The White House, Richard Helms, and Watergate: A Clash between Executive Power and Organizational Responsibility

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For someone like Helms, who believed in his obligation as DCI to support the office of the president, refusing White House requests could not have been easy. But he was not prepared to cross a line that would have had a long-term effect on CIA and future DCIs. This would be part of Helms's legacy as the first careerist to head the agency.

Between July 1971 and July 1972, senior officials of the Nixon administration sought CIA assistance to help it mitigate the damage of the leak of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 and the arrest of five men who had broken into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate Hotel on June 17, 1972. These requests were seemingly minor intrusions into the many strategic challenges Richard Helms faced as director of central intelligence (DCI) under President Richard Nixon.[1] Yet the damage to CIA's reputation and Helms's place in history was potentially far-reaching. As the seemingly isolated requests from White House officials trickled in, Helms was the only one in a position to eventually ascertain the pattern of behavior of the Nixon administration leading up to the Watergate cover-up.

Although not a seasoned political operative, Helms was a crafty Washington insider who was not naïve to the use—and abuse—of power in government. Protecting the agency and his role as DCI meant keeping the agency out of partisan politics. By the time that H.R. Haldeman tried to use the Bay of Pigs failure as leverage to coerce Helms to stop an FBI investigation, the administration's motives were evident.

Helms ultimately halted CIA assistance for the White House's illegal plans. For someone like Helms, who believed in his obligation as DCI to support the office of the president, refusing White House requests could not have been easy. But he was not prepared to cross a line that would have had a long-term effect on the CIA and future DCIs. This would be part of Helms's legacy as the first careerist to head the agency.

Doing Some Things for the President

On July 7, 1971, John Ehrlichman, assistant to President Richard Nixon for domestic affairs, telephoned CIA Deputy Director Robert Cushman requesting CIA's assistance. Ehrlichman told Cushman that former CIA employee E. Howard Hunt had been hired by the White House as a special consultant working on security problems. Ehrlichman said that Hunt would be contacting Cushman and asked the deputy director to lend Hunt a hand. Ehrlichman emphasized that Hunt was "doing some things for the president." Cushman, an active-duty Marine general who had served as then-Vice President Nixon's national security advisor, agreed to meet with Hunt.[2]

The next day at the director's morning meeting, Cushman reported that Hunt might require some assistance from the agency.[3] Helms acknowledged Cushman's update

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but, at that time, gave it no further attention.

This seemingly innocuous request would be the first in a series of engagements between the White House and CIA leadership in which the president's senior officials would attempt to drag CIA into their illegal schemes, including the break-in of the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate Hotel on June 17, 1972, and the subsequent cover-up.

Fifty years on, it is instructive to see how DCI Helms ended up in the middle of a clash between executive power and organizational responsibility and the actions he took. This article explores the challenges the DCI faced and the lessons learned when Nixon and his senior staff abused their power in relation to the CIA.

The publication by the *New York Times* in June 1971 of part of what became known as the Pentagon Papers—a classified Department of Defense history[4] of US political and military involvement in Vietnam in 1945–67, leaked by RAND Corporation researcher Daniel Ellsberg— and Nixon's use of former CIA employees as political operatives set the stage for a series of extraordinary events that would shake the foundation of the agency's relationship with the White House. No previous DCI had experienced the type of pressures that Helms would confront. These stemmed not only from Nixon's distrust of the CIA but also from his closest aides' unprecedented requests for CIA assistance. Helms was forced to weigh his responsibility—and professional desire— to serve and support the administration against his duty to protect the CIA.

From July 1971 to July 1972, Helms and his deputies would be put to the test by White House requests to:

- furnish technical support for White House operative E. Howard Hunt;
- prepare a psychological profile of Daniel Ellsberg;
- turn over sensitive files related to the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion (1961) and the ouster and assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem (1963) as fodder to attack the Democrats;
- order the acting FBI director to stop the bureau's Watergate-related investigation in Mexico; and
- make available unvouchered CIA funds to the Watergate burglars.

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Helms and Nixon

To understand the interaction between White House officials and senior CIA leaders, we can look to Helms's testimony before congressional committees; his oral history interviews and published memoirs; contemporary memorandums drafted by the participants; the testimony and subsequent writings of CIA and White House officials; and the Nixon White House tapes.

The context for Helms's dealing with the White House on these matters was set in the operating procedures that President Nixon and his national security team established for engaging CIA. Nixon did not hide his disdain for CIA, believing that CIA hurt his campaign in the 1960 presidential election by sharing intelligence on the Soviet Union's missile capabilities with his opponent Sen. John F. Kennedy, who used the purported missile gap to criticize then-Vice President Nixon during the campaign.

Upon taking office, Nixon surprisingly chose to keep Helms in place as DCI, even though he was not comfortable dealing with Helms. He regarded Helms as a favorite of a liberal Georgetown set, a group the president despised.[5]

Helms's entry point into the White House on intelligence and national security matters was National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. The *President's Daily Brief*, CIA's intelligence summary prepared specifically for the president, was first delivered to Kissinger's office, from which he would then make the material available to the president. Feedback and requests for information to CIA would be handled by Kissinger, who

dealt directly with Helms.[6] Helms recalled that only rarely did he deal with anyone other than Kissinger:

> *The problem was, if there was a problem, that he* [Nixon] *was a man who operated through his staff…. So Nixon himself would issue orders and you would get instructions that the president wants this done and that done and the other things. But he very seldom personally got on the phone or got one-on-one with another individual.*[7]

Slippery Slope

Ehrlichman's request for CIA support initially was specific and limited. In early July 1971, Charles Colson, special counsel to the president, hired CIA veteran Hunt to work on a strategy to investigate Daniel Ellsberg and to research information on the John F. Kennedy administration and Sen. Edward (Ted) Kennedy.[8] Hunt mentioned that a former boss at the public relations firm Robert Mullen Company (which had close ties to CIA) had a former employee with information on the fatal 1969 accident involving Ted Kennedy on Chappaquiddick Island, Massachusetts, that might be of interest to the White House.[9]

Colson asked Hunt to meet with the Mullen employee. Colson was intent on hiding Hunt's connection with the White House, and Hunt thought a disguise and false documents would be necessary. Colson suggested that he get it from his CIA colleagues. Hunt told Colson, "It has been my experience that a call from the White House always produced whatever the White House wanted."[10]

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On Colson's behalf, Ehrlichman agreed to contact CIA. He called Deputy Director Cushman rather than Helms. Cushman believed Ehrlichman was speaking with the authority of the president and agreed to meet with Hunt.[11] Cushman had earlier served as Vice President Nixon's national security advisor (1957–61). After becoming president, Nixon selected General Cushman to serve as deputy director of CIA.

