

A LIFE IN INTELLIGENCE

THE RICHARD HELMS COLLECTION





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GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



Overview





Overview

by David S. Robarge

Chief Historian of The CIA

This collection of material by and about Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and Ambassador to Iran comprises the largest single release of Helms-related information to date. The documents, historical works, essays, interviews, photographs, and video offer an unprecedented wide-ranging look at the man and his career as the United States' top intelligence official and one of its most important diplomats during a crucial decade of the Cold War. From mid-1966, when he became DCI, to late 1976, when he left Iran, Helms dealt directly or indirectly with numerous events whose impact remains evident today and which are covered in the release. They include the Vietnam War, two military conflicts between Israel and the Arab states, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, an unsuccessful covert action in Chile, arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union, Watergate, disclosures of controversial CIA activities, the formation of OPEC, and the first oil embargo. From his respective vantage points at CIA Headquarters in Langley, Va., and the US Embassy in Tehran, Helms participated in all of these developments—depending on the situation—as intelligence manager, presidential adviser, or representative of US national security interests.

No comprehensive biography of Helms has been written, and for years the most widely consulted work on his intelligence career has been Thomas Powers's *The Man Who Kept the Secrets* (1979). With the release of *Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence, 1966-1973* by Robert M. Hathaway and Russell Jack Smith—one of a series of internal surveys of DCI tenures—we have a solidly researched, lucidly written account of the major issues Helms confronted as DCI, prepared by a respected historian and an Agency veteran of scholarly achievement. Based mostly on CIA records and interviews with Helms and Agency officers and

originally published in 1993, it stands for now as the definitive account of Helms's directorship. The study was previously declassified in early 2007 but is being re-released with fewer redactions. When read with Helms's posthumously published memoir, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (2003), Hathaway and Smith's book gives a thorough look at how one of the Agency's most influential directors handled a succession of complicated intelligence and political challenges.

An especially useful part of the release is the set of oral history interviews of Helms conducted for the Hathaway-Smith book; the articles from CIA's in-house journal, *Studies in Intelligence*, including three by Helms; and the video of him speaking at a history symposium at CIA Headquarters in 1994. Taken together, these materials capture the man himself—thoughtful, direct, precise, discrete, politically astute, keenly cognizant of the interconnectedness of intelligence and policy, impatient with pretense, wryly humorous, and always adamant about the need for CIA to remain objective and independent. "If we ever lose our reputation for honesty," he wrote in one of the articles, "we lose all our usefulness along with it." The newly released materials also portray a career intelligence officer who was ardent about his profession and the Agency he worked for. As he told an assembly of CIA employees in 1996, "An alert Intelligence Community is our first, best line of defense. Service there is its own reward."

President Richard Nixon—dissatisfied with Helms's management of the Intelligence Community and, most important, angry at him for refusing to involve CIA in the Watergate cover-up—decided as early as September 1972 that "Helms has got to go." As Hathaway and Smith show, Nixon's choice of him to be Ambassador to Iran was a spontaneous move

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by the President to offer the soon-to-be-dismissed DCI a consolation posting. The Shah, though, saw the early replacement of a recent political appointee (Joseph Farland) with such an influential national security official as a clear indication of his country's significance to the White House and US foreign policy. The US Embassy in Tehran reported that local media coverage and private conversations with Iranian officials highlighted Helms's closeness to the President "and his prominence in American life as [an] important public servant . . . as indicating [the] heightened importance Washington attaches to its relations with Iran."

Iran was nearing the peak of its regional influence and its prominence as a US ally by the time Helms arrived there in February 1973. As DCI, Helms previously had noted that "During the past decade, and particularly during the past five years, the Shah has sought to provide for the security of Iran through the rapid development of that country as a modern industrial state with a rapidly expanding military establishment. He likes to describe Iran as the only strong, stable and important nation between Japan and the European Community."

