

CHAPTER 3

NIXON AND FORD - UNEVEN ACCESS

During his eight years as vice president in the 1950s, Richard Nixon had had broad exposure to the activities of the civilian US Intelligence Community. He was aware CIA had briefed the presidential candidates in every election since 1952 and undoubtedly harbored mixed feelings about the way the process had worked in 1960, when his narrow defeat by John Kennedy might well have hinged on the candidates' different perceptions of the intelligence process. This familiarity with the IC's capabilities and practices made him willing, at the outset of his new campaign for the presidency in 1968, to accept briefings from CIA Director Richard Helms. It also led him to decline to receive routine briefings from lower level officers, opening the way for Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor, to play a central and expanding role.

Nixon won the Republican Party nomination on 8 August 1968. Two days later the nominee and his running mate, Governor Spiro Agnew of Maryland, flew to Texas to hear a "general review of the international situation" from President Johnson and his key foreign policy advisers. In addition to the president, the group included Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Cyrus Vance (the number-two negotiator in the Vietnam peace talks in Paris), and DCI Helms. The president welcomed the Republican candidates with a tour of his ranch in an open convertible, but when the time came for the substantive briefing, he made only a few introductory remarks and then gave the floor to Helms.

Helms's memorandum for the record indicates that he focused on the handful of international developments that were at a critical stage during the late summer of 1968, including the confrontation between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, events in the Middle East, and the military situation in Vietnam.¹ The director also discussed Cuba, including Castro's support for revolutionary efforts in Latin America, and events in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Following Helms's briefing, Vance continued with a review of developments in the Paris peace negotiations that included details of the private talks under way between the United States and North Vietnam.

¹ Richard Helms, "Briefing of Former Vice President Nixon and Governor Agnew," memorandum for the record, 12 August 1968.



President Richard Nixon greets CIA employees as DCI Richard Helms looks on.

Helms recorded that Nixon and Agnew were interested, in particular, in the effects of the Soviet-Czechoslovak confrontation on Poland and Yugoslavia. He also noted that they were surprised to hear the North Vietnamese were demanding that the Saigon government negotiate directly with the communist shadow administration in South Vietnam, the National Liberation Front. During the course of the briefing, Nixon directed a number of policy questions to Rusk. The Republican candidate made clear he had no intention of saying or doing anything that would complicate the job of the US negotiators in Paris.

Looking back on his first briefing of candidate Nixon 25 years after the fact, Helms recalled that, in his view, it was not a particularly well-organized or useful session.² After his own 15-minute overview of key worldwide developments, he recalled, the politicians' instincts took over for the balance

of the discussion in the sitting room at the LBJ ranch and during the one-hour lunch that followed. Johnson was on a liquid diet, recovering from a bout of diverticulitis, so he was free to do all the talking while the others enjoyed a meal of steak and corn on the cob. Helms recalled with some amusement that the president of five years and the candidate, with his eight years of vice-presidential experience, each wanted to demonstrate to the other his mastery of foreign affairs.

Nixon appears to have been pleased with the session; he later wrote positively in his memoirs about the “full-scale intelligence briefings ordered by Johnson for each of the nominees.”³ The session concluded with the president’s assurance to Nixon that he could call on Rusk or Helms for any additional information he might require.

As it happened, the discussion in Texas on 10 August was the only briefing Nixon was to receive in the preelection period. That session had focused entirely on the facts of developments abroad and the status of negotiations in which the United States was involved. Unlike the situation that had developed in 1960, there was in the August briefing—and in the whole campaign in 1968—no effort by anyone to make a political issue of the Intelligence Community’s programs or analysis. A key factor that helped ensure that did not happen was Helms’s strict constructionist view of the CIA director’s job. He was determined to stick to the facts and avoid involvement in policy discussions, unlike his predecessors Allen Dulles and John McCone.

Helms was aided in his determination to avoid any politicization of intelligence in 1968 by the fact that there were no presidential debates that year. Although there had been one debate during the primaries (between Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy), once the nominations were final Nixon concluded that he could avoid debating his opponent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, just as Johnson had declined to debate Goldwater in 1964. Nixon’s judgment was buttressed by the results of polls showing, as early as the first week in September, that he was leading Humphrey by a substantial margin, which he was able to retain throughout the campaign.

² Richard Helms, interview by the author in Washington, DC, 16 March 1993. Subsequent comments of Helms come also from this interview.

³ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 316. Nixon’s Democratic opponent in 1968, Hubert Humphrey, routinely received intelligence reports by virtue of being the incumbent vice president. Two other candidates also received intelligence briefings in that unusual year: former Alabama Governor George Wallace on 26 July and Georgia Governor Lester Maddox on 21 August. Helms and others briefed each of these candidates in Rusk’s office, generally on the same array of subjects they had covered with Nixon. Very brief accounts of these sessions can be found in Helms’s memorandums for the record, “Briefing of Former Governor George C. Wallace,” 26 July 1968, and “Briefing of Governor Lester Maddox,” 22 August 1968.

After a postelection vacation in Key Biscayne, Florida, President-elect Nixon and his wife returned to New York City on Monday, 11 November, stopping en route in Washington for lunch with the president and an impromptu afternoon of discussions with the president and his foreign affairs aides. In addition to the president, Rusk, and Helms, this time the group also included Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, JCS Chairman Gen. Earl Wheeler, and National Security Advisor Walt Rostow. Helms remembers that the afternoon meeting in the cabinet room suffered from the short notice and complete lack of preparation given the participants. There was only a desultory exchange on substantive issues, inasmuch as “nobody knew what was wanted or expected.”

Invigorated by his election and vacation, the president-elect was struck by the very different mood of the other participants as they concentrated on Vietnam.⁴ He recalled that those assembled seemed very nearly worn out from dealing with the prolonged crisis and “had no new approaches to recommend to me.” Nixon said he saw the war etched on the faces around him and found them relieved to be able to turn the morass over to someone else. He recorded that they emphasized to him that the United States must see the war through to a successful conclusion and that a negotiated settlement that looked like a defeat would have a devastating impact on US allies and friends in Asia and around the world.

