

Richard Helms: The Intelligence Professional Personified

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Richard Helms, Director of Central Intelligence, 1966–1973

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A trailblazer who dominated American intelligence for much of the Cold War.
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Editor's Note: From 1997 to 2002, David Robarge worked as a research assistant for Richard Helms while the Ambassador was writing his memoirs, and also interviewed him extensively for other historical projects. In the course of those and many other professional and social contacts with the Ambassador and his family, the author came to regard Helms as a friend and counselor.

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The Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles once told Congress, “should be directed by a relatively small but elite corps of men with a passion for anonymity and a willingness to stick at that particular job.”¹ Richard Helms, the eighth Director of Central Intelligence (1966–1973) who died in Washington on 23 October 2002 at the age of 89, embodied those qualities. He was among the last of a dwindling group of trailblazers who dominated American intelligence for much of the Cold War. When Helms entered on duty with the new Agency 55 years ago, he was one of a cohort of young veterans of clandestine warfare during World War II who chose to stay in the secret world to fight a new, and in many ways more formidable, enemy. Seemingly a natural at managing secret operations, Helms rose from desk officer to DCI and came to represent a new type of govern-

ment professional: the career intelligence officer, steeped in the culture of clandestinity and devoted to the Agency as an institution. Intelligence work, Helms would later say, was “not merely . . . a job, but rather . . . a calling.”²

Formative Years

Born in 1913 into a family of means and international connections, Helms grew up in smart suburbs of Philadelphia and New York. One of his brothers described their youth as “conventional upper-middle class, well educated, well traveled, interested in good schools and sports, and with a social life centering around the country club.”³ Helms took part of his schooling at academies in Switzerland and Germany and became fluent in French and German. In 1931 he entered Williams College and majored in literature and history. He became class president and head of the school paper, and was voted “most respected,” “best politician,” and “most likely to succeed.”

After graduating in 1935, Helms set out to be a journalist and newspaper owner, and by age 23 was a European correspondent for United Press International. He advanced from writing obituaries of English

² From Helms's statement to the President's Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (the Rockefeller Commission), 16 January 1975.

³ Quoted in Trudi McC. Osborne, “The (Really) Quiet American: Richard McGarrath Helms,” *The Washington Post*, 20 May 1973, p. C2

¹ Quoted in “The Silent Service,” *Time*, 24 February 1967, p. 16.

celebrities to covering the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin—the so-called “Hitler Games”—and interviewing the Führer just after a chilling Nazi rally at Nuremberg. He returned to the United States the next year to learn the business side of newspapers, working up through the advertising ranks at the *Indianapolis Times*, a major Midwestern daily.⁴

Wartime with the OSS

In 1942, Helms joined the US Navy Reserve, received a commission as a lieutenant, and worked in the Eastern Sea Frontier headquarters in New York City, plotting the locations of German submarines in the Atlantic Ocean. A former wire service colleague approached him about working for the new Office of Strategic Services in its Morale Operations Branch, which produced “black” propaganda. In 1943, the Navy transferred Helms to OSS in Washington. He underwent the standard tradecraft training at a covert facility in suburban Maryland, which included hand-to-hand combat instruction from the legendary English expert Col. William Fairbairn and an exercise in infiltrating and “spying” on a local defense contractor.⁵

On finishing OSS “boot camp,” Helms began what he would spend most of his intelligence career doing: planning and directing espionage operations from an office in Washington. In this case, the target

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[In postwar Germany,] he tracked down Nazi sympathizers and war criminals, collected information on stolen goods, traced German scientists, and monitored Soviet military misdeeds.

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was Germany, and the agents were run out of Central Europe and Scandinavia. Early in 1945, Helms got his first overseas assignment, in the London office of OSS’s espionage branch. Working under (and sharing a Grosvenor Street flat with) William Casey, Helms organized infiltrations of agents behind German lines to spy and set up resistance networks. Late in the war he was “forward deployed” to Paris. Then, after V-E Day, he moved on to Luxembourg and Germany, where he was made deputy chief of the espionage element in Wiesbaden. In August 1945, he was transferred to a similar job in Berlin under Allen Dulles. From there he tracked down Nazi sympathizers and war criminals, collected information on stolen goods, traced German scientists, and monitored Soviet military misdeeds.

