SECRET

Interview with Richard Helms

by R. Jack Smith

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R. Jack Smith: Congressional relations. I don't know Dick, I thought that you might try to begin by--just give you some structure to work around--you might talk about what the system was in your relation to the Congress as you understood it and how it worked, the frequency with which you met with these people, the membership of the groups you talked with.

Richard Helms: I certainly don't, Jack, want to get into any statistics because I assume those are available from the records of the Congressional Liaison Office. Besides whatever I said would be affected by the accuracy of my memory in any given situation. What I do want to discuss and to underline is the fact that despite the problems of Congressional relations for the Agency, the Agency had a record over the years of being very forthcoming with the Congressional Committees to which it was supposed to report. In the Senate, it was a sub-committee of the Armed Services Committee and Appropriations; in the House, it was a sub-committee of the House Armed Services Committee and, of course, the House Appropriations. Over time, in the Senate, this composition of the sub-committee, to which the Agency was to report, changed. In the days of Senator Richard Russell, he set-up a small sub-committee to which he brought Senator Hayden, who in those days was the chairman of Appropriations, so that whether we had a hearing on policy or covert action or something of this kind, or whether it was a hearing on the budget, the same group of senators--and it was a small group--did the work with Russell in the chair and, in agreement with

Hayde, Hayden present, and then the normally Margaret Chase-Smith, who was the senior Republican at the time, or Senator Saltonstall, who was the senior Republican at another time. In any event it was by-partisan, but small, discreet, and very secure. In the House, the chairman of the Hose Armed Services Committee inevitably or invariably chaired the sub-committee. Whether it was back in the days of Carl Vinson or whether it was later in the days of Mendel Rivers, they maintained a secure hold on Agency affairs and had a larger group than in the Senate but nevertheless a tidy group of secure Congressmen who took care of the Agency's affairs. Now as far as the Appropriations sub-committee was concerned, by the time I really had a thorough knowledge of these matters, George Mahon, of Texas, had taken over as Chairman of Appropriations. He was most interested in keeping private the Agency's affairs so he had a small sub-committee that met in a secure basement room of the Capitol, met secretly; he had on that the Senior Democrat on Appropriations, whoever it might have been at the time, and also the senior Republican on Appropriations, whoever that might have been at the time. So that usually it was a committee composed of five people, three Democrats and two Republicans. In this fashion, the Agency, laid before the House Appropriations sub-committee in detail, dollar for dollar, its budget every year. There was nothing held back from the Mahon sub-committee. Since according to the Constitution, money bills all originate in the House, this is the place where, obviously one has to make one's case. So that articles in

newspapers and allegations to the contrary not withstanding, the Agency had an unexceptionable record of laying out every dollar of its expenditures, what it was for, where it went, whether it was covert action, secret intelligence, counter-intelligence, airplanes, satellites, whatever it was, that sub-committee got the material.

Now let us get off to one of the problems the Agency ran into, certainly during my time, I don't know if it was the case so much before but it still will be recalled that the first sort of unzipping of covert operations that the Agency was involved in arose in 1967, I believe, with the revelation that the National Student Association had been financed in its overseas operations by the CIA. This caused, obviously, a good deal of checking into various other organizations that the CIA had been supporting. There were a certain number of revelations that took place at the time. Nevertheless, the fact that Senator Russell spoke up publically and said that he had known about the Agency's support of the National Student Association, followed by a public statement by Robert Kennedy that he had also known about this and had approved it, turned off the fire storm which was about to begin over this. So things rather settled down again but never to be precisely the same. When Senator Russell passed on and Senator Stennis took over as Chairman of the Armed Services Commiteee, he did not want to appoint Senator Symington as Chairman of the Preparedness Sub-committee of Senate Armed Services. This was obviously a personal dislike, or distaste, or something between

Senator Stennis and Senator Symington. They referred to each other in private in most unflattering language and since Senator Stennis did not want to give Senator Symington this particular post, Senator Symington who was also on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, went to Senator Fulbright and got himself a kind-of investigative sub-committee so that he was not able to do under the aegis of Armed Services. Also since Symington was quite senior, Stennis did not like to have hearings of the Agency sub-committee simply because of this squabble between these two men. The net result of it was that we had comparably few hearings under Senator Stennis' aegis. Despite pleadings and "can't we have a hearing" and "we'd like to check some things out" and so forth, Senator Stennis was quite reluctant to do this. On two or three occasions Senator Jackson told me that he had attempted to get Senator Stennis to permit him to set-up a small sub-committee of Armed Services in an effort to have more regular hearings and give more guidance and help to the Agency, but Senator Stennis simply declined to do this. This obviously reacted unfavorably for the Agency because when the allegation was made that there had not been many briefings the allegation in effect was true. Also despite all those who say, "well, you shouldn't talk about secret matters with Congressional committees" and all the pomposity that follows this, in our kind of democracy a Director of Central Intelligence does need guidance from time to time from the people in the Congress as to how far he may go in certain kinds of activity.

At least he would like to have some advice. When this is not available through regular hearings it makes it slightly difficult for him. In fact, it makes it very lonely indeed. Not that I was unwilling to take on the ONUS of the responsibility or any of the rest of it. It was simply that I thought that a better system of relationships between the Agency and the Congress should have been arranged. I would hope that now that there is a select committee in the Senate and a Select Committee in the House that this would all work much more satisfactorily. Because it is obviously preferable, in my opinion, to have consultation between Congress and the Agency and not to have any law or legislation or statute which guides or hems in the Agency's activities.

One day, I believe it was in 1967, it might have been in 1968, President Johnson suddenly told me that he was not going to include the budget funds for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. I was stunned by this decision and asked him why it was that he was not willing to support what we thought were very effective organizations. Who had got to him I never did find out but he was quite adamant about this. So, a serious dispute erupted between us, the end of which was that he said, "All right, I'm just not going to support you on this. If you can go down to the Congress and get the money, you can have the money. But I'm not going to support you, and when you go down there to talk about this I want you to tell them that I'm not supporting you." I was a bit wistful under these circumstances because after all money for the Executive Branch

has the support and advocacy of the President. In any event, those were the days when the Congress still had powerful chairmen. By visiting the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Mr. Mahon and the Senate Appropriations Commiteee chairman whose identity at the moment I've forgotten, the senior Republican on Appropriations in the House and the senior Republican on Appropriations in the Senate, I finally came back with the money to continue Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty for another year. I mention this because I don't know what the record in the Agency shows, but I thought it was an interesting example of the support that one could get in the Congress from time to time for things in which they believed.

