitler could have escaped their attention. The fact that Hitler occasionally granted interviews to such distinguished journalists as Dorothy Thompson and Anne O'Hare McCormick was news in itself every time it happened. Actually, Helms' dispatch was the result of a group interview given to foreign correspondents covering the annual Nazi Party conclave at Nuremberg.

By 1939 Dick Helms was national advertising manager of The Indianapolis Times. In 1939 he married Julia Bretzman Shields, the divorced wife of an Indiana millionaire with two children of her own.

The First Helmses

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to contemplate Richard Helms without contemplating his first wife, Julia. Their marriage lasted nearly 30 years, and they

have a son, Dennis, now married and an attorney for the city of New York. Julia Helms is a highly talented and intelligent woman of exquisite taste who in her own estimation is "very intense and rather demanding." Realistic, good-looking still, at once tender and tough, rich, confident, without any

phony side and better avoided as an antagonist, she has conducted art classes for aphasic youngsters at Children's Hospital in Washington, and she sculpts (and exhibits) with distinction, infusing stone with rare humor.

She met Dick Helms on the day of her divorce from Frank Shields, the Barbasol king. As Shields' wife she had presided over an estate (now a country club) in Martinsville, Indiana, where she raised and showed horses, traveled to Churchill Downs and Europe. She says she was a "showpiece" for her husband in that life, not even being permitted to see much of her children.

When her lawyer, an old friend, told her as they left the divorce court that there was a young man in Indianapolis he wanted her to meet, she replied, "Oh, no! Not out the frying pan and into the fire." Nevertheless, she met Helms at dinner that night.

She later said, "I thought Dick had the most potential of any person I had ever met." They married the following year. Both of the Helmses were Europe-oriented, Julia being second-generation American. Her father, a naturalized German sometimes referred to as the "Bachrach of Indianapolis," was a successful society photographer. Dick Helms was third-generation American. This may account for the fact that the "Bold Easterners"—a group of amateur spies, disproportionately freighted with old Grotonians in the World War II espionage agency, the Office of Strategic Services—never quite accepted him as one of their own, although his immediate background was little different from theirs. Those of the group who stayed in clandestine work came, however, to consider him a good bridge between themselves and the relatively plebeian "Prudent Professionals," as Stewart Alsop has called them.

Helms' maternal grandfather was Gates McGarragh, a banker and important financial figure in New York who served from 1930 to 1933 in Basel, Switzerland, as president of the Bank for International Settlements, a precursor of the World Bank. Helms' paternal grandparents were German Lutheran immigrants. One of Dick's brothers, Rowland, was a grain merchant in Geneva,

Switzerland; another, Gates, an executive of a New York printing firm; and a sister, Mrs. Clinton Van Hawn, married a physician in Cooperstown, New York. Richard was the eldest child of what appears to have been a happy family.

Of the family finances while his father was alive, there are varying reports: One is that Herman Helms made a fortune in the stock market of the 1920s; another that he lost it there; still another is that there was McGarrah money. A woman who knew the family in Europe described the Helmses as "comfortable," but said: "Money? Well, they certainly weren't plastered with it." Of their youth in America Gates Helms says, "It was all that South Orange implies: conventional upper-middle class, well educated, well traveled, interested in good schools and sports, and with a social life centering around the country club." To this day, country-club life is essential to Richard Helms.

Helms' Second Family

THREE MONTHS after Helms' divorce from Julia became final in September 1968, and a year and a half after they parted, Helms married for the second time—and for the second time he married a divorcee with children of her own: Cynthia Ratcliff McKelvie. The McKelvies and Helmses had been cordial friends, seeing a lot of each other. Dr. Allan McKelvie is an orthopedic surgeon. Red-haired,



British-born Cynthia McKelvie Helms, 50, is good-looking but, as an acquaintance says, "no glamor girl."

