

# Revisiting Thomas Troy's Review of Richard Helms' Memoir

## *Taking Exception*

**Thomas Twetten, Richard Stolz and Hayden B. Peake**

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Portraits of former Directors of Central Intelligence hang on the wall of a first floor hallway in CIA Headquarters. When George Tenet became DCI, he had the portrait of Richard Helms moved to his office as a sign of respect. As DCI, Mr. Tenet frequently sought his predecessor's advice. His admiration for the integrity of the former DCI was widely shared by serving and retired officers. On one point Director Helms appeared resolute over the years—he said he would never write a book. So when the end of the Cold War caused his change of heart and the news reached former colleagues, they were delighted and awaited the outcome—*A Look Over My Shoulder* (Random House, 2003)—with great anticipation.

The book was reviewed favorably in more than 20 publications including *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, we were surprised and disappointed by the 10-page review by Thomas M. Troy Jr., a retired Directorate of Intelligence officer, in *Studies in Intelligence*.<sup>[2]</sup> The surprise came when we read on page one that “[Helms] used his memoir to pay back some people” and with the assertion that “[Helms] comes across as vindictive and even petty in discussing former colleagues.” These are most unusual assertions to make about this memoir. We were disappointed when it became apparent that the tone of the first page was reflected throughout the review. Equally troubling was the narrow focus of the review: it deals with only three topics in Helms' more than 30-year career covered in the book: “the Watergate scandal, the Nosenko affair, and the influence wielded at CIA by the controversial James J. Angleton,” as Troy labels them. The result is neither a balanced review of the memoir nor an adequate assessment of Director Helms' career, easily one of finest in the first generation of Agency officers. In the interest of fairness, we offer the following commentary on Troy's review. First, we will consider the three topics he selected, and then provide a brief, but broader, assessment of the book.

### **Watergate**

On the first point, we do not agree with Troy's conclusion that “the sad fact is that Helms and [Vernon] Walters (and through them, the CIA) *did* participate in the initial stages of the Watergate cover-up.” A careful reading of *A Look Over My Shoulder* supports this view.

## **The Nosenko Affair**

Yuri Nosenko volunteered his services to the CIA in Geneva in 1962. A KGB officer the second chief directorate (domestic security), he provided some valuable information and agreed to serve as an agent in place. In 1964, he met his case officer, again in Geneva, and this time said he was defecting, using as leverage the statement that he had personal knowledge of Lee Harvey Oswald's KGB file. Although doubts about his bona fides had already arisen in the mind of James Angleton, chief of the Counterintelligence Staff, mention of the file on President Kennedy's assassin left Helms (then Deputy Director for Plans) with little choice but to accept him and sort out his bona fides later. The issue was joined and, as Troy acknowledges, Helms wrote "no case was more baffling."

The process of determining whether Nosenko was genuine or not was a matter Helms left in the hands of the CIA element responsible for Soviet defectors, then headed by David Murphy. Troy reasons that "Angleton and Bagley [Nosenko's first case officer] presumably convinced Murphy and Helms that Nosenko was 'dirty.'" We believe this is too strong a judgment. In 1964, James Angleton was the counterintelligence guru at CIA, with an unblemished record accepted by every DCI since Allen Dulles. If his initial assessment was that there was a problem, management did not have to be "convinced" but would have taken Angleton seriously, and that is what Richard Helms did. Nosenko was subjected to intensive, austere interrogation. Looking back, we join Helms and Troy in acknowledging it went on too long, but it was Helms who ended it. Nosenko never changed his story about the lack of any KGB role in the Kennedy assassination and his knowledge of Oswald's file. But he did do one thing that Troy neglects to mention: he told many lies and eventually admitted them during hostile interrogation. No matter what his reasons, when a defector lies, he is in trouble.

On the matter of Nosenko's hostile interrogation, Troy is concerned that Helms "did not say in his memoir that he approved of this technique and the solitary confinement that accompanied it." But an even casual reading of pages 242–43 will lead many to the opposite conclusion. Similarly, Troy takes Helms to task for not mentioning Nosenko's defector protagonist, Anatoli Golitsyn, even though Helms did mention that another KGB defector was involved in the case. In the end, naming Golitsyn would neither have added to nor detracted from the Helms viewpoint. As a matter of fact, Golitsyn wasn't the only KGB defector involved, but Helms didn't name the other one (Peter Deriabin) either.

In one of his early conclusions, Troy noted that with the possible exception of Helms' acknowledgment of Agency involvement in Iran, there is nothing new in the book. This assertion is refuted in the short chapter on Nosenko—and elsewhere later—when Helms noted that allegations that Angleton was responsible for Nosenko's "confinement and extended interrogation" are wrong. In fact, wrote Helms, Angleton "disagreed with the hostile interrogation and confinement of Nosenko." That is not only new, it is news, and Troy missed its significance.

