

RICHARD HELMS--R. JACK SMITH INTERVIEW

22 June 1983

H: I suppose the first thing to say is that contrary to reports I've heard in various places, the word "CHAOS" was added to the MH digraph purely by chance.

S: Yes, I've ....

H: It was not picked.

S: I've heard that from Sammy Halpern.

H: It was not any attempt of mine. That is clear.

S: Yeah.

H: The second point is that allegations have been made that neither President Johnson nor President Nixon specifically asked me to set up a unit such as the unit I established under Dick Ober. I think this is probably true. Neither President Johnson nor President Nixon had the faintest idea of how one would go about finding out what they were very anxious to have the Agency find out, i.e., the influence of foreign individuals, intelligence services, embassies, individuals, in the financing of the anti-war movement in the United States during this period -- the period of the Johnson Administration, the period of the Nixon Administration. That the target, the objective, was a legitimate one, I think goes without saying. I mean, this was part of the Agency's job, that if foreigners were attempting to cause trouble in the United States, the Agency certainly had its part in trying to find out who these foreign countries were, what entities were involved and why they were doing this and how. Certainly, it was the FBI's jurisdiction inside the United States to try and stop people from doing these things, but certainly it was incumbent upon the Agency to do its best outside to

find out the origins of this anti-war movement, where the money was coming from and how it was being spent. Therefore, under pressure from President Johnson to find out what was behind the anti-war movement, and more particularly why it was that the students were in the vanguard of this, why the students on the campuses and so forth were in a turmoil all the time, I established this unit because it seemed to me that since this was a high priority in the eyes of the President, that it should be a high priority in the Agency. And I established this unit under Ober to try and look at all the material that came in from all over the world, from whatever source that we could find, to see what was behind this. And unless one put this kind of focus on it, I was afraid that it would simply get away from us. So that was what Dick Ober was supposed to do originally. As time went on, I recognized that inside the Agency, particularly among the young, there were some who felt that this was an inappropriate activity for the Agency. I think particularly that part of it where we were taking Americans and attempting to get them into the peace movement here and then move them overseas to target areas to infiltrate youth movements there to find out what these movements were doing and what their objectives were and what their modus operandi was and so forth. Nevertheless, it did not seem to me proper that I should give up this activity simply because some young men didn't like it. I mean there are often generation gaps and there are often differences in perception, and so if there is any criticism still around that these fellows should have carried the day and that the Director was not morally tuned to the younger generation or something, I heard all the arguments and I still thought that it was desirable that we continue on with this endeavor. Now, as to the pressure under which I was put, none of it was unseemly in any sense. It was much more an abiding concern on

the part of the President. Neither he nor the Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, could figure out why such turmoil, if there wasn't some foreign element or some foreign money behind it, and this was sort of a plea, "Can't you fellows find out what's going on here? Look at these people in the streets, we can't imagine that good Americans do things like this." So, the issue was not one of pounding the desk and saying go out and do this, that and the other thing, the issue was that this was a prime concern of the President and the Vice President, and therefore it seemed to me that it should be of prime concern with the CIA. I learned later when the Church Committee hearings came up that in two or three cases, I believe, perhaps the Agency overstepped its actual charter by debriefing young people whom it had infiltrated into the peace movement about actual activities and who was involved in activities in Washington. In some of these demonstrations I believe this was the case. My mind is not a hundred percent clear but certainly the Congressional testimony is so lavish that you can pick up any details about this that you want. I never knew about this at the time; I didn't realize it was happening. To this day it doesn't upset me all that much but I gather that this was the issue over which people felt that the Agency had actually overstepped its charter limits. To the end of MHCHAOS, we got a certain amount of information about foreign involvement, largely Cuban, but it was never really enough to satisfy the requirement and when we came to the question of this document, "Restless Youth," which was a very good analysis, it seemed to me, that was done by DDI, there was a big "hoo-ha" later because American youth was tied in with foreign youth. And this was supposed to be beyond our jurisdiction. But I took a conscious decision

