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Matloff: This is an oral history interview with Mr. Richard M. Helms, held on July 16, 1991, at 9:30 a.m. in Washington, D.C. The interview is being recorded on tape and a copy of the transcript will be sent to Mr. Helms for his review. Representing the OSD Historical Office are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Maurice Matloff.

Mr. Helms, as we indicated in our letter of June 18, 1991, we shall focus in this interview on events and issues affecting national security and the Department of Defense, particularly during your service as Director of Central Intelligence in the Johnson and Nixon administrations, from June 1966 to February 1973. First, by way of background, I should like to ask about your involvement and interests in national security problems and about your contacts with Secretaries of Defense and OSD in the period from 1947 to 1966, up to the point when you became the Director of Central Intelligence. This would be a sweep through your period as Chief of Operations, Deputy Director of Plans, and Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. For example, what were your reactions to the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, particularly in its implications for the intelligence and defense fields?

Helms: When I saw the terms of the National Security Act of 1947, I was delighted, because I, like many others, felt that we needed a central intelligence agency, an organization that took all the material coming from overseas, no matter from what source, analyzed and collated it, based estimates on it, and did whatever was necessary to bring to the attention of the high officials of government what was going on in the world. Also, there were some of us who, at that time, were in something called the Strategic Services Units of the State and War Departments, of which I was one, and we were naturally hoping that we would become members of this new Central Intelligence Agency.

Matloff: How familiar were you with the trends in defense organization and management subsequent to that legislation? Defense went through a number of reorganization acts. Were you keeping up with that?

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Helms: I can't say that that aspect of life in the Department of Defense interested me very much. At that time I was involved in the operational end of the Central Intelligence Agency, and I was trying my best to have a role in shaping and running that. I don't recall interesting myself in the Defense Department at all.

Matloff: What shaped your views of national security in that long period, 1947-66? What influences played upon your thinking, and your experiences?

Helms: I, like anyone else who was involved in intelligence in the late '40s, recognized that the defenestration of Jan Masaryk and the push of the Communists to take over the labor unions in France and Italy, for example, inevitably were going to push us even further into antagonisms with the Soviet Union. When I was in Berlin in the summer of 1945, we were already sensing that the Soviets were going to be difficult to get along with. We, of course, had no view of the extent to which this turned into a cold war. But during this period of 1947-66, the preoccupation of the operational part of the agency, certainly, was to do our best to see to it that the Soviets did not simply take over Western Europe, which was the primary focus of their efforts in those days.

Matloff: What were your views of the threat facing the United States and how did you view CIA estimates vis-a-vis those of the military agencies? For example, did you feel that those of the military community were inflated, self-serving, or budget oriented, as has sometimes been claimed?

Helms: In that period I can't answer, because I was not following what the military was producing.

Matloff: You remember the terms "bomber gap" and "missile gap." Did you and the CIA directorates subscribe to the existence of those?

Helms: That strange business of the missile gap, which was alleged by President Nixon to have had such an effect on the 1960 election, did not seem to affect the operational part of the agency very much. In fact, we were not even aware of the seriousness with which this was regarded by the politicians, as I remember. I do not recall, either, that

the agency ever felt that the Soviets were way ahead of us in this particular respect. I want to make the point here that it was made quite clear by the directors of the agency at the time that the agency was not involved in politics in any way, and, therefore, whatever what was happening in the campaign in 1960, we would have stayed miles away from in any event. I believe that Mr. Dulles was accused by Mr. Nixon of being the one that, through Senator Symington, in some fashion, perpetrated this business, but I don't really know the facts.

Goldberg: Symington's information came from the Air Force; there is no doubt about that.

Matloff: Did you mean Nixon, or Kennedy?

Goldberg: No, Nixon.

Helms: Nixon was convinced that the missile gap helped Kennedy to defeat him.

Matloff: Do you recall, from your standpoint in the agency, the major problems that CIA encountered vis-a-vis the Defense establishment in the intelligence field in this period before your directorship—for example, anything to do with collection, analysis, dissemination, research and development?

Helms: In the first place, the military establishment was helpful to us, particularly in Germany and the Far East, in getting established and providing cover arrangements, and things of this kind. I do recall that there was some kind of a rhubarb between Mr. Dulles and Gen. Trudeau at one time. I've now forgotten exactly what the episode encompassed, but that was the only real fracas that I remember. I know that negotiations had to be conducted with the Army at the time that the agency took over the Organization Gehlen in Germany, but that was a negotiation which was perfectly straightforward, and I don't remember any animus connected with it at all.

Matloff: Do you recall the relationships between the CIA directors and the Secretaries of Defense during this period? How close they were to them and were there any differences of views or common enterprises in which they were involved?

Helms: Obviously Gen. Smith had perfectly satisfactory relations with the Department of Defense. Gen. Smith was the type of personality that didn't brook opposition from anybody, so that by the time he was in civilian clothes, or in mufti, and running the agency, he just told people what he wanted and got pretty much what he did want. Mr. Dulles was closer to his brother in the State Department, so that I don't think that his relations with the DOD were particularly close. On the other hand, there wasn't any particular need for it that I recall. On the other hand, I don't recall any personality clashes between him and any secretaries of defense.

Matloff: How much control did the Directors of Central Intelligence establish over the overall intelligence community in this period? This would include control over the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Helms: The Director of Central Intelligence had no control that I recall over the military intelligence entities until President Kennedy came in. It was President Kennedy who formulated a doctrine that the Director of Central Intelligence was to have a coordinating authority over all the intelligence agencies and was to work on such matters as requirements, budgets, and things of this kind. So this process was started at that time with a very small organization. As I understand it, that organization that has to do with interagency affairs in the intelligence community has gotten larger and larger, but I don't know anything about it any more.

Matloff: Do you recall to what extent the Secretaries of Defense favored or resisted such control?