Jack Smith: I was going to ask you what evidence, or what occasions you could remember, in which there were differences between the White House and the Congress or whether you encountered any of these strains from time to time. That's a very good example. Can you think of any others?

ichard Helms: Well, there was the time when President Johnson had made a rather ambitious trip to the Far East. I believe he came back by Europe, but the details of that could be easily ascertained in the public record. When the trip was over, he said he wanted the Agency to pay for a certain percentage of the trip. When I was approached on this, I said that the Agency couldn't do this just that way because it was in no sense our budget, or our understanding that we would undertake anything like this, and that when we used the contigency fund

which the Agency had for expenditures, we were honor-bound by agreement, to consult the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee of the House and the Chairman of the Appropropriations Committee of the Senate. So, very reluctantly and glumly, President Johnson gave in and said "All right, if you have to do that, go ahead and do it." So I did go to see Mr. Mahon and Senator Russell. They were most reluctant to have Agency funds be used for these purposes but since they were supporters of the President and realized that he had gotten himself in a bind unwittingly, they finally agreed to release the money.

. Jack Smith: Dick, in your relations with these Congressmen and Senators were there any one of them who stood out in your mind as the most pleasant, useful to work with, to deal with?

ichard Helms: Well, of all the Congressmen and Senators I dealt with over the years, by all odds the most impressive was Senator Richard Russell. He was, as they say in the newspapers, a giant in the Senate. He was conservative, he was cautious, he was prudent, but he was powerful. I do recall that when I got in trouble with Senator Fulbright over a letter I had mistakenly written to a newspaper editor, commenting favorably on an editorial, part of which criticized Senator Fulbright, and was hauled up before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of a Friday morning, and taken to the woodshed by the Committee, including its Chairman--a time at which I apologized for the whole event because it was perfectly unintentional, I had no desire whatsoever to criticize Senator Fulbright, that wasn't part of it, the main part of the editorial had to do with something the Agency was doing--Senator Russell was not in

town that day. He was on his way to Winder, Georgia. I was not able to get him on the telephone at any point. On Monday, when he returned to Washington I immediately went down to explain myself to him and to send my apologies for having any embarrassment I might have caused him. Because he was responsible for Agency actions in the Senate, and the Senate had erupted over this whole affair. Senator Russell looked at me and said, "No Mr. Director, I see no reason for you to apologize. I've talked to people on both sides of the aisle. You seem to have handled yourself very well. Let's just forget the thing." He was a thorough gentleman. On the other hand, when he didn't think that a proposal would work, or he thought it was too excessive, he would immediately say so.

He cautioned me on various occasions. I remember one specific occasion in which he said, "Mr. Director, I think that you've got to be very careful not to get into affairs that don't concern you. More people have had real trouble in this town by getting involved in things that really aren't their business than for any other single reason that I know of." He said, "You must never forget that the most insignificant Senator can cause your Agency all kinds of trouble." As background to this particular statement, I had been sent by President Johnson to talk to him about supporting President Johnson's efforts to open consulates in Leningrad and maybe in another Soviet city. Although Senator Russell was perfectly favorable to the idea, he didn't think that the Director of Central

Intelligence ought to be up talking to him about consulates in the Soviet Union even though there was some intelligence by-product. It was that that induced him to say one should not get into affairs that didn't concern him. I thought it was the best piece of advice I ever had and I haven't forgotten it.

He was also very sensible about the way he dealt with Agency matters. When it was discovered that the Oxcart ~~was gonna~~ going to have a cost overrun, was going to maybe get up to as high as [redacted] to produce, he said to me, "All right, we'll deal with this as we're trying to deal with it now because the whole procedure for funding this development has been in the Agency budget. But from now on, we're going to set up a procedure whereby the Defense Department funds these expensive overhead reconnaissance affairs. There is no way we can keep hiding in the Defense budget this Agency budget if it's going to get larger and larger and larger. Therefore, you work out with the Secretary of Defense some arrangement whereby he's going to fund these things, at your request if necessary. That way we can get the money without having so much trouble about it. We can keep it secret. Secret that way, I'm relatively certain. But you do this and I'll talk to him myself." So that was eventually the way in the NRO context this thing was finally turned around so that the satellites which came later were very expensive for the Defense Department's budget rather than the Agency's.

Jack Smith: You've underlined what I've always felt which was that you had

a special relationship with Dick Russell.

ichard Helms: Well, I wouldn't call it a special relationship. He felt responsible for the Agency. I was its Director. He was a very straight-forward individual, and therefore he wanted to be helpful. He was always available and I find him an extraordinary fellow.

. Jack Smith: You could go to him anytime for guidance or counsel.

ichard Helms: That's right.

. Jack Smith: Dick, the system as you describe it, was exactly as I understand it, which is that the leadership of the Congress determined, in effect, for the Congress who was going to be privy to CIA briefings.

ichard Helms: That's correct. In fact, Jack, I remember on one occasion going to Senator Russell and suggesting that perhaps in order to get wider support in the Senate for the Agency and its affairs, that I should maybe brief certain other Senators about what we were doing and so forth. Senator Russell was absolutely opposed to this. He looked me right in the eye and his eye got a little bit glinty. He said, "If you feel any necessity to go around and talk to other Senators about the Agency's business I certainly can't stop you, Mr. Director. But I'll tell you this, I will withdraw my hand and my support from your affairs."

Jack Smith: No question about it, the system eventually broke down. Now did it start to show cracks during your regime?

chard Helms: Yes, the cracks weren't bad but Senator Stennis was no Senator Russell. He had no where near the swat and standing in the

Senate that Senator Russell did. There were few Senators who wanted to attack Senator Russell. Whereas in 1975, you will recall, when this big push for hearings on the Agency took place, the other Senators stampeded Senator Stennis right into the ground. They just rode over him. Where they never would have been able to do that with Russell. He would have found some way out of this. That made all the difference.