A Life’s Work

After President Truman abolished OSS in late 1945, Helms moved into the Berlin office of the Strategic Services Unit, a carryover operational organization warehoused in the War Department. In December he came back to Washington (for good, as it turned out) to run the Central Europe branch of the short-lived Central Intelligence Group. In late 1947, he took a similar position in the new CIA’s Office of

Special Operations. After the Directorate of Plans was created in 1952, Helms served as chief of operations (the number two job) for eight years, largely running the directorate as DDP Frank Wisner’s health deteriorated. Besides overseeing espionage operations during those years, Helms smoothed relations between competing factions in the directorate—the spy handlers and the covert operators represented different cultures and often worked at cross purposes—and helped protect the Agency from Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s efforts to seed it with informants.

Probably Helms’s greatest personal disappointment through this phase of his career was not being chosen to replace Wisner as DDP in 1958. If Helms had been selected, rather than Richard Bissell, he might have kept the Agency from committing its biggest blunder to date, the Bay of Pigs operation. Although the Eisenhower Administration almost certainly would have ordered the CIA to do something to remove Fidel Castro from power, Helms probably would not have approved a project anywhere near as large and unwieldy as the one Bissell backed. Without that covert action disaster on his record, Allen Dulles most likely would have finished his directorship quietly in a year or two and turned over a respected, even popular, Agency to his successor—assumed by many at the time to be Richard Helms.

As it turned out, Helms’s eventual selection as DDP in 1962 under John McCone—the DCI who had replaced Allen Dulles the year before—proved important symbolically and substantively. It quieted many of the rumblings from Clan-destine Service careerists after Bissell’s and Dulles’s ouster, and

⁴ Helms would be the only DCI with a background in journalism.

⁵ Of Fairbairn’s training, Helms later observed, “Within 15 seconds, I came to realize that my private parts were in constant jeopardy!” Quoted in DCI George Tenet’s remarks to the OSS Society, *What’s News*, No. 924, 30 August 2001.

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allayed their fears that McCone, a shipping and construction tycoon, was bent on running the Agency like a big business. Helms's promotion also signaled a shift in emphasis from covert action to espionage—a reorientation with which he wholeheartedly agreed.

During the bitter peace of the Cold War, when nuclear superpowers and their proxies faced off in hot spots all over the globe, Helms and his CIA colleagues had to be, in columnist George Will's words, "resourceful, tough-minded people" who "were not too squeamish to do hard things."⁶ Wherever CIA operatives were—behind the Iron Curtain, in Third World cities, or out in the jungle or desert—"[e]spionage is not played by the Marquess of Queensberry rules," Helms noted, "and the only sin in espionage is getting caught."⁷ *Secret intelligence work demands a special character in its practitioners, who must be able to bear the bleak reality that they "have only each other on whom to lean. Those on the outside either don't know them or don't like them. Those above them seek their loyalty, their competence, but hasten to distance themselves when something goes wrong."*⁸

After McCone resigned in 1965 and was replaced by Adm. William Raborn, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Helms DDCI to give him more Washington seasoning before elevating him to the top job. When

that occurred a year later, LBJ handled it in his inimitable way by announcing it at a press conference without asking Helms first; the DCI-designate heard about the *fait accompli* from an administration official only a short time before the President told the media.

Helms's Credo

Throughout his career, and especially as DCI, Helms hewed to several basic principles of intelligence activity. He expressed most of them in catch phrases, which he used often.