From Helms’s point of view, the meeting on 11 November was of significance for a reason unrelated to the discussion of Vietnam. Helms remembers that Johnson asked him to stay on for a private talk after the session adjourned. At that time, Johnson told Helms that Nixon had twice asked about him (Helms). Johnson said he told Nixon that he “had no idea how Helms had voted, but that his was a merit appointment.”

Johnson’s kindness in recommending Helms to the Nixon administration may have resulted from a lingering embarrassment over the way he had treated Helms at an earlier point. In 1965, Johnson had passed over Helms to appoint VAdm. William Raborn Jr. as DCI. At the time, Johnson informed Helms that, although he had heard good things about him, he was “not well enough known in this town,” meaning on Capitol Hill. But Johnson went on to tell Helms that he “should attend every meeting Raborn did.”

The director’s only other meeting with Nixon during the transition period occurred later the same week when he was summoned to New York City on Friday, 15 November. Helms entered the Nixon suite on the 39th floor of the Pierre Hotel at 1:30 p.m. to find the president-elect conversing with adviser

⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

John Mitchell, who was to become attorney general. With virtually no preliminaries, Nixon indicated that he would like Helms to stay on as DCI. The public announcement would come some time later.

Supporting Nixon's Team in New York City ⁵

Discussions between Johnson and Helms resulted in a decision that CIA should make available to the president-elect in New York City the same daily intelligence information being provided to the outgoing president in Washington. Helms assigned the task of providing this assistance to the Agency's deputy director for intelligence, R. Jack Smith. As a first step, he asked Smith to confer with Nixon's chief aide, former advertising executive Robert Haldeman.

Joined by Howard Osborn (CIA's director of security) and Richard Lehman (deputy chief of the Office of Current Intelligence [OCI]), Smith went to New York on the morning of 12 November.⁶ Smith showed Haldeman a sample of the intelligence publications the Agency proposed to make available to Nixon—the *President's Daily Brief* (PDB), the *Central Intelligence Bulletin* (CIB), the daily *Situation in Vietnam*, the *Weekly Review*, and selected memorandums. In turn, Haldeman asked that the Agency initiate special intelligence security clearances for a number of staff members, including Richard Allen and Martin Anderson. They had been the president-elect's advisers on foreign affairs during the campaign and were to advise him during the transition period.

It was agreed that CIA should establish a reading room in a secure area to which members of the Nixon staff could come for security indoctrination and to read classified documents. Space was not available in the Pierre, so it was decided to locate the Agency's outpost, dubbed "DDI-New York," in the basement of the Nixon campaign headquarters at 450 Park Avenue, six blocks from the president-elect's office. This site, formerly the world headquarters of the North American Missionary Alliance and soon to be demolished, was chosen because it seemed unlikely to attract attention from the press and the public. Allen's office was also in the building.

Paul Corscadden, an 11-year veteran of OCI, was designated officer in charge. Kenneth Rosen, an intelligence officer who had served in the White House Situation Room under President Johnson and worked a year as a spe-

⁵ The material that follows regarding the Agency's activities in New York City draws very heavily on the classified writings of the late Paul H. Corscadden; he is, in effect, the author of this section.

⁶ They had planned to fly, but a heavy snowfall intervened, and the three men traveled by train instead, arriving at Pennsylvania Station in the storm-struck metropolis at the onset of the evening rush hour. They were provided a police escort to take them through the badly snarled traffic to the Central Park area and the Pierre Hotel.

cial assistant to McGeorge Bundy, was second in command. Corscadden and Rosen moved into the Statler-Hilton Hotel at 7th Avenue and 33rd Street for the duration of the transition period. Because of the expense of living in New York City and the representational nature of the assignment, the executive director of CIA waived the standard per diem limitation and allowed each of them up to \$30 per day.

The area selected to house the Agency's facility required extensive renovation, which, magically, the CIA's Office of Logistics accomplished in 72 hours, including one weekend. The construction activity did not go unnoticed by other occupants of the building. Reports soon circulated that the Secret Service, the FBI, or some other sensitive, top secret government agency had moved in and would, among other things, assume responsibility for the physical security of all the president-elect's staff offices and the protection of his family. The CIA's Office of Security had decided not to identify the operation as Agency sponsored but, rather, to allow those who learned of its existence to draw whatever conclusions they chose. This decision, reasonable on the face of things, led to unexpected consequences. Before long, Nixon staff secretaries were calling to ask that someone "behind the Black Door" investigate the disappearance of office supplies or solve the mystery of a purloined television set. On another occasion, the supervisor of the staff mailroom demanded that one of the Agency communicators "taste" and immediately remove from the mailroom a crate of canned hams sent to the president-elect as a Christmas gift.

Those who were curious about what was housed behind that Black Door enjoyed the unwitting support of the municipal health authorities. Occupants of nearby buildings along Park Avenue had complained of an infestation of black rats that had established colonies in the ground around the brightly lighted Christmas trees festooning the avenue from 59th Street to Grand Central Station. Within hours, health inspectors poured through all the nearby buildings. A team came to the door of the Agency facility, demanding admission. They were turned away with the assurance that there were no rats inside.

Beginning on 19 November, intelligence publications were wired to New York on a daily basis. The *Situation in Vietnam* report arrived the evening of its publication in Washington; the PDB came soon after 5 a.m. each morning. Nixon staff members who had access to the intelligence publications came to the facility at their convenience. A reading table contained all of each day's publications, along with appropriate national intelligence estimates, special memorandums, intelligence handbooks, and various graphic aids. Of the key staffers, Allen and Anderson visited most often.

Corscadden and Rosen delivered a complete set of publications each day in a sealed envelope marked "Eyes Only—The President-elect" to Rose Mary

Woods in Nixon's office. Woods had been granted the proper clearances, and the Agency had installed a safe in her office for the secure storage of classified materials. Initially, it was thought that she probably would return the publications after two or three days, during which time the president-elect would have had the opportunity to read at least a current issue of the PDB.

