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CIA:

## The Constant Witness

It is hard to break free from the world of espionage, and no one knows that better these days than Richard McGarrath Helms. Appointed U.S. ambassador to Iran nearly two years ago, former CIA director Helms has been called home at least half a dozen times to testify about the agency's involvement in Watergate, domestic intelligence operations and the overthrow of Chile's Marxist President Salvador Allende Gossens. The simple inconvenience of this global shuttling now seems the least of Helms' problems. Last week, sources in the Department of Justice confirmed that it is picking through Helms's tangled testimony of recent years to see if the one-time master spy had committed perjury in the course of protecting the CIA—or himself.

Perjury is a hard crime to prove. Jus-

meanings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1973. At that point, Helms seemed to flatly deny that the CIA ever passed money to opponents of Allende. But last month he acknowledged that funds—about \$11 million, according to the CIA—did go to "civic action groups . . . newspapers, radios and so forth, in order to keep alive the [deleted] and the sort of nationalist side of the . . . social spectrum."

That Helms did not understand these forces to be the core of opposition to Allende was hard to believe, and Helms himself seemed to realize the weakness of his position. "I should have probably asked either to go off the record or to have asked to discuss this matter in some other forum," he told the Senate committee last January. "Because you will recall at that time Allende's government was in power and we did not need any more diplomatic incidents."

Helms blamed a faulty memory for his strikingly incomplete answers on

illustrated courses and a groups and kept tabs on—the very least—their foreign associations. But as Helms explained it in January, he had been so concerned about denying any agency connection with the Army intelligence operations mentioned by Case that "the first part of the question had simply gone out of my mind."

**Meeting:** From the available evidence, Watergate seems to be the subject on which Helms may prove most vulnerable. There his testimony was contradicted not only by his own subsequent clarifications, but by other witnesses and documentary evidence. Before the Senate Armed Services Committee in May 1973, for example, Helms said that Watergate had not been mentioned in the crucial June 23, 1972, meeting he had with Nixon aides John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman and CIA deputy director Vernon Walters. In fact, according to Walters's testimony and a supporting memo, Watergate was the main topic and



Photos by Ed Sreeky

Helms testifying before the Watergate committee in 1973: Artful dodger, forgetful 'boob'?

ice officials emphasized privately that their investigation of Helms has not reached the "accusatory" stage, meaning that they have yet to find sufficient evidence to seek an indictment. Moreover, most of the testimony involved—in at least a dozen appearances before various Congressional committees and Washington grand juries—remains highly confidential. Still, the portions that have become public often seem to undercut the candid image that Helms has always sought to maintain. Full of gaps and contradictions, they show the veteran CIA man both as an artful dodger and, astonishingly, a forgetful naïf—in his own words, "a boob."

The Helms testimony on CIA activities in Chile was confused by the fact that his Congressional inquisitors were often unclear about what period they were discussing: 1964 or 1970 or 1973, when Allende finally fell. But Helms did not help matters by selectively interpreting questions at his own

questions about domestic intelligence—specifically the short-lived "Huston plan" for surveillance of antiwar dissidents. At the 1973 Senate hearings, New Jersey Sen. Clifford Case began the following exchange:

**CASE:** "It has been called to my attention that in 1969 or 1970 the White House asked that all intelligence agencies join in an effort to learn as much as they could about the antiwar movement and [that] U.S. Army intelligence became involved and kept files on U.S. citizens. Do you know anything about any activity on the part of CIA in that connection? Was it asked to be involved?"

**HELMS:** "I don't recall whether we were asked but we were not involved because it seemed to me that was a clear violation of what our charter was."

Subsequently, it was confirmed by current CIA director William Colby, among others, that the CIA did take part in

it was agreed that Walters would try to block further FBI inquiries. "I didn't know what they were after," Helms told a House subcommittee later. "I realize in hindsight it makes me look like a boob."

Just how much cooperation Helms gave the Nixon White House on this and other matters still is not clear. After the 1972 election, Nixon planned to fire the CIA boss outright. But when the Watergate investigations began in earnest, the President decided to keep him on the team in an ambassador's post. Even now, his friends maintain, Helms is determined to say as little as possible for as long as possible. But he has hinted that unsettling disclosures will follow if the pressure on him gets too heavy. "If I ever do decide to talk," he told a friend in Washington, "there are going to be some very embarrassed people in this town, you can bet on that."

—DAVID M. ALPERN with EVERT CLARK and  
Washington

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