This situation had come about for geostrategic and economic reasons. Iran, with Saudi Arabia, had become one of the "twin pillars" the United States relied on to maintain stability in the Persian Gulf region after Great Britain withdrew its military forces in 1971. During the same time, the Nixon Doctrine, enunciated in June 1969, placed greater responsibility on regional powers to defend themselves. In May 1972, President Nixon agreed to let Iran buy essentially any kind of American conventional weaponry. In a speech at Iran's National Defense University in February 1976, Helms said that the United States regarded Iran "as a stabilizing influence in the region" and that Iranians must be "able to defend themselves against outside threats and to play a role commensurate with their interests." With oil wealth filling its coffers, Iran became the largest purchaser of US military wares (nearly \$2 billion worth) by the time Helms left his post. Meanwhile, with US encouragement, the Shah took an increasingly hard line against radical Arab states and established a close but quiet relationship with Israel.

Until the Department of State's *Foreign Relations of the United States* volume on US-Iran relations during 1973-76 is published (it currently is undergoing declassification review), this release presents the most extensive collection of diplomatic material on that subject now publicly available. Although they comprise only a tiny fraction of the massive amount of traffic between Washington and Tehran during Helms's ambassadorship, the more than 800 documents offer a snapshot of the workaday world of a senior diplomat: regularly meeting with the head of state and his principal officials; preparing reports on local and international developments for consumers back home; discussing the implications of US policy toward Iran with American leaders; and offering advice on appointments to key US Government positions dealing with Iran. Some of the dispatches show Helms striking the delicate balance between advocating US policy to the Shah and empathizing with him to Washington—a task made more difficult because at times it was not clear whether the Shah was being deliberately cryptic or was just confused. (There is no mention in the traffic that he seemed ill; in 1974 he was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer.)

Several portions of Helms's ambassadorial traffic deserve special mention because of their policy significance, because they show some of the recurrent annoyances diplomats everywhere face, or because they illumine some distinctive aspects of Helms's tenure. For example, at the time Iraq was conducting a counteroffensive against US- and Iran-backed Kurdish rebels, so Helms had periodic discussions with Henry Kissinger and the Shah about providing military and humanitarian aid to the Kurds. Helms complained to the White House about the Department of Defense not coordinating comments on US-Iran relations with him and about questioning some arms sales. He was put in the embarrassing position of explaining to his hosts what a disparaging remark by a senior US official meant—in this case, the Treasury Secretary calling the Shah a "nut" in a magazine interview.

Writing to DCI George H.W. Bush from the unique position as a former DCI, Helms expressed concern

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that some pejorative words in a CIA analysis of Iranian leadership would severely damage bilateral relations if the paper were leaked. He pointed out to his former Deputy DCI that the Embassy was not in the business of arranging audiences with the Shah for US visitors (“For some strange reason, ‘seeing the Shah’ has become sort of a weird tourist attraction for Americans.”). Helms spent a remarkable amount of his time dealing with the fallout from Watergate and the “Family Jewels” disclosures, receiving notifications and answering queries from Agency officials, congressional investigators, journalists, and attorneys. Perhaps in exasperation, he wrote to DCI Bush that he was “increasingly bemused by the double standard practiced by the Congress and the press on this issue of the confidentiality of sources . . . If ‘the public has a right to know’ about governmental actions, why does it not have ‘a right to know’ about where the information originated? If you are offered a glass of water . . . you should also have a right to know that it came from a poisoned well.”

“Our intelligence system,” Helms wrote in one of the *Studies in Intelligence* articles, “is in truth an expression of our society, with all its vigor and ingenuity, with all its complexity and some of its contradictions, as that society gropes for answers to challenges its founding fathers could never have conceived.” Helms’s service as DCI and Ambassador to Iran exhibits those same complexities and contradictions. For most of those years he worked under two of the most complicated presidents the United States has ever had, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and had to confront the welter of intelligence and policy conundrums that arose from US engagement with Southeast Asia, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East. Acting upon one of his guiding principles—“you only work for one president at a time”—he skillfully adapted to the changing atmospherics in Washington and to the break-up of the Cold War consensus in American politics. What Helms observed in one of the interviews about serving under Nixon could as easily be applied to the ten years covered in the material released today: “it seems to me that the fact I ended up with my head on my shoulders . . . is not the least achievement of my life.”