at the time this came up, I believe it was with Dick Lehman, I'm not sure anymore, said to me, "If we're going to make a rounded picture here, we've got to put it all together. It really doesn't make much sense to cut off the legs and just leave the torso wandering around. So let's put the whole thing together and take whatever chances go with this because it does seem to be so important." Well, when the issue came up later there was all kinds of blood on the moon about the fact that we had put together this kind of a study, but I still think that it's kind of straining at gnats that this over-moralizing and rather sanctimonious view that a lot of Americans seemed to take when anything is just slightly to their distaste and, you know, I've been through a lot of that. Going a little further with "Restless Youth," one of the most interesting things to me about this whole issue in retrospect was the fact that when I attempted, I believe it was early in the Nixon Administration, to establish in Europe, particularly, why it was that in Switzerland, in Germany and in France youth was rampant and so forth when they weren't after all involved in the Vietnamese War, what was it? Was it the Russians had a real net that was going into all of this and getting everybody excited at the same time? Was it the Chinese? Who was doing all this? And I made a specific trip to Europe, to England and to all of Western Europe, and talked to all the security services and so forth and what came out at the end was just Simple Simon. It wasn't any conspiracy at all. It wasn't any ganging up of any kind. It wasn't the Russians. It wasn't the Chinese. It turned out to be the television. That watching these students in Japan, for example, the English students got the idea of using these great big batons to go after the Mounties in London. They got other ideas from the Japanese, I don't know what they were. The

Japanese probably got ideas from the Germans or from the English. And it was watching on television that these kids picked up the techniques and the ideas of putting on some demonstrations themselves. I think, in point of fact, television was the villain, and historically I think it probably would be shown to be the case. There's been a lot of criticism, I know, of MHCHAOS. There's been a lot of misunderstanding about what the purposes of the affair were. I think actually when passions and tempers cooled and one begins to examine exactly what happened quietly and dispassionately and so forth, it doesn't turn out to be all that much of a much, particularly the issue about the files of Americans in the Agency. There was never the slightest intention on anybody's part to set up duplicate files with the FBI or to persecute Americans or to do anything with Americans, but we had this big traffic in paper, back and forth between the Agency and the FBI, everything that we'd get from overseas that had something to do with Americans or people involved in domestic affairs here, we'd send down to the Bureau. We'd get papers back, reactions from them. Obviously, we had to keep track of these papers, we had to file these papers and over time we built up a tremendous file. But it was not with any malign intent. I don't know of anybody who was really damaged in the process. In subsequent years there have been a lot of civil suits that you are well aware of, over letter openings, over NSA's work in looking at telegrams and telephone calls that go overseas and so forth. There've been a lot of suits with civil liberties and so forth. There we are, I mean, it's uh, there's no sense in being critical of the suits, we have a kind of wide-open society whereby you can pretend five years after something that you didn't know happen happened, that you were damaged, that you were

upset and so forth, and under our legal procedures there are some judges that think you were disturbed. So it's a kind of a nonsensical situation, but that's our system and so be it. The fact remains, however, that if one actually examines in detail each individual case involving Americans in any of these issues, nobody was ever harmed. And it seems to me that when one looks back at this period and looks back at it from the vantage point of 1980's, there's never been a time when civil liberties were more rampant than they are in the United States today, so all these allegations of abuses on the part of the CIA which were supposed to disturb and distort our great democracy; hell, our great democracy is even more progressive, more, what is that word, not profligate but, you know when you can do anything in sight. More than it's ever been in history. What is the word I really want?

S: Permissive.

H: Permissive. So all this nonsense about the Agency's role in distorting American democracy, I think it's just the biggest pile of crap imaginable, and I think history will show this to be the case. In other words, when people come up with all this junk about the senior officials in the Agency, and Agency operatives and Agency analysts having malign purposes and intent, it just doesn't show up on the record, and I think that history ought to show that this was the case. There may be a lot of dirty tricks in future times, but there haven't been dirty tricks on Americans in the past and they're damned lucky they had the kind of people they did running their organization so that they didn't.

S: Right. Well, you know, I think that the most salient point in all this is that the reports that were made as a result of this activity,

always said there is no credible evidence that foreign powers are intervening in these movements. As a matter of fact, it is instead a social revolution which has occurred independent of any outside interference, and we said that valiantly and repeatedly, despite the fact that people who had asked for these studies wished to hear something quite different. We never gave them what they wanted. Coming back just a minute, Dick, to your guidelines. Of course there was a point which you recognize most clearly, a dividing line in our kind of activity, where the FBI's role is and where ours is, and ours is fundamentally overseas, and I remember hearing you say one time with some heat in the Morning Meeting cause something had come up, Des or somebody had raised the point, and you said, "We do not operate against Americans in this country. Keep your hands off Americans in this country." I remember you saying that with great firmness and I think it was a guiding principle. What, do you remember, when you laid down that charter to Ober and company? Do you remember making that quite clear or was it unnecessary in terms of their understanding?

