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BOOK REVIEW

The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA. By Thomas Powers. Knopf. 393 pages. \$12.95.

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McMillan

Helms, CIA the Cold War

In this magnificent book, Thomas Powers has used the career of Richard Helms, former CIA director and a U.S. intelligence official for 30 years, as the peg on which to hang a history of the CIA. In so doing, Powers has given us a secret history of the Cold War.

It would take someone with a tremendous sense of irony, a feeling for the way opposites meet, to write a truly fine book on intelligence, and Thomas Powers has succeeded. He has used interviews with nearly 50 former CIA officials and other sources in and out of government to build his story layer upon layer. He has composed it with monumental fairness, stubborn integrity of judgment and a limpid vision that enables us to see right through to the ambiguity at the bottom of human affairs.

His book, like every good book, is ambitious, and the question that lies behind it like a shadow is this: Can a society remain free that has a powerful secret society at its heart?

Powers seems to think it can, yet his story is a tragic one suggesting the opposite. It is a tragedy not of Richard Helms and the CIA only, but of the American people. For we lived in a world of illusions, that we were not like them, the Russians, while the CIA lived in a much crueler world in which we were, indeed, rather like them. And a geological fault opened between the two worlds. It was not long before the mentality of that hard CIA world required for the Cold War perhaps crept over and poisoned our world and ended by corrupting the American political process itself.

Powers says that we Americans grew up with a child's view of history, and he opens appropriately with a child's view of Richard Helms. The child was a 10-

year-old boy who lived next door to Helms in Chevy Chase and who started in 1947 trying to figure out what Helms did. He learned that Helms was a spy; sometimes late at night he heard the tap-tapping of Helms' typewriter coming from

a screened-in porch, accompanied by the tinkling of wind chimes blowing in the summer breeze. The tinkling of those chimes was the echo of our innocence.

The boy did not learn much about Helms, who had gone to work for the OSS in 1943 and for the CIA at its founding in 1947. He was already an invisible man. He was committed to secrets, so much so that the keeping of them had become for him the bedrock of personality. He had a reputation within the CIA as a classic espionage man, one for whom the gathering of secrets, the recruiting and handling of agents, was the heart of intelligence work. Spy-running was in Helms' blood, and he was one of the best.

But Helms' caution and restraint made him an anomaly in Allen Dulles' CIA. Dulles had attracted from the beginning Ivy League patriots, men with names like Roosevelt and Bissell and Barnes, who were outgoing, risk-taking men, gung-ho on covert operations. Men who had been together since Yale and Groton and knew each other's reflexes found it easier to trust one another, and this was a good thing. It made for cohesiveness at the agency when the CIA came under the cold glare of Joe McCarthy.

This was one of the ways in which a man like Richard Bissell survived. Tall, courteous, a product of Groton and Yale, Bissell had a daring, imaginative mind; he used it to develop first the spectacular U-2 airplane and then the spy-satellite program. Yet in spite of these huge successes, people at the CIA were surprised in 1958 when Allen Dulles chose Bissell to be deputy director of plans, or covert operations, over Helms. But there was logic in the choice, for Bissell believed in "dirty tricks," while Helms tried to prune them and cut them back. The rivals differed over secrecy, too. To Bissell, "secret" meant that you kept an operation secret from the New York Times, at least until it was successfully completed, while to Helms "secret" meant secret from inception to eternity.

Helms as Skeptic

So it happened that as plans developed in 1959 for a secret, CIA-backed invasion by Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, Bissell, the man in charge, ran enthusiastically with the idea while the more skeptical Helms "listened carefully, inspecting his fingernails."

Then in 1960 John Kennedy was elected president after a series of televised debates in which he promised to be tougher on Fidel Cas-

tro than his opponent, Richard Nixon. When in April 1961 the Bay of Pigs landing failed, Kennedy was publicly magnanimous. Privately he was furious. For the Kennedys of those days, John and Robert, had been trained not to lose. When they did, they "didn't get mad, they got even." Thus the two brothers resolved to get even with Castro, who had handed them their big defeat.

They decided on "Operation Mongoose," a bizarre, super-secret scheme to overthrow Castro by staging paramilitary raids, wrecking the Cuban economy and "getting rid of" Castro himself. This time the man who was placed in charge was not Richard Bissell but Richard Helms. Helms often met in private with Robert Kennedy and he received impatient telephone calls from the attorney general demanding to know whether agents had landed to blowup the Matahambre copper mines. "My God," Helms lamented to a friend, "these Kennedys keep the pressure on about Castro."

