

The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA by Thomas Powers

(Knopf; \$12.95)

In his 26 years in the CIA, Richard M. Helms was a busy fellow. It was Helms who personally proposed MKULTRA, the CIA's notorious program of mind-control and drug testing, which led, among other things, to the death of Dr. Frank Olson, a civilian employee of the Army. When the CIA finally suspended the program 10 years later in 1963—not for moral considerations, but in fear that the secret experiments might become known—it was Helms who kept pushing for renewed testing of drugs on unsuspecting people. The agency had been administering LSD to American citizens who were lured out of bars by prostitutes in New York and San Francisco. Helms argued that the people drugged by the CIA must be "unwitting" or the results would be unreliable, creating only a "false sense of accomplishment."

Helms was, of course, deeply involved in the CIA's assassination plots. As the deputy director for Plans (now Operations), he was personally in charge of the effort in 1962 to hire the Mafia to poison Fidel Castro. A hazardous business: in 1976, the mobster in question, Johnny Rosselli, was found dead, stuffed inside a 55-gallon oil drum floating in the ocean near Miami. Helms approved the transfer of sniper rifles to the Dominicans plotting to kill Trujillo. He helped arrange for the CIA to open first class mail for 20 years in violation of the laws of the United States. He spied on American students for presidents Johnson and Nixon, delivering one report to Henry Kissinger with an explicit warning that it was "extremely sensitive," since the CIA had no legal authority to prepare it.

He presided over Operation CHAOS, the CIA's illegal program of domestic spying on the antiwar movement, which collected 300,000 names in its files in the CIA basement. He helped the Nixon White House smear Daniel Ellsberg by ordering the CIA's chief headshrinker to prepare a psychological profile on the man who leaked the Pentagon Papers. He authorized the agency to provide Howard Hunt with technical assistance, including his famous red wig, then ordered the CIA to cover up its help to Nixon's Plumbers when the government's prosecutors were investigating Watergate. Until the potato became too hot to handle, he complaisantly assisted Richard Nixon in covering up the Watergate burglary itself. He ordered the CIA's drug-testing files destroyed, and destroyed his own files during Watergate. He tried to block Salvador Allende's election as president of Chile, later followed Nixon's secret orders to try to overthrow him, and then lied about it to the United States Senate. For this he was convicted, fined \$2000, and sentenced to two years in jail. (The prison sentence was suspended.) And he agreed with the observation of his distinguished mouthpiece, Edward Bennett Williams, that he would bear the conviction as "a badge of honor."

A man who was able to accomplish this much can't be all bad, and Thomas Powers had doggedly set out to find his good side. It is an effort that evokes the little girl who, given a pile of manure for Christmas, cheerfully digs in, exclaiming, "There must be a pony in here somewhere."

Alas, it is a task foredoomed to failure, and Powers, a reporter of not inconsiderable talents, soon finds himself mired down and hip-deep, trying valiantly to interpret the distorted images in the fun house mirrors of the CIA. Along the way, he discovers some previously hidden passageways, some new anecdotes, and some fresh perspectives on old tales. But the pony eludes him. It was never there.

It was not a bad idea to begin with, to tell the story of the CIA since World War II by tracing the career of the senior clandestine official with the longest record for survival, Richard Helms. But somewhere along the line, Powers became enamored of his subject, and the result is a book that is defensive, semi-adulatory (as its title suggests), and often querulous in tone.

It is easy to see how this occurred. Richard Helms is a man of marked personal charm. It was not by acting the curmudgeon that he cultivated a wide circle of influential friends within the press corps in Washington, in the foreign policy establishment, and among the most powerful grandees on Capitol Hill. These friends put a great deal of pressure on Griffin Bell to keep their friend Dick out of the slammer, where Bell had no stomach for sending him in the first place.

In researching this book, Powers talked at length with Helms, who devoted "four long mornings" to interviews. And he talked to everybody else, or almost everybody, including a heavy sprinkling of the patrician Old Boys who were rewarded for their loyal years of clandestine service by being forced to walk the plank by Admiral Turner, who had, unfortunately, gone to Annapolis instead of Groton. He talked to Johnny Bross, and Richard Bissell, and Frank Lindsay, and Tom Parrott, and Jack Maury, and a lot of other retired "black" operators. And to his credit, he read everything, steeping himself in the growing literature about intelligence and the CIA, familiarizing himself with the minutiae of past intelligence triumphs, failures, rivalries, internal wars, and ambiguities.

