

# SECHRONICLE Helms 'Regrets' CIA's Use of Mafia

## Washington

Former CIA Director Richard Helms, breaking a long silence, said yesterday the agency's decision to enlist the Mafia in a plot to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro "is one of the greatest regrets of my life."

"When I found out about it, I should have corked it off and stopped it right then and there, and I am genuinely sorry that I didn't, and I can't do any more than say that," Helms said, in a taped television interview with David Frost on NBC.

"I am sorry. It was a mistake. It was a case of poor judgment."

Helms said the agency was under great pressure to "make contacts to Cuba," and he let the pressure "get the better of my judgment."

In 1975, West Coast mob leader John Roselli told Congress that he and Sam

Giancana, a Chicago Mafia figure, were recruited in late 1960 on behalf of the CIA to attempt to assassinate Castro, his brother, Raul, and revolutionary Che Guevara by putting poison pellets in their food.

Before he could also testify to Congress, Giancana was slain in his suburban Chicago home in what was described as a Mafia "hit."

Helms said there is "not the slightest evidence... that any poison pellets ever even got to Havana."

"We have the word of a gangster (Roselli) that they did, but we have no record, no evidence, no nothing, and I don't believe it, and I think he and his case officer grossly exaggerated what they had accomplished or were trying to accomplish," Helms said.

At another point he said: "As far as the Mafia bit was concerned, that is one of the greatest regrets of my life — that I

had anything to do with that."

He said all he ever authorized was an operation under which the Mafia would try to make contact with organized crime elements in Cuba, and "I shouldn't have even authorized that."

Helms commented publicly for the first time since he pleaded no contest last fall to a misdemeanor charge of lying to a Senate subcommittee about the CIA's covert attempts to subvert Chile's 1970 presidential election. He was given a six-month, suspended jail sentence.

In the wide-ranging interview, Helms also:

- Accused his successor, William Colby, and former President Ford of weakening the CIA by opening up secret documents to the public and Congress. He said the Ford administration should

have gone all the way to the Supreme Court before releasing the documents.

- Said he warned former FBI director J. Patrick Gray at the time of the Watergate break-in that the burglars "may have some connection with (John) Ehrlichman," a top presidential adviser later convicted in the Watergate cover-up. Helms said: "I don't know why it was... that Gray didn't believe me... I knew Ehrlichman was the one who had arranged for the hiring of Howard Hunt."

- Scoffed at Frost's suggestion he "blackmailed" President Nixon into naming him U.S. ambassador to Iran when he was replaced as CIA director in 1973. Helms said that "whole theory is laughable," adding: "I never by word, deed, action or innuendo, threatened President Nixon with anything ever."

United Press