. Jack Smith: Was Mahon his counterpart in the House--would you say?

ichard Helms: No, I think that Mahon was never a tiger when it came to defending the Agency. He was just careful about its affairs and never allowed anything to leak. As a matter of fact, let me just say for the record, that my experiences with the Senators and Congressmen with whom I dealt in all the years I was with the Agency was a very good experience except for a couple of quixotic examples which are not important. There were no leaks from the Congress of which I was aware, and they were perfectly secure in their dealings on Agency affairs.

. Jack Smith: I seem to have a recollection that one time some Congressmen wanted to be brdefed in detail on some program or other and you raised the question with Mahon, and Mahon said send him to me and I'll talk to him. Does that jibe with your understanding?

chard Helms: Well I think that that story is somewhat accurate but not entirely. I believe that this has to do with a request from Senator Proxmire that I was to testify before the Joint Economic Committee of which he was the Chairman. I didn't

think that this was something that Senator Russell wanted me to do. So I went to see Senator Russell. He said, "No, I don't want you to go up there for the Agency testifying about things like that. I want you to go back to Senator Proxmire. Just say you've discussed this with me and that I would prefer that you didn't do it and that if he has any continuing problems would he please give me a call." That was the end of the matter. When I told Senator Proxmire this he just sort of waved his hands and that was the end of the discussion.

Now that also had an event prior which was, as you will recall, that John McCone when he was Director asked Ray Cline to hold a press conference about a piece which had been written in the Agency about the Soviet Economy. It so happened that a day or two after that press conference I happened to accompany John McCone to a hearing at the Senate Armed Services Committee. Before the committee hearing began, Senator Russell came in and he really went to town on John McCone. He had John McCone flushed red. He said, "If you ever do this again, if you ever go public in this manner on things of this kind again, I simply am not going to support the Agency in its works or its budget or anything else. You leave those matters to the State Department or the Commerce Department, or the recognized agencies of Government that are supposed to testify before this body on matters of economics or politics or whatever the case may be. The Agency must stay in the background. I just want to tell you this is my warning to you about

this." I've rarely seen John McCone so put down in my life. But the message rang loud and clear that as long as Russell was there this was not to be.

Jack Smith: It took a Dick Russell to do it. But you don't have any recollection of a similar kind of discipline prevailing in the House with Mahon?

chard Helms: I can't say that I do. It may have been the case but I say that I don't know.

Jack Smith: Because thinking back, it is remarkable to think that there were very few instances in which members of the House tried to get from us information for their own particular purposes. There weren't very many instances. I remember when Rigel came out one morning as a brand new freshman Congressman just newly elected. He decided he ought to have all the daily publications that we were producing because he needed them for his background, his work. Maybe I was so brash as to say, "Perhaps you ought to talk to Congressman Mahon about this." But at any rate, my feeling was that...(interrupted).

chard Helms: You may have the wrong fella now here because on matters of that kind you would have to go to Mendel Rivers who was Chairman of the Armed Services. He's the one that controlled access to Agency hearings. The Appropriations sub-committee Chairman never showed his head in any of these matters. He was purely money.

Jack Smith: Of course, Mendel Rivers never had the moral force of Mahon. But on the other hand, Mendel Rivers could ride high in the saddle when he choose. Who took over from Mendel Rivers, was it--well I've forgotten.

. Jack Smith: I have too. The point I'm reaching for--and it really lies outside your period of leadership--is that eventually in 1975 when this thing exploded and we had Pike and all the people of that sort making noises about how the Agency had been doing these things and not informing Congress and so on, my feeling was that that was, in part, an internal part within Congress. Some of the young members had gotten out of hand and were blaming the leadership for not giving them a slice of the action.

ichard Helms: No question about that because two things coincided, one was the eagerness of a lot of these young turks to find out what the Agency was doing and to get Agency information, and the other was the decline of the power of the Chairmen in the Congress, which came about as a result of some other factors entirely. It had nothing to do with intelligence. These two things tended to coincide. What one sees now that all kinds of Agency analysts are being sent-up to brief various Congressmen and Committees and so forth. You will recall that I had a very distinct policy about that: if they wanted anybody up there they were going to get me. Because I was absolutely persuaded that unless the number one man in the organization appeared before these committees, or before these Congressmen, that a) there would be no control over this the next thing I knew; and b) if they needed somebody else he could always go with me and I would sit here while they did the briefings and so forth. This is what I did at all these various hearings. I still think it's the proper way to handle these affairs because underlying it

all, Congressional Committees have their own amour propre, each of those politicians is vain--he wants to be attended to by the number one man and even though he's glad to have some analyst come up and tell him some information which he can use for a debate on the House floor, that is a very loose way of trying to control your information.

Jack Smith: Well, I think that pretty well covers Congressional relationships. I think we ought to go back again and look again at some of the things about Vietnam and see if we can flush out a little more recollection from you of individual instances of interference of approval or whatever. The chief problem we had, the one where we had the least success as judged by a number of factors, was the numbers problem, the order of battle question. I've done a fair amount of thinking about that and one of the things that struck me is that this is the first time in American history that a civilian intelligence agency attempted to tell an Army in the field what was the size of its opponent, its enemy, the forces it was facing. We were in a sense, really trying to do an almost impossible thing, sitting in Washington, looking at the data which fundamentally was collected through mechanisms that the military were running, and determine from it what the best possible answer was. I myself feel that the Agency did a most distinguished job, but it's not always recognized that that's the case. Every now and then it flares up again as it did on the CBS Mike Wallace interview with Westmoreland and so on, which was instigated largely by our dear old friend Sam Adams.

ichard Helms: Did you see TV Guide's attack on the program?

. Jack Smith: Yes, yes. Mr. Annenberg took it apart. If anyone is at all fairminded, has any notion of what ethical journalism amounts to, all you have to do is watch Mike Wallace for about 5 minutes and you can see all the ethics violated very quickly. But the number problem, the order of battle. The morning meetings records are filled with instances in which Sherman Kent or I or George Carver reported to you on what the latest development was in our negotations with the military. Most of it was methodology. The notion among people who don't understand the problem is that there was a number. There was thoroughly accurate number, and all you had to do was to be honest about it, and you could know what that number was and report it. But of course, there wasn't any number. I really doubt seriously whether Viet Cong themselves knew precisely how many people there were who were responsive to military discipline in the South. So that we were dealing with scrappy information much of the time. A lot of it was a matter of definition. The military wanted to deal only with the regular line forces; they wanted to include theirs in their numbers. We feeling, rather more than they did, that it was a political war, wanted to include people who were part-time fighters, storekeepers by day and saboteurs by night. We felt that they were part of the picture and this, of course, is where Sam Adams got so badly askew because he wanted to count all those as individual integers just like the people in battalions in the regular forces. And

the Army under Westmoreland, all the military forces, opposed this, I should think, quite properly. There was where all the bind was, the methodology of trying to weigh the value, the valance, if you like, of this information as opposed to that. There were any number of methods by which you can arrive at an answer. There was probably no way on God's green earth of saying that this answer is without question, the best answer. That's what we were engaged in. What do you remember about pressures from individuals to get some kind of an answer on this. What did President Johnson ever have to say on this subject? Do you remember?