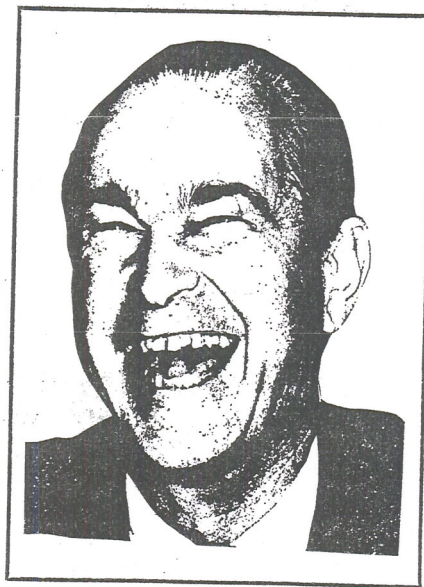
In Washington, Richard and Cynthia Helms lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a high-rise building and, said Mrs. Helms while her husband still directed the CIA, they invariably returned to it, if they had been out, by 11:15, as Helms was apt to receive phone calls at any time of night and "He's got to be in a fit state to make a decision; it's always a crisis."

Into Clandestine Work

WITH THE APPROACH of World War II, the Indianapolis episode in Helms' life ended as abruptly as it began. He was commissioned lieutenant

(jg) in the Navy in July 1942 and, 30 hours after his and Julia's son was born, left for naval training at Harvard. Julia followed, but says that for the next six years she hardly saw him. In the winter of 1942 he served in New York and helped to publicize the Navy Relief Society, hobnobbing with the important persons who sponsored its big social benefits and balls. In 1943 he was assigned to the OSS and performed desk jobs in New York and Washington before going to the European theater: England, France and, after the war, Germany. Following his initiation into clandestine work, Dick Helms never looked back.

At war's end, he remained, as a civilian, with the OSS's successor organizations: the Strategic Services



Unit of the War Department and then the Central Intelligence Group. Upon its formation he moved naturally into the CIA. According to Time magazine,

Helms' public record for the next five years is "a total blank," but colleagues say he was not posted out of the country. He surfaced in 1952 as deputy to the deputy director of the CIA's plans division, the "black" division that handles undercover operations. In 1962 he became deputy director for plans, in 1965 deputy director of the agency—it being generally understood that he would succeed Vice Admiral William Raborn as chief after a short period; and in 1966 Dick Helms fulfilled his college classmates' expectations of him by reaching the top, being named director of Central Intelligence and, concomitantly, chairman of the United States Intelligence Board, tandem posts exceeded in importance by few others in government.

He had, in his own phrase and in one of his rare self-directed comments, "worked his way up through the ranks," becoming the first intelligence professional to become intelligence chief. (By profession, Allen Dulles was a lawyer.) To the ranks this was as stimulating as the appointment of a career diplomat to the Court of St. James would be to members of the State Department.

It was the second time that the promotion of Richard Helms had rallied the morale of the intelligence agency: The previous time was when he was named chief of plans following the downgrading the CIA received as a result of the Bay of Pigs, a fiasco that Helms had opposed and from which he had disassociated himself.

Because 'It's Secret'?

THROUGHOUT HIS rise Helms was on the operations side of the CIA. There are indications that his wife Julia had little patience with what she later called "the James Bond stuff" and regretted Helms' turning away from journalism: "I'll buy you a paper," she had tossed out at one time. Over the years she tried to read the spy stories of which he was fond, but quit finally and in distaste by throwing into the wastebasket what is probably the best of the lot, John Le Carre's "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold." It was reported in The New York Times that Helms and his present wife read spy stories aloud to each other.

