

# Helms Displays His Old Skills As a Diplomat

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When Richard McGarrah Helms ran the Central Intelligence Agency during its most difficult days he was known as a quiet and aristocratic professional who usually managed to keep on the best of terms with both hawks and doves.

Helms returned yesterday to a Washington divided not by war but by Watergate and once again displayed his diplomatic skills.

For defenders of the embattled Nixon presidency, Helms offered an account that did no flagrant damage to the testimony of pro-administration witnesses. For

### Commentary

those critics who believe that the White House has misused the badge of national security to pursue its own political ends, Helms supplied a strange tale of persistent White House "feelers" that would have enmeshed the CIA in the Watergate coverup.

Helms' central account was of how he had resisted these "feelers" and fought to maintain the integrity of the agency he served from 1947 until President Nixon

nudged him into an ambassadorship this year.

Speaking in a cool, low-key manner that featured flashes of sardonic humor, Helms suddenly surprised senators who had been straining to hear his softspoken responses by shouting out:

"It doesn't seem to get across very well but the agency had nothing to do with the Watergate break-in. I hope all the newsmen in the room hear me clearly now."

Helms' own account allowed for no such unequivocal conclusion about CIA involvement in the Watergate coverup, though it did seem clear that such conduct was personally repugnant to Helms.

The former CIA director related how John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman had called him to the White House and "talked around him" to his deputy Vernon Walters in an apparent attempt to have L. Patrick Gray slow down the FBI investigation on spurious grounds that it would interfere with CIA operations.

Later, said Helms, John W. Dean III broached the subject of using CIA funds to provide bail for Watergate defendants and to pay their salaries while they were still in prison. Helms said he resisted, and the suggestion was finally dropped.

There was a strange sadness to Helms as he described these "feelers," almost as if he knew that the very presence of the top CIA officials in discussions about restraining the Watergate investigation had somehow compromised the agency he loved and his professional career.

At other times, Helms seemed annoyed at the slop-



By Douglas Chevalier—The Washington Post  
Richard M. Helms, former director of the CIA, tells Senate committee members of his dealings with White House.

piness of it all and discomfited at the insistence of Haldeman in not-so-subtly reminding Helms about the Bay of Pigs invasion during a post-Watergate White House meeting.

"I reacted to that very firmly," Helms recalled. "The Bay of Pigs is the rubric for a very unhappy event in the life of the CIA. It's been a dead cat that has been thrown at us over the years ever since."

The "dead cats" were matched by bad disguises.

Though always polite, Helms proved unable to conceal his professional contempt for E. Howard Hunt, the CIA graduate who proved less successful as a master spy than as a White House consultant who coaxed the CIA out of a wig, a voice changer, phony identity cards and a camera concealed in a tobacco pouch.

Hunt visited Dita Beard, the talkative former ITT lobbyist, while dressed in a red wig but Helms insisted that the CIA had given him a brunette wig.

"Some of the CIA technicians rather resented the fact that the red wig had been tied into the CIA be-

cause it was such a lousy fit," Helms recalled.

Helms said that Hunt had a "good reputation" in the CIA but nothing that was said by Helms yesterday did anything to enhance it.

"Mr. Hunt was a bit of a romantic, he used to write books in his spare time, and I think there was a tendency sometimes for him to get a little bit carried away with some of the things he was involved in . . ." Helms testified.

While Helms thought more highly of James McCord, the Watergate burglar who blew the whistle on the coverup, he labeled the break-in of Democratic headquarters engineered by McCord as "amateurish in the extreme."

"The breaking and entering and not getting caught is a very difficult activity," Helms advised. "For it to be done properly one has to have trained individuals who do nothing else and who are used to doing this frequently and are trained right up to the minute in how to do it," Helms said.

"Was McCord in this category?" asked Sen. Howard Baker.

"Obviously not," Helms replied.

Though Baker wondered aloud why Helms hadn't been more vigorous in examining the role of former CIA agents in the Watergate case, the senators generally treated Helms with both kindness and respect. The committee was even kinder to the day's other witness, Gen. Robert E. Cushman Jr., the Marine Corps commandant who had been deputy under Helms and security adviser to Mr. Nixon during the last four years of the Nixon vice presidency.

In his CIA days Cushman saw nothing improper in furnishing Hunt with the disguises and other equipment he requested. But he labeled Hunt "a pain in the neck" when these demands were extended to include a stenographer, a New York office and an answering service.

Cushman, who disclosed that he taped Hunt without telling him, essentially supported Helms' account with minor differences.

The minor discrepancies didn't seem important to Committee Chairman Sam Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), who earlier in the day dismissed an

important conflict in recollection between Helms and Walters by reading from his favorite crib sheet, the Holy Bible. Ervin observed that the four gospel accounts give different versions of the sign placed on Christ when he was crucified — and then read all of the versions for the edification of the television audience.

The difference in recollection concerns whether or not the President's name was invoked at a White House meeting with the CIA officials. Walters has said that it was, but Helms has no recollection of it.

There was, however, no doubt in Helms' mind that Mr. Nixon wanted him out of the CIA directorship when he called Helms up to Camp David last November and suggested that he become ambassador to Iran.

"When the President makes a suggestion, you said he resisted, and the suggestion you're being pushed, shoved or led, do you?" asked Sen. Herman Talmadge of Georgia.

Helms said nothing, but he nodded emphatically. It was a gesture that spoke louder than many of his words.