.chard Helms: I don't recall any discussions with President Johnson personally on this matter. Obviously, he was constantly concerned about the enemy forces because he was being promoted all the time for additional American troops to fight the war. I agree with everything you've said about this controversy. It's an interesting controversy because it's the first time in American history a) I agree with what you said, where civilians were trying to tell the military the size of the force they were fighting, but b) it was the first time this really had any relevance because this is the first war the United States ever lost. If they hadn't lost it, nobody would even be looking at these figures now.

Jack Smith: There's a "C" here, and that is that McNamara introduced the cost-accounting technique here, and you had to produce certain numbers of reductions in order to justify the increased layer of activity.

ichard Helms: I agree with that as well. The main thing, I think, that one historically should simply focus on is the fact that everyone was trying desperately to ascertain what truth was in this matter. Whether there were different methodologies, different methods of counting, attitudes, approaches, what should be counted in, what should be counted out, was this important, was that important, everybody involved in this exercise was obviously trying to get to a point where they felt comfortable with the result. The controversy over such a long time lay in the fact that there were these constant disagreements of what should be counted and what should be counted out. There's also no doubt about the fact that Sam Adams over all those years of fighting this war of his about his concepts of what the figures should be, did nobody any favor. I would be the first person to enjoy the spectacle of a fellow who felt that he was disadvantaged or over-ridden or anything else, I mean the guts to fight forward and make his case and perhaps come out victorious in the end. I am for the underdog just like anybody else, but Sam Adams way overplayed his hand. There was no reason to believe that Sam Adams, the one person of all these people that was involved in this exercise, should have been right and everybody else wrong. In other words, his motives weren't any better than anybody else's.

Jack Smith: Plus the fact he could never convince his peers with whom he worked day after day with the same material with which they worked. McNamara on the numbers, or Wheeler, or Congress?

ichard Helms: No. I don't. You know this whole business about the numbers seems to have been sort of mood music in the back of the playing orchestra because seldom did this question come up. It was much more when the numbers were mentioned it was body count, how many sorties had been made, what had been destroyed in the bombing, who had won the battle, and so forth. This question about the force levels--although McNamara was aware of the controversy, Johnson was aware of the controversy, Rostow was aware of the controversy, everybody was--this was not something that was normally discussed at the policy meetings.

. Jack Smith: Well, that's interesting because it sure was diverting the days and nights of those people who were dealing with the analysis side of the war.

ichard Helms: But I think this is perfectly normal. This should be the case.

. Jack Smith: Sure. I do too.

ichard Helms: Because Johnson, and McNamara particularly, had confidence in what we were trying to do. They also had confidence in what the military was trying to do. They saw that everybody was struggling with this as best as they can. What was the sense of sitting and sort of grinding their teeth over the fact that some answer didn't pop forward? They assumed that you fellows were gonna be sweating your tail off in an effort to get this done.

. Jack Smith: Well, the assumption that I was working under, which is not borne out by what you say, was that because there was a confrontation of sorts, eventually between the civilians and the military,

that there must have been some partisanship in the upper levels regarding this. This apparently was not the case.

ichard Helms: Not that I ever recall.

. Jack Smith: That's very interesting. Very important.

ichard Helms: You know it's fair to say, and I think that I'd like to make this point, that both Johnson and McNamara were not of the kind that attacked one on one's motives, or why [illegible] weren't you on the team, or things of this kind. Obviously, Johnson would be irritated with reports from time to time that didn't support his theory of the battle or how it ought to go or things of this kind, but he was a big man in the sense that after grumbling maybe a little bit he would accept this, he would swallow. He took it pretty well. McNamara had a lot of confidence in the estimative process of the Agency. In fact, he had more confidence in it, and has been more favorably disposed and has said so privately, at least to me, than any Secretary of Defense we had in years.

. Jack Smith: There was an episode that you reported one morning...(interrupted).

ichard Helms: As a matter of fact, why don't you go in and see McNamara one day? He has an office over at 1800 K. He's out of town a lot because he travels a lot but he'd be delighted to talk to you about all this.

. Jack Smith: That's a good idea. There was one episode that you recounted, and my recollection is a little hazy and I hope yours is sharp. Because it was an episode involving McNamara and Johnson. To the best of my recollection, about the spring of 1968, when we had finished another one of our Rolling Thunder analyses.

By this time we were demonstrating that the Viet Cong had improved their capability to move material south roughly five-fold over the period of the Rolling Thunder bombing program, in despite of it. And there was a discussion in the White House at which you were present and McNamara and Johnson, if I remember this correctly, regarding some major, large increment of improvement--whether it was a matter of sending more troops, or whether it was a matter of increasing the level of the bombing, or what I can't remember exactly. As I remember your account of this, McNamara said when Johnson was urging that this be done, that an increase be made in support of the war, McNamara said, "Mr. President, I have here in my hand a study by CIA that demonstrates that this program to date has not succeeded." Whereupon, according to my recollection, Johnson said, "You don't believe that crap, do you Bob?" McNamara said, "Yes, Mr. President I do."

ichard Helms: Well, I have to confess that I don't recall the incident but in terms of the personalities and the atmosphere and all the rest of it, I would accept it as being a truthful story.

. Jack Smith: It's indelibly printed in my mind.

ichard Helms: If it didn't happen exactly that way it was close to it.

. Jack Smith: Well, I think you've counted this one morning in a morning meeting to let us know that we were registering and making contact. The relationship with President Johnson certainly was the most satisfactory one you had with the Presidents with whom you dealt. Can you remember any specific anecdotes of any times that are comparable to the kind of things that

you'd remember about Russell and you relationship with him, or any time Johnson chastised you, or spoke favorably of what we had done or you have done?

