

Symington Doubts Nixon Didn't Know of CIA Role

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Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) said yesterday he finds it hard to believe that President Nixon was unaware of attempts by senior White House officials to use the Central Intelligence Agency to cover up the Watergate scandal.

Symington expressed his doubts after listening to three more hours of testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee by present and former CIA officials.

He recalled his own experience on the National Security Council in 1950-51, and observed: "It is hard for me to visualize that he (Mr. Nixon) knew nothing about it." Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.) expressed a similar view.

The witnesses before the committee yesterday were former CIA Director Rich-

ard Helms and his deputy in the agency, Gen. Robert Cushman, and Lt. Gen. Vernon A. Walters, the agency's deputy director.

They gave additional details of efforts to further involve the agency in domestic espionage by three White House officials—H. R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and John W. Dean III.

The CIA officials have previously testified to the agency's role—at the behest of the White House—in the Daniel Ellsberg investigation and in additional efforts by the White House to involve the CIA in covering up the break-in at the Democratic Party's Watergate headquarters in June, 1972.

Helms, Cushman and Walters have all testified, Symington said, that they were unaware of the extent of

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President Nixon's knowledge of these interventions. Helms has also testified, however, that approaches to the agency by White House officials were made in the name of the President.

General Walters, in an affidavit released Wednesday, described several meetings with Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean beginning within a week after the Watergate break-in. He was asked in the course of these meetings for CIA help in disguising the nature of the break-in. Furthermore, said Walters, Dean specifically asked the agency to provide bail and salary payments from "covert funds" for the Watergate defendants, some of whom were, in Dean's reported words, "scared" and "wobbling."

Walters said he told Dean that if CIA money were used for covert operations in this country, he would have to report it to a congressional committee that deals with CIA affairs.

Walters refused to comment on his testimony yesterday, but Symington said Haldeman apparently "localized in" on Walters and that Dean followed up with pressure to obtain CIA help.

Senator Jackson, also a committee member, termed the White House effort a "premeditated plan and design to use the CIA as a cover-up in connection with illegal activities undertaken by the administration."

Jackson said Helms and other CIA officials "had reason to believe the requests had the sanction of the President of the United States." But, like Symington, he was unable to offer any evidence to substantiate that claim.

When asked whether Helms had questioned Haldeman and Ehrlichman about the President's support, Jackson said, "You don't ask those questions when you're a professional and in this kind of climate."

Jackson said Helms "had a right to believe that it (the request for cover-up assistance) came from the top."

Symington said that Helms testified that he talked with Mr. Nixon earlier this year when Helms was appointed ambassador to Iran, but said that the subject of Watergate did not come up. Symington said that at no time during the time of the White House pressures on the CIA did Helms communicate his concern to the President.

A committee source said that Helms' testimony yesterday was mostly an elaboration of the three White House requests described Monday by Walters, and that no new approaches emerged.

The source said that from the questioning it was obvious that the committee members felt Helms and the

other CIA witnesses "had done a pretty good job of resisting (the White House) under the circumstances."

Helms clearly made some accommodations to the White House staff, the source said, without connecting the requests to a larger program of political espionage that had not yet been publicized at the time.

However, Helms may face more unfriendly questioning Monday when he appears before the Senate foreign Relations Committee to explain why he denied at least three times in January and February that the CIA had been involved in Watergate in any way. Helms made the denials in hearings for his confirmation as ambassador to Iran.

"Several members of the committee are disturbed that some of the stories they have read of CIA involvement are not consistent with what they understood from the confirmation hearings," a committee staff aide said.

The aide said Helms will be asked in the closed session to describe all White House requests to the CIA and the domestic intelligence in which it participated.

While the committee cannot revoke its confirmation of Helms, it could turn over transcripts of testimony to the Justice Department for possible perjury action, or could even recommend impeachment proceedings.

Helms is also scheduled to appear before a federal grand jury here and before the Senate Select Subcommittee investigating Watergate. He may also be called by a Los Angeles County grand jury investigating the break-in of the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

It was also disclosed yesterday that Walters testified that he recently visited the White House to talk with Counsel J. Fred Buzhardt and that he left some memoranda there at Buzhardt's suggestion. Buzhardt, former Pentagon counsel, joined the White House on May 10.

The memoranda, a committee source said, were Walters' recollections of the White House meetings in June with Haldeman and Ehrlichman. Symington said that the Armed Services Committee has requested the documents, and that Buzhardt has said he will deliver them.

Helms appeared later in the day before a House armed forces subcommittee, after which Chairman Lucien N. Nedzi (D-Mich.) said the former CIA director "felt he was getting orders from the highest authority."

Referring to White House pressures for assistance in domestic intelligence operations, Nedzi said, "It is difficult with the benefit of hindsight how one should have acted under tremendous pressure."