Eulogy





Eulogy

by George Tenet

Former Director of The CIA

As we marked the 50th anniversary of the Central Intelligence Agency in 1997, Richard Helms spoke of those who had gone before, those who had given so much of themselves to build and nourish a vital institution of government that itself has given so much to the treasured cause of freedom.

“Each of us,” he said, “has his own heroes and heroines.” He was right. Here today, I join with you in this tribute to one of our greatest heroes.

A life such as his, rich in years and richer still in honor and achievement, is not easily described. Over the many decades, in the decisions he made, in the actions he took, he influenced countless other lives—thousands, perhaps even millions—in ways both subtle and direct.

At its best, that is what intelligence does in service to liberty. And, in Richard Helms, intelligence in service to liberty found an unsurpassed champion.

As a young reporter for the United Press in the Germany of the 1930s, he saw at first hand the menacing machinery of totalitarianism. In a few short years, though, he would go from the recording of history to the making of it.

With his knowledge of Europe, his proficiency in languages, and his gift for observation and analysis, he was a natural for the fledgling intelligence service of a nation plunged suddenly into global war.

And it was there that the military ultimately sent him, proving that the bureaucracy can get it right, sometimes anyway.

Richard Helms did more than adjust to this new world of intelligence and espionage. He made it his own.

In the ranks of the Office of Strategic Services, a dazzling collection of talents thrown together for the country’s urgent defense, Richard Helms found the calling of his lifetime.

In its Secret Intelligence Branch, he mastered the delicate, demanding craft of agent operations. He excelled at both the meticulous planning and the bold vision and action that were then—and remain today—the heart of our work to obtain information critical to the security of the United States—information that can be gained only through stealth and courage.

He came to know, as few others ever would, the value of a stolen secret, and the advantage that comes to our democracy from the fullest possible knowledge of those abroad determined to destroy it.

In 1945, in the ruins of a fallen Berlin, amid the rubble of one conflict just over, Richard Helms saw the stirrings of another just beginning: a Cold War, destined to be fought against a very different enemy in a very different way. Now, the open clash of arms would be replaced by a fierce contest of wills and ideas.

As a seasoned officer, he understood the key role that espionage would have to play in divining the strengths and weaknesses of the closed, predatory tyranny that was the Soviet Union.

And so, he stayed with the profession in an America eager to enjoy the fruits of a hard-won peace. He stayed as our nation decided on the kind of intelligence service it would need as a new superpower in a new and dangerous atomic age.

His faith, his patience, and his persistence were not in vain.

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When our country found its answer in the Central Intelligence Agency, Richard Helms was ready. His career at CIA, now the stuff of legend, was a rise of profound skill and of strength of character to match.

In an organization where risk and pressure are as common as a cup of coffee, he was unflappable. In an organization where exceptional dedication and extraordinary hours are the norm, he was, in the words of an admiring colleague, “always there. When you had to get Mr. Helms, he was there.”

In the Agency’s maze of rundown, temporary buildings down along the Reflecting Pool, a place where, he fondly recalled, “we learned the difference between perspiration and sweat”—I can see him saying it—he was almost as famous for his disdain for the trappings of high office as he was for his thorough success in it.

His sound operational judgment, his complete command of the facts, his reputation as the best drafter of cables anywhere—and his modest black Plymouth, decrepit enough to be heard from a long way off—these are but a few images of Richard Helms.

His focus—and his austerity—never left him. Nor, thankfully for all of us, did his sense of identification with the mission he knew so well and with the men and women of CIA, whom he loved so much.

In his nearly seven years as DCI, he set standards of leadership—and standards of excellence—that endure to this day. Though associated most closely with our Clandestine Service, which he had guided with tremendous insight, Richard Helms is for all of us the complete American intelligence officer.

For he not only understood the complicated mechanics of his business, he understood both its possibilities and its limits.

He saw intelligence for what it truly is: an essential service to the President of the United States. His goal, as he used to say, was to try to “keep the game honest”—to stick to the facts and their interpretation, to be an impartial voice, and to leave the policy decisions to others.

He once remarked that “God did not give prescience to human beings.” And he recognized that perfection is impossible in a profession devoted to the complexities and unknowns of the world. In pursuit of the truth, he urged his officers to be bold and to take risks. He led from the front.