Helms: I felt that during the time that I had anything to do with this that the job of the director was to use persuasion as best he could to convince the other elements of the intelligence community that this coordination was a good idea, that their cooperation was necessary and what the President wanted, and so forth. Gradually, I think this did come about. It was a slow process and took some time, there is no doubt about it. I would like to point out that it was after I left office that I noticed for the first time that

the Secretary of Defense really stepped in to head off what I think he regarded as an undesirable effort on the part of Adm. Stansfield Turner to take over the whole budget process in the intelligence community. I remember vividly, on the shuttle to New York one morning, reading in The New York Times a little squib saying that Secretary Harold Brown had appointed Adm. Daniel Murphy as his intelligence assistant. My first thought was, "checkmate." This was the device that he was going to use: put a four star admiral against a four star admiral and see to it that Adm. Turner did not get into the Defense Department's budget business to a degree that he felt to be undesirable. You put your finger here on a problem of continuing complexity and difficulty, and I don't know whether it will get straightened out when the Congress reorganizes the intelligence community or not. I have lots of comments on that particular problem, but they are not of interest to your history; they are of interest to the current events.

Goldberg: With reference to the '50s, to the extent that friction did exist between Defense and the military services on the one hand and CIA on the other, was that, at least in part, the result of CIA becoming involved in military estimates, as it did increasingly during the 1950s?

Helms: I think there is no question that it was in the estimating process that these disagreements came to a head, particularly about the strength of Soviet forces, defense forces, offensive forces, chemical warfare, nuclear developments, missiles, and all the rest of it. There were disagreements and some real struggles about these estimates, but I don't recall anybody going to the mat, tearing into the President, and saying he had to fire the Secretary of Defense or the Director of Central Intelligence. I think there was an honest effort to try and see if these really differing views couldn't be accommodated.

Goldberg: Wasn't there a feeling on the part of the military that the CIA was beginning to encroach on its territory?

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Helms: I haven't the slightest doubt that the military has always felt that the Agency was attempting to encroach on areas that legitimately were theirs. I don't think they liked the coordinating idea, and I don't think they have liked having to share these arrangements with the Central Intelligence Agency. On the other hand, this is the way various presidents have wanted to do it.

Goldberg: You think it was a natural development, then, for the Agency to become involved in military estimating?

Helms: I think it was absolutely inevitable, because the national intelligence estimates, which these papers were called, would not be national intelligence estimates without the Agency writing them. After all, it should be remembered that these were the Director of Central Intelligence estimates. He actually signed the cover of these estimates, so they were supposed to be the last word on the subject. But, of course, the military was always able to have footnotes to these estimates, so their views were always incorporated in the papers.

Matloff: Do you recall your reaction, and possibly those of the Directors of the Agency, to the establishment of the NSA in 1952 and the DIA in 1961? Do you recall what impact that might have had on CIA?

Helms: I don't think that the founding of NSA created much reaction in the Agency. After all, it was simply a consolidation of existing organizations. As far as DIA was concerned, there was a feeling that this would be competitive in the analysis field. But on the other hand, it was interesting to note that, whereas it was thought at the time that the analyses of the Defense Intelligence Agency would be kept within the Pentagon and not sent to the White House. They were not only sent to the White House but the Kennedy administration began to ask for raw reports from the military, NSA, CIA, and so forth. The Situation Room was inundated with unevaluated information, and that has been going on ever since, as far as I am aware.

Goldberg: Who was pushing that in the White House?

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Helms: I think President Kennedy, himself, pushed it. It was certainly continued in President Nixon's administration, because Kissinger wanted all those raw reports.

Matloff: Do you have any impressions on whether the establishment of these agencies improved military intelligence, production, and operations?

Helms: I am not able to comment on that.

Matloff: Ray S. Cline, one of your former colleagues, in his book, Secrets, Spies and Scholars, states: "The one major change in CIA structure that McCone [Director, 1961-1965] made was one I disapproved of. He felt strongly that CIA, in order to compete with the Pentagon in the field of technical reconnaissance research and development had to strengthen its scientific and technical resources. Accordingly, he created a new Directorate, Science and Technology. For some reason, Cline didn't go along with this. Did you have any feelings, one way or another?"

Helms: Let's look at this thing historically. Out of that office of Science and Technology in the Agency have come almost all of the big reconnaissance developments of modern times--the U-2; the Ox-cart, which the Air Force called the SR71; the satellites; the whole KH series of reconnaissance vehicles, and so forth. Granted, this was done under the aegis of the NRO, and the Department of Defense had a big role in this; no question about it. But the individuals who actually produced the designs for these way-out, high tech systems, were in that office of Science and Technology. If it hadn't been founded, we probably wouldn't have had these devices. The KH-11, for example, involved a technology which was so far out there was a very real question as to whether it was feasible or not. Fortunately, at that particular time David Packard was the Deputy Secretary of Defense. He had a background in engineering and solid-state development, and felt that it was worth the effort to see if it could be made to work. So he approved it, whereas others were trying to kill it. It was a collaboration, no question, between the DoD and the Agency, but the brains for doing this were in the Agency.

Goldberg: In fact, then, what McCone did was to formalize something that already existed on a substantial scale within the Agency. He simply gave it a status and an organization.

Helms: It was sort of an office off to the side of the Director's when Bissell was in charge of the U-2 program. Later the DCI appointed a deputy director and gave him the job of running this organization. It expanded and got more financing. An interesting thing is that when the Ox-cart, or SR-71, was being developed, Senator Richard Russell, who had oversight of the Agency in those days, called me over one day and said that the airplane was becoming so expensive that for the CIA to put it into its budget was making a problem. The problem was that when this large bulge was put in the Defense Department budget it was harder to give cover to the CIA budget. He wanted me to go to the Secretary of Defense and work out an arrangement whereby from then on the DoD paid for such new systems directly, even in the black budget. It was not to be in the CIA budget. That's what we did. Thus new systems came under the purview of the National Reconnaissance Organization.

Goldberg: This was approximately when?