A final comment on Troy's treatment of this case concerns what he views as a failure by Helms to refer in his memoir to four books that have some bearing on the case. Troy assumes Helms avoided mentioning two of them, those by David Wise and Tom Mangold, because they were "perhaps embarrassing." The reasons for Troy's concern with the absence of the other two, by former KGB officers Oleg Kalugin and Vasili Mitrokhin, are not given.<sup>[3]</sup> All argued that Nosenko was genuine. Troy asks rhetorically, "doesn't this establish Nosenko's bona fides?" It is easy to agree now, but as Helms wrote, at the time there was a presidential assassination involved. In the context of the times, Helms was giving a top-down view of the Nosenko case as it affected his professional life—a topic not covered in other books about Nosenko. He was not rehashing

the case and the various opinions about it; for that, a much longer chapter would have been required and his uncertainty would not have been overcome.

James Angleton

Turning to Troy's comments on James Angleton, he writes that Helms' account amounts to an apology for which "we must take his word." We express an alternative view. Even Wise and Mangold give Angleton considerable credit for his abilities.

When it came to operation MH/CHAOS, the infiltration and reporting on US citizen war protestors, Troy points out that Helms admits it was wrong and should not have been done. Troy says Helms' explanation amounted to a "devil made me do it defense." Helms' elucidation of the issue is more complex, rooted in the difficulty of refusing a presidential order, a point he discusses in some detail. Troy wonders why Helms didn't threaten to resign when the president asked him to violate the CIA's charter. In retrospect, perhaps he should have, but at the time Helms thought it better to minimize the damage from within.

On a very sensitive topic, the careers ruined by Angleton's insistence that there was a KGB mole in the CIA, the management view was that the guilt or innocence of those under suspicion couldn't be proved or disproved. Troy, though in disagreement, acknowledges that Helms was honorable in admitting "the decision was mine alone" and that he should have "insisted that Angleton step aside." That failure, Troy writes, sullied Helms' reputation. But Helms accepted the judgment that he was too loyal, too long, to a trusted colleague. He didn't dodge the issue.

On the Book Overall

It is true, as Troy maintains, that *A Look Over My Shoulder* doesn't reveal any new operations, betray any secrets, give up any confidences, divulge any sources or methods, or describe any clandestine boudoir dalliances. But the book was never intended to do that. As reviewer Thomas Powers put it, "far more interesting was everything he had to say about the ways of power and the people who occupied and struggled for access to the oval office...[Helms'] account of the issues and arguments that agitated presidents makes for a book of unusual depth and richness..." [4] To this is added descriptions of how Helms became an intelligence officer and the disappointments of service that he overcame—important lessons for those that follow. His professional character quietly shines through as he describes his insistence on delivering unwelcome predictions about the Vietnam War to the president, who then ignored them.

Those who remember the times will be impressed by Helms' arguments that the CIA was never a "rogue elephant." The bureaucratic maneuvering associated with, and his views on, the Bay of Pigs operation provide a unique view of the matter. And then there is his candor in the paragraphs about the Agency's attempts to assassinate foreign leaders: they are unpleasant but forthright. All this and more suggests something of the feel for how an officer rises through the ranks and deals with ever more difficult problems in a long and distinguished career. Toward the end of the book (374), Helms relates his final conversation with Allen Dulles in which his mentor tells him "I want you to know that I think my not giving you the DDP job [Bissell got it instead] was my biggest mistake." [5] This is another "new" item that Troy overlooks, and the fact that this very private matter was mentioned at all indicates how important it must have been to Richard Helms at the time.

No doubt all who read this book wish that more detail had been included. But we agree with

Troy on at least his last sentences: “We are all fortunate that [Helms] left us a memoir that both entertains and stimulates.... Today’s intelligence professionals should read it and heed its lessons.”

## Footnotes

[1] The *New York Times* reviewed it twice: Joseph Persico, *New York Times Book Review*, 4 May 2004: 9; Tom Powers, *New York Times*, 14 May 2003, Arts/Culture: 10.

[2] Thomas M. Troy Jr., *Studies in Intelligence* 48, no. 1 (2004): 75–84.

[3] David Wise, *Molehunt: The Search for Traitors That Shattered The CIA* (New York: Random House, 1992); Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior: James Jesus Angleton—The CIA’s Master Spy Hunter* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Oleg Kalugin, *The First Directorate*(New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); Christopher Andrew and Vasli Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*(New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[4] Powers.

[5] One can only speculate whether the Bay of Pigs would have occurred on Dick Helms’ watch had Bissell not been the DDP.

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