CONTINUED

As a result, the book takes on an unintended value, not as an exculpation of Richard Helms, or as a history of the CIA, but for the detail, the fine brushstrokes it adds to what is already known. For example, we learn a bit more about the agency's assassination plots, about Richard Nixon's relationship to the CIA, about the scandalous willingness of the agency—and Helms—to cook its Vietnam estimates to please the Johnson White House. And some of Mr. Powers's character sketches—particularly his portrait of James Angleton—are very good indeed.

On the other hand, the author goes to great lengths to persuade us that Helms, the CIA's quintessential covert operator, at heart did not approve of covert operations. Which is rather like saying that the Beatles never really liked rock and roll and were secretly off in a corner listening to Buxtehude when their concert dates permitted.

Another premise of *The Man Who Kept the Secrets* is that Helms was something of an innocent, who often did not know what was going on. He even quotes Helms, at the time the number two man in the agency's dirty tricks division, as saying in German, "Aber keiner sagt mir 'was!—No one tells me anything!"

Powers, who has a Pulitzer Prize to his credit (for his UPI reporting on Diana Oughton, the Weatherperson terrorist), is too good a reporter to believe such a premise, which is soon laid threadbare by his own evidence. Indeed, 31 pages later, Powers tells us: "As Bissell's chief of operations Helms may have complained that no one ever told him anything, but in truth there cannot have been much that slipped entirely by him."

Powers argued that the really big secret that Helms kept was that President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy in fact authorized the CIA to kill Castro. While this may or may not be true, Powers offers no new evidence to support the indictment. He suggests that Helms and the CIA did not implicate the Kennedys in their testimony to the Church committee out of tradition and loyalty to the presidency. And because, he concedes, there was no proof.

Another major contention of the book is that Nixon fired Helms and shipped him off to Iran as ambassador because Helms had refused to cover up Watergate. While it is possible that Nixon may have felt that way, the facts are that Helms, at Nixon's request, did attempt to cover up Watergate. To perpetuate the myth that Helms did not, which the Powers book does, is a disservice to history. The facts are indisputable: Nixon, through H. R. Haldeman, asked Helms and his deputy, Vernon Walters, to tell the FBI to confine their investigation to the burglars already nabbed at the Watergate. Helms did exactly that for two crucial weeks. Not until the unfortunate Pat Gray, the acting FBI director, demanded that the CIA put its cover-up request in writing did Helms back off. And almost a full year went by before the CIA told the Justice Department about Nixon's attempt to stop the FBI investigation.

One of the difficulties faced by Powers, or anybody else writing about a secret agency, is that in some areas the truth remains mercurial. For example, he offers us five versions of how the CIA obtained Khrushchev's famous 1956 secret speech denouncing Stalin. Which is true? Who is to say? Similarly, he reports that the CIA "managed to persuade *Time's* bureau chief in Washington to abandon plans for a cover story" on *The Invisible Government*, of which I was the co-author. I called John Steele, *Time's* bureau chief in 1964 when the book was published, and asked him whether this was true. He said no one at CIA had asked him not to do a cover story on the book, and that none had been planned. Who to believe?

To defuse any possible criticism about his personal background, Powers tells us forthrightly in a chapter note that he used to work for the *Rome Daily American*, which turned out to be a CIA front, and that his father, Joshua B. Powers, ran something called Editors Press Service, which the *New York Times* has identified as a CIA propaganda service in Latin America, which the senior Mr. Powers denies.

There are a number of errors in the book: for example, the author misspells

the names of John McMahon, the CIA's deputy director for Operations; Joseph Burkholder Smith, the author of a book on the CIA; Admiral Noel Gayler, former head of the National Security Agency; Manuel Ogarrio, the Mexican lawyer who laundered the Watergate money; Robert Keuch, a deputy assistant attorney general; and the late Laurence Stern of the *Washington Post*.

But these are minor lapses alongside the central problem. At bottom, what Powers seems to be telling us is that Richard Helms is a patriot who lied for his country, lied because he was expected to by the establishment he served so well, but which abandoned him when he was caught and permitted him to be destroyed. There may be a case to be made here, but it is a weak one at best.

I prefer to remember the words of Judge Barrington Parker, whom Powers quotes at the sentencing of Richard Helms:

If public officials embark deliberately to disobey and ignore the laws of our land because of some misguided and ill-conceived notion and belief that there are earlier commitments and considerations which they must observe, the future of our country is in jeopardy. There are those employed in the intelligence security community of this country . . . who feel that they have a license to operate freely outside the dictates of law. . . . Public officials at every level, whatever their position, like any other person, must respect and honor the Constitution and the laws of the United States.

David Wise

David Wise is a political writer based in Washington. He is co-author of *The Invisible Government* (Random House), the first critical study of the CIA.