

# 'Imperial Presidents' and the CIA

"I'm going to keep very quiet," said Richard Helms, speaking of the investigation into the Central Intelligence Agency. "But if it looks as though it's all going to be my fault, I shall have a great deal to say."

There is an implication here which recalls another Helms remark, made when he was summoned home from Iran two summers ago to testify on the subject of the wig and the camera lent to Howard Hunt and on Richard Nixon's attempt to use CIA as a foil for halting the investigation into Watergate.

"Who would have thought," Helms said then, "that it might someday be judged wrong to carry out the orders of the President of the United States?"

They hint—these two remarks—at the imperial presidency which historian Arthur M. Schlesinger has described.

They hint of Lyndon Johnson, large, powerful, domineering, thinking of himself as law. They hint of Richard Nixon, sly and stealthy, plotting how to retain beloved trappings of power. Johnson, one can imagine, would order the thing done without a thought as to whether the thing was legal. Nixon, one can imagine, had more consciousness of evil. He would sneak the thing

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through. The end was the same: The end was corruption.

It is all very well to say that Richard Helms should have risen to the occasion: "Mr. President, I won't do that. If you insist, Mr. President, my only course is to resign."

When authority gives an order it is easy to find reasons why authority may be right. More important, the President is the Commander-in-Chief. Does a soldier quit the field of battle when the general orders a foolhardy attack?

Maybe the problems of the CIA are battlefield related. Its leaders were steeled in war and most of them were steeled in a very special kind of war.

Most of them came out of OSS, as the wartime secret intelligence agency was called. This meant, first of all, that they had volunteered to carry out very unusual orders.

It also meant that they were unusual people, given to taking great personal risks, desirous of operating alone or in the company of two or three others, impressed more than most soldiers can be impressed with the absolute necessity for secrecy and the almost certain penalty which awaits the slightest breach of it.

It meant one more thing which may be important to the CIA story. The OSS men, who became the CIA men, thought of themselves as their country.

Dropped alone in groups of two or three onto unfamiliar and enemy-occupied lands, they were, whether in Norway or in Southern France, in Holland or in Thai and, all that there was of America.

And while they may well have been on the run, hunted and harried from one hiding place to another, they took more pride than most soldiers learned to take in the fact of what they were. They were America. That and the death pill in their pockets were all they had.

Is it not possible that men who have learned to do everything in secrecy, who are accustomed to strange assignments and who think of themselves as embodying their country are peculiarly susceptible to imperialistic Presidents? Have they not in fact trained themselves to behave as a power elite?

"For 26 years," Richard Helms remarked the other day, "I had the idea certain that I was serving my country." That's a proud thing to be able to say. What a shock it must be to such a man to be told that from time to time during those 26 years he was wrong.