According to Ehrlichman, Nixon appointed Cushman to the job in order to keep track of Helms. Ehrlichman said, "Cushman was, we then thought, Nixon's man over there at the agency."[12] Helms did not know why the call did not come to him. Aware of Cushman's previous relationship with Nixon, Helms thought that because Cushman was a Nixon appointee and a military officer, he might be more likely to respond to orders from the White House.[13]

On July 22, Hunt met with Cushman at CIA. Hunt's requirements were simple. He needed a physical disguise and some identification cards for what he described as a "one-time operation."[14] At no time did Hunt reveal specifically why he needed this equipment, and Cushman did not ask. Cushman directed agency personnel to provide Hunt with the material.

In the following weeks, while working directly with CIA's Technical Services Division, Hunt requested additional equipment and documents including more disguise and alias material, special recording equipment, and a concealed camera and film. The technical staff would also help Hunt by developing the film.

Hunt's added requests for the temporary services of a CIA secretary based in Paris and for a backstopped New York telephone answering service had raised red flags among the CIA team supporting Hunt.[15] They did not know specifically why Hunt's requirements had expanded. When these new demands were brought to Cushman's attention, he decided to put an end to CIA's support to Hunt.[16]

CIA's technical staff and the deputy director were unaware that Hunt's role in the Nixon White House had broadened to include working with a unit nominally under John Ehrlichman called the Special Investigations Unit, which included former FBI agent G. Gordon Liddy. This group, which would become known as the Plumbers, was set up to address leaks and to investigate Daniel Ellsberg and portray him as a traitor.[17] The Plumbers surveilled the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist in California and subsequently broke into the psychiatrist's office in search for embarrassing material on Ellsberg.

Pain in the Neck

Cushman followed up on his decision to end CIA support by calling Ehrlichman. On the routing sheet of

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his August 27, 1971, memo, Cushman wrote for the attention of Helms: "I called John Ehrlichman Friday and explained why we could not meet these requests. I indicated Hunt was becoming a pain in the neck. John said he would restrain Hunt." Helms initialed the routing sheet and wrote the word "Good."[18]

Cushman and Helms differ in their recollections of when and how much Cushman told Helms of the Hunt requests. According to Cushman, after giving instructions to the technical staff to provide Hunt with the requested material, "I reported this a few days later to the Director of Central Intelligence, Mr. Richard Helms, and he assented to what I had done."[19] And later when he determined that Hunt was going beyond what the agency should be furnishing him, Cushman said: "I so reported it to his superior in the White House and to Mr. Helms. This stopped all dealings with Mr. Hunt."[20]

Helms, on the other hand, did not recall when he was first informed of the request to have CIA provide support to Hunt. His initial view was that it was a routine request from the White House for standard pieces of equipment.[21] Helms, in retrospect, did not question the fact that Cushman handled the request from the White House himself. "The decision to supply the equipment might be interpreted as falling within the deputy director of central intelligence's area of responsibility, but it was a close call."[22] Helms, however, did wonder why Cushman did not ask what the White House staff planned to do with the material. [23]

By the time Hunt's requests became excessive, Cushman asserted that he took the initiative to let Ehrlichman know that CIA would no longer be supporting Hunt. Helms remembered it differently: "General Cushman and I had a talk, and I asked him to please call Ehrlichman and tell him that Hunt could not have this secretary, and I thought the support to him should be stopped."[24]

Helms and Cushman maintained that they had no idea that Hunt would ultimately use some of the CIA-provided equipment for any type of burglaries. Helms asserted, "I certainly was totally unaware of any illegal activity, any improper activity, or anything that would have raised a question about the type of thing that Mr. Hunt was involved in."[25] Helms did not view it as the type of matter that needed to be addressed with either the president or Ehrlichman. However, he later admitted, "I can only say that if we had the benefit of hindsight, maybe we should have asked a lot more questions."[26]

Helms said he first became aware of the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office when he read it in the newspaper in May 1973.[27] The expanded nature of Hunt's requests for CIA support clearly indicated that he was involved in more than a one-time activity as he initially claimed. Yet no evidence shows that Helms was aware of the purpose of Hunt's work and the activities of the Plumbers. The Rockefeller Commission, established by President Ford in 1975 to investigate CIA's domestic operations, concluded, "Nor has the investigation disclosed facts indicating that the CIA knew or had reason to believe that the assistance it provided to Hunt and Liddy would be used in connection with the planning of an illegal entry."[28]

Profiling Ellsberg

CIA was also approached separately to support another Ellsberg-related White House idea. In mid-July, David Young, a former assistant to Henry Kissinger on the National Security Council who had been reassigned to support John Ehrlichman in reviewing classification procedures and preventing unauthorized disclosures, phoned CIA Director of Security Howard Osborn asking CIA to prepare a psychological profile of Daniel Ellsberg. Helms had earlier designated Osborn as his point of contact for Young on matters related to classification procedures.[29] In addition to these duties, Young was part of the White House effort to deal with the fallout from the Pentagon Papers.

Concerned that Ellsberg was being viewed by some in the country as a hero, the White House wanted to destroy his public image and credibility and portray him as a traitor. During his time on Kissinger's staff, Young had become familiar with the psychological profiles CIA had done on foreign leaders. He believed such a profile might be of value in painting the type of damaging picture of Ellsberg that he and the Plumbers had in mind.

Osborn told Young that he would not proceed with such a request without the approval of the DCI. Osborn went to Helms with the request. Helms remembered his immediate response: "I said, 'Why should we do a personality assessment

on Dr. Ellsberg?'"[30] Subsequently, Helms spoke to Young directly about the request, expressing his reluctance to do the profile.[31] According to Helms, Young emphasized that the White House wanted this done and the CIA was the only place with the capability to do it. Helms noted, "They very much wanted the agency to do it, that it had the highest White House level support, and so forth."[32] Young told Helms that he needed the profile for a White House study about the whole Pentagon Papers business.[33]

Young reminded Helms of his responsibility as DCI to protect sources and methods and national security secrets and that this request was consistent with those obligations.[34] Helms later explained the dilemma he faced while under White House pressure: "I was reluctant to have such a psychological profile done, but on the other hand it did not seem to me to be excessively out of line, particularly if it was not used in any nefarious scheme or devious ways."[35]

Helms instructed Osborn to proceed with preparation of the profile. CIA's Office of Medical Services (OMS) psychologists initially objected because the subject was a US citizen. They agreed to prepare the profile, given the DCI's direction. By August 10, the OMS team sent their first attempt of the Ellsberg profile to Helms, who in turn sent it to Young. Young and others working on the Ellsberg matter were not satisfied.