Focus on the core missions: collecting and analyzing foreign intelligence. Helms believed that the CIA is best at acquiring secrets and telling policymakers what they mean, but that covert action in peacetime can cause the Agency no end of trouble. Espionage and analysis inform policy, but CA programs too often become substitutes for it. *Operations intended to be plausibly deniable usually end up as neither, and the Agency gets blamed for the unintended consequences.* Having seen how covert action failures tarnished the CIA's image during its supposed "golden age" under Dulles, Helms was determined to prevent similar flaps when he was DCI. As far as collection methods were concerned, Helms duly appreciated the contribution of technical means, but he

insisted that satellites and sensors would never replace spies as the best way to learn about an adversary's intentions. Although a fan, he disliked the term HUMINT, remarking that "it sounds much too much like a type of fertilizer." He was quoted as saying: "Classical espionage has been termed the second oldest profession, and I want to predict that it will no more go out of business in the future than the first . . ."⁹

Keep the game honest. Helms thought that the purpose of finished intelligence was to inform but not second-guess policy decisions. He was sensitive to the fact that intelligence is inherently political in that it exists in a policy environment and sometimes tips the balance in favor of one decision or another. In that way, analysis can never be truly "objective" because the policymaking community will use it to justify or sidetrack initiatives. At the same time, Helms believed that finished intelligence should not be politicized—skewed to support a particular course of action or an ideological or departmental viewpoint. Instead, it should reflect the honest appraisal of all available evidence, evaluated by fair-minded observers—in some ways like the journalism he once practiced. "Objectivity puts me on familiar ground as an old wire service hand," Helms remarked to a group of newspaper editors in 1971, "but it is even more important to an intelligence organization serving the policymaker. Without objectivity, there is no credibility, and an intelligence organization

⁶ From Will's tribute to Helms on ABC Television's program "This Week," 27 October 2002.

⁷ Quoted in Jon Thurber, "Richard Helms, 89, CIA Chief, Career Spy," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 October 2002, p. B-14.

⁸ From "Keynote Address by Ambassador Richard Helms at June 7 Memorial Garden Dedication Ceremony," *What's News*, no. 325, 12 June 1996.

⁹ Quoted in Walter T. Hitchcock, ed., *The Intelligence Revolution. A Historical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1991), pp. 305-6.

without credibility is of little use to those it serves”¹⁰

Never wear two hats. Perhaps the best way for a DCI to avoid the politicization mire, according to Helms, was to stick to the facts and stay out of policy debates. Unless explicitly requested, Helms avoided offering advice that would tie the CIA even indirectly to a policy outcome. Otherwise, the Agency’s most valuable commodity—its reputation as a source of independent, unbiased information and analysis—would be devalued, and the CIA would become just another voice in the chorus of policy advocates. According to Henry Kissinger, Helms “never volunteered policy advice beyond the questions that were asked him, though never hesitating to warn the White House of dangers even when his views ran counter to the preconceptions of the President or of his security adviser. He stood his ground where lesser men might have resorted to ambiguity.”¹¹ Helms recalled that at meetings in the Johnson White House, “[t]he other people present had to be a little careful about the way they pushed their individual causes . . . because they knew very well that I probably had the facts fairly straight and wouldn’t hesitate to speak up.”¹² To him, that was the best way a DCI could serve a president

Stay at the table. Helms thought that CIA officers sometimes forget that they work for a “service orga-

¹⁰ Richard Helms, “Global Intelligence and the Democratic Society,” speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 14 April 1971, p. 13, DCI Files, Job 80R01284R, box 1, folder 6

¹¹ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 37

¹² David Frost, “An Interview with Richard Helms,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall 1981), p. 5

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nization”—that the product they provide must be relevant, timely, and cogent to be of value to their customers. If the Agency prepares analyses that are out of date by the time they are received, deal with topics that policymakers are not following, or are crafted in ways that do not resonate with consumers, the CIA will lose its audience. On the operations side, Helms acted from the presumption that presidents are going to get done what they want done, whether the DCI or the Agency likes the idea or not. A nay-saying CIA will find itself left out of discussions about activities that it may be able to do better than anyone else. The Agency, Helms said, “is part of the President’s bag of tools . . . and if he and proper authorities have decided that something has to be done, then the Agency is bound to try to do it.”¹³ The alternative is irrelevance.