H: Well, I would have thought it was unnecessary because I thought everybody in the Agency over the age of 12 knew that this was one of the guiding principles of Agency operations, but I certainly on various occasions in talks with Ober and others had plenty of opportunity to re-emphasize this. I don't think anybody had any doubt about it. You see, one of the things that to my astonishment tended to get all tangled up in this CHAOS thing later, at the time of the Church Committee and so forth, was some operations that the Office of Security was running to try and determine what kind of foreign elements or hostile elements were attempting to get into our buildings, they were gonna demonstrate near our buildings and things of this

kind. And I can't say that all of those operations I spent maybe as much time on as I should have, simply because they were being done in conjunction with local police forces and the FBI, and it seemed to me that they were perfectly legitimate means of protecting ourselves against damage to property and damage to personnel and so forth. But when they finally were surfaced and got tangled up with CHAOS, then it was hard to see who was guiding whom and obviously CHAOS had nothing to do with the Office of Security and the Office of Security had nothing to do with CHAOS. So it tended to, I think, confuse and sort of muddy some of these issues. You see my point.

S: Yes, I do.

H: When you are talking to "an innocent abroad," some young lawyer who wants to hang you, and you're attempting to point out to him that after all the Office of Security was different from MHCHAOS, and he says, "But it's all the CIA." I mean, you just can't get through that wall. So, I think this was another thing that helped to give this a high sheen.

S: Right. Now, do you remember when you, in your first discussions with President Johnson any particular vehemence on his part or any, how, how strong was the pressure? What kind of pressure did you actually feel?

H: He was very concerned about this, and I don't think that anybody that was in National Security Council Meetings with him had any doubt that he was very worried about what kind of foreign influence was in the anti-war movement and was talking about it constantly and couldn't understand why people couldn't find the evidence.

S: What was his reaction when the reports (were) brought down, "Restless Youth" report, the first one?



H: Well, I don't know that I recall any specific reaction on his part. It seems to me that I got a reaction from Vice President Humphrey about it, something to the effect that, well, if this is what it shows, that you're really certain that this is right and so forth. In other words, they were not gonna give up on this baby.

S: Yeah, but you'd expect Hubert to be a little more fair-minded about it.

H: Well, I think ....

S: A little less passionate than Lyndon.

H: That is true, that is certainly true, except that here was one that was bothering both of them. That's all I can say.

S: Right. What was the difference in the heat or the aggressiveness on the subject when Nixon urged you to go back into the lists? He must have said ....

H: Well, you will recall that Nixon was just as convinced as Johnson (about this). There was a lot of hanky panky going on. But his particular concerns were directed at the FBI, because he felt that J. Edgar Hoover was simply not doing his job. Now when Nixon was Vice President, he'd been a big supporter of Hoover's, and theoretically was a big supporter of Hoover's in his Administration as President. But it is quite clear that for reasons which I am not aware of, he rapidly got to the point where he thought that Hoover should be moved on. And there is a story that goes with this. You will recall that I was criticized in the Rockefeller Commission Report, by implication, when they made a recommendation saying that the Director of the Agency ought to be a man of independence, standing wealth and so forth so he could stand up to the President and so on. Which, as you are well aware, I resented very much because I didn't think there was any

basis for this comment. And the particular issue was on the request that came from Ehrlichman for reports on the so-called or alleged assassinations of Diem, Trujillo and Castro, I think -- was it Trujillo? No, it was Diem, Trujillo and Lumumba, I think -- which trio it was I don't know, but anyway I got the studies together, and then I said to Ehrlichman, "Now, look here, I've got these studies together that you requested of me, but I want to talk to the President before I turn them over. Would you set up an appointment?" So he did set up an appointment for some time on a certain day, which is ascertainable from the record somewhere, and I went down to the White House with these studies under my arm, and when I was ushered into the oval office Ehrlichman and the President were there. And the first issue that the President raised was, he said, "Dick, John Ehrlichman and I have just been discussing how we can get J. Edgar Hoover to resign. Do you have any thoughts on how this might be accomplished?" And I said, "I didn't." I didn't think he had any intention of resigning and I thought it would be a difficult thing to do unless his resignation was actually requested. So there was some desultory conversation about this which was the first time I'd heard out of the President's own mouth that he wanted to get rid of Hoover. It was after that that I then took up the issue of these studies and asked him if he was personally requesting them and personally asked for them and personally wanted them, because after all he was the President and the one fellow that had a perfect right to get anything out of the Agency he wanted to. So when I established that I turned them over, and there was conversation about why he wanted these things, that he'd protect us and all the rest of it. But, these two things happened to be in the same meeting and that's the reason I regurgitate the story. And

S: Now the impression I've gotten from my brief discussions with Ober were that to his mind whatever transgressions occurred, or could be called transgressions, occurred when we had recruited Americans, as you suggested earlier, to infiltrate them into the peace movement here, anti-war movement, with the expectation of moving them abroad . . . .