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"How Does One Know?"

The OMS team produced a second version by November 9. Helms reviewed the draft and forwarded it to Young with a cautionary note: "I have seen the two papers which Dr. Malloy [chief of CIA Office of Medical Services] prepared for you. We are, of course, glad to be of assistance. I do wish to underline the point that our involvement in this matter should not be revealed in any context, formal or informal. I am sure that you appreciate our concern."[36] Despite the additional material and the OMS revisions, Young also found the second profile lacked the type of information that would be useful in their attempt to smear Ellsberg.

Helms's note accompanying the profile indicated his concern about what he had agreed to do. Expecting the matter to be kept secret, he did not question his decision at the time. As he later reflected, "I didn't think it was any mistake until the time that it was blown up into a big balloon . . . so that in retrospect it would have been better, I suppose, to have had the fight at the time, but how does one know? You just use the best judgment you can."[37] He justified his action further, saying, "This was not one of those events that you would talk to the president about because it wasn't any big deal."[38]

Helms later acknowledged that agreeing to prepare the profiles was a bad judgment call on his part; CIA had overstepped its charter. As he admitted, "In retrospect, it was mistaken of me to have permitted this psychological profile to be written. I should have said, 'No, we will not do this, since the man involved is an American citizen.'"[39]

The fact that Howard Hunt was present at some of Young's meetings with the CIA psychologist also complicated matters. Helms claimed he was not aware of Hunt's involvement in this White House request. He testified, "In May 1973, I was informed at the agency that during this period, this psychologist who had been consulting with David Young at the White House, that Howard Hunt had been present on one occasion.… They certainly did not inform me, so I was totally unaware of his identification with this exercise in any form whatever."[40]

Those in CIA involved in the preparation and review of the Ellsberg profiles were unaware that another part of the agency was also supporting Hunt. Helms did not consult with Cushman on the profile request. In his testimony to the House Select Committee on Intelligence (known as the Nedzi Committee) investigating CIA activities related to Watergate and Ellsberg, Helms explained this decision:

> *I handled hundreds of things every week that I didn't inform General Cushman about, not because there was any reason not to inform him. It was simply there were so many going on I never got around to it. That was the way I operated, for better or for worse.*[41]

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These disconnects inside CIA contributed to a muddled picture of the White House's Ellsberg-related activities. There is no evidence the White House was concerned about the propriety of using CIA to deal with Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers. Nixon and his team saw themselves as protecting national security secrets and striking back at their political opponents.

Request for CIA Files

Outraged over the Pentagon Papers leaks, Nixon contemplated releasing additional documents from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations for political gain in his battle with his Democratic opposition. The Nixon White House recordings reveal that during their meeting on July 2, 1971, Nixon told Haldeman, "I'm not so interested in Ellsberg, but we have got to go after everybody who's a member of this conspiracy. There is a conspiracy and I've got to go after it."[42]

One of Nixon's tactics was to declassify documents that would embarrass opponents. The White House tapes captured Nixon arguing: "Well, we just can't let them [the Democrats] get away with this. That's the point.… [It's] their complicity and the Pentagon Papers are about their administrations. That is why it's to our interest to put the war in their administration."[43] In this regard, the CIA would be helpful; Ehrlichman told Nixon, "I've got to talk to Helms about getting some documents which the CIA has on the Bay of Pigs and things like that which they would rather not leak out. It's a challenge." Nixon agreed, "It's going to be hard."[44]

Following up on Nixon's plan to obtain and release documents from the Kennedy–Johnson era, Ehrlichman called on Helms on September 22, 1971. Ehrlichman asked Helms for CIA material on the Diem coup, the Bay of Pigs, and other activities involving the CIA.[45] Ehrlichman gave no reason for the request other than that the president wanted them. Helms agreed to gather and review the requested material.[46] The two met again on October 1, and Helms told Ehrlichman he would only turn the files over to the president himself and not give the files directly to Ehrlichman.[47]

Helms met with Nixon and Ehrlichman on October 8. The Nixon tapes show just before Helms joined the meeting, Nixon and Ehrlichman strategized how to deal with Helms, given the director's reluctance to hand over material. Nixon and Ehrlichman would justify to Helms the need for the material by saying the president must know all the facts bearing on these matters. But they would emphasize to Helms that they were not going to release the documents or "put them all out."[48]

When Helms joined the meeting, Nixon explained why he needed the CIA files. He stressed that when it came to the Bay of Pigs and the assassination of Diem and other topics, he needed to understand everything that might bear on the "Cuba confrontation." Moreover, in light of the Pentagon Papers, the president said he needed to be prepared to address any further inquiries from the media regarding the leaked material or be prepared to handle any further leaks. He said he needed the information, "for defensive reasons . . . 'the who shot John' angle. Is Eisenhower to blame? Is Johnson to blame? Is Kennedy to blame? Is Nixon to blame?"[49]

Nixon assured Helms that he was going to protect CIA and would not release any of the CIA files. The material would not go further than the president and Ehrlichman. Contrary to his earlier discussion with Ehrlichman, Nixon told Helms,

> *I am not talking to you as…one that's out to get the CIA, that's out to get Kennedy, out to get Johnson, the rest. I think it's very harmful to the presidency, as an institution, to make it appear that a former president lied.*[50]

In the course of the conversation, Helms pointed out that his obligation was to Nixon because he could only serve one president at a time and that any papers in his possession were at the disposal of the president.[51] Helms just wanted to be sure that it was the president who was making the request because the material he was providing happened on another president's watch.[52]

Closed Like a Safe

In his 1978 memoir, Nixon described the difficulty he had in obtaining information from Helms. With regard to CIA's files on Diem and Castro, Nixon wrote, "The CIA protects itself, even from Presidents. Helms refused to give Ehrlichman

the agency's internal reports dealing with either subject."[53] According to Nixon, Ehrlichman concluded that the material Helms provided was incomplete. From this experience, Nixon believed, "The CIA was closed like a safe and we could find no one who would give us the combination to open it."[54] In response to Nixon's criticism, Helms in 1988 told interviewer Stanley Kutler, "I don't know what he's talking about. I gave him those files."[55]

Nixon kept the files Helms delivered, but he did not follow through on his original plan to declassify select documents to embarrass the previous administration, or to use them in his own battles with Democrats. Also, no evidence shows that the material Helms provided included any documents related to sensitive matters such as CIA's assassination plots. Nixon, neither during nor after his presidency, publicly raised CIA's plans to assassinate Castro or other foreign leaders.