Richard Helms: Well, did we the last time go over the June War of 1967?

Smith: Yes. That's a beautiful example.

Helms: Well, it seems to me that that sets the thing in a kind of a perspective. That was really what got me going with Johnson. I don't think there was any doubt about this. Shortly after I was appointed Director a couple of things came up, without identifying what they were even if I could remember. He was very vociferous with me and I was very vociferous right back. There were two of these occasions, they occurred within the first month that I was Director. After that I never had a vociferous conversation with President Johnson again. I think he figured that taking me on that way was not very useful, and that if he wanted to talk to me he did it differently. From then on, we never had any noisy words to each other. In other words, there was no shouting back and forth. I remember on one occasion and I happen to have hanging on a wall in my house now a photograph taken during this discussion which was purely happenstance. But I recall what we were talking very intensively about on this occasion. Admiral Taylor had been testifying on my behalf before the Armed Services Committee, because I had been out of town. They wanted somebody and Admiral Taylor was the Acting Director and had gone up there. During his testimony some question was raised about civilian casualties from the bombing in Vietnam. I believe, or as best I recollect this, that Admiral Taylor attempted to give

some sort of figures about who had been killed. On this particular day when the photograph was taken as we were walking through the arcade between the Mansion and the President's office, President Johnson said to me, "Now, if you feel any urge to go up and testify in Congress on this whole question of civilian casualties in Vietnam, I just hope you'll pass by and have a drink with me, the afternoon before." I said, "All right, Mr. President, I'll do that." Well this was a way of conveying a message to me that he wanted to have something to say about this. But it was done pointedly but not vociferously.

Jack Smith: The next day, or one of the following days, you instructed us to watch ourselves in reporting civilian casualties, in briefings in particular.

Richard Helms: But by-and-large, my relationship with him was excellent. He didn't badger me; I was well treated by him. My impression was that a button labeled "Covert Operations" was not on his organ. He was quite willing to be involved in them, he would approve suggestions brought to him, but usually they had to originate somewhere else in contradistinction to Presidents Kennedy and Nixon who really thought frequently in covert action terms. But the net of it all was that I felt very well treated by President Johnson. I had none of the complaints about him that some of the people did, that he was rough and unreasonable and so forth. I felt that he had a regard for the Agency, was respectful of its work, and the relationship had been a good one.

. Jack Smith: Let's talk now--in kind of a summing up--your thoughts on running the Agency from 1966 to 1973. You must have had in your mind--you probably never articulated it--but you probably had somewhere a set of guiding principles or some ideas of how you wanted to run the Agency. Perhaps the best way to delineate them or at least one way, might be for you to say how you wanted to run the Agency differently from the way John McCone ran it.

ichard Helms: Well, I don't know whether that is the most useful way to discuss it or not. Let me just give what my philosphy was, and then you can see how that fitted together. I am a believer that the Director of Central Intelligence, as the principal intelligence officer to the President, should not be involved in the foreign relationships policy except to the extent that the presentation of any intelligence material to a President is in itself a type of policy recommendation. This is inevitable. I don't think that his position ought to be a partisan one. I don't think it's helpful to a President to have <u>all</u> of his people surrounding him involved in policy issues. You may note that Kissinger in the first volume of his book, when he's discussing the various people with whom he has dealing as advisor on National Security Affairs, mentioned this point about policy and intelligence and so forth. John McCone believed that he could wear two hats. One hat was a Director of the Agency and the presenter of intelligence information which the Agency produced. The other, that he could sit at meetings and help to formulate

the policy which the Administration ought to follow. I did not agree with that. I felt, as I said to you earlier, that I played a more useful role for President Johnson by keeping the game honest, by seeing to it that the Secretary of State or Defense or whoever was advocating whatever they were advocating, stayed within the acceptable limits of the facts as we knew them, the parameters of events that had transpired, and that this was a useful function to perform for the President. Because every cabinet officer, in advocating policies, whether the President's policy's or not, is constantly tempted to overdrive and to oversell, to overpersuade. Often the degree to which something is being done gets lost sight of. I figure that the intelligence Chief has a role to play in keeping all these things in perspective, keeping the perceptions as accurate and as objective as possible.

As far as running the Agency was concerned, I had had it in my mind for a long time that intelligence is really not an end in itself. That intelligence people should not get the impression that because they've got an organization and a lot of people and do a lot of work and produce a lot of papers, that this is an entity which therefore should struggle for turf, for influence, for having a certain section of the budget for itself--a whole host of demands get tossed into these matters. It's easy for the intelligence people to forget that they're really a service organization, that they're really there to <u>assist</u> in the policy making process through other people. If you stripped the Government down and left

nothing but the intelligence organization, what would it do? It would have to consume its own smoke and that would obviously give the President, the Vice President, the Cabinet the impression that the Agency was there to be useful, to be of service, to be helpful. I did my dammedest, as a result of demands placed on the Agency in various fora, to see to it they were carried out and that the Agency put its best foot forward and the papers were produced in a timely fashion, and even when this meant sacrifice on the part of the analyst or the producers who had the work to do, that this is what we were in business for and we were going to do this as best we could.

I suppose that there are things that happen in life that cause more anguish or irritation than others though I must say that the charge that the Agency was not objective, that it did not attempt to deal fairly with the facts and controversies and various estimative problems, I think has absolutely no basis, in fact, I don't know of any time when there wasn't a sincere effort to accommodate all the varying pressures and still come out with what we thought was a proper answer. There may have been differecnes at times as to whether it was or not--these things will always be debatable, I chose not to turn off debate, if I could possible help it. I did feel that this was one of the most important functions the Agency had to play. Whether it was under President Johnson or President Nixon.

Continuing along those same lines, I very much wanted to see the Agency continue, to be innovative in the technical field,

particularly in overhead reconnaissance. I supported as best I could all of those ideas which came up from DDS&T particarly, about new kinds of satellites whether they were photogtaphic or electronic or what they might be, and to try and see that we've got these things funded and supported. We've already discussed the KH-11 earlier. That was the kind of thing I wanted to see the Agency move forward on. It just seemed to me that we were more independent, that we were more innovative than anybody else in the Government, including the Department of Defense, and that break-through ideas were going to be born and they were going to be born in the Agency to some of these young scientists.