For the first 10 days of the operation, only intelligence analyses prepared for the outgoing administration were made available to the president-elect's staff. It soon became apparent, however, that the needs of the incoming administration did not coincide in every detail with those of the Johnson administration. To meet the emerging special needs of the new team, OCI on 29 November compiled the first "Nixon Special," an "Eyes Only" intelligence memorandum based on sensitive intelligence information that the Agency knew would be of interest to Nixon. The Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) soon afterward provided an additional service by transmitting directly to New York from its field bureaus foreign press and radio articles pertaining to the incoming administration.

The Key Player: Henry Kissinger

The appointment of Harvard Professor Henry Kissinger as assistant for national security affairs was announced by the president-elect at a news conference on 2 December. By prior arrangement with DDI Smith, who had telephoned him from Washington the morning of Nixon's announcement, Kissinger came to the Agency facility on Park Avenue for a briefing that same afternoon.⁷ He was shown current issues of all the intelligence publications available in the facility and was told what had been delivered to the Pierre for the president-elect since the Agency support operation began. Kissinger was assured that the CIA was prepared to provide full support to him and the rest of the incoming administration.

During that first session, Kissinger expressed appreciation for the Agency's willingness to assist him and for the support it had so far provided the incoming administration. He promised to arrange his schedule to allow 15 minutes per day to read the intelligence publications. He also accepted a proposal that Corscadden and Rosen undertake during off-duty hours to advise him of any critical world developments requiring the attention of the president-elect. This precautionary arrangement had earlier been accepted by Allen and Anderson as well as Haldeman.

⁷ A more detailed discussion of Smith's exchange with Kissinger can be found in his memoirs, *The Unknown CIA*, 201–203.

Kissinger asked for time to become familiar with Nixon's reading habits and daily routine before advising the Agency of any recommendations he might have for changes. He did say—in what foreshadowed Nixon's style and his own, in the White House—that it had been made clear to him that the president-elect had no intention of reading anything that had not first been perused and perhaps summarized by one of his senior staff. Kissinger said he did not know what had happened to issues of the PDB already entrusted to Rose Mary Woods but that, without his prior approval, future deliveries would not reach the president-elect. Two days later, Kissinger underscored that the Agency should not provide intelligence support to anyone at the Pierre other than the president-elect and himself; Mr. Haldeman and others from the campaign might have access to classified publications after they had arrived in Washington, but they would have no need for them before that time.

Kissinger reacted none too favorably to the first few issues of the PDB that he read. At one time he expressed a preference for the CIB with its more complete text and greater detail. He complained that the prose in the PDB was too often elliptical and that the selection of topics was too random and lacked the continuity necessary for the uninitiated reader. Kissinger's points were well taken. The PDB was uniquely tailored to the needs of the outgoing administration—just as its predecessor had been shaped to the reading preferences of President Kennedy. Moreover, its authors could assume that President Johnson and his advisers were familiar with the background of the subjects covered each day. Nixon and Kissinger, however deep their background and however well read, lacked detailed familiarity with many of the ongoing, current issues addressed in the PDB.

The Agency had anticipated this situation, because it had come up in all prior transitions. OCI had already begun to devise a new version of the PDB for Nixon and his aides. Considerably expanded in length, the new brief had been circulated for comment to the DCI, DDI, and others of the Agency's principal officers. With their concurrence, it was decided to send the new PDB to New York. Kissinger approved its format and style at a meeting on the evening of 6 December. Thus, the Agency began to publish, in effect, two PDBs. The substance was the same, but the publication given to Johnson was significantly more concise than that given to Nixon.

To no one's surprise, it proved impossible to schedule daily briefings with Kissinger; he was seen frequently but unpredictably. His assistant, Lawrence Eagleburger of the Department of State, was seen every day and was notably more appreciative of the assistance he was provided.

On 9 December, Kissinger told Corscadden that he had been asked to brief the president-elect's "senior staff" and would need inputs for a 30-minute ses-

sion on the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, the state of US-Chinese relations, the US-USSR strategic arms balance, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. He asked especially for “tidbits, local color...things which will make these people think they’re getting the inside story but which, if leaked, will not compromise or embarrass me or the president-elect or the United States Government.” He promised to come to Park Avenue soon to review the drafts.

On the afternoon of 11 December, Kissinger paid his second visit to the basement suite on Park Avenue, arriving with Eagleburger. It was evident the two had discussed the format Kissinger preferred even before he had seen the materials prepared by the Agency. Eagleburger’s assignment was to redraft CIA’s contribution. After scanning the briefing book and posing one or two questions about France’s nuclear program, Kissinger asked for still more material on Berlin, the problem of Nigeria’s breakaway state of Biafra, the strategic arms balance, NATO, the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia, and the prospects for a meeting in Warsaw of Chinese and American representatives. Kissinger delegated to Eagleburger responsibility for preparing “drafts” for his consideration the next evening in Washington, when the president-elect proposed to unveil his cabinet during a nationwide television broadcast from the Shoreham Hotel in Washington. Eagleburger worked in the basement at Park Avenue until three o’clock in the morning, returned to the Pierre for a few hours’ rest, and then resumed the job of redrafting and editing the briefing Kissinger was to give.

Eagleburger’s task was complicated by the fact that, except for Woods, none of the Nixon clerical staff, including Kissinger’s secretary, had yet been granted special intelligence security clearances. Corscadden arranged to have Eagleburger’s preliminary text typed by the Agency secretary assigned to DDI-NY and to have it taken to the Pierre. Eagleburger was then driven to LaGuardia Airport for his flight to Washington. CIA officers met Eagleburger at National Airport and took him to an improvised two-room office at the Shoreham Hotel. They remained with Eagleburger for much of the night of 12 December, calling on the Agency’s analytical resources to provide substantive backup through the duty officer in the Operations Center.⁸

During his late-evening television appearance, the president-elect disclosed that he and his cabinet-to-be and top advisers would spend the following day, Friday, 13 December, in conference. One of the highlights of their all-day session would be an intelligence briefing by Kissinger. Agency officers received no direct feedback on the substantive discussions held on 13 December. They were interested that Kissinger, in their next meeting, directed that Attorney

⁸ The CIA officers involved in this exercise were delighted later in the month when Kissinger sent Helms a letter of thanks for their extraordinary efforts.