Helms: I have a hard time with the year, but not long after I became director, in 1966.

Matloff: How about the reaction of the Secretary of Defense? This was in McNamara's period. He was supporting, as I recall, the military services in this area of technology.

Do you recall his reaction to CIA getting into the business?

Helms: McNamara was a supporter of the CIA, not only in its national estimates, which he found useful, but also in its analysis. Also, he was a supporter in matters of this kind. He saw the point here that this was going to make for a difficulty. I do not recall having any problem in getting this agreed in the Pentagon.

Matloff: I seem to recall that the Air Force eventually got control of the SR-71, and I think McNamara backed the Air Force on that one.

Helms: What happened on that was that the problem was brought to President Johnson: here were the CIA planes and the Air Force planes, and he claimed the budget could not afford to have two sets of planes with approximately the same qualifications, or qualities. It was his decision that we should, therefore, mothball the Ox-carts and that the SR-71s should be used. I argued with him, but it was pointless. I don't think in this instance it was the influence of McNamara that got Johnson to make up his mind. It was that Johnson took a look at the budgetary situation and decided it was much better to have the Air Force run the thing than to have all that money spent in the Agency. There was a difference between the two planes. The Ox-cart was a plane for one human being only, and could carry a much larger amount of film--about twice the amount of the SR-71. The SR-71 had two men, a pilot and an observer, and a smaller capacity to photograph.

Matloff: To get back to the earlier period again, before mid-'66--did you have any direct dealings with the military services and the JCS?

Helms: I have a terrible time remembering matters of that kind. I might not have noticed if I was dealing with the G-2 of the Army, for example; I was dealing with all those people, it seemed to me. While I was Director of Operations, I do not recall having any contacts with the Joint Chiefs of Staff as such; most of them were with the intelligence chiefs of the three military services.

Matloff: Did you ever have any problems getting information from them, if you needed it?

Helms: No, not that I know of. I think that it wasn't the information from them that was the problem, but there was always a small amount of skirmishing in Germany and places in the occupied areas as to who was running what intelligence organizations, and things of that kind, but that gradually got straightened out. I don't think that historically it's a big thing, except to the extent that over time it became clear that the Agency, in the espionage field particularly, should be the one controlling the assets of

the United States government, and that if any of the military services wanted to be involved in this activity, they should clear these things with the Agency people. I get the sense now, simply from reading the newspapers, that the military wants more of a hand in running covert intelligence operations, and this is now bubbling to the surface again as an issue.

Matloff: This touches on the question of the budget. A considerable portion of the funds of the CIA for operations evidently came from the DoD budget.

Helms: They didn't come from the DoD budget; they were put in the DoD budget.

Matloff: How were those figures arrived at, and who made the final determination of CIA's share?

Helms: It wasn't a question of a share. The Agency went to the Congress to get its budget. When the budget was decided by the Congress and had the President's approval, the financial people in the Agency and the DoD Comptroller decided how it was to be put in the Defense budget for cover purposes. My recollection is that for several years it was put in the Air Force budget. This was worked out between the financial people in the two organizations. This was a sum of money that was put aside by the Congress for the work in the CIA; it had nothing to do with the DoD whatever.

Goldberg: In the late 1950s and early '60s, the Air Force was getting the lion's share of the Defense budget. It did include, at that point, the CIA money, also.

Helms: I think that was probably why the Air Force was picked; it had a bigger bulge and therefore it was easier to hide it in its budget. This was a question, if you like, of manipulation. It had nothing to do with policy; it was how do you hide this money and where do you hide it best?

Goldberg: I was simply making the point because the Army and the Navy during that period were getting smaller budgets. The Air Force was getting almost 50 percent of the total Defense budget, which made them look very much out of line and made them

look like the dominant service, to the unhappiness of both the Army and the Navy. It is interesting that at least some billions of that money was CIA money.

Helms: It probably did not come into the billions in those days; it was in the millions.

Goldberg: In 1960? Hundreds of millions. NSA money was probably there, too--either there or in the Army; and most likely the Air Force, too.

Matloff: To turn to some area problems and crises, what role did you and your staff play during the Korean War? Was there any coordination with Defense between the two agencies?

Helms: I don't have any very good recollection of the details of the Korean War. The Agency was just getting started in those years. I know that OPC, which was just getting organized, was attempting to play a role in the Korean War and did have a small role, I believe. The Agency's espionage work was not big stuff in those days, as I recall it.

Matloff: Let me ask you about the U-2 reconnaissance missions. Obviously CIA played an important role in the development of the U-2, from what you have indicated. What was McCone's attitude toward the control of the flights, vis-a-vis that of McNamara?

Helms: Most of the U-2 flights were in Allen Dulles's administration. My recollection is that, as far as control of the flights is concerned, Bissell, working with the Under Secretary of the Air Force, Joe Charyk, worked out the operations, and these were personally cleared by Mr. Dulles with President Eisenhower, working through Andrew Goodpaster. Goodpaster was the go-between on most of these things.

Matloff: Moving up to the McCone-McNamara period, in early October 1962 responsibility for the flights was turned over to the Air Force. Do you recall Mr. McCone's reaction to that?

Helms: In 1962 I was Deputy Director of Operations. I know that there was trouble between Mr. McCone and Mr. McNamara, and also for a while with McNamara's deputy, Mr. Gilpatric. Even though Gilpatric and McCone were friends, they had quite a ruckus, I believe, over how the National Reconnaissance Organization was going to

be run. The details of this ruckus I was not involved in, but I know the Agency historians have a lot of material on that. Ken McDonald could probably provide a lot of background.

Matloff: Apparently McNamara urged Air Force control, and felt strongly about it.

To bring up briefly the Cuban Bay of Pigs affair, what involvement did you have in it and what, in your view, went wrong with handling the operation?