The available records do not show that either Nixon or Ehrlichman revealed to Helms their real motive for requesting these various CIA files. Nor did Helms ask why Nixon wanted them. In his own accounts of this episode, Helms did not provide any hints that he knew why Nixon wanted the material. Defending his actions, Helms said, "When the top man in the White House asks for some support and assistance, it is given to him."[56]

The Rockefeller Commission examined Nixon's requests and was somewhat critical of Helms. The commission concluded that Helms had every reason to believe Nixon's request was for "proper purposes"

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and that the DCI cannot refuse a direct order from the president without being ready to resign. Nevertheless, the commission maintained,

> *In the final analysis the proper functioning of the agency must depend in large part on the judgment, ability and integrity of its director. The best assurance against misuse of the agency lies in the appointment to that position of persons of such stature, maturity and integrity that they will be able to resist outside pressure and importuning.*[57]

Controversial CIA–White House matters like these would not surface again over the next eight months. During that time, Hunt and the Plumbers had shifted their efforts from Ellsberg to supporting the Committee to Reelect the President's intelligence operations.

Watergate Break-In

On June 17, 1972, Helms received a call from the director of security informing him of the Watergate break-in, the names of the burglars, and that Howard Hunt might be involved.[58] Helms, wasting no time, quickly called acting FBI Director Patrick Gray and told him CIA had nothing to do with the Watergate burglary. At his morning meeting on June 19, Helms said that those implicated in the burglary with CIA connections should be referred to as former employees. Helms also pointed out "We have no responsibility with respect to an investigation except to be responsive to the FBI's request for name traces."[59]

Those around the table were concerned that there would be speculation that CIA was behind the operation. Helms asked his executive director at the time, William Colby, to coordinate the agency's internal response. According to Colby,

> *Helms spelled out a fundamental strategy with which all his associates, myself included, agreed. To protect itself from even the appearance of involvement in Watergate, the agency was to distance itself from the event to every extent possible. "Stay cool, volunteer nothing, because it will only be used to involve us. Just stay away from the whole damn thing." That was the gist of Helms's advice.*[60]

On June 22, Gray called Helms to ask whether, in the course of the FBI's investigation of the break-in, the bureau might be touching upon CIA operations. Helms told Gray that since the break-in the agency had been looking into the matter, but Helms stressed, "There was no CIA involvement."[61]

Within days of the burglary, the White House began plotting to use CIA to stop the FBI's investigation. The FBI was beginning to trace money from Republican campaign contributions to the burglars. Such money was being laundered through Mexico. Gray initially thought, because of the burglars' status as former CIA employees, that Watergate might

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be a CIA operation. John Mitchell, the former attorney general and director of Nixon's reelection committee, drew upon Gray's speculation and concocted a way to keep the matter under control. He suggested that Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman call in the newly appointed deputy DCI, Gen. Vernon Walters, and have him ask Gray to halt the investigation into the money because it might touch upon CIA activities.[62]

On the morning of June 23, John Dean, the president's counsel, who was emerging as the point figure in controlling the Watergate fallout, shared Mitchell's recommendation with Haldeman. In coming up with this approach, Mitchell and Dean gave no thought to whether it was appropriate to use CIA in such a fashion. Rather, they rationalized it as protection of CIA operations—with absolutely no knowledge of what the agency might in fact have been doing in Mexico. Haldeman, likewise, raised no objection to trying to use the CIA to stop the FBI's investigation.

The same day, Haldeman broached the idea with Nixon, who was on board immediately.[63, a] Haldeman proposed that he and Ehrlichman call in Helms and Walters. Nixon said, "All right, fine."[64] Nixon instructed Haldeman on how to approach the CIA leaders:

> *When you get these people in say, "look, the problem is that this will open up the whole Bay of Pigs thing, and the president just feels that," I mean, without going into the details, don't lie to them to the extent to say there is no involvement, but just say this is sort of a comedy of errors, bizarre, without getting into it…they should call the FBI in and say that we wish for the country, don't go any further into this case, period! And that destroys the case.*[65]

Haldeman met Nixon a second time that morning on another matter, when Nixon again raised the meeting with Helms and Walters. Nixon again instructed Haldeman on the approach:

> *I'd say, the primary reason, you've got to cut it the hell off. I just don't think, ah, it would be very bad to have this fellow Hunt, you know, he knows too damn much. And he was involved, we happen to know that. And if it gets out, the whole, this is all involved in the Cuban thing…the CIA looks bad, it's going to make Hunt look bad, and it's likely to blow the whole Bay of Pigs thing, which we think would be very unfortunate for the CIA and the country at this time.*[66]

The president did not spell out his concerns regarding CIA and the Bay of Pigs.

Ehrlichman summoned Helms and Walters to his office for the meeting on June 23. They were unaware of why they were called.[67] Helms also did not recall a time when both he and his deputy had been called to the White House. Haldeman joined them. Haldeman took charge and referenced the Watergate affair and the trouble it was causing; the FBI investigation could make it even worse.[68]

He asked if there was a CIA connection; Helms said there was none. Helms mentioned that he spoke with Gray the day before and relayed the same message. Haldeman then got to the point of the meeting. According to Walters's contemporaneous memo for the record,

> *Haldeman said that the whole affair was getting embarrassing, and it was the president's wish that Walters call on Acting FBI Director Patrick Gray and suggest to him that since the five suspects had been arrested that this should be sufficient and that it was not advantageous to have the enquiry pushed, especially in Mexico, etc.*[69]

Following Nixon's guidance, Haldeman said that if the investigation in Mexico were not stopped, it would open up the Bay of Pigs matter. Helms was apparently surprised that Haldeman would bring up the Bay of Pigs. Helms later testified: "I said, 'Well, you know the Bay of Pigs

a. Nixon's White House recordings clearly reveal that Haldeman followed up on Mitchell's recommendation. Haldeman, however, chose to discuss it with Nixon first instead of going directly to Walters, as Mitchell and Dean had recommended. Had Haldeman followed their guidance, the president would have been kept out of this scheme to use CIA, at least during the early days of trying to contain the political damage resulting from the break-in. H.R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (Times Books, 1978), 31–32.

was a long time ago. I don't care anything about the Bay of Pigs, so don't worry about the Bay of Pigs' . . . the problems arising from it had been liquidated."[70] Beyond the general reference to the Bay of Pigs, no other Cuba-related covert actions were mentioned. Walters agreed to speak with Gray that very afternoon.