General-designate Mitchell receive the PDB and all other reports in which he expressed any interest. Before long, Mitchell was being briefed on a daily basis and proved to be “very helpful as a window into what Nixon wanted.”⁹

In mid-December, Kissinger also directed that no national intelligence estimates were to go to the president-elect. Somewhat sharply, he explained that no one department or agency of the government would be permitted to present its views directly to Nixon to the disadvantage of any other. Coruscadden pointed out that an NIE was the product of the Intelligence Community as a whole, that it was issued in the name of the United States Intelligence Board, and could not be considered “parochial.” This rejoinder had no appreciable effect.

Toward the end of December, Kissinger began to meet more regularly with Coruscadden and Rosen. By then Kissinger was able to read only the PDB with any regularity; DDI-NY was responsible for calling to his attention “critical items” in other publications. The balance of the 15-minute “daily” session was devoted to a capsule review of crucial international situations the new administration was likely to face during its first few months in office—“stressing the significance, not the facts”—and to discussion of whatever papers Kissinger had requested of the Agency. He directed that memorandums prepared for Nixon should contain a “statement of the problem and an assessment of its significance,” as well as a summary.

Kissinger’s reading of an estimate on Soviet strategic attack forces led him to ask for an oral briefing on the US-Soviet strategic balance. After consulting with his military aide, Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, and with Eagleburger, Kissinger decided that the J-3 section of the Joint Chiefs should take the lead. CIA’s deputy director for science and technology and director of strategic research were also invited to participate in the briefing, which was held on Saturday, 21 December 1968. In addition to Kissinger, Mitchell, Eagleburger, and Goodpaster were present.

This was the most formal briefing Kissinger received during the transition; unfortunately, it did not go well. The J-3 team that had traveled from Washington to conduct the briefing used only the “high side” numbers regarding Soviet capabilities in their text and graphics. This prompted the CIA experts present to try to supplement the briefing and question some of its conclusions. In the discussion that followed, Kissinger, Goodpaster, and finally Mitchell asked ever-more probing questions, to the obvious chagrin of the briefers. Kissinger and Mitchell both made clear after the fact that they were not satisfied.

The issue of possible direct State Department involvement in the support process in New York arose as a result of a PDB item on coup reports in a cer-

⁹ Richard Lehman, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 10 March 1993.

tain country. Kissinger asked about US contingency plans if a coup occurred. When the Agency officers replied that they were not normally privy to such contingency planning, Kissinger turned to Eagleburger and insisted that a representative of the State Department attend the morning briefing sessions. Eagleburger discussed the idea with CIA, but nothing came of it. Years later, describing how the system worked, Eagleburger recalled that he “occasionally called on the State Department to send specific written materials—I was from State, after all—but the Agency team was all we needed right there.”¹⁰

As Kissinger became more and more active toward the end of December, his probing questions and his insatiable demands for assessments of the significance of isolated developments—even those in the low order of probability—meant that far more speculative, estimative analysis was required. This led CIA to the strategy of having its substantive officers prepare detailed backup pieces to complement the topics covered each day in the PDB. These reports provided the generalists who briefed Kissinger with additional information with which to field his queries.

Mindful of Kissinger’s repeated requests for “problem papers,” special briefings on emergent crises likely to confront the new administration during its first months in office, and “must reading” before Inauguration Day, the Agency in late December began appending to the PDB a series of special papers focused on critical issues. For more than 18 months, the PDB, at President Johnson’s request, had carried special annexes on Vietnam and on North Vietnamese reflections on the US political scene. Kissinger decided that the annexes need not be sent to the president-elect and should not be published after Inauguration Day. The new “problem papers” were designed in part, therefore, to replace the Vietnam annexes in the New York edition of the PDB, which was by now being tailored for the incoming administration.

In the remaining days of the operation, Kissinger read the “problem papers” on such subjects as access to Berlin, the communist troop buildup in South Vietnam, the military balance between the two Koreas, and the French economic situation. For each of these subjects, CIA analysts with the appropriate expertise traveled to New York to accompany the regular briefers. Especially in the cases of Vietnam and Korea, Kissinger had numerous questions. He wanted to know the Agency’s past track record in estimates on the subject at hand and pressed the analysts for “your personal opinion.”

On 6 January, Kissinger, who initially became Nixon’s national security advisor, turned to the question of intelligence support on Inauguration Day and

¹⁰ Lawrence Eagleburger, telephone interview by the author, 1 November 1993. Other comments by Eagleburger also come from this interview.

thereafter. By this time, Nixon had expressed his intention to hold regular staff meetings with his key advisers at 9:00 a.m. or 9:30 a.m. each morning. Kissinger surmised that he would brief the president for 30 minutes each morning, immediately following these staff conferences. He did not want to give Nixon anything he and his National Security Council staff had not had time to mull over and was anxious to “preview” intelligence reporting each evening, with an eye to meeting the chief executive early the next day.

Kissinger proposed that the DCI change the PDB’s publication time for the PDB from early morning to late afternoon, releasing the publication to him in the evening and to the president the following morning. This would, Kissinger admitted, introduce a lag of 12 hours in the reporting time, but he was not disturbed that the PDB would be less current; he was more concerned that he have time to prepare his own comments on anything the president would see.

With Inauguration Day less than a week away, the Agency proposed to introduce to the president-elect and Kissinger an entirely new PDB—redesigned to meet Kissinger’s specifications for a briefing paper tailored to Nixon’s preferences. The new publication was to consist of three sections—“Major Developments,” “Other Important Developments,” and occasional annexes—all double spaced and printed on legal-size paper bound at the top.

The first section, “Major Developments,” was to be subdivided into sections on Vietnam, the Middle East, Soviet Affairs, and Europe. This was not a static listing. As developments warranted, some areas could be dropped, others added. The second section, “Other Important Developments,” was intended to highlight problems which—though not yet critical—could in time engage US policy interests. The annexes were to fulfill the same role as the “problem papers” that were appended to the PDB sent to New York during the early part of January. Kissinger approved the new format on 15 January 1969.

