

Helms, the C.I.A. and Public Trust

By Walter Pincus

WASHINGTON—The judgments that led to covert United States intervention in Chilean politics deserve to be criticized, but at least there the Central Intelligence Agency was within its legal authority under its charter. That was not the case with C.I.A. complicity in Watergate "extra-agency activities" and the subsequent cover-up.

The law barring the agency from undertaking domestic operations was clearly violated.

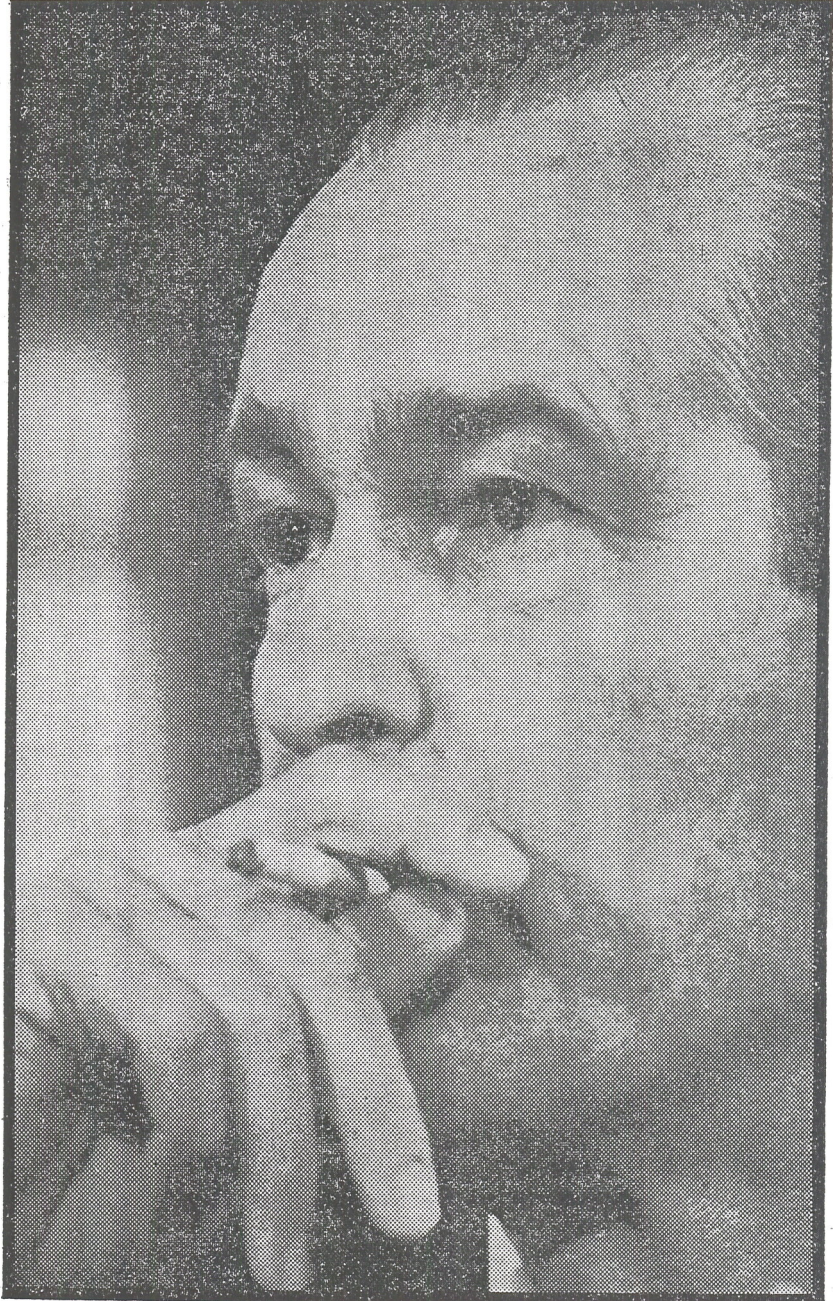
Moreover, when the former Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, gave misleading and inaccurate answers to questions posed to him during Congressional committee hearings about C.I.A. assistance to Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt while Mr. Hunt worked for the Nixon White House, Mr. Helms was apparently covering up information relevant to a criminal investigation then under way.

