

Colby's Report: A Charge Against Helms

Before Richard Helms arrived home last week from his post as ambassador to Iran, he had already learned a fact he could hardly believe: His old friend and successor as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, William Colby, had turned over to the Justice Department evidence suggesting that while in CIA Helms had authorized illegal activities.

Moreover, Helms learned, Colby's action was not the result of an order or in response to subpoena. It was voluntary.

The moment Richard Nixon left the White House, Colby began an investigation of CIA activities during the Nixon years. He discovered operations he thought were of questionable legality and turned the facts over to Justice. He did so even though the activities he described were covert and had been conducted in Helms' official capacity.

This was the act which set in motion the chain of events leading to charges that the CIA had violated its charter. Colby's in-house investigation led to leaks; these leaks and Colby's report to the Justice Department led to a request from President Ford for a fuller report. This second report led to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's suggestion for a blue-ribbon committee to conduct an investigation. Meantime, the agency is paralyzed and probably could not conduct a major covert operation now if one were required.

Helms was not the only man to be dumbfounded by Colby's conduct. To one high official who asked him point-blank why he did it, Colby cited the post-Watergate climate in the country. It was his duty, he thought, to restore the morale of the agency and the country's confidence in the agency, and the best way to do that was to stick within the law.

"The things the agency used to get

by with and the stories or non-stories it used to tell the Congress are no longer possible," he told another senior official who expressed dismay. "From now on, we have to operate according to the book; and if the book won't allow us to operate, then the country has to decide either to put us out of business or to change the book."

The "book" is CIA's charter which gives it power to conduct espionage and other covert operations, but prohibits domestic activity except that necessary to protect its own security and sources of intelligence. Helms is presumably relying on this exception

to the no-domestic-activity law when he says he authorized no illegal activities.

And if the blue-ribbon committee suggested by Kissinger can pre-empt the field and keep the Congress from investigating, Helms will maintain this defense before friendly and understanding inquirers, most of whom were associated with CIA in a pre-Watergate climate.

Meantime, Colby's initiative has broken the old school tie which has long bound the agency's chief officials. He and Helms were both veterans of the wartime Office of Strategic Services.

After the war, Colby worked for a time in the law firm of Maj. Gen. William J. Donovan, chief of the wartime espionage service, who lobbied hard for a CIA and was broken-hearted when he was not named to lead it.

By the time Colby joined the agency, Helms was already on the way up. But there was never any enmity between the two. One veteran of CIA explained the strange course of events as follows: "Helms had to conduct the agency under Nixon, and Colby had to conduct it after Nixon. Those two time frames are really a couple of centuries apart."

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