Helms and Walters initially differed in their accounts of one important part of the meeting. Walters in his memo noted that Haldeman said that "It was the President's wish that Walters call on Acting FBI Director Patrick Gray." Helms, on the other hand, recalled that "Mr. Haldeman then said something to the effect that it has been decided that General Walters will go and talk to Acting Director Gray of the FBI."[71] Helms did not believe Haldeman specifically mentioned the president as the one who recommended that Walters call Gray.

Helms was uncertain and unclear about several aspects of the meeting. First, why did Haldeman ask Walters to talk with Gray? Helms believed that if the president wanted a message delivered to the acting director of the FBI, it should have been delivered by the DCI and not his deputy.[72] But Helms acknowledged his reasoning in an interview a decade later,

> *I always assumed that the reason General Walters was picked was that he had just recently been made deputy director of central intelligence; he had only been there for a few weeks, and that Haldeman and Ehrlichman and possibly the President himself, felt that since he was obliged to them for the appointment, he would do their bidding more obediently and with less argument possibly than I would have done…. In other, words, that having come on board, he was now being asked to pay for his new appointment by carrying out their wishes. This explanation seemed perfectly logical to me and I don't think that one has to look much further for the reason.*[73]

The Bay of Pigs was the one big public CIA failure up to that point the administration could use as leverage over the DCI. Helms, however, believed there was nothing additional to expose to embarrass the agency.

According to Dean, Ehrlichman recommended that it should be Walters and not Helms because Walters was a friend of the White House.[74] With Walters at CIA, the White House could have some influence through him.[75] Walters had served in the army since 1941; Nixon nominated him to be DDCI on March 2, 1972, and Walters was sworn in a month later. Walters admitted Nixon was instrumental in his getting the job. He explained, "I think it came about mostly through President Nixon, whom I had known for a long time."[76]

Helms also couldn't quite understand the reference to the Bay of Pigs. He later wrote, "It baffled me then, and it does today."[77] The Bay of Pigs was the one big public CIA failure that the administration could use as leverage over the DCI. Helms, however, believed there was nothing additional to expose to embarrass the agency. The assassination attempts against Castro had not been fully uncovered at that time. No evidence suggests that Haldeman was aware of such plots, and the chief of staff gave no indication that he was tying the Bay of Pigs to assassination plots.

Helms and Walters agree that Watergate was the lead-in to the meeting.[78] But Haldeman did not reveal the fact that the FBI was pursuing leads in Mexico that would connect the burglars' money with Republican campaign funds. Thus, Helms did not understand how their concern with Mexico was tied to the Watergate affair. Helms testified,

> *And I frankly was hard put at the time to understand what Mexico was involved with. This was only a week after the break-in. I did not know why Mexico was being mentioned, and it never occurred to me that it had anything to do with the Watergate burglary.*[79]

With his admitted confusion over Haldeman's concern about CIA operations in Mexico and with Watergate in the background, it is surprising that Helms did not push back on their request. The only objection he raised in the meeting was the reference to the Bay of Pigs. Helms, however, at the time did not view Haldeman's request as a direct order to have Walters tell the FBI to halt its Mexico investigation. As he testified later,

> *Mr. Haldeman then said something to the effect that it has been decided that General Walters will go and talk to Acting Director Gray of the FBI and indicate to him that these operations—these investigations of the FBI might run into CIA operations in Mexico and that it was desirable that this not happen and that the investiga-*

"It simply did not occur to me that the chief of staff to the president might be asking me to do something that was illegal or wrong. If one were to question every order from the White House, it would be almost impossible to conduct the daily business of the government."

tion, therefore, should be either tapered off or reduced or something but there was no language saying stop, as far as I recall.[80]

His failure to say no also comported with his role as a senior officer in the executive branch. He explained to one congressional committee this way:

I was sitting talking to the two principal lieutenants of the president, and they were sitting there together, and saying this is what has been decided to do. They declined to come up with any further explanation or descriptive material, and I can only say that an assumption had to be that they knew what they were talking about and this is what they wanted.[81]

In testimony to another committee, Helms gave Haldeman the benefit of the doubt on the Mexico angle:

At this point the references to Mexico were quite unclear to me. I had to recognize that if the White House, the president, Mr. Haldeman, somebody in high authority, had information about something in Mexico which I did not have information about, which is quite possible—the White House constantly has information which others do not have—that it would be a prudent thing for me to find out if there was any possibility that some CIA operation was being—was going to be affected, and, therefore, I wanted the necessary time to do this.[82]

After the meeting, Haldeman reported to the president that he raised the Bay of Pigs issue. According to Haldeman's account, he also brought up Howard Hunt. As the White House recordings revealed, Haldeman told the president, "The whole problem [is] this fellow Hunt, so at that point Helms kind of got the picture, very clearly. He said 'We'll be very happy to be helpful to, you know, we'll handle everything you want.'" Haldeman was not going to share anything else about the matter. He told Nixon that Helms said "fine" and Walters was ready to meet with Gray.[83]

Neither Helms nor Walters in their accounts of the meeting mentioned Haldeman's reference to Hunt. Also, Haldeman's depiction of Helms as ready to be helpful is at odds with Helms's description of the session.

As Helms and Walters left the meeting, both were prepared to comply with the request. But Helms cautioned Walters on what specifically he should ask Gray to do. Helms remembered, "He [Walters] should only go so far as to say that if Mr. Gray in his investigations ran into any CIA operations in Mexico, he should remember about the delimitation agreement between the FBI and the CIA, and advise the CIA that he had done so."[84]

Knowing that Walters had only been in the job for six weeks, Helms wanted to make sure Walters did not go too far in what he said to Gray:

I wanted him in his comments with Mr. Gray to stay within legitimate parameters…. What I was telling him to do was legitimate, because in any investigation in a country like Mexico, there is no way of knowing what one might come across the next day, the next week or the next month in the way of CIA assets.[85]

Walters, likewise appreciated the situation he was been put in:

It simply did not occur to me that the chief of staff to the president might be asking me to do something that was illegal or wrong. If one were to question every order from the White House, it would be almost impossible to conduct the daily business of the government. Had I been asked by Haldeman to stop the whole investigation, I might have become suspicious, but at this moment the Mexican aspects of the case had not even come to my attention.[86]