On the estimative side I tried to expand somewhat, the interests of the Board of National Estimates rather than having so much focus on the military estimates. I wanted to try to get somebody in there on petroleum, which I thought was an on-coming and very important item, and there were two or three that I attempted to add to the mix on the Board so that there would be a little wider sphere of interest and comprehension and experience.

As far as the DDP was concerned, I, to the end, thought that the principal function of the DDP was to try and work on Soviet Union, Communist China and the satellites. That was the reason we'd been set up in the first place, and that although some of these other things were interesting, like Vietnam and information of the sort that helped policy makers. For example, producing documents about what a certain negotiating position of the Japanese was going to be before the negotations took part.

That kind of thing, useful as it was, we really should continue to fight to penetrate the hard targets. We had some success, we had a lot of failures. It was probably as difficult a period in that respect as any, and I can't say that I was necessarily charmed with the results that we actually achieved over all those years. But that wasn't for want of trying, or my taking my eye off what I considered to be the ball, which was that.

That leads me to what was an on-going problem between the counter-espionage staff of the DDO, and what was then known as the Soviet-Russian Division. A constant fight over whether agents that were recruited who were Soviets, whether they were double-agents or not. This was one of the most bitter controversies, and always seemed to end up in the Director's office as to which side was going to win out in these debates. It would have been very tempting to do what Colby later did, and that is fire one of the fellows involved. But it never seemed to me that that made any sense at all. The tension here was the tension born of necessity and that if you didn't have a counter-espionage fellow who was constantly challenging all the agents that were recruited, you were going to end up with one of these situations in which you were going to be very seriously penetrated. It's almost the same as if you prevented in a trial in court in this country, crossexamination, what the prosecution said was the case. In other words, you don't have a chance to hammer at the witness which is after all part of our judicial system and the judicial balance. And it seemed to

to me the only way you could keep the balance was to keep this tension in the DDO or the DDP. Painful and difficult as this was, and made unnecessarily painful by circumstances and personnel, the fact remains that it seemed to me it had to be borne because otherwise you weren't going to do the job very competently.

Now as far as the Community was concerned, there I realize--as one looks back at it--some differences developed, particularly during the Nixon Administration, because I think there was a desire to have the Director move out much more and control the Community. I never thought that would work. I did not pick up this invitation with a fervor that was expected that I would because in my best judgement I thought we were going to get into a situation which was not only going to be very tenable. It simply goes to this: these other entities were largely controlled by the Department of Defense. The Department of Defense is the most powerful Department in the United States Government, both in terms of money and votes, and whatever else one would like to consider. The heads of these Departments, their efficiency reports if you like, were made out by the Department of Defense. The money came from the Department of Defense. Therefore, when the Director of Central Intelligence, who was the jack-rabbit against the elephant in this, attempted to assert his authority over the funds that they could have and things of that kind, it seemed to me he was getting himself in an almost impossible ~~situation~~ position, vis-a-vis, the Secretary of Defense. Therefore, through John Bross and Bronson Tweedy I attempted to carry out the President's wishes, by suasion, by

consultation, by talks, we could work together on targets, and on production and an all the rest of these things, and could gradually get ourselves, as a Community, all headed in a common direction. I think that to a certain extent this was achieved. The contrary approach, or the other approach, was obviously the one followed by Admiral Turner later. How people have thought it worked out, I don't have any particular judgement on the matter because I don't know, I did get the impression from Admiral Inman that it had been a failure. That Turner had over-readhed himself, and that he had run into the problem that was predicted that he would run into, and that was that the Secretary of Defense was not going to have all his turf taken away from him. This is why I use the term "turf" a few minutes ago. I think the struggles of the Intelligence Community for authority and who's going to run whom, and who's going to control what tend to stultify what I think is the Community's real job. That is to use its best brains to work on the Russians and oil problems and money problems, and all the rest of it, and stop squabbling among themselves over who's going to control what.

Now, as far as organization is concerned, you will recall that I made very few changes after John McCone left or Admiral Rayborn left, if you like. There may have been a few modifications or some fine tuning and so forth. This was conscious on my part. I could have in order to put my stamp on the Agency, move some chairs around. I'm well aware of the American syndrome which is that if something isn't working it will always be better

if you will ~~recognize~~ organize it. Or on the contrary, no matter how well it's working if you reorganize it it will work better. Americans love reorganizations. I had been in the Agency, after all since the doors opened in 1947. I was very conscious of the fact that it was men that were going to produce the intelligence products, and whether they sat in chair A or chair B was not ~~merely~~ nearly as important as the fact that you should have brainy, intelligent, well-educated, studious and motivated men doing the jobs. Therefore, whatever way they were happy in doing them seemed to be the most sensible way to run the Organization. Constantly heckling them with moves and changing of chairs and changing from end to end, and so forth is a very costly process in terms of concentration, in terms of focus, in terms of interest, and all the rest of it. So it just seemed to me that we would make it run the way it was and try to see if we couldn't stop wasting energy over reorganization plans and new charters and things of that kind.

Jack Smith: The truth of what you say is visible on every floor of Langley today. It's been organized and reorganized to death. They're battered and worn and depressed.

Richard Helms: Yes, and the notion of turf has become dominant. It's the most important consideration. I was struck by one thing when you were talking about service, Dick. You talked, and this is clearly--I'd already gotten this impression from reading the morning minutes again--how often you counseled us to do something in the way of a study or of a report, an analysis because somebody in the top layer--whom you were seeing almost daily--was interestet

in that subject, or needed it, or you anticipated the need, or you felt that we should do our job by fulfilling that. It struck me that you referred mostly to analytic work. I wondered whether there were ever occasions in which you felt a service could be performed equally by the clandestine services in certain areas. Were there areas in support of McNamara or Rostow or Rusk or whomever, that you felt that your command of that instrument could be useful too?

ichard Helms: Certainly. There was no doubt about that but I rather thought of that in a different compartment of my mind because these things tended to take place in different fora. You would get down to the 40 Committee, or whatever it was called in those days, and here would be a concentration on covert action, on things that were being done to help policy and so forth. It was usually in that context that I would accept or even invent things that the Clandestine Services could turn up that might be helpful in support of this project. At various times--I remember for example on the last day of the Six Day War in 1967--there was an almost frantic effort to try to bring this war to an end, and to do the things that had to be done. When Kosygin came on the hotline that day, we sent all kinds of queries out to the Middle East to get information about where the Israelis were, where they were likely to stop, the condition of things in Syria and Egypt and so on. So that there was a constant--particularly in connection with Vietnam--we were constantly asking questions to support this or support that or check this out or check this out of find out what information they had clandestinely

on some particular item. I always regarded that as a kind of an untidy way to do business. I like to do it, in other words I have nothing against it, but you know it wasn't the tidy way that you could do an analysis where you really had a piece of paper and it could stand on its own two feet.