Nixon Remains Aloof

The support operation mounted in New York constituted the most elaborate system yet designed to provide intelligence to a president-elect. Ironically, Nixon’s aloof style resulted in a situation in which the Agency had no direct contact with him. Until mid-December, for example, Agency officers were uncertain whether he had been reading the PDB or the other publications deposited each morning with his secretary. On 18 December, Eagleburger confided that Nixon had informed Kissinger that Woods had been “stockpiling” the unopened envelopes containing the PDB, CIB, and memorandums on Vietnam. Nixon had asked Kissinger to send someone upstairs to retrieve these envelopes so that Kissinger could review the collection and decide

whether there was anything in it that the president-elect should read. The question had been answered: Mr. Nixon had read no Agency publications during the first month of the New York operation.

Eagleburger observes that Nixon's handling of the intelligence material was a result of his management style rather than any disinterest in foreign developments. In fact, he says, "Nixon was very interested—but it was just him and Henry. That's why you didn't brief him directly." Eagleburger did not see Nixon either—briefings of the president-elect were the prerogative of Kissinger alone.

Other accounts, however, confirm more directly that Nixon's refusal to receive intelligence briefings personally stemmed from negative attitudes about the CIA that went well beyond an aloof and formal management style. Goodpaster, who worked with the transition staff to help organize the national security apparatus, remembers discussing with Nixon how the Eisenhower team had handled intelligence support. Goodpaster says Nixon "acknowledged the importance of intelligence, but also commented that when you needed it, it often wasn't there."¹¹

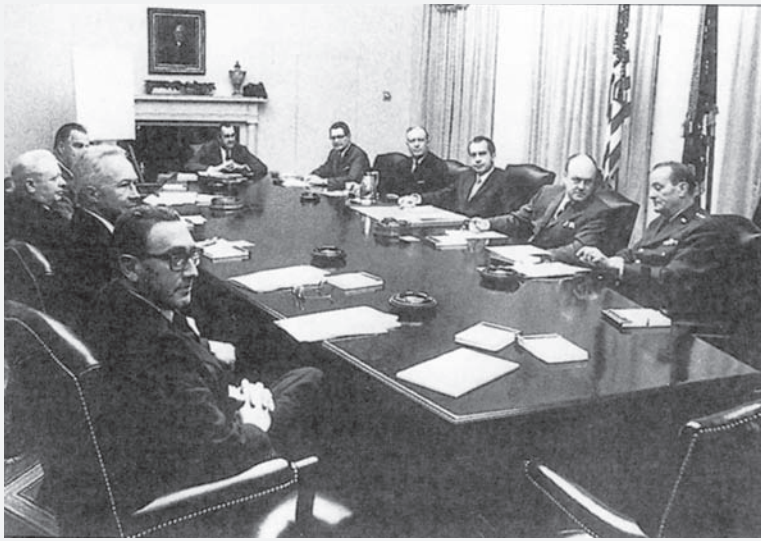
Discouraging as it was to CIA officers not to have personal contact with Nixon, a great deal of Agency material did reach the president-elect through Kissinger's daily briefings. According to Eagleburger, "Henry made heavy use of the CIA material. I remember especially Korea and other Asian issues. Henry would go in and go over the material with Nixon; documents would be left behind that Nixon would read." Rosen remembers how pleased the Agency team was when it would occasionally receive back from Kissinger copies of the PDB initialed by Nixon, confirming that at least some of the material was being read.¹²

Throughout the two months of the operation in New York, there was some uneasiness among Agency managers because Kissinger levied heavy demands for analytic work in the president's name, and Eagleburger levied similarly heavy demands in Kissinger's name. Without direct access to the principal consumer, it was always unclear how much of this material was really wanted or read by Nixon himself. For the most part, however, it did not matter. CIA took pride in serving those who clearly would be the key foreign policy aides to the new president.

On one occasion the ambiguity about who was really speaking for whom was especially worrisome. A few days before the inauguration, Kissinger called Helms in Washington with a discouraging message. He said that the CIA

¹¹ Andrew Goodpaster, telephone interview by the author, 17 November 1993.

¹² Kenneth Rosen, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 22 March 1993.



DCI Helms waits to deliver his intelligence briefing to the National Security Council.

director, following the inauguration, should brief the National Security Council on intelligence matters at the opening of its meetings but should then leave the meetings before the policy discussions. This scenario was represented by Kissinger as Nixon's idea, but Helms knew it was a ridiculous idea. Long experience had shown him that policymakers, during the course of their deliberations, frequently needed to turn to the representative of the Intelligence Community for factual updates.

Two days following the inauguration, the first NSC meeting was held. At the outset, Nixon invited the attendees to stay for lunch following the meeting. With this encouragement, Helms stayed through the meeting and lunch. And with the precedent established, he simply stayed throughout all subsequent NSC meetings. The scenario earlier raised by Kissinger never surfaced again.

CIA's direct access to Nixon was limited to the briefings by the Agency's directors—Richard Helms, James Schlesinger, and, finally, William Colby—at meetings of the National Security Council. In an interview in 1982, Helms offered a graphic account of how difficult those meetings could be, especially during the early period of the Nixon presidency:

From the very beginning of the Nixon administration, Nixon was criticizing Agency estimates, estimates done back when he was Vice

President. What he knew about estimates in the intervening years I don't know. But he would constantly, in National Security Council meetings, pick on the Agency for not having properly judged what the Soviets were going to do with various kinds of weaponry. And obviously, he was being selective, but he would make nasty remarks about this and say this obviously had to be sharpened up. The Agency had to understand it was to do a better job and so on. And I haven't the slightest doubt that Nixon's carping affected Kissinger, who after all was his national security advisor.