Walters met with Gray later that afternoon. He pointed out that "while the further investigation of the Watergate affair had not touched any current or ongoing covert projects of the agency, its continuation might lead to some projects."[87] Walters cited the delimitation agreement between CIA and FBI. Gray said he was familiar with the agreement and said that the bureau would abide by it.[88] In his memo for the record, Walters recalled what happened next:

I repeated that if the investigations were pushed "south of

the border" they could trespass upon some of our covert projects and, in view of the fact that the five men involved were under arrest, it would be best to taper the matter off there.[89]

The Mexico Connection

Walters had done exactly what Haldeman asked. Following the meeting, Gray informed John Dean what had occurred.[90] Walters went back to CIA headquarters and asked Colby to examine the records and determine if there were any CIA operations in Mexico that would be threatened by an FBI investigation.[91] By June 24, Colby told Walters that it was unlikely that any CIA operations in Mexico were in jeopardy.[92]

The key to the FBI investigation in Mexico was an attorney named Manuel Ogarrio. Tracing the money, FBI found that four checks had been made out to Ogarrio. In agreeing to Walters's request, Gray had told his agents only to hold up on interviewing Ogarrio but to proceed with everything else. "If there was indeed a CIA connection in Mexico, as Gray later wrote, "I surmised, Ogarrio would have to be it"[93] The investigation into the Ogarrio angle had slowed. Helms described the CIA's next steps: "We have to check files and records and we would have to check with people in Mexico. . ."[94] After four days, with his team anxious to move ahead with the interview, Gray called Helms and pressed him about any CIA interest in Ogarrio. Helms called back in a few hours and reported the CIA had none.[95]

Even though Gray had receive oral feedback from Helms on Ogarrio, he wanted something in writing. On July 5, he called Walters and said that unless he received a document stating that "their investigation was endangering national security" the FBI would proceed with interviewing Ogarrio.[96]

Walters promised he would deliver, and on the next day he presented Gray with a memorandum that covered the CIA relationships with Hunt, James McCord, and the other burglars. Walters told Gray that he could not ask him to stop the investigation for reasons of national security.[97] As soon as Walters left, Gray ordered that the interviews be conducted.[98]

In the immediate aftermath of the break-in, FBI's overall investigation had continued, but because of Walters' intervention, the Mexico angle had been delayed by almost two weeks.

In the immediate aftermath of the break-in, FBI's overall investigation had continued, but because of Walters's intervention, the Mexico angle had been delayed by almost two weeks. Helms, in retrospect, defended the action he and Walters took:

It may be alleged that we did have some hint or that we could have guessed, I simply do not accept that fact. How we would have known about this convoluted process of sending money to Minnesota, to Mexico and all over the place, is something I don't have a clue about; but I want to make the record absolutely clear that we knew nothing about it at that time.[99]

Unvouchered Funds

While the Mexico investigation was playing itself out, Walters was dragged into another desperate effort by the White House to contain the damage from the Watergate break-in. On June 26, John Dean asked to meet with Walters. The two met over the course of the next three days. Dean reviewed with Walters the different theories about the Watergate break-in, one of which was that it was organized by the CIA. Walters stressed that he was sure the agency was not involved.[100] Dean raised the possibility that the burglars were still working for CIA. Walters emphasized that they were not.[101]

According to Walters, at the second meeting, Dean explored the possibility of CIA providing unvouchered funds to those who were arrested. Walters wrote, "Dean then asked whether there was not some way that the agency could pay their bail. He added that it was not just bail, that if these men went to prison, could we [CIA] find some way to pay their salaries while they were in jail out of covert action funds."[102]

Walters pushed back on the idea of getting the CIA involved. He wrote, "The scandal would be ten times greater as such action could only be done upon the direction at the 'highest level' and those that were not touched by the matter would now certainly be so."[103]

Trying to portray himself in a more positive light, Dean testified, "Before Walters departed, I assured him that I agreed that it would be most unwise to involve the CIA and I thanked him almost apologetically for coming by again. At no time did I push him as I had been instructed."[104]

Helms concluded that there was nothing to be gained by confronting the president. As he later acknowledged, "I can only assume that the president would have treated me as he did others and that is, he would have lied to me."

Walters kept Helms informed of his meetings with Dean. Helms was very clear that CIA could not comply with the suggestion. He reportedly told Walters,

> *"It* [the CIA] *can be hurt badly by having somebody act improperly who was in the line of command, and I don't want you to acquiesce in a single thing that will besmirch this agency."And he agreed.*[105]

Helms further pointed out that only the DCI could release unvouchered funds and that, if he did so, he would have to report it to the Senate and House Appropriations Committees. He would not use funds set aside for secret intelligence operations to pay burglars.[106] Helms did not regard this as a direct order from the White House. He told the Senate committee investigating the Nixon presidential campaign, "These were feelers to find out if there was some way that the CIA might do—according to General Walters's report to me, he was never requested to do anything."[107] After these meetings, neither Dean nor anyone else in the White House again raised the idea of using CIA funds to pay the burglars.

Walters was at the center of the White House's Watergate requests. Helms, however, later chose to emphasize his role in drawing the line when it came to White House requests:

> *In his book,* Silent Missions*, I don't like the way Walters dealt with his role in the chapter of the book where he is talking about Watergate, because he gives himself a lot of kudos for having stood up to the Nixon administration. It was not him making the decision to stand up. It was me telling him exactly what he had to do under the circumstances…. I was the one who stood up to the White House. I am not trying to preen myself. I am just telling you that a man who had been in the agency about two months was in no position to deal with a complicated matter like this.*[108]

Dean's desperate plea to Walters for CIA funds was the last time the White House would turn to Helms or Walters for help with Watergate.

Given the way the White House tried to use the CIA to support what ultimately became a cover-up, questions remain as to why Helms did not raise objections directly with the president early on or why he did not report to Congress or the Department of Justice. Part of Helms's decision not to go directly to the president can be seen in his overall views on the relationship between a DCI and the president. He testified,

> *If the White House asks me to do something, I believe it is my proper duty to go ahead and do it. I have a very keen sense, I thought, of what my responsibilities were and where to draw certain lines and when to appeal decisions that were improper.*[109]

Helms acknowledged that there was an effort by some in the White House to "use" the agency.[110] At the time, he did not believe Nixon was part of a cover-up:

> *President Nixon was not put forward by any of these people in their discussions. They were conducting them on their own as far as I was aware.*[111]

Helms concluded that there was nothing to be gained by confronting the president. As he later acknowledged, "I can only assume that the president would have treated me as he did others and that is, he would have lied to me."[112]

Based on what he knew at the time and considering the circumstances, Helms also did not believe that he needed to get Congress involved:

> *I don't recall having wrestled with whether I should come and speak to any congressional committees. I was doing my level best to handle the Agency's affairs, to keep it out of involvement in this burglary, which there seemed to be a lot of effort on the part of newspapers and other to put us into it. I was attempting to fend this off to protect the Agency's name. I had been reasonably successful and didn't see anything about these things I needed to report on.*[113]

Helm's objective as DCI was to protect CIA from being implicated in the Watergate mess; to that end, he calculated that Congress would not be of much help.