The question, as it was argued later with theological intensity by the Church committee of the Senate, was: Did John F. Kennedy personally order the assassination of Fidel Castro? For the Kennedys and the CIA had a long-standing habit in common — they never put anything explosive down on paper. So to this day no piece of paper has ever been discovered to prove that the president even knew.

In the most maddening, fascinating chapter of his book, Powers argues the question backwards, forwards and upside down and by the counterintelligence method of triangulation; he demonstrates, to my mind convincingly, that the president both knew and gave the order. For example, on being introduced for the first time to Tad Szulc, a reporter for the New York Times, Kennedy actually asked, "What would you think if I ordered Castro to be assassinated?"

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Powers' rigor in thrashing out the question is appropriate, for it is the key to what happened. The sad truth is that, beginning in 1960, the American people elected three presidents in a row who lost their heads over Communism and very nearly destroyed American democracy in the process.

Thus the next president, Lyndon Johnson, lacked Kennedy's "personal fire and vindictiveness" about Castro — he transferred it instead to Vietnam. His successor, Richard Nixon, ordered the director of the CIA, now Richard Helms, to prevent the election and installation of a socialist, Salvador Allende, as president of Chile.

From using the CIA to intervene

in the constitutional processes of sovereign nations abroad, it was only a short step to importing the same methods back home. It began under Johnson, really, with Operation Chaos, an investigation of student protest movements against the war in Vietnam. It continued in the Nixon era when a weary and compliant CIA found itself — in violation of its charter — helping to draw up a domestic intelligence program at the direction of a White House aide, Thomas Charles Huston.

It was not just the CIA that had become compliant but also its director, Richard Helms. He had never been one to lie awake at night wondering if CIA had a moral right to do as it did — "If we wanted to be in the Boy Scouts, we'd have joined the Boy Scouts," he used to say. Helms was the president's servant, but he wondered sometimes, especially when, as happened with increasing frequency during the late 1960s and early '70s, the president's orders were in violation of American tradition, law and plain common sense.

Nixon was the biggest challenge, for he hated the CIA and treated its director with contempt. But the contempt in which Nixon held Helms and the CIA was of a piece with his contempt for the American people to whom he announced on the day they handed him his smashing re-election victory of 1972 that they were "like a child in the family."

Nixon's Test

It was Nixon who at last put the American people to the test. But first he tested Richard Helms. Of the five burglars who tried to break into Democratic headquarters at the Watergate apartments on June 17, 1972, three had some connection with the CIA, and one, Howard Hunt, was personally known to Helms. During the months that followed, Nixon tried first to link the CIA with the break-in, for which it was not responsible and of which it had had no advance knowledge, and then to make it accept blame for the cover-up, for which Nixon himself was re-

sponsible. Throughout the blackmailing moves and countermoves Helms stubbornly, inch by inch, and in order to save his agency, refused. It cost him his job.

Nixon fired Helms and appointed him ambassador to Iran. During confirmation hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 1973, Helms testified falsely that the CIA had not intervened in the Chilean elections of 1970 and had not passed money to opponents of Allende. For these answers he was later subject to a three-year investigation by the Department of Justice on the question of perjury. Finally, in 1977, he was allowed to plead "no contest" to two misdemeanor counts of having failed to testify "fully, completely and accurately" and was given a suspended sentence.

To this day, despite pressures and punishments, Helms has not betrayed a single secret of the United States. He kept them not merely to protect himself, since he was at the heart of so many, and not merely to protect the CIA, to which he had given his life and which he believes the American people still need. He kept them, Powers suggests, to protect our innocence. For if the secrets can be kept, then, in a wry, metaphysical way, they have no existence and we Americans are not like the Russians after all.

Reading this superb and subtle book, one sees with the clarity of tragedy. One sees why the system held and why the men who were shaped by it kept faith. Yet one wishes it had not happened that way — that the rigor of things had broken and that someone had *told*. For had we been trusted with the truth, had we been allowed to forfeit our innocence and make our choices for ourselves, then the American people might have been spared — and might have spared others — abuses like Vietnam and Watergate, which ruptured the fabric of our society and continue severely to compromise our political system to this day.

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