H: Right.

S: But then using them in a sense while they were here.

(BRIEF INTERRUPTION RE MR. HELMS' CAR KEYS)

S: Well, I was asking about the use of people who were supposed to be sent overseas who were in the movement here, but occasionally were used or debriefed on their activities in indigenous anti-war movements here. Do you remember getting any of those reports? Do you remember any of the any particular discussion with Ober about that particular question, or did it come up at the time?

H: I don't particularly remember but then there's no reason why I should remember because it would have been so routine and humdrum.

S: But you would have felt there was a dividing line, would you not?

H: Yeah but there was a tremendous pressure in connection with Vietnam. Now there, that was unremitting. Nixon would say, "Look, don't talk to me about this and that and the other thing, there is only one problem these days in the United States and that's Vietnam." And we were not doing well about getting intelligence on what was going on in Hanoi and North Vietnam and so forth. And I had the bull whip out all the time on the FE Division, how it was to come up with new ways to try and see if we couldn't find out what the enemy was up to in the Vietnamese War -- the Russians, the Chinese, the North Vietnamese and so forth. So that planting

people in the peace movement and moving them overseas seemed to be one of the legitimate ways of our trying to get into   or to some of these other countries where there were large peace movements so that we could get information from people who actually went to North Vietnam and so on.

S: Yes. My question is not addressed to that but it's instead the immersion part when they were getting themselves kind of tuned up for going overseas. And they were actually operating in the United States among American peace movements.

H: Well, I didn't know that this was going on. As a matter of fact, I'm certain that I didn't because when this came up in the Church hearings I was quite surprised by it. I wasn't shocked by it; I just was surprised that I'd never heard about it.

S: Well, that's my question really. It hadn't been brought to your attention.

H: No, not that I was aware of. If it had been, it had gone clear out of my head.

S: Right. Right.

H: But I'm not pointing fingers at anybody . . . .

S: Oh no no no no no. Well, it's a very natural, easy slipping over the line. It's what happens to us sometimes. Well, Dick, I don't think there's an awful lot to talk about on this subject, frankly. I think you've just about exhausted it. It seems to me that . . . .

H: Well, there was so much in the Congressional hearings. And once you can sit down with Ober, then he can go over (it). The poor fellow has had a very rough time, I know that. But I think by now he must have sorted

himself out, and you say he looks well and so forth, but I imagine he'll be ready to be kind of historical on his perspective and then whatever kinks you've still got left, I'm sure he'll be able to fill in.

S: Well, as you remember, the focus of this history is on your role -- your operational activities. About all Ober can do is help me remind you and me of occasions when you acted, that you may have lost sight of at the present.

H: That's what I meant, and his impression of my instructions and all the rest of it.

S: Right. Yeah. But other than that, I don't know whether there's an awful lot more to get into. So if you're content, I am.

H: Well, I am. Are there any other issues left that we ought to have another session about that you know of?

S: Not as far as I'm concerned. I'm writing now the Vietnam operations and there is not, really, a proper section on your administering of the DDP. The section I wrote on intelligence production pretty well covers the DDI and the section that John wrote on Community Affairs certainly gets into some of the major contributions of S&T, but there isn't really a section on how you dealt with the DDP. And what I've done really is to make the Vietnam operations a kind of exemplar of the way you did things.

H: I think that's good. Because that's the only way to do it. Because, otherwise, how the hell do you pick up historically a hundred decisions in a week about something of this kind?

S: No, you can't. But I've drawn together some concepts (based on) conversations I've had with quite a number of people. I've talked to an awful lot of people, it seems to me, and they have their views and how you dealt with the matters seems to be pretty much alike.

H: Are they consistent?

S: Yeah. They're very internally consistent.

H: Did you talk to Cord Meyer at all?

S: No. I have not.

H: Because he was Tom's Deputy and since Tom has passed on Cord might have some insights; I don't know whether he does or not. Sam Halpern certainly does.

S: I did. I talked to Halpern.

