

Eulogy for Former DCI Richard McGarrah Helms

George J. Tenet

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.



Former DCI Richard Helms

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.

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 unfailing 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.

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 the 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.