To those unaffected by it, the opiate of clandestine operations is as inexplicable as is the opiate of mountain climbing. A sampling of remarks aimed at explaining the lure of spying includes: "It was romantic, sexy and nobody got hurt except the bad guys . . ." "It exerted a romantic pull . . ." "It was doing something of responsibility with the attendant excitement of danger and

reward and without being held to the narrow responsibility of a puritan life . . ." "You are a band of brothers." Stewart Alsop has said of his clandestine operations in France in World War II that "It was great fun, in some ways the most fun I've ever had in my life." Some men feel they are "an active arm of policy." All feel the exhilaration of playing for big stakes.

Not all intelligence work seems so: Kenneth Downs, a Washington publicist and a onetime OSS officer, says: "Nine-tenths of the work is reading foreign-language papers and journals in Washington. The other tenth is espionage, and it yields far less intelligence. It's a lousy job, too, because it is based on betrayal of trust."

In his dual role as CIA chief and chairman of the U.S. Intelligence Board, under the old intelligence setup, Richard Helms was not just "Mr. Intelligence": He wore two hats. As board chairman, he presided over six intelligence-gathering agencies that were independent and competing fiefdoms. In addition to the CIA, which in principle was paramount among them,

they were the Defense Department's far-larger, code-cracking National Security Agency; the Defense Intelligence Agency, which incorporates the branches of military intelligence; the State Department's Intelligence and Research organ; the Atomic Energy Commission's intelligence unit and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. A former aide to President Lyndon Johnson said, "There was enormous infighting among these groups. It was a major operation to coordinate the fruits of their services—to the extent that they were coordinated . . . A lot was at stake in those weekly meetings—not just estimates of the damage done by bombing in North Vietnam . . . Helms' job was to get a consensus from the meetings. He had plenty to think about, plenty to worry about. It was a *very* complicated job. It was a triumph for a man to be able to stay in it a while. I give full marks for being able to sit on top of it."

The Shop and the Chief

WHEN WEARING the other of his two hats, Helms masterminded the varied and complex functions of the CIA, which has been said to be "filled with young men whose fathers won't trust them with the family business." In fact, at the time Helms was chief, half of CIA's corps of analysts possessed advanced degrees, 30 per cent of them doctorates and, according to Adm. Raborn, they could "easily and

adequately staff a university." Speaking a hundred languages and dialects, they included economists, cartographers, psychiatrists, agronomists, chemists, anthropologists and foresters; their activities included maintaining listening posts and operating broadcasting facilities, airlines, space satellites, publishing houses, philanthropic foundations, and training bases for insurgent or counterinsurgent forces. As has since become evident, the CIA's insurgent activities amounted to a good deal more than that. It admitted recruiting, training, equipping, paying, supplying and advising a 30,000-man fighting force of "irregulars" (many from Thailand)—the chief offensive troops in the "secret war" in Laos. The admission caused Arkansas' Sen. William Fulbright to say, "The CIA has become another Defense Department."

A former CIA man in clandestine operations says of Dick Helms: "He's cautious. I've known him not to want some of these things done, but if they have to be done he'd rather have them done within the CIA . . . Like any good bureaucrat, he will argue against what he doesn't approve up to a point, then he carries out his orders." John Maury said, "He is less adventuresome than his predecessor as chief of plans. With Dick in charge we might not have had a Bay of Pigs, but neither would we have had a strategic satellite."

Not to Make Policy

SPEAKING FOR HIMSELF, Helms convinced his congressional examiners at the time of his confirmation that the CIA would not attempt to make policy and that he, as the Presi-

would not use his role to do so. He had been known to say before his rise, "I'm sorry, Mr. President, but that's a policy matter and policy is not my field." Harry Howe Ranson, professor of political science at Vanderbilt University, argues the opposite point: that the intelligence establishments "exert undue influence on policy" because "America's high government officials do not adequately monitor secret operations." Ranson says that former Secretary of State Dean Acheson advised President Truman when the CIA was created that "neither the President, the National Security Council nor anyone else would be in a position to know what it was doing or to control it." Ranson predicts that proliferating technology will increase the influence of intelligence organizations and "in some circumstances control decision-making."