Lack of Trust

When it came to reporting to the Department of Justice, a lack of trust and Watergate-related leaks influenced Helms's decisions. He explained,

> *Even in retrospect, I don't know who I would have talked to about these things because I think it became clear that officials at the top level of the government, if not the president himself, knew about these matters to a greater or lesser degree, depending on who they were, and that Gray's behavior toward the agency, after I tipped him off in the early stages as to where I thought the problem in this whole affair was, made me very uneasy about whom I could have any confidence in, if I had to come up with something on a fiduciary basis.*[114]

In following this approach, Helms would be accused of not fully cooperating with the FBI in its investigation. He defended his decisions by pointing at the FBI:

> *It was not long after the burglary took place, and not long after efforts were being made to get the burglars counsel and money for their defense and all the rest of it, that the FBI, for the first time, at least in my knowledge, in its history began leaking information about the on-going investigation.*[115]

Helms had informed CIA General Counsel Lawrence Houston about Haldeman's instructions to Walters at the June 23 meeting. Houston did not advise Helms to report the episode to federal prosecutors.[116]

Nixon's presidency ended in ignominy, but how do we judge Helms? As a career intelligence officer who had been at CIA since its creation in 1947, Helms had a great deal of pride in the agency and his profession.

In the weeks following Walters's meeting with Gray on July 6, the FBI asked CIA for information about Hunt's relationship with CIA after he retired and James McCord's attempts to inform the agency that they were being set up to take the fall for Watergate. The bureau also requested access to current agency employees who were aware of CIA's support to Hunt in summer 1971. Accusations would be made that CIA was not being fully cooperative with the FBI's investigation, especially with regard to giving access to agency employees.

Helms, did, in fact, on June 28 ask Gray that the FBI not interview two current employees at all. Gray agreed. However, the interview of one of the employees had already taken place by the time Helms called.[117] Helms would later maintain, "Because for the first time in my memory there were definite leaks out of the Alexandria office of the FBI after the Watergate break-in, and it struck me that there was no need to get people from the agency who were on active duty involved with the agents at the field office."[118] When the facts emerged later, Gray believed Helms had lied to him in order to hide the fact that the CIA had been providing Hunt with technical support well before the Watergate break-in.[119]

Judging Helms

For Nixon, who cruised to reelection in 1972, the reckoning would come in 1974 with his resignation before impeachment votes in the House and Senate took place. Recognition of the Nixon White House's abuse of CIA was noted in the articles of impeachment affirmed by the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives in July 1974. As stated in Article 2, Section 5:

> *In disregard of the rule of law, he knowingly misused the executive power by interfering with agencies of the executive branch, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Criminal Division, and the Office of Watergate Special Prosecution Force, the Department of Justice, and the Central Intelligence Agency, in violation of his duty to take care that the laws be faithfully executed.*[120]

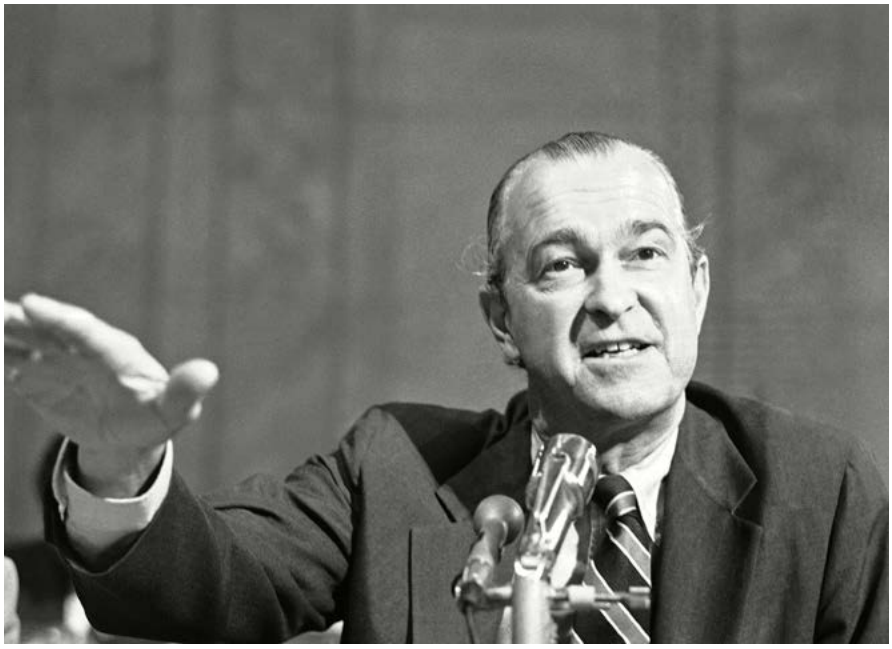
Nixon's presidency ended in ignominy, but how do we judge Helms? As a career intelligence officer who had been at CIA since its creation in 1947, Helms had a great deal of pride in the agency and his profession. For him, the CIA was essential in the defense of the nation. To be effective, the agency had to be able to operate in secret with its integrity and objectivity protected from unwarranted political interference. He stated, "Without objectivity, there is no credibility, and an intelligence organization without credibility is of little use to those it serves."[121]

In his testimonies, interviews, and memoirs, Helms was consistent in explaining and justifying his decisions. With respect to the Ellsberg profile, he acknowledged his error in judgment. On other issues, he defended the steps he took, arguing that he acted based on what he knew at the time. Helms presented his case with an expectation that we take him at his word about what he knew or did not know about the various White House schemes.

With the benefit of the released Nixon White House tapes and the information that emerged from executive and congressional reviews, a clear picture emerged of what actually went on in the White House. How much of this picture should Helms have surmised as it took shape?

