

Perjury on Chile?

By Tom Wicker

Nicholas M. Horrock of The New York Times has impressively documented a grim story of how the Nixon Administration attempted to overthrow the Government of Chile in the fall of 1970, before Salvador Allende Gossens could take office as that country's first Marxist President. This American effort to inspire a military coup in Chile began at a secret meeting on Sept. 15, 1970, of Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Attorney General John Mitchell and Richard Helms, then the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

In "strong language" Mr. Nixon told Mr. Helms, according to Mr. Horrock's account, that the C.I.A. was not doing enough to prevent Mr. Allende from becoming President, and had better "come up with some ideas." Mr. Nixon authorized an expenditure of \$10 million for the effort to unseat Mr. Allende (who had won the popular election with less than a majority of the vote, and whose election therefore had to be confirmed by the Chilean Congress).

The result of this meeting was two unsuccessful coup attempts backed by the C.I.A., one of which resulted in the kidnapping and death of Gen. René Schneider Chereau. That is bad enough, a shameful blot on American history, but it cannot be undone now. Unless Mr. Horrock's account is disproven in virtually every detail, however, strong grounds appear to exist for a perjury indictment against Mr. Helms and perhaps others.

Repeatedly, through a series of Congressional hearings, Mr. Helms has testified that no such effort to overthrow the Chilean Government was made. At worst, he has conceded in some of his testimony, efforts were made to see if it was possible to bribe members of the Chilean Congress to refuse Mr. Allende the Presidency.

That was found to be "quite unworkable," Mr. Helms told the Foreign Relations Committee on Jan. 22, 1975. "Allende had this all wrapped up, it was put in the bag, and there was nothing that was going to change it."

But two years earlier, on March 16, 1973, before a Senate subcommittee, Mr. Helms had denied even that bloodless effort. Senator Frank Church of Idaho asked him: "Up to the time that the Congress of Chile cast its vote installing Allende as the new President, did the C.I.A. attempt in any way to influence that vote?"

"Which vote?" Mr. Helms asked.

"The vote of the Congress," Senator Church said.

"No, sir," Mr. Helms said flatly—although he later explained that he thought the C.I.A.'s "probe" into the

possibilities of using bribe money had not really been an attempt to influence the vote. "I realize," he told Mr. Church last January, "even in light of that, that my answer was narrow."

It was not so narrow as another answer he gave at confirmation hearings on his nomination to be Ambassador to Iran in 1973. Senator Stuart Symington put the question flatly: "Did you try in the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow the Government of Chile?"

"No, sir," Mr. Helms replied, despite the apparent C.I.A. involvement, while he was the agency's director, in two separate plots designed to bring about a military takeover of the Chilean Government and to bar Mr. Allende from the office to which he had been elected.

Asked about that again on Jan. 22, 1975, Mr. Helms insisted: "As far as the earlier statement is concerned, whether the agency tried to overthrow the Government of Chile, I answered, 'No.' I believe that is true. If it has been alleged differently by someone else, I would appreciate having it."

It may be that Mr. Helms, at hazard to himself, was simply protecting the national security, as he saw it, with these answers; but on that same Jan.

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22, 1975, Senator George McGovern asked him if he thought he had "a right, maybe an obligation, on certain occasions, to mislead Congressional committees?"

No, Mr. Helms said, he had tried to be as forthcoming as he could be, and he had always had the option of going privately to Senators and saying what perhaps could not be said in hearings. "I don't want to seek refuge and say I lied in the national security interest," he said. "I didn't run into any situation where I thought that was required."

Now the Justice Department apparently is considering this record, together with the facts of C.I.A. operations in Chile, and perhaps other activities it undertook while Mr. Helms was its director. If a perjury charge issues, that would be a sad development for Richard Helms but it might have salutary effect elsewhere in the Government.

It might make public officials think twice before routinely lying, or misleading Congress and the public with "narrow" answers. If they feared to lie or mislead, it might make them think twice about what they do. Public officials who had to face up to their own actions and policies, and accept the political and legal consequences, might not be quite so quick to overthrow another government, cover up a scandal or play ball with the interests they supposedly regulate.

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