CIA

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The Helms Defenders

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Washington

For that small circle of influential people, the ones who help shape America's foreign policy and share national secrets, the intimate dinner party the other night in honor of Richard Helms was an especially tender moment.

"Touching and moving," said one who was there.

Assembled in the Chevy Chase home of columnist Tom Braden and his wife, Joan, were some perennial notables:

Averell Harriman, the patrician statesman; Stuart Symington, the senator from Missouri; Robert S. McNamara, who once ran the Pentagon and now runs the World Bank; Henry A. Kissinger, whom everybody knows. Even the outsiders were prominent

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ones: NBC's Barbara Walters and Israel's Ambassador Sincha Dinitz, among others.

They were gathered to cheer up an old friend, a comrade wounded by recent events, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, who is now confronted with embarrassing uestions about tqhe secret agency's domestic surveillance activities.

After the smoked salmon and crown roast of lamb, the glasses of rich red wine were raised in his honor.

Symington toasted the "splendid job" that Helms had done in seven years as America's intelligence chief. Harriman seconded those sentiments.

But the high point was the brief and melodramatic speech of Robert McNamara, defense secretary during the long struggle in Vietnam, a man who shared with Helms the anguish of the Johnson years.

McNamara wanted all in the room to know: whatever Dick Helms did, whether it was over the line or not, the former secretary of defense supported him fully. That moment of fraternity moistened some eyes around the table.

According to the etiquette of important dinner parties, no one is supposed to speak afterward of what was said by whom, especially the press.

Yet, somehow, the story of McNamara's toast is circulating, confirming what many already suspected — that Richard Helms has been shaken by the current CIA controversy and that the established circle is drawing the wagons up close in his defense.

That message was already whispering around Washington, in part because the Secretary of State was telling friends and associates on the dinner-party circuit that he was dismayed by what happened to Helms.

"An honorable man," Kissinger says solemnly, then he adds a word or two of private rebuke for the present CIA Director William E. Colby, who made the public disclosures of CIA domestic spying, ond even for Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, who investigated the subject when he held the CIA job briefly before Colby.

These are glimpses of the private and almost visceral political currents that now surround the CIA controversy, a struggle as intangible as smoke, yet with real significance for the players.

Helms is in foremost jeopardy, not simply because most of the activities of debatable illegality happened during his tenure, but also for what he said or didn't say about CIA activities while under oath before various congressional committees.

On a political level, the situation is perilous for Colby too, who now must answer the agency's critics more fully at forthcoming hearings without totally alienating CIA's traditional friends or his own troops within the agency. In a secondary sense, the struggle threatens Kissinger and Schlesinger too, who now represent the natural institutional rivalry between the Defense and the State departments, who both played a direct hand in the CIA's past.

As one close partisan described it: "A fairly Byzantine happening by some fairly Byzantine people."

Helms' difficulties stem from his bland assurances, given regularly in recent years to congressional inquiries, that the CIA did not do such things as penetrating domestic political organizations or spying on radicals. Then, after the New York Times account of domestic spying was published December 22, Colby eventually made a public recitation on the subject, acknowledging what Helms seemed to have denied.

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