Serve only one President at a time. Henry Kissinger has observed that Helms “never forgot . . . that his best weapon with Presidents was a reputation for reliability.”¹⁴ Any DCI, Helms believed, must adapt to the Chief Executive he works for and has to suppress political or other differences that may arise when a new occupant enters the Oval Office. Living through the changes from John Kennedy (whom he often observed

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Kissinger, p. 37

while DDP) to Lyndon Johnson to Richard Nixon, Helms saw that Presidents have their own appreciation of intelligence and their own way of dealing with the CIA. They may be fascinated with certain kinds of secret information or types of clandestine activity, or they may not be interested in intelligence at all. A DCI who does not learn to live with those differences, or who tries to oversell the Agency or obstruct policy, will soon find himself disinvented from the Oval Office—which Helms watched happen with McCone and Johnson. “We would have a very strange government,” Helms remarked in retirement, “if everybody with an independent view of foreign policy decided he was free to take or not take the President’s instruction according to his own likes and beliefs.”¹⁵

Make intelligence a profession, not just an occupation. Helms had little time for officers who joined the CIA for any reason other than to serve their country by making intelligence their career. There was a big difference between that and being a careerist, however. With his characteristic bluntness, Helms warned a new class of trainees in 1960 that “[f]iguring out where you’ll be five years from now is a feckless exercise.”

If you’re already concerned about promotions and perquisites, you are wasting your time and ours. You’re either getting a kick out of your organization, or not. If you are not . . . you would be better off outside . . .

¹⁵ Frost, p. 9.

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*You are the agency, its future. It will be as good or as bad as you are. No genius in command will ever change that fact . . . But you are not God's gift to the CIA and you have not been sent here to rearrange it . . .*¹⁶

Committing one's life to the profession of intelligence often exacted a high price, but as Helms told an assembly of Agency employees in 1996: "An alert Intelligence Community is our first, best line of defense. Service there is its own reward."¹⁷

Helms's Style

Urbane, cool, shrewd, sure-footed, tight-lipped, controlled, discreet—such adjectives appear frequently in colleagues' and friends' recollections of Helms. On the job, he was serious and demanding. An efficient worker and delegator, he left his desk clear at the end of the day (almost always before 7:00), feeling assured that the trustworthy subordinates he had carefully chosen could pick up the details and handle any problems. According to a colleague, "Helms was a fellow who by and large gave the people who worked with him his confidence . . . his instinct was to trust them . . ."¹⁸

Sometimes, however, Helms's hands-off style and deference to deputies worked against him. In

the area of covert action, for example, more "proactive" management on his part might have averted the near-collapse of the CIA's political action capabilities after the Agency's network of international organizations, propaganda outlets, proprietaries, foundations, and trusts was exposed in *Ramparts* magazine in 1967. Similarly, in the area of counterintelligence, Helms accorded the chief of the CI Staff, James Angleton, much leeway in vetting assets, dealing with defectors and suspected double agents, and searching for "moles" inside the Agency—despite the costs of disrupting legitimate operations and tarnishing officers' careers.

Helms's office-hours rapport with most associates was cordial and proper: he was not a feet-on-the-desk yarn spinner like Dulles. John Gannon, a friend and former chairman of the National Intelligence Council, described him as "a man you had to work to get to know. He had a certain reserve about him . . . [b]ut if you cut through that and got to know Dick[,] he was an extremely warm man with a really great capacity for friendship."¹⁹

Also unlike Dulles, Helms did not cultivate a public persona. Reserved, unostentatious, and self-effacing—in the term of the day, a "gray flannel suit" executive (but

much better dressed than that)—he gave only one speech to a nongovernmental audience as DCI. He nonetheless made himself known in quiet ways to those outsiders he judged needed to know him, such as certain members of Congress and the media, whom he met at briefings and lunches.