Despite this challenge to the estimates, the analysis and so forth of the Agency, the fundamental fact remains that if the things had not been read, if people were not paying attention to them there never would have been the challenge. So I don't think anybody needs to feel bad about a rocky period in the Agency's history. It was bound to be a rocky period with Richard Nixon as President, given the fact that he held the Agency responsible for his defeat in 1960. And he never forgot that and he had a barb out for the Agency all the time because he really believed, and I think he believes to this day, that that "Missile Gap" question was the responsibility of the Agency and that it did him in.¹³

When he was elected president in 1968, Nixon could hardly have imagined how US collection capabilities had improved since the end of his term as vice president eight years before. At the time he had left that office, several years of U-2 flights had given the United States an invaluable look at the Soviet Union. But the flights had been intermittent and covered only a portion of Soviet territory. As a result, the United States in 1960 was still dealing in conjecture, albeit informed conjecture, about possible deployed Soviet strategic systems. In 1968 it was dealing in facts. It was never clear that the cynical president appreciated what had changed. As the years passed, the NSC forum was less and less fruitful. Colby remembers that "Nixon didn't operate well in meetings—he liked to make decisions on the basis of written material. When you did brief him on something, he looked like his mind was on other things—he may have been thinking about Watergate, I guess."¹⁴ Colby wrote in his memoirs that none of Nixon's three DCI's saw him outside formal or ceremonial meetings. "I remember only one private conversation with him; it occurred when he phoned to ask what was happening in China and I provided a quick summary off the top of my head."¹⁵

¹³ Richard Helms, interview by R. Jack Smith, Washington, DC, 21 April 1982.

¹⁴ William Colby, interview by the author in Washington, DC, 7 April 1993. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent comments by Colby also come from this interview.

Throughout the Nixon presidency, a courier delivered the PDB to Kissinger's office. Each day Kissinger delivered to the president a package of material that included the PDB along with material from the State Department, the White House Situation Room, the Joint Chiefs, and others. Nixon would keep the material on his desk, reading it at his convenience throughout the day. Feedback to the Agency typically was provided by Kissinger directly to the DCI.

A Closer Relationship With Ford¹⁶

In the late spring of 1974, when it was becoming apparent that Nixon would not survive the Watergate scandal, the DCI saw a responsibility and an opportunity.¹⁷ William Colby, who had been appointed director in September 1973, decided that CIA should help the new vice president, Gerald Ford, prepare for his probable elevation to the presidency. Colby's initiative was to afford CIA unprecedented direct and daily access to the resident when Ford moved into the Oval Office.

Colby modestly recounts that his decision to provide full intelligence support to Ford "had as much to do with good preparation in case something happened to the president—any president—as it did with Nixon's problems with Watergate." Colby remembers thinking at the time, "We should get the PDB to the Vice President so that he would know everything the President knew. We didn't want another situation like when Truman was unaware of the Manhattan project."

Whatever his mix of motives, Colby invited the vice president to visit CIA Headquarters. Ford came, on 12 June 1974, and was given wide-ranging briefings on intelligence operations and assessments. In response to Ford's request, Colby agreed to send him the PDB, in addition to the *National Intelligence Daily* (NID) he had been receiving. An Agency current intelligence specialist, David Peterson, was assigned to provide continuing intelligence support to the vice president.

¹⁵ William Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 373.

¹⁶ The material that follows regarding the Agency's support of President Ford was in large part drafted by David A. Peterson.

¹⁷ In the election campaign of 1972, there had been no special intelligence briefings. Nixon, as the incumbent president, continued to receive the PDB. His Democratic opponent, Senator George McGovern, at one point had agreed (against the counsel of his advisers) to receive an intelligence briefing from Kissinger. The CIA was to follow up with regular briefings. Unfortunately, the political crisis involving McGovern's running mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton, forced the cancellation of the Kissinger briefing, and it proved impossible to reschedule either that briefing or the others that were to follow.

Ford accepted a suggestion that the PDB be brought to him directly, acknowledging that this would be the most secure way to receive the sensitive document. He specified that he would like to see it early each morning, preferably as his first appointment. Beginning 1 July that became the regular routine, one that was altered only occasionally by such diversions as a vice-presidential breakfast with the president or a speaking engagement out of town. On a few occasions Ford was seen at his Alexandria home before he flew off to keep such an engagement. Always a gracious host, he brewed and served instant coffee.

Ford came to the vice-presidency an informed consumer of the products of the Intelligence Community. He notes that he “had become familiar with CIA first as a member of the Intelligence subcommittee on Appropriations; later in other roles, including Minority Leader. I knew Colby from my days in Congress.” This familiarity, particularly with Colby personally, was to provide the Agency at least a temporary buffer in some difficult times to come.¹⁸

When Nixon resigned and Ford was sworn in as president on 9 August 1974, Agency officers were uncertain whether the briefings would continue. It seemed probable that Kissinger would intervene and terminate the sessions, substituting some other arrangement. (He was described later as “furious” when he learned of the CIA briefing routine, of which he had not been informed.) The uncertainty was short lived; that evening Ford passed the word that he wanted his usual briefing the next morning at the White House.

On Saturday morning, 10 August, Ford seemed as awed as Peterson when he entered the Oval Office to begin his first full day as chief executive. Gen. Alexander Haig, who was to carry on as chief of the White House staff, was also present. The walls and furniture in the Office were bare following the removal of Nixon’s pictures and possessions. The famous desk had only a telephone console on it, prompting the new president to tell Haig that he would rely on him to help keep the desk uncluttered.

To Peterson’s surprise, in view of Haig’s presence, the president first asked for his intelligence briefing. He was given a status report on a sensitive operation that interested him, after which he read the PDB, punctuating his perusal with a couple of questions.

During that first session, Ford asked Haig for his views on how the intelligence briefing should fit into the daily presidential schedule. Haig replied that Nixon had received the PDB along with several other reports, cables, and overnight summaries to read as time permitted during the day. The general

¹⁸ Gerald Ford, interview by the author in Beaver Creek, Colorado, 8 September 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, all observations by Ford come from this interview.

went on to say, however, that an early daily intelligence briefing was a better idea. Ford agreed, expressing satisfaction with the routine that had been established and observing that such an arrangement would help prepare him for a subsequent daily meeting with Kissinger. The new president evidently felt at some disadvantage in discussing foreign affairs with his secretary of state and wanted as much advance support as he could get. Accordingly, the CIA briefer would continue to be the president's first appointment each morning.

