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Congress

The Other Shoe Drops

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 21 — When you push Senator Jesse Helms, he pushes back.

The anti-tobacco lobby has discovered this the hard way. So, too, has the White House when it tries to give a job to someone the Senator considers too liberal.

Now the North Carolina Republican is taking on a fellow Senator, and the intelligence establishment is worried that the battle could cost intelligence agencies a budget increase for next year.

Amendments to Intelligence Bill

The dispute began a little more than a month ago, when the chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee asked the Justice Department to investigate whether Senator Helms or his staff had passed sensitive American intelligence information to Chile.

Since then Senator Helms has not been idle. He fired off angry letters to various Federal agencies and to the committee, demanding details on how the investigation was instigated. Furthermore, he told Senate leaders that he plans to try to amend the bill that sets next year's spending levels and spell out policy initiatives for the intelligence agencies.

Congressional and Administration officials contend that Mr. Helms's maneuvering is aimed at Senator Dave Durenberger, who as the chairman of the Intelligence Committee is responsible for steering the intelligence bill through the Senate.

Mr. Helms says his amendments are not intended as retaliation, explaining, "I have felt for a long time that we ought to take a look at what the intelligence agencies are doing."

But if he gets acceptable answers to his letters to the committee and elsewhere, he says, he may withdraw some of his more than a dozen detailed amendments. "It depends on what's done between now and the time the legislation is pending in the Senate," he says.

Congressional sources say the intelligence bill, whose exact figures are classified, calls for some substantial budget increases. If Mr. Helms carries out his threatened-floor fight,

the Intelligence Committee may be forced to abandon the bill, leaving the agencies' budgets in 1987 at this year's levels.

The intelligence authorization, one of the more delicate pieces of legislation handled by Congress, is generally passed on voice votes without debate, its provisions worked out in secret committee hearings.

Senator Helms makes it clear that in this particular case he has no quarrel with the Central Intelligence Agency. Nonetheless, one Administration official worries that the agency might be harmed by the clash between Senators Helms and Durenberger. "They're the meat in that unappetizing sandwich," the official says.

One Helms amendment would bar the C.I.A. from running any paramilitary program that costs more than \$20 million a year. This would end the C.I.A.'s role in the aid to Nicaraguan or Afghan resistance fighters. Another amendment calls for a team of outside experts to review a pointed list of the agency's intelligence assessments on the Soviet Union.

It Started at a Party

All this activity had its beginnings at a Washington cocktail party at which, according to Administration officials, Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, told Senator Durenberger of allegations that Senator Helms or his staff had compromised an intelligence operation in Chile.

The evidence was circumstantial: Just 24 hours after a Helms staff member received a briefing from the C.I.A. that quoted from an internal Chilean military document, a Chilean official was complaining to the State Department that American intelligence had stolen secrets from his country, Congressional sources say.

Administration officials say the C.I.A., although quite angered, decided not to demand an investigation. The Senator is well-known for his ability to reward friends and punish enemies.

But the State Department probably felt no such constraints: The department and Mr. Helms have been openly feuding for years over ambassadorial appointments and policy.



The New York Times

Senator Jesse Helms

Mr. Abrams has openly assailed Senator Helms over his criticism of the American Ambassador to Chile.

After the Intelligence Committee staff reviewed the allegations, Senator Durenberger and Patrick Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is vice chairman of the committee, asked the Justice Department for an investigation. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is still looking into the matter.

"These charges will be proved false," says Mr. Helms. "In the meantime, my name has been smeared across the country. Anybody, a Senator or not, is entitled to due process." He has sent a letter asking if the committee violated its rules by authorizing an investigation without the support of at least five members.

A committee spokesman says the rules did not apply to the Helms investigation, which was being conducted by the F.B.I., not the committee. Members of the committee have been vociferous in criticizing the Reagan Administration for disclosures of classified information, and committee aides said it would be hypocritical to ignore a possible security breach by a member of Congress.

Mr. Helms has also asked the Justice Department to investigate whether he or his staff were illegally wiretapped by American intelligence agencies.

"I simply want the truth to be told," he says. "I have told Senator Durenberger that I expect him to correct the situation at the appropriate time and I've said the same thing about the State Department."