In contrast to John McCone—the archetypical "Type A" executive—Helms did not come to the directorship with a "vision" or try to remake the Agency in his image. He did not have any ideas formed from outside experience about how the CIA **ought** to be run. As a career insider, he knew how it **was** run, and he was inclined, by temperament and judgment, to leave it alone. In Thomas Powers's apt description, Helms's "instinct was to soften differences, to find a middle ground, to tone down operations that were getting out of hand, to give faltering projects one more chance rather than shut them down altogether, to settle for compromise in the interests of bureaucratic peace."²⁰ A colleague similarly recalled that "the question he would tend to ask himself on an issue was, 'Is there something about this that is going to make it difficult for me? Is it going to trigger political reactions that are going to be unpleasant?'"²¹ Helms was a skilled infighter who knew when to step away from trouble, and he thought that most interdepartmental skirmishing over turf and prestige—particularly with the Pentagon—was pointless and self-defeating. After all, he observed, the Secretary of Defense was the second most powerful official in

¹⁶ Quoted in Charles A. Briggs, "Service Anywhere, Anytime: An Anecdotal History of the JOT-CI Program, 1951-1990," unpublished ms., pp. 24-25.

¹⁷ "Keynote Address by Ambassador Richard Helms at June 7 [1996] Memorial Garden Dedication Ceremony," *What's News*, No. 325, 12 June 1996.

¹⁸ Quoted in John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 546.

¹⁹ Quoted in Tabassum Zakana, "Former CIA Director Helms Dead at 89," *Reuters* story no. a6029, 23 October 2002.

²⁰ Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 109.

²¹ Quoted in Ranelagh, p. 546.

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Washington, but “I am the easiest man in Washington to fire. I have no political, military or industrial base.”²²

Off the job, Helms was a charming conversationalist, a wry wit, a convivial partygoer, and a proficient dancer. He always returned from social events at a reasonable hour, his wife Cynthia once remarked, because “[h]e’s got to be in a fit state to make a decision; it’s always a crisis.” While at home, Helms relaxed by playing tennis, gardening, and reading. Although not a devotee of espionage fiction like Dulles, he enjoyed the occasional spy novel—except for John le Carré’s. According to his son, he “detested” *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, with its portrayal of intelligence work as steeped in cynicism, defeatism, and betrayal, and its unconcealed suggestion that, at least in the espionage “game,” East and West were morally equivalent.²³ To Helms, the differences between the Free World and the Communist World were stark and incontrovertible, and intelligence organizations could not attract worthy officers, let alone survive, unless they were founded on trust and loyalty.

A Tempestuous Tenure

Helms spent much of his nearly seven years as DCI—the second longest tenure of any director—trying to defend the Agency from political attack and preserve its influence as the Vietnam war fractured the Cold War consensus on foreign policy and a resurgent Congress asserted itself against “imperial presidents.” In that con-

tentious environment, he served under two presidents—Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon—who neither trusted nor heeded the CIA. He secured a coveted seat at Johnson’s “Tuesday Lunches” after the Agency called the 1967 Arab-Israeli war correctly, but he never was close to the Chief Executive who picked him as DCI. In the Nixon administration, besides the President’s political and social resentments toward the CIA, Helms also had to joust with an ambitious and secretive national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, who insisted on being the President’s senior intelligence officer. Throughout, Helms worked from the premise that the Agency’s survival depended on his ability to preserve its part in informing the policy process. “Dick Helms was a survivor and was in for the long haul,” a colleague remembered. “His aim was to protect the long-term interests of the Agency.”²⁴

As DCI, Helms was generally successful at “keeping in the game” but often found that hard to balance with “keeping the game honest.” Some Agency colleagues thought that he compromised the objectivity he lauded to maintain access downtown. They accused him of politicizing estimates by

removing judgments that the Pentagon disagreed with, as in the cases of assessments of the enemy order of battle in Vietnam and the Soviets’ SS-9 missile. Helms responded that he was treating intelligence politically, demonstrating his concern for the policy implications of “objective” analysis. To him, the coordination process was unavoidably political: everyone involved had to engage in bureaucratic give and take. Moreover, all sides had to accept that they frequently would have reasonable and defensible differences of opinion over the meaning of ambiguous information, especially when forecasting likely outcomes—“God did not give man the gift of prescience,” he observed.²⁵ When CIA analysts produced assessments on aspects of the Vietnam war that suggested that US policy was not working but that did not have to be coordinated with other agencies—for example, studies of the ineffectiveness of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam, the communists’ will to persist, and flaws in the Domino Theory that posited the almost inevitable spread of communism—Helms did not try to alter their conclusions or limit their distribution.