He gave them the authority to do those things, while keeping for himself the one thing that no real leader can ever delegate: ultimate responsibility for the actions of the men and women he leads.

These are some of the principles that Richard Helms stood for. And he stood for them not in times of quiet or ease, but in turbulent times—times of grueling war in Southeast Asia, of enormous tension and conflict in the Middle East, and of Cold War everywhere.

He was shaped by the 20th century, but he was not bound by it. For the values he embodied are timeless: love of country, dignity and discipline in its service, and a grace and elegance of style, paired with a restless desire not simply to know about the world, but to help change it for the better.

In his life of accomplishment, Richard Helms had a great advantage—the unflinching love and support of his wonderful wife, Cynthia. Her care, her affection added to his focus and his strength.

Husband. Father. Patriot. Friend. Servant of liberty at the Central Intelligence Agency and far beyond. A lasting source of inspiration. A man who had reached the top of his field, who had kept the company of presidents, kings, and prime ministers, but who—to the end of his life—made time to inspire young people establishing their own careers in intelligence. To them, and to so many others, he offered priceless counsel and encouragement.

What others hoped to be, he was.

He will be missed by many. But he will be remembered and revered by many more. Wherever American intelligence officers strive to defend and extend freedom, Richard Helms will be there. By word, by deed, by example, he taught them all. They are his legacy. They will be his memorial.

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I was fortunate and indeed privileged to have our paths cross. I could have had no finer mentor, no better teacher, no wiser friend. Whatever the problem, I knew he had faced it. Whatever the challenge, I knew he had met it. And I always knew he was in my corner.

In the toughest of times, it was his voice on my answering machine, his notes in the mail, or the phone call where he would simply say keep your head up—get on with it—always get on with it, because there is so much at stake.

His was the most valuable advice, the advice of experience. He was the voice of constant encouragement.

I am going to miss the twinkle in his eyes, his signature smile, the great stories, knowing this giant of a man and talking to my friend. May God bless you always, Dick. May your memory be everlasting.

George J. Tenet is a former Director of Central Intelligence. He delivered these remarks at the memorial service for former DCI Helms at the Fort Meyer Officers' Club on 20 November 2002.



The Intelligence Professional Personified





The Intelligence Professional Personified

by David S. Robarge

In Memory and Appreciation

Editor's Note: From 1997 to 2002, David Robarge worked as a research assistant for Richard Helms while the Ambassador was writing his memoirs, and also interviewed him extensively for other historical projects. In the course of those and many other professional and social contacts with the Ambassador and his family, the author came to regard Helms as a friend and counselor.

Richard Helms

*Director of Central Intelligence,
1966-1973*

The Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles once told Congress, “should be directed by a relatively small but elite corps of men with a passion for anonymity and a willingness to stick at that particular job.” Richard Helms, the eighth Director of Central Intelligence (1966-1973) who died in Washington on 23 October 2002 at the age of 89, embodied those qualities. He was among the last of a dwindling group of trailblazers who dominated American intelligence for much of the Cold War. When Helms entered on duty with the new Agency 55 years ago, he was one of a cohort of young veterans of clandestine warfare during World War II who chose to stay in the secret world to fight a new, and in many ways more formidable, enemy. Seemingly a natural at managing secret operations, Helms rose from desk officer to DCI and came to

represent a newtype of government professional: the career intelligence officer, steeped in the culture of clandestinity and devoted to the Agency as an institution. Intelligence work, Helms would later say, was “not merely . . . a job, but rather . . . a calling.”

Formative Years

Born in 1913 into a family of means and international connections, Helms grew up in smart suburbs of Philadelphia and New York. One of his brothers described their youth as “conventional upper-middle class, well educated, well traveled, interested in good schools and sports, and with a social life centering around the country club.” Helms took part of his schooling at academies in Switzerland and Germany and became fluent in French and German. In 1931 he entered Williams College and majored in literature and history. He became class president and head of the school paper, and was voted “most respected,” “best politician,” and “most likely to succeed.”