Peterson's initial session in the Oval Office ended on a mildly embarrassing note. He exited the room through the nearest door—only to find himself at a dead end. A second door, which he later learned led to a smaller, more private office for the president, was locked, trapping him in the passageway. The presidential lavatory was on one side opposite a Pullman kitchen where stewards prepared refreshments. It was obvious that unless he was prepared to stay indefinitely, he would have to reenter the Oval Office, where the president and Haig were still conferring. Peterson knocked, opened the door with apologies and sheepishly explained his predicament. The president laughed and professed that he didn't yet know his way around the West Wing very well either. He directed Peterson out another door to the hallway. The observant briefer noticed that this door had no frame and was papered to blend with the wall.

For two days during the first week of the Ford presidency, Peterson met alone with the president each morning. On the third morning, Gen. Brent Scowcroft, then Kissinger's assistant as national security advisor, indicated that henceforth he would accompany Peterson. Although this arrangement probably was prompted, in part, by Kissinger's desire to know what CIA was telling the president, Scowcroft's presence undoubtedly enhanced the value of the session for Mr. Ford. The president would raise questions about the policy implications of the intelligence, and Scowcroft would either provide the answers or undertake to obtain an early assessment. It soon became evident that no previous president had derived such prompt benefit from the Agency's current intelligence reports.

The daily contact with Ford facilitated CIA's ability to respond to his intelligence needs. Immediately after each briefing session, Peterson would report via secure telephone to his immediate boss, the director of the Office of Current Intelligence, who would relay any presidential queries, messages, or comments to the DCI's daily staff meeting at 9:00 a.m. With that kind of communication, the director and his senior aides could get rapid feedback, and the president's needs could promptly be served.

A further advantage of the direct contact involved the security of the PDB. By carrying it away after the president read it, CIA was able to maintain complete control of his copy of the publication. Coupled with the more stringent

controls that were applied to a second copy provided Scowcroft, which he later showed to Kissinger, CIA was able to terminate the wide exposure that the PDB had had among members of the White House and National Security Council staffs during the Nixon presidency.

Once it was clear that the Agency had established a secure and expeditious channel for providing sensitive material directly to the president, the Agency's director and the deputy director for operations granted permission to publish articles drawn from the Agency's most protected sources. Occasionally operational activities also were reported. Highly sensitive intercepted messages were included on a regular basis for the first time. To limit access to such compartmented material even within the Agency, it was typed on loose pages that were stapled into the copies for the president and Kissinger.

Discussing Operations and Intelligence

One tightly held operation was not covered in the PDB, but Ford was provided an oral account of its status each morning while it was in progress. That operation, the *Glomar Explorer* project, was an intricate undertaking to raise a Soviet ballistic missile submarine that had sunk in the Pacific. In his memoirs, Ford wrote of the deliberations that occurred "on the second morning of my Presidency, [when] Kissinger, Scowcroft, Schlesinger, and CIA Director William Colby came to the Oval Office to advise me that *Glomar Explorer* was on station and ready to drop the claws."¹⁹

Two decades after the event, the former president remembered well his apprehensions about the operation: "I did feel the *Glomar* action was a gamble. We didn't know what the Soviets would do. But I was convinced we had to take the risk, in terms of what we stood to gain."

Fortunately, Ford had been briefed on the *Glomar* project in detail during his visit to CIA as vice president two months earlier. Like Kennedy on the Bay of Pigs operation, Ford had less time than he would have liked to become familiar with the plans. Unlike the Cuban undertaking, however, the operation in the Pacific did not result in a challenge to a new president. The Soviets, unaware of their lost vessel's location, watched the "deep-sea mining" operation with interest, but did not attempt to thwart it.

There is no doubt that the drama associated with the *Glomar* endeavor and Ford's keen interest in it helped to certify for him the utility of the daily briefing sessions. Later, however, it was Peterson's unhappy lot to inform the pres-

¹⁹ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 135–36.

ident that an accident during the lifting operation had caused the fragile hulk to break apart, resulting in the loss of a critical portion of the submarine.

An ancillary benefit from these daily meetings with Ford was the closer cooperation that developed between the PDB staff and the White House Situation Room, which provides round-the-clock support to the president on foreign developments and national security affairs. At Scowcroft's request, after each briefing session the Agency representative would give an account of the meeting to Situation Room personnel so they could get a better insight on the president's interests and concerns. In addition, CIA's PDB staff began to inform them each evening of the topics to be covered in the PDB the following morning so they would not duplicate coverage of any current development in their own morning summary for the president.²⁰

The president soon became acutely conscious that CIA's reporting was problem oriented. Told on one occasion that the Agency did not have much to tell him that day, he replied that he wasn't disappointed: "When there is more to report, that usually means you have more bad news."

Sometimes the bad news was political and preceded the Agency's briefer into the Oval Office. One such occasion came in March 1975, the day after the DCI had testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the situation in Cambodia, where the Lon Nol regime was under heavy attack by Khmer Rouge forces. The president's first words that morning were that he was unhappy about "what your boss said on the Hill yesterday." He had read an account of the director's testimony in the *Washington Post*, which quoted Colby as saying the Lon Nol regime would have little chance to survive even with the supplemental US aid the president had requested from Congress. Scowcroft helpfully pointed out that the advance text of the director's statement did not include any such remark. It turned out the DCI's response to a question from the committee had been quoted out of context.

The eventual success of the Khmer Rouge and the forced US withdrawal from Vietnam soon led to the *Mayaguez* affair. The seizure of the US-owned container ship by the communist forces occurred in the early hours (Washington time) of 12 May 1975. Before the CIA briefer left for the White House, the Agency's Operations Center armed him with a map and the latest information on the incident, still in progress, including messages sent a short time earlier by the ship's radioman as Khmer Rouge troops were boarding the vessel.

²⁰ One morning Ford's dog, Liberty, was in the Oval Office. While the president read the PDB, the friendly and handsome golden retriever padded back and forth between Scowcroft and Peterson. All was well until her wagging tail struck the president's nearby pipe rack. The clatter of pipes and other smoking paraphernalia brought swift presidential retribution; Liberty was banished, never again to appear during a PDB meeting.

The president was distressed to receive this news, but by the time Kissinger got to him on the telephone during the PDB session Ford had absorbed the facts and had given some thought to the implications. Plans for the subsequent rescue operation began to formulate during that conversation with Kissinger. Ford recalls that, in the end, the *Mayaguez* incident “gave us a welcome opportunity to show that we were not going to be nibbled at by our enemies.”