In 1968, Helms weathered two major intelligence failures. Headquarters analysts played down field reports about a major communist military operation in Vietnam and did not issue warnings about the long-prepared wave of attacks that became the infamous Tet offensive until a few days before they began. That same year, the CIA gave no warning of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia because it had next to no intelligence about the mili-

²² Quoted in Osborne, p. C2.
²³ Powers, p. 55.

²⁴ Quoted in “Dick Helms,” *The Times (London)*, 25 October 2002.

²⁵ Quoted in Hutchcock, ed., p. 307.

tary buildup on the Czech border. Two years later, Helms felt the fallout from a dispute with the military over the size of North Vietnamese arms shipments into the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. Information from a newly recruited source in the Cambodian port showed that the Agency's estimates were wrong and the military's were more accurate. Afterward, whenever the CIA disagreed with the Pentagon, the White House would ask Helms: "What about Sihanoukville?"

On at least two occasions, Helms was accused of being too subservient to the White House: first, for allowing the CIA to spy on American antiwar protesters—whom Johnson and Nixon believed were receiving foreign support—and, second, for letting the Agency supply equipment to the "Plumbers" in their attempts to stop critics of Administration policy from "leaking" national security information to the media. Helms said that although some aspects of the first operation "went too far," he believed that refusing that presidential order was pointless; he would have been fired and the assignment given to someone else to carry out, perhaps with unhealthy zeal.²⁶ "I've known him not to want some of these things done," a former operations colleague said, "but if they have to be done, he'd rather have them done within the CIA."²⁷

The Unraveling

During his later years at the CIA, Helms witnessed the Agency and the whole enterprise of intelli-

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gence fall into disrepute as Congress and the public subjected US foreign policy to unprecedented criticism. Helms took the occasion of his only public speech as DCI to affirm that "the nation must to a degree take it on faith that we too are honorable men devoted to her service."²⁸ By the end of his directorship, however, years of political protest, social upheaval, and revelations of government incompetence and wrongdoing had depleted much of that faith. Helms became a (not entirely blameless) casualty of that

rapid and sweeping change in the American people's sense of what their government should and should not do. He had once said that Americans "want an effective, strong intelligence operation. They just don't want to hear too much about it."²⁹ But now prominent voices demanded of the CIA far more accountability than Helms was used to or thought appropriate. As he wrote in this journal in 1967:

... it is sometimes difficult for us to understand the intensity of our public critics. Criticism of our efficiency is one thing, criticism of our responsibility quite another. I believe that we are . . . a legitimate object of public concern . . . I find it painful, however, when public debate

²⁸ Helms, "Global Intelligence and the Democratic Society," p. 25

²⁹ Quoted in Ronald Powers, "Richard Helms, Former CIA, Dies at Age 89," *Associated Press* report no. a0527, 23 October 2002.



Helms testifying before a congressional committee in the 1970s

²⁶ Frost, p. 18.
²⁷ Quoted in Osborne, p. C2.

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[By the early 1970s,] prominent voices were demanding of the CIA far more accountability than Helms was used to or thought appropriate.

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*lessens our usefulness to the nation by casting doubt on our integrity and objectivity. If we are not believed, we have no purpose. . .*³⁰

Helms declined a presidential request to submit his resignation after the 1972 elections, not wanting to set a precedent that he thought would politicize the position of DCI. After he was forced out in 1973—he believed that Nixon was mad at him for refusing to use the CIA in the Watergate cover up—Helms spent several years coping with controversies ensuing in part from some of his acts of omission and commission while at the Agency. He became a lightning rod for criticism of the CIA during its “time of troubles” in the mid-1970s. He was called back many times from his ambassadorial post in Tehran to testify before investigatory bodies about assassination plots, domestic operations, drug testing, the destruction of records, and other activities of dubious legality and ethicality known collectively as the “Family Jewels.” He responded to inquiries about them cautiously, sometimes testily, as he tried to walk the increasingly fuzzy line between discretion and disclosure.