Having served as DCI under President Johnson, when CIA was asked to investigate possible links between American antiwar protestors and hostile foreign governments, Helms was not unaccustomed to dealing with White House requests that crossed over into domestic operations. Yet the political and self-serving nature of the Nixon administration's requests and their later gravity were not readily apparent to the DCI as they occurred one by one. He was not experienced in the world of cutthroat political battles led by such operatives as Haldeman and Ehrlichman, with whom he had few dealings. It is not unreasonable to take him at his word about how much he knew about what Nixon and his men were contriving.

In dealing with any presidential administration, Helms felt it was important for the DCI to be at the table if CIA was to be relevant. A DCI that did not support the White House would find himself or herself disinvited and marginalized. Helms acknowledged that CIA was "part of the President's bag of tools… and if he and proper authorities have decided that something needs to be done, then the agency is bound to try to do it."[122]



Having spent most of his career avoiding the limelight, Helms would testify to Congress multiple times in the 1970s, as in this September 1975 appearance before the Church Committee on intelligence activities to explain his decisions about CIA's stockpile of poisons. (© Harry Griffin/AP/Shutterstock)

In the end, did Helms keep CIA at the table while keeping it distant from the Watergate affair? After Nixon's reelection, the president, seeking an overhaul of his administration, requested the resignation of his cabinet members. Helms was not a cabinet member and viewed his position as apolitical; he did not submit a resignation. In November 1972, Nixon called Helms to Camp David to inform him that he was going to be replaced as DCI.

One interpretation for this move is that Helms was fired for not supporting Nixon on Watergate. There is nothing in Nixon's records and audio recordings to indicate that this was the case. Helms himself was unsure whether Watergate was the reason for his dismissal. He said, "It might have been a factor, it might not have been a factor. Maybe he was planning to make the change after the election, if he won. In any event, I simply don't know."[123]

At no point did Helms consider resigning during these controversies. "I don't mean to be immodest," he explained, "but I felt that I understood about these matters and these delimitations and I thought I could take care of the agency better if I stayed where I was."[124]

Unlike the suspicions that Nixon, Haldeman, and Ehrlichman had about

Helms, Kissinger respected Helms for his sense of duty and the way he handled the job.[125] During a discussion with Nixon regarding Helms's future assignment as ambassador to Iran, Kissinger said, "Helms is a loyalist. . . . We won't have any problems with Helms."[126] The Nixon White House tapes reveal that, even after the turmoil of Watergate, Helms in his last days in office remained deferential to the president and treated Nixon with the type of respect that a president expects from a CIA director.[127] On February 2, 1973, Helms's seat at the table was taken by James Schlesinger, a man more to Nixon's liking.

Overall, Helms was not completely successful in keeping the agency from being tied to the Watergate scandal. His efforts to reaffirm that CIA had nothing to do with Watergate and limit FBI access to CIA personnel and materials in the immediate aftermath of the break-in kept CIA out of the early FBI leaks. Nevertheless, public speculation and congressional interest in CIA's Watergate role grew. In May 1973, at Ellsberg's federal espionage trial, Howard Hunt would revealed the extent of CIA support he received. This again put CIA in the public spotlight.

Congress followed up this revelation with its own investigation. The Special Subcommittee on Intelligence of the House Committee on Armed Services held an inquiry and issued a report on CIA's involvement in the Watergate and Ellsberg matters. Helms and others in CIA would be called to testify that same year at the the Irvin Committee. Sen. Howard Baker, the vice chairman, would pursue a deeper investigation into CIA's role and attach an annex to the committee's final report. Baker's annex drew no new conclusions about CIA's role in Watergate, but it highlighted CIA's involvement in domestic activities.

It is not excusing Helms to argue that his approach must also be viewed in the context of the time. Congress was only beginning to be more assertive in matters related to CIA.

A Different Era

It is not excusing Helms to argue that his approach must also be viewed in the context of the time. Congress was only beginning to be more assertive in matters related to CIA. The type of congressional oversight of CIA that exists today would not begin until the implementation of the recommendations of the Church Committee in 1976.[128] The media was starting to uncover more of CIA's secrets, but not until Seymour Hersh's revelations in December 1974 of CIA's domestic operations was the agency put under the type of constant scrutiny that exists today.

In addition, the DCI was just beginning to deal with former agency officers who were writing books critical of CIA activities. The volume of books and articles by former CIA officers that are commonplace today was rare until 1974 when Victor Marchetti and John Marks published *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, a scathing critique of CIA operations.

And although the DCI was organizationally the head of the entire Intelligence Community, it was a responsibility that Helms and his predecessors devoted little time to, unlike the role that the Director of National Intelligence fills today. With all of this in mind, Helms was able to operate without many of the constraints that more recent directors have faced.

What has not changed is the fact that the CIA director still supports the president and is responsible for protecting the agency from executive abuse and enabling the intelligence professionals to carry out the agency's mission. In this regard, Helms's experience from 50 years ago is instructive.

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Endnotes

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102. Walters memorandum, June 28, 1972.
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104. John W. Dean 3d quoted in Walters, *Silent Missions*, 598.
105. Helms testimony, Nedzi Committee, 97–98.
106. Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 12–13; Helms testimony, Irvin Committee, 3271.
107. Helms testimony, Irvin Committee, 3271.
108. Richard Helms, Kutler interview, July 14, 1988.
109. Helms testimony, Nedzi Committee, 104.
110. Helms testimony, Irvin Committee, 3250.
111. Ibid., 3256.
112. Richard Helms, Bross interview.
113. Helms testimony, Nedzi Committee, 103.
114. Richard Helms, Bross interview.
115. Ibid.
116. Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets,* 339.
117. CIA Watergate History, 96–97; Gray, 78.
118. Richard Helms testimony March 8, 1974, quoted in CIA Watergate History, 99.
119. Gray, *In Nixon's Web,* 79.
120. Articles of Impeachment, July 27, 1974.
121. Richard Helms quoted in Robarge, 37–38.
122. David Frost, "An Interview with Richard Helms," *Studies in Intelligence* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1981), 9.
123. Richard Helms, Bross interview.
124. Helms testimony, Irvin Committee, 3252.
125. Henry Kissinger foreword in Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, x–xii.
126. NWHT, Nixon, Kissinger, Haig—Oval Office, December 12, 1972 in *The Nixon Tapes, 1971–73*, ed. Douglas Brinkley and Luke Anichter (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 704.
127. NWHT, Telephone Conversation between Nixon and Helms, January 25, 1973.
128. See "Interview with Former US Senator Gary Hart," *Studies in Intelligence* 54, no. 4 (December 2021).

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