

Richard Helms, Ex-C.I.A. Chief, Dies at 89

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Published: October 24, 2002

WASHINGTON, Oct. 23 — Richard Helms, a former director of central intelligence who defiantly guarded some of the darkest secrets of the cold war, died of multiple myeloma today. He was 89.

An urbane and dashing spymaster, Mr. Helms began his career with a reputation as a truth teller and became a favorite of lawmakers in the late 1960's and early 70's.

But he eventually ran afoul of Congressional investigators who found that he had lied or withheld information about the United States role in assassination attempts in Cuba, anti-government activities in Chile and the illegal surveillance of journalists in the United States.

Mr. Helms pleaded no contest in 1977 to two misdemeanor counts of failing to testify fully four years earlier to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His conviction, which resulted in a suspended sentence and a \$2,000 fine, became a rallying point for critics of the Central Intelligence Agency who accused it of dirty tricks, as well as for the agency's defenders, who hailed Mr. Helms for refusing to compromise sensitive information.

In the title of his 1979 biography of Mr. Helms, Thomas Powers called him "The Man Who Kept the Secrets" (Pocket Books). Mr. Helms's memoir, "A Look Over My Shoulder: a Life in the C.I.A.," is to be released in the spring by Random House.

After he left the C.I.A. in 1973, Mr. Helms served until 1977 as the American ambassador to Iran, whose ruler, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was supported by the United States. He later became an international consultant, specializing in trade with the Middle East.

Born on March 30, 1913, in St. Davids, Pa., Richard McGarrah Helms — he avoided using the middle name — was the son of an Alcoa executive and grandson of a leading international banker, Gates McGarrah. He grew up in South Orange, N.J., and studied for two years during high school in Switzerland, where he became fluent in French and German.

At Williams College, Mr. Helms excelled as a student and a leader. He was class president, editor of the school newspaper and the yearbook, and was president of the senior honor society. He fancied a career in journalism, and went to Europe as a reporter for United Press. His biggest scoop, he said, was an exclusive interview with Hitler.

In 1939 he married Julia Bretzman Shields, and they had a son, Dennis, a lawyer in Princeton, N.J. The couple were divorced in 1968, and Mr. Helms married Cynthia McKelvie later that year. She and his son survive him.

When World War II broke out, Mr. Helms was called into service by the Naval Reserve and because of his linguistic abilities was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the C.I.A. He worked in New York plotting the positions of German submarines in the western Atlantic.

From the beginning, he worked in the C.I.A.'s covert operations, or "plans" division, and by the early 1950's he was serving as deputy to the head of clandestine services, Frank Wisner.

In that capacity, in 1955, Mr. Helms impressed his superiors by supervising the secret digging of a 500-yard tunnel from West Berlin to East Berlin to tap the main Soviet telephone lines between Moscow and East Berlin. For more than 11 months, until the tunnel was detected by the Soviet Union, the C.I.A. was able to eavesdrop on Moscow's conversations with its agents in the puppet governments of East Germany and Poland.

Over the next 20 years, Mr. Helms rose through the agency's ranks, and in 1966 he came the first career official to head the C.I.A. He served under such men as Allen W. Dulles, Richard M. Bissell, John A. McCone and Vice Adm. William F. Raborn.

During most of his tenure as C.I.A. chief, Mr. Helms received favorable attention from lawmakers and the press, who remarked on his professionalism, candor, and even his dark good looks.

That reputation grew after 1973, when Mr. Helms clashed with President Richard M. Nixon, who sought his help in thwarting an F.B.I. investigation into the Watergate break-in. When Mr. Helms refused, Mr. Powers wrote, Mr. Nixon forced him out and sent him to Iran as ambassador.

But Mr. Helms soon found himself called to account for his own actions when the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence delved into the agency's efforts to assassinate world leaders or destabilize socialist governments.

The committee, which was led by Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, accused Mr. Helms of failing to inform his own superiors of efforts to kill the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, which the Senate panel called "a grave error in judgment."

A separate inquiry by the Rockefeller Commission also faulted Mr. Helms for poor judgment for destroying documents and tape recordings that might have assisted Watergate investigators.

But the most contentious criticism of Mr. Helms centered on Chile. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Helms insisted that the C.I.A. had never tried to overthrow the government of President Salvador Allende Gossens or funneled money to political enemies of Mr. Allende, a Marxist.

Senate investigators later discovered that the C.I.A. had run a major secret operation in Chile that gave more than \$8 million to the opponents of Mr. Allende, using the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation as a conduit. Mr. Allende was killed in a 1973 military coup, which was followed by more than 16 years of military dictatorship.

In 1977, Mr. Helms stepped down as ambassador to Iran and returned to Washington to plead no contest to charges that in 1973 he had lied to a Congressional committee about the intelligence agency's role in bringing down the Allende government.

"I had found myself in a position of conflict," he told a federal judge at the formal proceeding after entering a plea agreement with the Justice Department. "I had sworn my oath to protect certain secrets. I didn't want to lie. I didn't want to mislead the Senate. I was simply trying to find my way through a difficult situation in which I found myself."

The judge responded, "You now stand before this court in disgrace and shame," and sentenced him to two years in prison and a \$2,000 fine. The prison term was suspended.

Mr. Helms said outside the courtroom that he wore his conviction "like a badge of honor," and added: "I don't feel disgraced at all. I think if I had done anything else I would have

been disgraced."

Later that day he went to a reunion of former C.I.A. colleagues, who gave him a standing, cheering ovation, then passed the hat and raised the \$2,000 for his fine.

For a man who considered himself a genuine patriot, it was a bleak note on which to end his professional career. Mr. Helms believed he had performed well in a job that, although many Americans considered it sinister and undemocratic, was nevertheless a cold-blooded necessity in an era of cold war.

Mr. Helms, who was allowed to receive his government pension, put his intelligence experience to use after his retirement. He became a consultant to businesses that made investments in other countries.

He was known as a charming conversationalist, a gregarious partygoer and an accomplished dancer, and he and his wife continued to be familiar figures on the capital party scene.