Helms: It was not long before the Bay of Pigs that Richard Bissell replaced Frank Wisner as Deputy Director for Plans. That was the title that the job had all through those years. It was Bissell who picked up the concept that later became known as the Bay of Pigs. I forget what the code name was in those days. I know that the planning for it and some of the work on it started in the Eisenhower administration. Then when Kennedy came in, there was the problem of "selling" him on this whole concept and operation. As you just mentioned, there is plenty of information around about what actually happened, and certainly Mr. Bissell would be available to discuss this. It is my recollection that in President Eisenhower's mind the idea of this operation was to establish a beachhead in Cuba; then, in that beachhead, to establish a government in exile and use that as an effort to bring down Castro--in other words, to have this government in exile concept and its authority spread over Cuba. President Eisenhower had in mind that if the landing of these Cuban exiles was not successful, he would have the United States Navy standing by to see to it that they did get ashore successfully. So when the operation actually came into being and was run, during the Kennedy administration, President Kennedy not only cut off the air support, which the people that ran the operation felt was absolutely essential, but there was no feeling that the Navy should participate at all; therefore the thing ended in disaster. Those two things alone were sufficient to defeat the operation, because if Cuba maintained its presence in the air, the men in boats were just sitting ducks, and if the Navy wouldn't come in and protect them and help to establish, with a field of fire, a landing strip, then that

would have defeated it as well. Of course, there is an other aspect to the affair, and that is, is it feasible for an organization like the Central Intelligence Agency to try to run a military operation of the size that the Bay of Pigs became? After all, the Pentagon has a whole staff and logistics organization to support things of this kind, whereas the Agency was not only trying to do all these things, but was also attempting to do them covertly. Therefore, I think it was a scheme that was ill-conceived, because of its size, to start with.

Matloff: Do you recall that later on there was a post-mortem in which Gen. Maxwell Taylor and Robert Kennedy played a part. They talked about the roles of CIA vis-a-vis DoD in future para-military operations. Do you recall what your reactions were?

Helms: I recall that they did have a post-mortem, and I am relatively certain that I agreed with them.

Matloff: To turn to the Cuban missile crisis--how did you first learn that there was a crisis, and what role did you and your staff play?

Helms: We were, in those days, running agents into Cuba. We were also running the interrogation center in Florida, in Opa-locka, I believe. During this period Senator Keating of New York was going public and saying there were missiles in Cuba. It turned out later that he was taking a chance that he would turn out to be right, because there had been reports from refugees and agents that missiles were seen moving around, but the type of missiles seemed to be uncertain. We were doing our level best to find out exactly what was going on and we had some pretty good reports, but we didn't have any type or measurements of the missiles. Finally there were enough of these reports that President Kennedy gave in and permitted a U-2 flight over Cuba to establish what was going on as best we could. When those pictures came back, there was an area near San Cristobal, in Cuba, which was laid out in what was obviously a missile-firing site. It turned out that the agent that we had in the Soviet Union by the name of Penkovsky had some time before given us the manuals of a

certain Russian missile, and in the manuals were the instructions for laying out the field of launching. So the photographs were put beside these designs in the manuals and it was seen that they were one and the same thing. That told immediately what kind of missile it was, and what would have to be in place before it was in a position to fire. The significance of this material was that, a) it not only confirmed the existence of the Russian effort to put nuclear missiles in Cuba, but also, b) it told Kennedy how long he had before those missiles would be in a position to fire. It gave him several days to work out the negotiations with Khrushchev which ended the crisis. If he had not had this information from Penkovsky about the kind of missile and what the firing positions looked like, he might have had to send in the Air Force right off the bat and just blast that part of Cuba. Whether this would have been a better solution to the Cuban problem or not, some people wonder, depending on their point of view. But that is what happened.

Matloff: Were you consulted in connection with discussions in the EXCOMM?

Helms: I was in regular touch with Mr. McCone. He was the agency representative to the EXCOMM, and we got together every morning about the intelligence and what it showed, and so forth.

Matloff: How closely was he dealing with Mr. McNamara during that crisis?

Helms: I don't recall attending any EXCOMM meetings, but my impression was that they were all working together on these problems. I don't know of any rivalry, or antagonism; if you have evidence to the contrary, it may be true.

Matloff: No. Why did the national security system work better during the missile crisis than in the Bay of Pigs affair?

Helms: In the Bay of Pigs there was never any day-to-day examination of the project by the National Security Council or any part of it. It was a private CIA operation, and only the President was kept informed, as far as I know, by McGeorge Bundy and those

officials. The net result was that it came as a big surprise to many people when it failed.

Matloff: To this day, both McNamara and Rusk have great misgivings that they weren't more alert to what was going on in the earlier crisis. What do you think was the decisive factor in Khrushchev's retreat?

Helms: I think there is no doubt that when Khrushchev actually faced the problem of a confrontation with the United States of America, he knew very well that he couldn't possibly win a nuclear war; that the missile gap was baloney; that they couldn't match what the United States had; and that it would have been absolutely disastrous for the Soviet Union.

Matloff: Were you involved at all in the Berlin crisis of 1961-62?

Helms: This was the wall?

Matloff: Yes.

Helms: We had a lot to do with the backing and forthing and information about the wall and what was going to happen, but I don't have any particular insights. I noticed, in a book by Wyden about the Wall, the allegation that I sort of gave it the back of my hand as an important intelligence item. I didn't do that at all, but I was informed enough to recognize that the decision to put up the Wall was made on the spur of the moment by the Russians and the East Germans and that to figure out exactly what they were going to do, you would have had to have been inside the brain of one of them. So I never regarded this as an intelligence failure, but as one of those policy failures which we have so frequently.

Matloff: On the military side, the reserves were called up, unlike the Vietnam experience later on. So from the military standpoint it was of considerable importance. Were you drawn in on any NATO problems, in this period up to mid-'66?

Helms: No; the people involved in espionage and covert action had almost nothing to do with policy matters of that kind.

