

Helms Tells Of Order On Poisons

By Lawrence L. Knutson
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Former CIA Director Richard Helms testified yesterday that his employees were trained to accept oral commands as "orders written in blood"—and therefore he had spurned ink and paper when relaying a directive from the President of the United States.

Helms said the CIA's failure to destroy its cache of poisons in accordance with President Nixon's order was an "odd aberration" unlikely to recur.

He told the Senate intelligence committee that while he issued no written backup order he had assumed the shellfish toxin and other poisons had been destroyed.

Sen. Walter F. Mondale (D-Minn.) told Helms and Thomas Karamessines, the CIA's former deputy director for plans, that their responses illustrate the difficulty the committee has had in assessing responsibility inside the CIA for a wide variety of questionable actions, including the alleged assassination of foreign leaders.

"The situation always is something happened and nobody did it," Mondale said.

Shortly after Helms testified, it was announced that Sidney Gottlieb, a former CIA scientist whom Karamessines identified as having been given the order to destroy the toxins, has told the committee through his lawyer that he will invoke the Fifth Amendment and refuse to answer questions.

The committee is seeking to question Gottlieb, former head of the agency's Technical Services Division, in connection with both the retention of the shellfish toxin and the destruction of records about the CIA's testing of LSD and other behavior-modifying drugs.

Fritz Schwartz, the committee's chief counsel, said the Justice Department has been told that if Gottlieb does invoke his constitutional right to avoid self-incrimination, the committee will seek to compel his testimony by granting him immunity for whatever he might say.

Both Helms, now U.S. ambassador to Iran, and Karamessines testified that Gottlieb appeared to agree fully with them that the order issued early in 1970 by president Nixon was valid, did apply to the CIA, and should be complied with.

The order renounced the use by the United States of chemical and biological weapons and directed that they be destroyed.

Dr. Nathan Gordon, the CIA scientist in charge of the

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agency's chemical weapons division, testified Tuesday that he and two associates had decided on their own they need not comply with the order.

Helms was asked by Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho) if he had been shocked when he learned five years later that the order to destroy the toxin had been disobeyed.

"I was surprised and disappointed," Helms said. "I don't shock easily." *

He said he now assumes Gordon and his group retained the toxin because it had been difficult to obtain and because they believed it might be needed in the future. "I think he was yielding to that human impulse of the greater good," Helms said.

In the form of a poison dart or a suicide pill, shellfish toxin has the capacity to kill almost instantly. Church has said the 11 grams found last spring in a CIA vault in Washington could kill hundreds of thousands of persons if correctly applied.

Curtis Smothers, the committee's Republican counsel, said there is evidence that a great many distributions of shellfish toxin were made by the Army to private research institutions and the Public Health Service after the Nixon order was issued.

"There were a lot of scientists who felt this stuff was too valuable to destroy," he said. He did not accuse the Army of actually avoiding the order, which did permit retaining small amounts of such

materials for research purposes.

Sens. Mondale and Robert B. Morgan (D-N.C.) said that an inventory of toxic substances made in 1970 by the Army at Ft. Detrick, Md., showed no holdings of shellfish toxin because it was made after the Army had quietly transferred two containers of the substances to the CIA.

"I won't say the inventory was a fraud, but it comes close to it," Mondale said.

Helms was asked at one point how Congress could assure itself that the CIA in the future would obey a presidential order.

"I find it enormously difficult to legislate a solution to an aberration," Helms said. "I just don't know how you legislate against the odd mistake, the odd aberration, the odd disobedience of orders."