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BOOKS

America in the spy business

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One breezy day in 1967, while I waited with the usual crowd of tourists to take the elevator to the top of the Washington Monument, three U.S. Army soldiers wearing the distinct green beret of the Special Forces walked jauntily by, eliciting stares and a few murmurs. Said one woman to her husband, "They must be French or something." Said he, "No, I think they're British."

Americans, I think, have always been uncomfortable with the notion that the United States employed elite commando units, or engaged in the spooky kind of dirty work we attributed disdainfully to, say, Europeans, "the Old World." Somehow, it was undemocratic. Only in America would a Secretary of State (Stimson) shut down an intelligence operation with the sniff, "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail." Was he kidding?

"If we'd wanted to be in the Boy Scouts," former CIA Director Richard Helms liked to say, "we'd have joined the Boy Scouts." And with that attribution, Thomas Powers has set the tone in *The Man Who Kept the Secrets. Richard Helms and the CIA* for his far-reaching account of the growth of America's secret intelligence establishment.

It is far-reaching because Powers's book spans the days of the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS) through the indictment of Richard Helms in 1977 for lying to a Senate committee about CIA activities in Chile.

Part of Helms's job in his thirty years with the CIA required keeping only a small elite coterie of Washington insiders informed of what the CIA was doing. A little war in Laos? Check it with Symington. Assassinate Castro? The President and his brother were enough. *And nothing on paper.* Here is Powers's summation of Helms's thinking on that:

"Could anyone doubt the response of the Kennedy people, and very likely the Senate Intelligence Committee itself, if some CIA official had risked the complete absence of a single piece of paper to back him up and had said: Well, who do you think ordered Castro's assassination, the office boy? *It was John F. Kennedy and his brother Bobby.* If Helms had said that... he not only would have been the target of some extremely caustic comment, but from that day forward he would have lunched alone."

Heavens, lunch alone in Washington? The ultimate penalty, one would imagine. Certainly his dining partners would have been different, and William E. Colby, who was Helms's protege, would not have been among them. It was Colby who broke the rules and delivered "the family jewels" to the Rockefeller Commission in 1975, which caved in the roof. The slime began to ooze out from under the doors of CIA headquarters then, and no longer do Americans think their intelligence agency is a squad of Boy Scouts. Richard Helms was caught in the switch. Suddenly, the old rules of keeping the game limited to a few players no longer applied. Congress, the press, the Justice Department (at least some people in the Justice Department) really wanted the truth. And Helms had lied.

In 1973, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Helms gave these answers to Senator Stuart Symington:

Q. Did you try in the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow the government of Chile?

A. No, sir.

Q. Did you have any money passed to the opponents of Allende?

A. No, sir.

Q. So the stories you were involved in that war are wrong?

A. Yes, sir.

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE
SECRETS.RICHARD HELMS AND THE
CIA

by Thomas Powers

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Helms thought it would be criminal to let that out. "In particular, the Director of Central Intelligence had a responsibility not to answer every idle question put to him." Helms of course would have preferred to keep other matters in the box, all of which he was responsible for, directly participated in, or had intimate knowledge of: the assassination plots concocted with gangsters, the drug testing on unwitting Americans, the domestic letter-opening and wiretapping.

Powers takes us inside all these matters and gives us the insights of the men who made the decisions. (Women, while playing important roles as agents and analysts, have not moved into senior positions in the spookery.) In doing this, a picture forms of the career CIA operative as the compleat bureaucrat, and especially of Richard Helms. This is most useful, for where we once embraced what Powers calls "a child's history" of the CIA, imagining intelligence types to be brilliant, solitary, back-alley operators, that portrait has been replaced by the CIA agent as a heavy-handed, cruel blunderer. Neither is accurate in its generalization.

Both Helms and Colby plead for us to remember that they are "honorable men." Powers tells us that Helms "concentrated on the basic secret intelligence work which he was to defend throughout the rest of his career against the charms of covert political intervention, paramilitary activities, and other direct routes to secret ends."

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tainly a laudable goal in a dangerous world. But what are we forced to conclude about a CIA Director who went along with the Pentagon's phony estimates of enemy strength in Vietnam (deflating the totals by half to show that we were winning)? Or the fiasco of the Son Tay rescue? One day a CIA officer decided to quit over phony statistic building and asked to see Helms. "Helms calmly asked if any of that really mattered," Powers writes. The officer began to get angry and brought up Son Tay. "People's lives were at stake," he cried. "Helms," Powers goes on, "sat poker-faced throughout, and when Riccio was done, began talking about the generation gap."

Powers makes clear that the CIA for too long acted as the President's private army, and not, as Senator Frank Church put it, "a rogue elephant." And for too long, little light got in through the cracks. In the case of the Castro assassination plots, a handful of people made the decision, and the legacy of that ill-considered venture remains with us.

Powers, a fine reporter who has written a remarkable book, unfortunately leads us only to the water's edge. He concludes that the CIA is "one of the fatal facts of modern life, like taxes, prisons, and armies," and reaches for the old bromides about national security to justify blind obedience to the President who "needed more choices than the dispatch of a white paper or the Marines." Surely these are not the only tactics available to the President, and the Carter Administration's record has shown that a forced reliance on diplomacy, when the fast gun of covert action is no longer so easily available, has its benefits.

Still, even if unintendedly, Powers has debunked the myth that total secrecy is productive in foreign policy. *The Man Who Kept the Secrets* is a lively, informative, and important contribution to the literature. The book will be an invaluable weapon to stem the chorus of demands for a new free hand for the covert action boys, after the smoke clears in Iran.

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