Matloff: Let me take you to the war in Vietnam, our involvement in Indochina. What was your attitude toward our involvement? This is in the period from the Eisenhower administration up to your Directorship.

Helms: Vietnam became an absorption.

Matloff: What do you think was at stake for American security or national interests in that period?

Helms: I was inclined to believe during this period that we should do the best we could to support the Montagnards and the other dissidents in Vietnam who were prepared to fight to keep the South out of the clutches of the North. I saw nothing wrong at all with the operation. We did the best we could, and it was not our fault that the policymakers decided gradually to escalate the amount of American troops and forces involved in the fighting. There is no point in trying to paint a picture that the Agency itself was of one mind, but it is clear that most of the operators out there felt that it was much better to try to fight this war by irregular means than it was to involve regular troops in the paddies and mountains of this country, which we didn't understand and which was quite alien to our concepts of life, religion, and everything else. On the other hand, when the increased waves of troops were added, and the whole nature of the battle was changed, the Agency was very much involved, and we spent endless hours providing personnel, support, and intelligence. During the Johnson and Nixon administrations you couldn't get those Presidents to talk about anything else except Vietnam. There is one issue here on which I would like to make a point. That point was constantly being made to President Johnson, I remember, by Lee Kuan Yew, the long-time Prime Minister of Singapore--that the American effort had a great deal to do with saving the rest of Southeast Asia for the free world and for their own freedom. He was absolutely persuaded that if the United States had not displayed an interest in Laos and Vietnam, the whole area would have collapsed over time. The Communists would have succeeded in taking over in Indonesia, and the Communist

takeover in Indochina would have gone through Malaya and all the rest. That was one man's opinion, but it has a strong basis in fact. To go to Laos for a moment, where the Agency was given the very difficult job of trying to keep alive opposition in that country without the U.S. hand showing--this was a result of the Accords with the Soviets about Laos; it was supposed to be a neutral country--and yet they were constantly encroaching, so we had to set up opposition. When the war ended, at least as long as the Agency was involved there, we actually won. The idea was to keep the area out of Communist hands, and it only collapsed when Vietnam collapsed. So it is possible with the use of some of the irregular forces actually to accomplish more than one recognizes.

Goldberg: That was a pretty substantial job on the part of the Agency.

Helms: Yes, but the Air Force and the State Department helped; it was really a governmental effort. But the Agency's hand was the main one that provided the guns, troops, training, overflights, helicopters, and all the rest of it.

Matloff: I take it that there must have been some coordination with DoD in this.

Helms: No question about it, and it worked very well.

Matloff: You recall in the Kennedy period one of his first acts was to increase the number of military advisers in Vietnam. He wanted to know how many were there and then he doubled the figure. Did the President, to your knowledge, consult the Agency on the effects of increasing the number of military advisers in Vietnam?

Helms: I can't answer that question, because in those days McCone was the man dealing with these problems. Frankly, I don't think there was much consultation, but I can't say for sure.

Matloff: How about on the question of Diem, the South Vietnamese leader? Was the Agency asked in advance about possible effects of the toppling of Diem?

Helms: I remember this episode vividly, because the Administration telegram that was sent to Lodge was rather unsettling out there--that we had to get rid of Nhu, Diem's

brother. In retrospect, that telegram was based on a misconception of what the Buddhists were up to. The fact that they immolated themselves horrified the people in Washington. If they had known anything about Buddhist culture, they would have seen nothing very unusual about immolation as a means of doing away with yourself if you felt that you were on the wrong side, or sinful.

Goldberg: We had a few here, too.

Helms: We did indeed. There is no doubt in my mind, in retrospect, that it was a misguided move to get rid of Diem, because after that we had a revolving door of prime ministers, and the whole cohesion of the South Vietnamese effort was disastrously affected, in my opinion, by this maneuver.

Matloff: Was the Agency asked to take a position on the matter?

Helms: No. This cable was sent out on a Saturday night. When they were looking for McCone, and finally got hold of me, I was told that the President had already approved it and this was a coordination process. Under those circumstances, I said that I had no grounds for holding it up. But obviously at that time we did not know exactly what the outcome was going to be.

Matloff: There appears to have been a feeling among American officials in 1963 that the Americans would be able to end their military role by the end of 1965. Did you or the Agency share that optimism?

Helms: There were a lot of estimates and analyses written about Vietnam. They must be available to show precisely what the Agency's views were. I would not rely on my memory with respect to that. Also, there are people still alive in town having a more intimate view of these things than I do. I had an assistant when I was Director who ran a little Vietnamese office for me, to keep me up to date. That gentleman is still alive and might be able to answer some of these questions for you; his name is George Carver.

Matloff: Did your or your Agency's role change when Johnson became President in respect to Vietnam, before you became Director? Was there any change in the way Johnson made use of the Agency from the way that Kennedy had made use of it in connection with Vietnam?

Helms: I don't think there was much change.

Matloff: How and when did you first learn of the Tonkin Gulf incident, in August 1964?

Helms: I heard about it when it first occurred, and I had no better insights than anyone else about the exact details; in fact, I think they are still in dispute. I recently attended a conference at the LBJ Library—Adm. Moorer and Gen. Westmoreland were there. The incident is still controversial. I have a transcript of that conference.

Matloff: There were two key decisions reached by President Johnson in 1965: one was the decision to bomb north of the 17th parallel; the other was the decision to commit American ground combat troops. Did Johnson consult with the Agency on either of these decisions?

Helms: He certainly was basing his decisions on the Agency's reports of what was going on in Vietnam, but I think most of his decisions about military matters were almost entirely the result of discussions with McNamara and Gen. Wheeler. He read the Agency's reports and we gave him a lot of bad news. I remember his reading a report about the effectiveness of the bombing in the north. It was a very negative report. He was a gentleman about it; but, nevertheless, he didn't consult with the Agency about military tactics or strategy.

Matloff: How about McNamara himself, as Secretary of Defense? Did he consult with the Director for intelligence evaluations in connection with strategy or policy towards Vietnam?