H: My way of dealing with the DDP in those days was that Tom Karamessines usually dropped into my office after the Staff Meetings and took up what matters he had that were of purely operational interest and we sort of decided them right then and there in the next few minutes, and then if there was anything that came up during the day, he buzzed me. But that was the most comfortable way to do it and it was by and large the way we did do it. And I spent so God damned long in that operation that I knew all the people, and I did continue the policy of signing off on all Station Chief appointments so I could see who was going where and if I didn't like it, stop it in time. And in a business that is square, the only thing you've got is people and money. That's a rather important consideration.

S: I've laid considerable emphasis on that.

H: So I spent a lot of time, or a reasonable amount of time, on that, but that's about it.

S: Well, I'll have it, I expect to have it done by early in July.

H: Do you? You're moving right along.

S: My report. My section. It's only supposed to be about 40 to 50 pages and then this will be kind of a, an adjunct to it, along with . . . .

Actually Vietnam is not Vietnam, it's Indochina, which comprises Laos as well as . . . .

H: Oh.

S: South Vietnam. Talked to [ ] at great length about Laos.

H: Talked to who?

S: [ ]

H: Yeah. The tough thing about Laos, in my opinion, because the evidence -- I tell you why I think it's kind of tough. The other day I was reading an article in the Miami Herald by Tom Polgar, and he points out the various times that the United States had attempted to support dissident movements in various parts of the world, and then he mentioned all these various countries we'd failed to do so successfully, (BRIEF INTERRUPTION) including Laos. And you know the Agency won the war in Laos.

S: Certainly.

H: It was losing in Vietnam because the collapse of our forces and in Laos it was the withdrawal of American support. It wasn't the fact this, you know, paramilitary war hadn't been successfully executed.

S: No, it had limited objectives and it achieved them.

H: They were achieved. There's no question about it.

S: Right. The only, the support was withdrawn principally in Congress, and largely, I guess, through the instigation of Symington and company.

H: Well, I don't think that that really was (it). I think if you even examine at the end when Symington was going around talking about his "secret war," the money was never taken away from the Laotian operation as I recall it. What actually ruined it in the end was the collapse in Vietnam.

S: Uhum.

H: Because of the withdrawal of American support obviously, these poor people couldn't get on with it. But up until the time American support was withdrawn, they're winning the war.

S: Yes. But, Dick, you do remember that you felt -- and [ ] is very eloquent on this -- you, yourself, felt that the time was coming when the Agency ought to withdraw from that operation.

H: Oh yes, no doubt about it.

S: It was getting much too large, it was no longer possible to put the budget . . . .

H: It'd been going on for several years, Jack, my God! I mean, you shouldn't have to do those things year after year after year.

S: That's right. No, they cannot remain covert just to begin with, and if it's not covert, it isn't our show. But you had a long talk with [ ] just before he went out to Laos and said, "Where are we headed?" You talked to him about 45 minutes or an hour. You know, "What, what should we do about this?" And subsequently, as [ ] remembers it, the decisions were made to start transferring Agency operations to the Army. General Vessey was out there. Vessey or however you pronounce.

H: Who was it?

S: Jack Vessey.

H: The one that is now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

S: Yes.

H: Was he out there?

S: Yeah.

H: Vessey?



S: Yeah.

H: I didn't realize that.

S: And he and [ ] sang sweet duets together and got it all worked out. It was a very easy transition, there was nothing dropped and everything continued. And we phased out.

H: You know I'd forgotten that.

S: Yeah. I don't doubt it, but that was a very wise and a very important decision and you get high marks for it, certainly in [ ] judgement.

H: I'd forgotten . . . .

S: You will in the study.

H: It was actually phased out. (Laughter)

S: Well, everybody who comments on it, comments that you took great pride in that activity, that you thought it was a success.

H: Yeah, I did. It was one of these things, you know.

S: It was, no doubt about it. But you also had the good sense to step out. Incidentally, even Colby speaks to that point. He says he thought that you were always more interested in FI and he in CA, "nation-building" and so on, and he felt that you worked together well in that respect because he liked to initiate the programs, you were reluctant to have them continue too long cause they were attracting too much attention, and, he said, and getting us into trouble -- he granted all this -- and that you had the judgement to stop them.

H: That is interesting.

S: Yeah.

H: And as near as anything, it's a valid judgement about the difference in our interests and orientation . . . .

S: I do too and I had never thought of it before as, you know, a kind of a team aspect to it which may be post facto but nonetheless (Laughter) it's pleasant to think about.

H: Yeah.

S: Well, OK, Dick.

H: Fine, Jack. Thank you very much for taking all this trouble. Again, I thank you. I'm so very pleased that you're doing it.

S: I must say I'm enjoying it and I went into it in the first instance because I had a great many unanswered (questions).

(END OF TAPE)