On May 21, 1973, with the Watergate cover-up beginning to crack, Mr. Helms was called back from Iran, where he was Ambassador, and questioned under oath by members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The break-in at the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's former psychiatrist, Dr. Lewis Fielding, by then had been uncovered, along with information that the C.I.A. had given equipment and aid to Mr. Hunt, who had directed the illegal entry.

Mr. Helms testified that he had never heard of Dr. Fielding until the psychiatrist's name had appeared in the newspapers. When asked about photographs that Mr. Hunt had taken of Dr. Fielding's office with a C.I.A. camera and that the agency had developed for Mr. Hunt, Mr. Helms swore, "I do not know what the contents of the film were in the latter part of August, 1971."

One Senator asked if anyone at the agency who had reviewed the film had thought Mr. Hunt might be contemplating a break-in. "I never heard



Photograph of Richard Helms

anybody at the agency mention such a theory," Mr. Helms responded, adding later that "nobody had given us the slightest indication that anything underhanded was afoot."

Mr. Helms was asked why then had the C.I.A. halted its assistance to Mr. Hunt back on Aug. 27, 1971, the day the photographs had been returned to Mr. Hunt. Twice Mr. Helms said that it was solely because Mr. Hunt's requests had become "too extensive."

To support that, he recollected that Mr. Hunt had asked to have his former secretary brought back from Paris and that a covert New York telephone number and mailing address be established for him. Mr. Helms never mentioned the photos and what they appeared to show as the reason for the agency's having stopped its aid to Mr. Hunt.

Almost a year after the Helms testimony, the House Judiciary Committee released its material on the Ellsberg break-in and the C.I.A.'s role. Sworn statements from agency personnel along with other testimony indicate that Mr. Helms did not give the true story.

On Aug. 25, 1971, the new material shows, Mr. Hunt along with G. Gordon Liddy requested and received a high-speed camera, concealed in a tobacco pouch, designed for indoor clandestine photography.

A few days later, Mr. Hunt called long-distance and asked a C.I.A. technician to meet him at Dulles Airport, outside Washington, to pick up the camera and film and get it developed at the agency's laboratory.

The camera had been used by Mr. Hunt and Mr. Liddy to photograph Dr. Fielding's Beverly Hills office, inside

and out, in order to plan the burglary.

When developed, but before they were delivered to Mr. Hunt at his White House office, the photos were reviewed by C.I.A. supervisory personnel. They showed a shot of a parking space with the name "Dr. Fielding" visible. They also showed shots of the doctor's office, including his file cabinets and safe.

One C.I.A. official speculated at the time, according to the House committee's records, that these were "casing" photographs. Since such "bag jobs" were carried out by C.I.A. agents abroad, these officials were familiar with the need for the type of photos Hunt had taken.

The C.I.A. Deputy Director, Gen. Robert E. Cushman Jr., was informed since he had made the original arrangements to assist Mr. Hunt.

According to a Cushman aide, C.I.A. technical personnel had determined that the assistance already given to Mr. Hunt "appeared to involve the agency in domestic clandestine operations," a finding confirmed, if not initiated, by the C.I.A. general counsel's office, which also had reviewed the pictures.

The decision was made to end further assistance to Mr. Hunt unless Mr. Helms ordered it continued.

Mr. Hunt was so informed when the photographs were delivered to him the afternoon of Aug. 27, 1971. That day, Mr. Cushman called John D. Ehrlichman and told him of the agency's decision. That such steps would have been taken without Mr. Helms's knowledge is unthinkable.

In 1971, Mr. Helms in a public speech asked the American people to

recognize that in the case of autonomous, secret agencies such as the C.I.A. "the nation must to a degree take it on faith that we too are honorable men devoted to her service."

Mr. Helms appears to have broken that faith and in a matter that involves corrupt activities at the highest Government level.

If he and his former agency are ever to again gain the public trust they need, they must make a full public accounting of past Watergate-related conduct. The Congressional committees with responsibility for overseeing the C.I.A. must now order that accounting to be made.

Walter Pincus is executive editor of The New Republic.