Helms: Yes; the Agency was turning out papers for McNamara and Johnson by the reams.

Matloff: Was McNamara relying only on his military intelligence agencies?

Helms: I think he relied on everything he could get his hands on. McNamara had no prejudice against Agency reports. As a matter of fact, I think he believed that they were more accurate, in some cases, than the military ones.

Goldberg: He was a vacuum cleaner, anyway; he sucked everything in that he could get hold of.

Helms: That's right.

Matloff: How about the Agency's reactions to McNamara's conduct of the war down to mid-'66? Did you have any feeling about the way the war was being conducted, in agreement or disagreement?

Helms: The atmosphere in those days was such that President Johnson made it very clear how important the prosecution of the war was to him. Everybody in the Executive Branch works for the President, and we didn't spend much time scratching our heads and wondering if we should be going in the other direction or not; we were doing our best to help with the effort. It is indeed true that there were people working with Clifford, later, who were trying to undermine what the President was doing, but this was not true in the early days of the Johnson administration.

Matloff: You mentioned the CIA evaluations of the progress of the bombing--do you recall if you had any impressions of how those compared with the evaluations of the military agencies?

Helms: No, I don't.

Goldberg: There was some opposition in the State Department, particularly on the part of Ball, were you aware of that?

Helms: Yes. Ball, throughout this period, was an advocate of getting out of the war. President Johnson knew this, and on occasion he would say, "We are going to meet at 2:00 (we had been meeting in the morning) and have George Ball take 30 minutes to explain why we shouldn't be doing the things we are doing." So Ball had every

opportunity to express his opposition to this whole effort, over and over again. When his memoir came out, I read a part of it, and it seemed to me that he was attempting there to adduce to himself a credit about foresight in this thing, which I don't think is in keeping with the facts, but, nevertheless, he was opposed.

Goldberg: I think McNamara shares your view of that.

Matloff: We have talked to McNamara about the war. I think we are the first historians that he spoke to at some length about the war.

Helms: McNamara won't talk to people on the outside about it any more. He wouldn't go to this recent conference, for example. He turned it down flat.

Matloff: Is there any way of knowing to what extent Johnson's policies were based on the intelligence estimates of either CIA or the military, or both?

Helms: It's pretty hard to know.

Matloff: Let me touch on the Dominican operation of 1965-66—did you or the Agency play any role in connection with the American intervention?

Helms: We were certainly involved in it. That was the time when Adm. Raborn was the Director and I was the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. I attended all of the meetings. That was a short-lived crisis. The Agency had a role, as far as the intelligence was concerned, in what was going on politically in the Dominican Republic and the position of Bosch and others. President Johnson was given all that material and I think he found it quite satisfactory. I remember on one occasion he sent a Justice of the Supreme Court, Abe Fortas, to the Dominican Republic to make an intelligence reconnaissance for him. I attended the meeting late one evening when Justice Fortas came back and briefed the President, various people of State, Defense, and Intelligence, about what he had found out in the Dominican Republic. President Johnson was playing his usual game of getting information from as many sources as possible. I thought this was relatively amusing, that he should have used a sitting Justice of the Supreme Court to do an intelligence reconnaissance for him.

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Goldberg: Ray Cline gave us some interesting information on this particular operation, in which he was apparently involved to some extent. He briefed Johnson in the White House on this, on one occasion.

Matloff: I gather that during this operation Adm. Raborn established an Operations Center in the Agency; was it patterned at all after anything in Defense?

Helms: I didn't recall any operations center having to do with the Dominican Republic.

Matloff: Now we are coming to the period of 30 June 1966 to 2 Feb. 1973. What were the circumstances of your appointment as Director? What was the background and who had recommended you for the position?

Helms: I don't know. Mr. McCone told me that he had recommended me. I noticed in Mr. Clifford's book that he takes credit for having recommended me. All I know is that President Johnson called me down one day and said, "Mr. McCone is leaving the Agency and I am going to appoint a new Director. I am going to appoint Adm. Raborn. He has been recommended to me by the Civil Service chief, John Macy. He has good relations with the Congress because of his success with bringing the Polaris submarine in on time and under budget. I think that he will be well and favorably received in the Congress. I am going to make you Deputy Director, and I want you to go to all the meetings with Adm. Raborn and help him in any way you can. At meetings down here, you come with him--and also in meetings with Congress, if necessary. In any event, I want you to work with him because he hasn't any experience in intelligence and you have been with this agency all this period of time. Maybe some day I will make you Director, after you get more acquainted with Congress. You are not well known in Washington now and I think it would be a mistake to appoint you at this juncture, because nobody would know what you represent." I thanked him very much. He then told me the circumstances under which the announcement would shortly be made and the surprise he would have for the public down at the LBJ ranch, and that was that. To go one step further, one Saturday morning about 14 months later I returned from

doing some errands and had a call from John Macy, the head of the Civil Service operation. He asked if I had heard that the President was having a small press conference in his office during which he would announce my appointment as Director. I said "No." Macy then said that if he didn't announce it and I heard nothing about it, not to tell anybody that Macy had told me, that Johnson would kill him. I said, "No problem. If I hear about it, fine. If not, fine." Within an hour the phone was ringing off the hook, with the press and so forth. The President had sandwiched the announcement between some others and hadn't even bothered to tell me he was going to do it.

Goldberg: Whom did you replace as Deputy Director?

Helms: Marshall Carter.

Goldberg: Wasn't it a bit unusual for Macy to be involved in appointments at this level?

Helms: President Johnson worked in mysterious ways. Where he got his information from at any time and whom he talked to were very difficult to fathom. Some of his decisions were made on the basis of information which had nothing to do with the normal processes of government. I mention this to you because that's my recollection of what he told me.

Matloff: How long and well had you known President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and Secretary of State Rusk by this time?