. Jack Smith: But I've always felt, and I continue to feel, that unless the Director of Central Intelligence has that instrument in his hand he's just like anybody else contending. This is what's wrong with the Ray Cline concept, that you can separate the analytic forces put them out there in an ivory tower.

ichard Helms: No, I certainly agree with that. It's a great asset to a Director because if he doesn't have an action arm he really has almost no arms at all.

. Jack Smith: His entrée.

ichard Helms: That's right. It is his entrée. There's no question about that. The only thing that I felt strongly about to this day, then and to this day, was that this was a useful agency. The DDP was a useful agency for the Director to have, it was useful for the Government to have. It should be just where it was, but that one should be careful not to allow it to influence the analytic process. Because I believe it was in that case a producer like any of the rest of them were producers and it should not be a situation in which the desk officer in charge of Jordan, we'll say, in the DDP is constantly influencing an analyst on Jordan and the DDI to the detriment of an objective opinion as to what was going on.

aith: Would you agree that the capability, that Clandestine Services capability, is more durable in establishing the Director's

right to be heard than his claim that he's objective? Would you agree that it's true looking back that what has been eroded is the feeling that the Agency is objective. We all knew we were subjective as hell, but that's no longer commonly thought to be the case. But no one questions the fact that we had access to information clandestinely achieved that no one else had.

ichard Helms: Well, I think that you're right about this. But that, Jack, is the age old story of the fact that you can get attention by something sexy when you should be getting attention for some other reason entirely. You can't change the world and therefore this is always going to be true. But the fact remains that in those days, you remember, when John McCone was trying to get newspapermen to write articles about the estimating process and so forth, that they would always end up asking him if he used women as agents and so forth, and it used to frustrate him mightily. There was no doubt that you're right about this, and there's no doubt that that's the sexy part of the Agency's work. It is also the Director's job to keep perspective between these two things so that one doesn't ride away without the other. I also think that this is a good point in time to make one other point that I felt strongly about then and feel the same way to this day. Not that that makes any difference. [Each President has to be dealt with by a Director according to his personality and according to his way of doing business. To have a board or a commission say that the Director's relationship with the

President should be X, Y, or Z, is absolutely worthless. It's a waste of time. I have seen important men in the United States sit there and nod their heads and say the President should see this Director every hour on the hour or every other day or some damn thing like this. There is no <u>way</u> that these things can be legislated or controlled. Every President is going to do his business the way he wants to do it. You say, well, he should discipline himself but they never do. They do it exactly the way they want to do it. Even if you convince them that they ought to do it differently, they'll never do it for more than twice differently, and then they go back to the way they wanted to do it before. Now President Johnson was much better at reading documents. The way to get his attention was to present a well-reasoned, well-written piece of paper. With President Nixon, it was very much the same. He took it in better through the eye. The question was getting the documents, the relevant ones, on Johnson's desk and on Nixon's desk. Talking to them about or briefing was <u>not</u> the way to get their attention or the way to persuade them about anything. With President Johnson, when I would brief at National Security Council meetings from time to time, I finally came to the conclusion that what I had to say I should get into the first 60 seconds, or at ~~least~~ best 120 seconds, that I had on my feet. Because after that he was pushing buttons for coffee or Fresca or talking to Rusk or talking to McNamara or whispering here or whispering there. I had lost my principal audience. With Nixon, it was very much the same

way. He liked longer briefings, he would sit there for longer briefings, but after the first five minutes his mind would start to wander ~~too~~ unless something came up that he was particularly interested in. So one has to adjust to these things. The notion that a Director should constantly see and be in the presence of the President is not necessarily true. In other words, it does not necessarily make him more effective. As a matter of fact, he can become an irritant. It's one of these things that finished John McCone with Lyndon Johnson. McCone started briefing him everyday once he became President after President Kennedy's assassination, and I know exactly what happened. Johnson finally got bored, closed the door and that was the end of that. He just didn't want to do it any more. You couldn't make him do it anymore. This one-on-one, that people hold to be so important who live in academia, does not necessarily achieve your objective. You either adjust your production to the man you have in the office or you're going to miss the train.

Jack Smith: We talked one time earlier about the Rockefeller Report and how it came up with some notions about the Director ought to have certain kinds of prestige in order to be most effective. Do you think there are any guiding concepts for chosing a Director? Do you think there are any--leaving present personalities out of account--if you were going to design an ideal Director of Central Intelligence, what do you think you'd come up with?

chard Helms: Well, I've never regarded this as being a difficult or arcane affair. The most important requirement the fellow has

to have is that he's got the President's confidence. That has to be number 1. Number 2, that he knows something about the job that he's doing. In other words, does he understand intelligence's role, how it's acquired, and things of this kind. If he's been experienced in intelligence matters, all the better. The only thing that I do not subscribe to in some of these other formulations that I have heard, is that this man has got to have his own independent power base, either financial, political or otherwise. I don't see that this is relevant. The charge in the Rockefeller Report, or the implication in the Rockefeller Report, was that if a fellow does not have this independent standing he is likely to do a lot of illegal things because the President wants them done. In other words he won't stand up to the President. I would like the record to show where it was that I didn't stand up to either Johnson or Nixon.