After graduating in 1935, Helms set out to be a journalist and newspaper owner, and by age 23 was a European correspondent for United Press International. He advanced from writing obituaries of English celebrities to covering the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin—the so-called “Hitler Games”—and interviewing the Führer just after a chilling Nazi rally at Nuremberg. He returned to the United States the next year to learn the business side of newspapers, working up through the advertising ranks at the *Indianapolis Times*, a major Midwestern daily.

Wartime with the OSS

In 1942, Helms joined the US Navy Reserve, received a commission as a lieutenant, and worked in the Eastern Sea Frontier headquarters in New York City, plotting the locations of German submarines in the

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Atlantic Ocean. A former wire service colleague approached him about working for the new Office of Strategic Services in its Morale Operations Branch, which produced “black” propaganda. In 1943, the Navy transferred Helms to OSS in Washington. He underwent the standard tradecraft training at a covert facility in suburban Maryland, which included hand-to-hand combat instruction from the legendary English expert Col. William Fairbairn and an exercise in infiltrating and “spying” on a local defense contractor.

On finishing OSS “boot camp,” Helms began what he would spend most of his intelligence career doing: planning and directing espionage operations from an office in Washington. In this case, the target was Germany, and the agents were run out of Central Europe and Scandinavia. Early in 1945, Helms got his first overseas assignment, in the London office of OSS’s espionage branch. Working under (and sharing a Grosvenor Street flat with) William Casey, Helms organized infiltrations of agents behind German lines to spy and set up resistance networks. Late in the war he was “forward deployed” to Paris. Then, after V-E Day, he moved on to Luxembourg and Germany, where he was made deputy chief of the espionage element in Wiesbaden. In August 1945, he was transferred to a similar job in Berlin under Allen Dulles. From there he tracked down Nazi sympathizers and war criminals, collected information on stolen goods, traced German scientists, and monitored Soviet military misdeeds.

A Life’s Work

After President Truman abolished OSS in late 1945, Helms moved into the Berlin office of the Strategic Services Unit, a carryover operational organization warehoused in the War Department. In December he came back to Washington (for good, as it turned out) to run the Central Europe branch of the short-lived Central Intelligence Group. In late 1947, he took a similar position in the new CIA’s Office of Special Operations. After the Directorate of Plans was created in 1952, Helms served as chief of operations (the number two job) for eight years, largely running the directorate as DDP Frank Wisner’s health deteriorated. Besides overseeing espionage operations during those years, Helms smoothed relations between competing factions in

the directorate—the spy handlers and the covert operators represented different cultures and often worked at cross purposes—and helped protect the Agency from Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s efforts to seed it with informants.

Probably Helms’s greatest personal disappointment through this phase of his career was not being chosen to replace Wisner as DDP in 1958. If Helms had been selected, rather than Richard Bissell, he might have kept the Agency from committing its biggest blunder to date, the Bay of Pigs operation. Although the Eisenhower Administration almost certainly would have ordered the CIA to do something to remove Fidel Castro from power, Helms probably would not have approved a project anywhere near as large and unwieldy as the one Bissell backed. Without that covert action disaster on his record, Allen Dulles most likely would have finished his directorship quietly in a year or two and turned over a respected, even popular, Agency to his successor—assumed by many at the time to be Richard Helms.

As it turned out, Helms’s eventual selection as DDP in 1962 under John McCone—the DCI who had replaced Allen Dulles the year before—proved important symbolically and substantively. It quieted many of the rumblings from Clandestine Service careerists after Bissell’s and Dulles’s ouster, and allayed their fears that McCone, a shipping and construction tycoon, was bent on running the Agency like a big business. Helms’s promotion also signaled a shift in emphasis from covert action to espionage—a reorientation with which he wholeheartedly agreed.

During the bitter peace of the Cold War, when nuclear superpowers and their proxies faced off in hot spots all over the globe, Helms and his CIA colleagues had to be, in columnist George Will’s words, “resourceful, tough-minded people” who “were not too squeamish to do hard things.” Wherever CIA operatives were—behind the Iron Curtain, in Third World cities, or out in the jungle or desert— “[e]spionage is not played by the Marquess of Queensberry rules,” Helms noted, “and the only sin in espionage is getting caught.” Secret intelligence work demands a special character in its practitioners, who must be able to bear the bleak reality that they “have only each other on whom to

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