Helms: I hardly knew President Johnson at all. I knew McNamara somewhat better, but not very well. I knew Rusk because in President Kennedy's administration I was in the White House a fair amount of time. Kennedy did things in an unconventional way and was constantly calling meetings with underlings that the heads of the agencies and departments didn't attend, so I had become acquainted with him, and, through him, with Rusk and McNamara. So I knew them far better than I knew President Johnson.

Matloff: How about the outgoing Assistant for National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy, and the incoming, Walt Rostow?

Helms: I had a lot of work with Bundy, because that was where we plugged in on operational matters at the White House. And I had a lot to do with Rostow.

Matloff: Did President Johnson give you any instructions or directives for this post?

Helms: The extent of his direction was, "Go out there, shake that place up, and make it run right." That was about the extent of it. I saw no reason to shake it up. I thought it was running pretty well, so I just tried to make it run better.

Matloff: What problems in national security did you face when you assumed office?

Helms: Vietnam was the big issue. Vietnam and the annual estimates about Soviet forces were the two big issues every year.

Matloff: How did you see your role, vis-a-vis that of the rest of the intelligence community, including Defense? Did you see it in any way differently, say, from what your predecessors had seen it?

Helms: I don't think that we made any dramatic changes. I certainly tried to get the coordinating process working. I put John Bross in charge of this activity, and I think he did a good, persuasive job of bringing the military into the process and making the whole thing work better than it had previously. I didn't believe in trying to make any dramatic changes. My experience in government was that if you couldn't do these things gradually and try to get everybody on board before you made the announcement or the move, that was a mistake, because you would get a lot of hostility and animus and it would be difficult to make your program operate. So I usually went at these things gradually. One of the things I might put in here is about the June war of 1967. The Agency made an estimate for President Johnson which indicated that if it came to war between the Arabs and the Israelis, the Israelis would win within two weeks, regardless of who started the war, because they were in a position to take on any combination of Arab forces that could be put against them and

win. This was based on the fact that we had had a running analytic process in place that every six months brought up to date the question of the Arab and Israeli forces in the Middle East, because it was obviously a tinder box and had been for a long time. So when the Israelis came in with an estimate one day which indicated that the United States should help Israel, the intimation was that Israel was going to have a tough time and therefore needed help. This estimate was written to counter that estimate. President Johnson had been up opening the American part of the exposition in Montreal and arrived back in the early evening. He called everyone into his office because that day the Israeli estimates had come in--one to the Agency, one to Dean Rusk, another to Arthur Goldberg in New York. When Johnson read our paper, he noted it was counter to what Dean Rusk had been telling him as to the balance of forces. Johnson said to Earle Wheeler and me, "Go back, scrub this thing down, and bring back another piece of paper being more precise about this." That process was done, and when it came back, it was narrowed down to a week. The only amusing aspect of this, according to my recollection, was that when the original estimate was shown to Rusk, he turned to me and asked if I agreed with it. I said, "Yes." He said, "In the words of Fiorello La Guardia, 'If this is a mistake, it's a beaut.'" In any event, you know the outcome of the war. I mention this because I think for the first time in his administration as President, Johnson saw that intelligence could be useful to him. It was just after that period that he suddenly began inviting me to the Tuesday lunches, which were the internal policy-making core of the Johnson administration. I stayed on that list until he left office. I think it made a difference in what he saw as, a) intelligence's contribution, and, b) what a Director could do for him. My role in the Johnson administration was, as I phrased it, "To keep the game honest." Because when Johnson, Rusk, Wheeler, and McNamara would be arguing about something in Vietnam, I was the one who would speak up and say, "Those aren't the figures that we have"; or "This isn't the way we regard this"; or "We think you ought to look at

something a little differently." I didn't take part in making, advocating, or denying policy, but I wanted to keep the facts straight upon which it was based.

Goldberg: One couldn't help but be impressed by an estimate so accurately validated so quickly.

Helms: That's right; it was a lucky thing for the Agency, because you know this city very well, and you know that the influence that people perceive one has depends a great deal upon where you are, where you sit, and with whom you associate.

Matloff: How about President Nixon's use of the CIA Director and the Agency?

Helms: When Nixon came to office, there was a very sour taste in his mouth about the CIA, and it all dates back to that so-called "missile gap" during the 1960 election campaign.

Goldberg: For which you weren't responsible, in the first place.

Helms: Right. He was, therefore, very specific that he didn't want the Agency involved in policymaking. He felt that Allen Dulles had been involved with policy making during the Eisenhower administration, when he was vice-president, and he felt that was a mistake. He almost went to the point of barring me from policy discussions of the National Security Council. For some reason, this never eventuated. I was told that I was not to be there, but I continued to go, and he never told me to leave. My role, I think, was essentially what it was in the Johnson administration.

Goldberg: Who told you not to attend?

Helms: Kissinger, on Nixon's instructions. But it never happened that way. In his book, Kissinger says that it did, but it never transpired. Nixon was very distrusting of the Agency, and was constantly referring to the fact that our estimates on Soviet forces were inadequate. I used to get a lecture from him from time to time. Most of my dealings in the Nixon administration were with Kissinger or Haig. If I wanted to see Nixon, I had no trouble getting to see him. He was available, if needed. But Nixon didn't like to talk to people. He really is the original loner. He would tell his people to

do things, but I noticed he didn't like to talk to anybody very much, including his Secretary of State, or Secretary of Defense. Bill Rogers was an old friend; I guess he talked to him from time to time. He had that group around him that he used for his "outreach," and he read the papers sent down to him. But I did not have the relationship with Nixon that I had with Johnson; I got along very well with Johnson. Everyone has said Johnson was hard to get along with, but I never had any difficulty at all. I found him extraordinarily decent to deal with.

Goldberg: You were lucky.

Helms: Exactly.

Goldberg: You were also operating in an area where he didn't have any expertise.

Helms: That's right. He just counted on me to do the job, and felt that I had sense enough to do it. Instead of messing around with me, he left me alone.