The morning briefing session was not confined solely to current intelligence. Selected national intelligence estimates and other memorandums occasionally were provided as well. The most timely and effective example of this occurred shortly before Ford’s meeting with Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev at Vladivostok in November 1974. The day before the president’s departure, the PDB carried the key judgments of the annual estimate of Soviet strategic forces, and the briefer emphasized the underlying rationale and principal conclusions of the study. A copy of the complete NIE with its voluminous annexes was given to him to take along on the trip. The Agency also had put together a 10-minute film with color footage of Brezhnev in an informal setting that was shown to Ford in the cabinet room before his departure.

Events had pressed Ford to decide very quickly in his presidency whether to follow through with Nixon’s commitment to the Vladivostok meeting. As a result, he probably studied the intelligence reporting on this issue as closely as any. The president recalls, “[Although] I had only a few months, I felt fully prepared to discuss the substantive issues as a result of the briefings I had received in Congress, as Vice President, and then as President.”

In 1993, Ford remembered clearly the distrust of Agency analysis he had felt during his early years in Congress, when Allen Dulles and others seemed to be exaggerating the Soviet threat. He claimed to have had no similar reaction to the Agency’s work during his own brief presidency but offered the cautious assessment that “in part it may have been that by then I had a pretty good understanding of my own of what the situation in the USSR was all about.”

Ford did not receive his intelligence material exclusively through the PDB. He used NSC meetings much more effectively than his predecessor; indeed, he probably used them more effectively than any president since Eisenhower. The NSC sessions almost always began with an intelligence update. Colby remembers that Ford, unlike Nixon, “always paid attention and was engaged. He was well informed.”

Ford, too, remembers the formal NSC meetings as useful. In thinking back on those sessions, he remarked, “On substantive performance, I thought very highly of Bill Colby. I saw him primarily at the NSC. He always briefed, for example on Vietnam as we were forced to withdraw, on the *Mayaguez* seizure by the Cambodians, and on SALT.”



President Gerald Ford, flanked by Secretary of State Kissinger and Defense Secretary Schlesinger, presides over an NSC meeting. DCI Colby is seated at the far left.

Outside the formal NSC structure, however, Colby had few contacts with Ford and, thus, little direct personal knowledge of the issues the president was concentrating on at a given time and his intelligence needs. Colby described the situation this way: “My own reluctance to push into the Oval Office unless I was invited or had something that I thought demanded my personal presence, combined with a lively awareness of the probable reaction if I had tried to elbow past Henry Kissinger, kept me from pressing for personal access to either Nixon or Ford. In retrospect, I consider this one of the errors I made as Director, although I am not sure how I could have done any differently.”²¹

Ford makes the same point: “The Sunday when Colby came to my office to resign was probably the first time I met with him one-on-one. I don’t remember ever telephoning him directly for information.”

Political Problems Undermine the Briefing Process

Regrettably, the domestic political problems the CIA created for Ford before long began to outweigh the good will built up by the Agency’s substantive sup-

²¹ Colby, *Honorable Men*, 373–74.

port. Within months of Ford's accession to the presidency, the Agency, and then the White House, were buffeted by public accounts of CIA's past involvement in domestic spying, feckless preparations for possible assassinations, and covert action undertakings in Chile. As the Rockefeller Commission and the Church and Pike Committees exposed more and more information about the Agency's real and imagined misdeeds, the director's standing with Ford weakened. Colby was not responsible for the sins of the past and, in fact, had ordered some controversial programs halted, but his handling of the issues—in particular, his failure to forewarn the White House of breaking embarrassments—caused Ford and Kissinger to lose confidence in him.

Ford recalls that in 1975 he “talked with Colby, although not regularly, about the difficulties the Agency was having with the Church and Pike Committees. In addition to the real problems, the committees were up to some political mischiefmaking. We went through a terrible time. We just needed a fresh start with the Congress.”

Intended or not, the system of PDB briefings of the president became a casualty of the shakeup Ford instituted on 3 November 1975 among his senior national security officers. Colby and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger were replaced, respectively, by Ambassador George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, until then the president's White House chief of staff. Scowcroft was elevated to assistant to the president for national security affairs, the position Kissinger had retained with Scowcroft as his deputy, after assuming stewardship of the Department of State.

Concerning the change in procedures that accompanied the personnel shifts, Ford recalls:

The result was we set up a better system where I had an oral presentation [of information available from all agencies] by Brent [Scowcroft]. Dave Peterson had been very helpful, but his separate sessions were no longer necessary. Scowcroft had more time for the daily briefs than Henry had. Kissinger had been wearing two hats and didn't have time to handle the morning meetings properly. I took away his second hat. Henry was not happy about that, but he understood.

Ford maintains that under the new procedures he “continued to be very conscientious about reading the PDB [and] interested in the information.” CIA, no longer present, lost the benefit of the president's immediate reaction to each PDB. Scowcroft saw the president often, but he was not normally present when the president read the PDB and, therefore, had little to pass on in the way of the president's views and questions relating to the intelligence he was receiving. As a consequence, the PDB could no longer be tailored as well to suit Ford's personal needs.



Former Ambassador George H.W. Bush receives congratulations from out-going DCI Colby and President Ford after his swearing in at the CIA Headquarters Auditorium.

There was no indication that Ford felt deprived after the daily PDB sessions ended. At the CIA, however, the experience of 14 months of daily meetings with the president, contrasted with the succeeding months without those meetings, confirmed vividly the stark truth that there is no substitute for direct access to the president.

George Bush returned from China to become DCI in January 1976. He had been a colleague of Ford's in Congress and was untainted by the Agency's image problems. Even in these improved circumstances, however, he found it necessary to rely primarily on the written PDB and on briefing opportunities at NSC meetings to keep the president informed. Even he had relatively few one-on-one meetings with the president. For his part, Ford remembers that

there was “no material change” in his relationship with Bush (compared with Colby) as far as the presentation of substantive intelligence was concerned.

Ironically, it would not be until Bush himself was in the Oval Office that CIA would again establish with a president a working relationship as fruitful as the one it had enjoyed during the first half of the Ford presidency.