Jack Smith: The access question though, that you raised, perhaps that's also part of it in those minds of the people who came up with this idea that you have to have an independent power base. If you have one, then presumably that would provide you with access to the President. How is access to the President best achieved? Knowing this business, do you think?

chard Helms: I would think that the most important thing was a) that the President liked the man, b) had confidence in him, c) didn't tighten his sphincter when he walked through the door. I think that these are the important things and only the President can contrive this when he picks the man do to the

job. He has to make up his mind about this. If he decides that the fellow is not the man he wants there, he should get rid of him because power base be damned. How does that insure that he's gonna get in there on the basis that it's going to be useful? Let's argue this for justa minute. Let's assume that you made Nelson Rockefeller a pillar in the Republican Party. A man of independent wealth and substance and so forth. Suppose that Nixon had made him Director of Central Intelligence. Now he could barge in to see Nixon anytime he wanted to. But if Nixon didn't hit off with Rockefeller, which he didn't, that would have made no difference at all. He could have bombasted, talked, written papers, done all the rest of it, and Nixon would have done with him what he did with other people that he didn't like. He would say to Kissinger or to somebody, "You know I just can't bear having that Rockefeller around. You see that he doesn't get in here." And then when Rockefeller goes to the newspapers and says I'm not seeing the President, they'll say no, we saw you last week, and we did this, and we did that, and it would simply roll over and over and over, just tumble. I really think they missed the point, and most people miss the point about the United States government. The Cabinet and all the principal appointive jobs, and they are <u>all</u> appointive, after all, the only two people elected are the President and Vice President. Everybody else is appointed. Yet every single one of those fellows has got to be someone that the President can get along with. If the President doesn't get along with him, then he'll fade away. As a matter of fact,

John Gardner, who was Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, in the Johnson Administration, once told me that, no-no he didn't leave the Administration over the Vietnamese War, as it was touted he did, or over disagreements about this, that and the other thing. It was simply that he realized that it was beginning to get more and more difficult to do business with President Johnson, for whatever the reason was. I really and truly believe that in our halls of learning it would be far more useful to teach our students the facts of life, which is that no appointive office has any power of its own. Every bit of power is derived from the President himself or what he's prepared to allow you to do. He didn't put inhibitions on me. I could do just about as I pleased. Well, I thought that was fine and that as long as I could keep his confidence and so forth it would stay that way. If you don't over do it, and don't under do it, and so forth, I agree you'll get along all right. But certainly if you talk about power in this town I had lots of it.

Jack Smith: How about out at Langley? Would you prefer to see a professional come up through the ranks or would you perfer to see someone brought in from the outside?

chard Helms: Well, Jack, I don't want to answer the question either flatly one way or other. By definition, I would think a professional would be a better Director. On the other hand there's no reason why a man who comes in from the outside can't be a good Director too, depending on his personality and his interests and so forth. So I don't want to state this flatly, one way or the other. I simply return to what I

said at the outset and that is whoever he is, he must enjoy the President's confidence, and he must be someone that the President feels reasonably comfortable with, and even if the President and he don't feel comfortable with each other at least there ought to become mutual respect as far as getting on with the job and doing what the President wants done. Because after all the President can't have a buddy in every job, he's got to get along with a few people that he may not feel all that comfortable with.

Jack Smith: You've answered the question saying it's not really a prime factor whether he's a professional or not. Dick, looking back, what would you say was the greatest satisfaction you had in being Director of Central Intelligence?

ichard Helms: You mean an event?

Jack Smith: Any way you want to answer it. You must look back on your career and you must say to yourself, there are aspects of this of which I'm very, very proud and pleased.

ichard Helms: Well, as I said in that interview with Frost, of which I gave you a copy. The estimate on the Six Day War, I think, was the really intelligence bingo of my time because it was so apt, concentrated, you could see cause and effect. I mean the whole thing was put together in a tidy little bundle there is a short space of time. I still look back on that as being one of the neatest pieces of intelligence work that was done. I also look back on certain other things as having been really distinct achievements. Some of them not when I was Director. I remember I thought the Berlin tunnel was

a remarkable operation. I thought the Popov and Penkovsky cases were run as well as anything of that kind could possible have been run. I thought that a lot of the work that we did on the Vietnam War, even though the war came out so badly, was nevertheless extraordinarily good intelligence work of which I'm pleased. Obviously, I was not pleased about Sihanovkville and things of that kind. But you've got to take the good with the bad and anybody who goes into the intelligence business, I think, goes into it with a recognition that God did not give prescience to human beings. That He, for some reason in His wisdon, or nature in it's wisdom or however you want to go about this matter, realized that human beings are not very good when they know that some disaster is about to strike and therefore you don't give them prescience for that sort of thing. You just go ploding along and face their fate when it comes. This is also true of intelligence officers. They haven't been endowed with any prescience that anybody else didn't have. They may learn some, but they haven't been endowed with it. And therefore you've got to assume that you're going to make a lot of bad calls, particularly if you have any courage and really reach out there. So you've got to be prepared for the calls and prepared to take them, and get on and try to do better the next time. I think that the development of the KH-11 was an absolute masterpiece. I really don't know how well it does, nobody tells me about it these days. I knew if it was ever going to be made to work it was going to be an absolute breakthrough. It was going to change the timeliness and the ability to collect intelligence in a way

that nothing else had done except maybe the advent of the U2 or the first photographic satellite we put up.

Jack Smith: You put it not largely in terms of individual achievements or actions, could you think of it in terms of the daily satisfactions? When you went into the office in the beginning of the day and came through the end of the day even on the days when none of these things were accomplished, what aspects of the job did you enjoy most?

ichard Helms: (Pause) In an effort to answer that question I wanted to think a moment, because there are few jobs in the world where there is such a variety in the daily life of any Director from the time he sets foot in the office in the morning with the mornings' telegrams, reports at the staff meetings of what is going on in various parts of the Agency, also in the Community, also in the world, foreign visitors, developing situations, wars, hostilities, debates over the budget, cover action approvals, briefings of the National Security Council, presentations for the Congress. In short a Director's life is full of variety and full of decisions that just would never occur to most people that the man would be going through. I remember Bill Benton, who you remember used to be a Senator and was the Benton of Benton and Bowles, and later on the Encyclopedia Britannica. He was a very bright and intellectual man. I remember his saying to me one day when I went to talk to him about some matter or other where the Agency needed some help on something. He said, "Well you realize, of course, that you make 10 times more decisions in a day than any businessman ever does. A businessman has a decision to make every now and then

about this, that and the other. You're making decisions all day long. From that standpoint you have one of the most facinating jobs in the world." Well this is indeed true. My answer to your question would be it was a variety of things with the kaleidoscopic effects of them and so forth that I think that my satisfaction of the job derived from when I was able, basically, to persuade the President that our analysis was accurate, that the Senate Committee received a briefing with approval, that we had a breakthrough in some operation where we finally got the documents we wanted. In other words, it was the accumulation of these small successes that would give me satisfaction.

Jack Smith: Very good.