Helms ran into legal troubles resulting from his judgment about when and when not to reveal secrets. Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee just after leaving the Agency, he denied that the CIA had tried to influence the outcome of the Chilean presidential election in 1970. Helms described his quandary this way: “If I was to live up to my oath and ful-

fill my statutory responsibility to protect intelligence sources and methods from unauthorized disclosure, I could not reveal covert operations to people unauthorized to learn about them.”³¹ He eventually pleaded no contest to charges of not testifying “fully, completely and accurately” to the committee. His statement to the federal judge who was about to sentence him, although addressed to the immediate situation, could also summarize nearly his whole experience as DCI: “I was simply trying to find my way through a difficult situation in which I found myself.”³²

Restoration

After resolving his legal affairs, Helms embarked on a second career as an international consultant on trade and other matters. He named his firm the Safeer Company (*safeer* means “ambassador” in Farsi) and once again became a fixture on the Washington scene. In the late 1970s, Helms was one of the CIA’s staunchest public defenders. He complained that Congress was naively weakening the Agency and warned that “This is a time when our intelligence can’t possibly be too good and when we can’t have enough of it.” He also criti-

cized the Carter Administration for emphasizing human rights instead of Cold War enemies—“We ought to keep quiet and go to work where it matters,” he said. In 1978, he lent his support to oft-maligned officers

A professional intelligence service is essential to our survival, [but too often [CIA officers] are reviled and cast as second-class citizens. If this is the way the public wants to deal with its intelligence professionals, then we ought to disband the Agency and go back to the way we were before World War II. Otherwise, it is up to the citizens of this country, the Congress and the President, to support these people

. . .³³

In the different atmospherics of the 1980s and 1990s, political leaders and intelligence professionals regarded Helms as an *éminence grise* and sought his counsel on a range of foreign policy issues. He received the National Security Medal from President Reagan in 1983 and considered the award “an exoneration.” Early in his administration, President Bill Clinton asked Helms how the US government could best protect the country against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. His advice was simple and direct. “Strengthen the CIA and the FBI and see to it that they stay on top of their jobs.”³⁴ In recognition of his decades of contributions to the craft of espionage, DCI George Tenet recently named

³⁰ Richard Helms, “Intelligence in American Society,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer 1967), p. 15.

³¹ Frost, p. 10.

³² Quoted in Christopher Marquis, “Richard Helms, Ex-CIA Chief, Dies at 89,” *New York Times*, 23 October 2002, p. B9.

³³ George Lardner, Jr., “Helms Warns of Excessive Curbs on CIA,” *The Washington Post*, 17 May 1978, p. A1; Hugh Sidney, “Time to Send a Public Message,” *Time*, 18 December 1978, p. 34; and Frost, p. 3.

³⁴ From “Remarks by Ambassador Richard Helms,” *What’s News*, No. 621, 2 April 1999.

an Agency training center and an instructional chair after him.³⁵

To the end, Richard Helms was “at the table.” He remained privately engaged in public affairs for so many years after leaving Langley that it is easy to forget how long ago he entered the secret world and how far he traveled within it. His forthcoming memoir, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the CIA*, will enable us to accompany him on that fascinating journey. When it is over, we will better understand the man who declared, at the depths of the Agency’s travail in the

³⁵ *What’s News*, Nos. 621 and 964, 2 April 1999 and 31 October 2001

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mid-1970s, “I was and remain proud of my work there . . . I believed in the importance to the nation of the function that the Agency served. I still do: without regrets, without qualms, without apology.”³⁶ If he could speak to us now, he would say the same—and probably add, “Let’s get on with it.”

³⁶ From Helms’s statement to the Rockefeller Commission, 16 January 1975.