

'Data Ordered Withheld'

Report on Helms' Watergate Role

By Seymour M. Hersh
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Richard Helms, while director of Central Intelligence, ordered a high official of the agency to withhold Watergate information and deny Justice Department access to a key witness in the break-in on June 17, 1972, according to previously unpublished testimony.

The official, Howard J. Osborne, who was director of security for the CIA before he retired in late 1973, told a House intelligence subcommittee in May, 1973, that Helms decided that a series of letters sent to the agency by James W.

McCord Jr., a member of the team that broke into Democratic party headquarters at the Watergate complex, should not be forwarded to the Justice Department.

The McCord letters, sent between July 29, 1972, and early January, 1973, warned the agency that officials of the Committee for the Re-election of the President were planning to contend that the break-in was a CIA operation.

McCord later wrote, "I have the evidence of the involvement of (former Attorney General John N.) Mitchell and others sufficient to convince a jury, the Congress and the press."

Osborne also said that Helms had instructed him not to inquire into the agency's involvement with E. Howard Hunt Jr., another Watergate participant.

Helms further directed, Osborne said, that the FBI not be permitted to interview Karl Wagner, a CIA employee, who had knowledge that John D. Ehrlichman, then the chief White House adviser on domestic affairs, had authorized the agency to establish a work-

ing relationship with Hunt in July, 1971.

"You forget about that," Osborne quoted Helms as having told him in late June, 1972. "I will handle that. You take care of the rest of that."

At the time, Osborne had been designated by Helms as the official directly responsible for coordinating and expediting the CIA's communications with the FBI about Watergate.

Helms and other high-level CIA officials repeatedly stressed in their public statements that their actions regarding Watergate were not illegal, but legitimate steps to protect the agency from possible adverse publicity and to prevent the leak of highly classified informa-

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tion about the agency's operational procedures.

Lawrence Houston, then the general counsel to the agency, subsequently testified before the House subcommittee that he had advised Helms that the agency had no legal responsibility to pass along the first McCord letter.

Osborne acknowledged to the committee that he had been troubled by Helms' order not to forward the McCord letters.

"We had been working very closely with the FBI," he testified. "I have always given them everything. I have never held anything from them."

"At the time I don't think I really agreed with it (the decision to withhold the letters). But, you know, I worked for Mr. Helms, he was my boss."

The three U.S. attorneys who originally prosecuted the case for the Justice Department did not learn of the Ehrlichman link to the CIA for five months. They also were not told of the McCord letters to the CIA until May, 1973.

The House subcommittee began hearings in the spring of 1973 shortly after CIA involvement with the White House "plumbers" became known.

The panel eventually concluded that the agency had been misused by the Nixon administration.

The testimony was declassified late last year, without public announcement, by Representative Lucien N. Nedzi of Michigan, the subcommittee chairman.

Helms was not directly asked about Osborne's allegations, but he told the representatives that "everybody was instructed to help with the FBI investigation in the agency, and every lead was checked. . . all the records were gone through and all the things were pursued."

Helms, who headed the CIA from 1966 to 1973 and is now ambassador to Iran, could not be reached for comment. A State Department aide said he was traveling and would not return to his post in Teheran, from which he has been on leave, until later this month.

~~Do not have NYT version in file; perhaps carried 2 Feb, a Sunday?~~

NYT clipping, 2 Feb 75, filed W/gate. It is very much longer and much more detailed.