Some of Helms' expressed opinions are: "We are, after all, a part of this democracy and we believe in it. We would not want to see our work distort its values and its principles. We propose to adapt intelligence to American society, not vice versa . . . In a free society there is a limit to what a clandestine service can do. It cannot substitute for the government in a Bay of Pigs." He told a congressional committee: "In our society even a clandestine outfit can not stray far from the norms. If we get . . . the public, the press or the Congress against us, we can't hack it." Insofar as the printed record shows, during his tenure Helms was scrupulous in present-



dent's principal intelligence advisor,



ing objective fact to Congress. He said he would only lose credibility by shading fact one way for Senator Fulbright and another way for Mississippi's Senator John Stennis; he re-established the CIA's good congressional relations, which had deteriorated under

Admiral Raborn. Despite that, Helms was in hot water with Congress more than once: In 1967, when Ramparts magazine revealed that the CIA had subsidized the National Student Association since 1952; in 1969, during the CIA's suspected but denied involvement with the mystery killing of Vietnamese alleged counterspy Thai Khac Chuyen, for which six Green Beret officers were charged with murder and conspiracy to murder. One of the officers, Robert F. Marasco, later confessed to the murder. In another confession, Capt. John McCarthy Jr., of the Green Berets, said he had participated in a CIA-directed operation to aid in the overthrow of former Cambodian ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

But Helms' first exposure to congressional heat occurred only 18 days after he took office as chief in 1966. He signed a letter to the St. Louis Globe Democrat praising one of its editorials titled "Brickbats for Fulbright," which employed epithets and expressed satisfaction at the Senate's refusal to add three members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to the seven-man "watchdog" subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services and Appropriations Committee, which keeps tabs on the CIA. The letter set off a storm in the Senate. Helms apologized and explained that he had signed the letter, drafted by an assistant, without giving it his full attention. He said he had made a mistake and it would not happen again.

Asked about the "mistake," the assistant in question—Col. Stanley J. Grogan, CIA press officer at the time and soon thereafter retired—said, "Helms didn't do that! I did." Asked if Helms—whom Grogan calls "Hel-ums"—had read the letter, Grogan replied, "Sure he did." Then he amended his answer: "I don't think he read it. He signed it. That wasn't the only letter I wrote that day that he signed. I wrote about 30 of them." Old hand Grogan remembered himself as telling his new chief Helms, "You can say I wrote it. I'll take all the responsibility, but senators are not sacred. I will not apologize to Mike Mansfield—whom I like—and those other senators. They have to take the gaff as well as give it." Helms did the apologizing and parlayed it into better congressional relations.

An Unblemished Star

ALTHOUGH HELMS at first appeared to have dropped his anchor in Congress instead of in the executive branch, and was viewed as an "institutional man" rather than a "presidential man," by 1971 his star was bright with both arms of government. The CIA had been able—and happy—to disavow responsibility for the faulty intelligence leading to the raid on the prisonerless Sontay prison camp, and for the failure to predict massive North Vietnamese resistance to the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos. In November of 1971, more than a year before Helms was superseded by Arthur Schlesinger and his vaunted reorganization of the intelligence network, a no-longer-mentioned, long-awaited and far-reaching intelligence reorganization took place under Richard Helms. He was given "an enhanced leadership role" with governmentwide responsibilities and the power—never before given to an intelligence chief—to review and thus affect the budgets of all of the nation's foreign-intelligence-gathering agencies.

Much of Helms' previous operational work was turned over to his deputy, Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman, now commandant of the Marine Corps. Gen. Cushman had been Richard Nixon's military aide during his vice presidential years.

By law, only one of the two top CIA posts could be held by the military: Both could be held by civilians, but custom and deference to the Armed Services Committee always divided the honors. As the first intelligence professional in the top job, Helms had no outside source of strength and said, "I am the easiest man in Washington to fire. I have no political, military or industrial base."