Goldberg: He had enough other things to mess around with.

Helms: Yes.

Matloff: In 1971 Nixon did issue a directive to you as Director to play "an enhanced leadership role" in the overall intelligence community. How much of that was stimulated by James R. Schlesinger's study of overall intelligence in that same year when he was acting as Deputy Director in OMB?

Helms: I think that it was stimulated by that, no question about it. It was Schlesinger's suggestion and Nixon simply decided. "OK, it looks like a sensible suggestion, let's do it that way." We attempted to expand the coordination. This is a good place to make this point: It's fine for presidents to say that an individual should do in his administration X, Y, Z. But when that involves confronting one of his own Cabinet officers, and particularly when it involves confronting the Secretary of Defense, who has the biggest budget, the most people, the most bases in every congressman's and senator's area, who is going to be able to take on the Secretary of Defense? It's like the elephant and the jackrabbit. If the Secretary of Defense wants to be cooperative, these

things can be made to work; if he doesn't particularly want to be cooperative, they won't work. He makes out the fitness reports of the directors of DIA, NSA, and the rest of the organizations. He has his own Assistant for Intelligence, he has his own State Department in ISA, he has his own intelligence department; he has everything a man needs to run a government. So these ideas that come up in Congress and various places, that the first thing you ought to do is put an intelligence czar in the White House, run right smack into the Secretary of Defense, who could eat that fellow for breakfast any time. Not long ago, I talked to the House Select Committee on Intelligence and I said that I noticed that if the Secretary of Defense closes a few bases, it gets their attention. They all laughed, but that's the power I am talking about. If you set up a czar over there, he comes into direct conflict with the Secretary of Defense, and the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and he becomes another competitor for the President's time, which is the only commodity the President has which is really valuable. So it's nonsense. You make these things work by collaboration and understanding. If you are going to fight about them, it's never going to work.

Matloff: This brings us to the point about Secretary of Defense Laird's reactions to your efforts to implement that directive of Nixon.

Helms: I did not find that Laird was combative at all about this. I think he believed in trying to get the job done. In looking at Melvin Laird, whom I regard as a friend and like very much, he is nevertheless, in the words of President Nixon, one of the most devious men that ever held office in the Executive Branch. The games that Laird knew how to play, particularly as Secretary of Defense, were legion. I remember his laughing years later, on one occasion, and saying, "I was not going to let those fellows in the White House get that information from NSA before I got it, all the stuff that was going on in Vietnam; I wasn't going to be at a disadvantage like that. So I appointed my own fellow to be head of NSA and told him to keep me informed first." Later he made that

man Commander in Chief of the Pacific fleet, even though he was not the admiral that a lot of people would have picked. He was a bit of a maverick. That's how Admiral Gayler got the job.

Matloff: I share your impressions. So you don't recall resistance on the part of Defense, particularly Laird's refusing to surrender control of the Pentagon's military agencies in resisting that directive?

Helms: I think that directive was never intended to put any command authority in the hands of the Director of Central Intelligence. That is a no-no, it doesn't work. Even if it did say that, we would have disregarded it, because you can't ask a military officer to work for a civilian when his efficiency reports and assignments are being handled by somebody else. It just doesn't make sense.

Goldberg: All this amounted to was dotted lines on a chart?

Helms: That's right.

Matloff: You did have two tools to manage overall intelligence as coordinating committees. You had the Intelligence Board, the USIB, and the new one, the Intelligence Resources Advisory Committee (IRAC).

Helms: What was that one, I forget?

Matloff: It was formed in November 1971, to manage the portioning of resources and discussion of what resources could be drawn on by the various agencies.

Helms: That must have been a subcommittee of USIB.

Matloff: No, apparently a separate committee.

Helms: Maybe it was set up in the context of managing the community. We were trying to get a more formalized structure for allocating resources and deciding what requirements were and so forth.

Matloff: Defense was represented on both USIB and IRAC. Did you run into any problems with the Defense agencies in that connection?

Helms: I think it was set up with their acquiescence.

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Matloff: In Defense the Fitzhugh Panel in 1970, the Defense Blue Ribbon Panel, was appointed by President Nixon and Secretary of Defense Laird to review the entire organization and management of DoD. In the process of going over that whole area the panel came across intelligence and came up with some conclusions about that, including the establishment of a new post, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, set up in November 1971. So it happened on your watch. Were you drawn in at all by the Fitzhugh Panel?

Helms: No.

Matloff: How about the establishment of this new position, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, held by Dr. Albert Hall?

Helms: I don't recall that we were asked about it. I think they just set it up.

Matloff: Did the establishment of that position that called for his having overall responsibility for military intelligence in any way ease the coordination between the CIA and Defense agencies in intelligence?

Helms: I can't answer that.

Matloff: Other new agencies were created also in the wake of this commission: for example, the Defense Mapping Agency and the Defense Investigative Service, in early 1972. How interested were you, in retrospect, in establishing a dominant position, if you could have done it, in managing the overall intelligence community?

Helms: May I say that I had sense enough to recognize that we could accomplish some of these objectives by persuasion; that there was no other way to do it; and that I was not trying to establish a dominant position. I knew that was silly, and I would accomplish nothing, except getting myself in trouble.

Matloff: Did you ever feel that these other agencies were getting out of their bailiwick, and possibly encroaching on CIA's turf, and therefore did you ever resist any expansion by any Pentagon intelligence agency?

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Helms: I think that we were constantly resisting this effort to get into the espionage field, and trying to keep that under control. That's the type of activity that can end up in certain kinds of disasters. When you start competing for espionage sources, you can have a political scandal of no small proportions. Somebody has to run it, and I think that it was only fair to say that we had more people, better understanding, better files, records, and all the rest of it, than anybody else.

Goldberg: Were the military very much involved, still, in the espionage business at that time?

Helms: Not so much; I think they had backed off.

Matloff: Do you recall who, in particular, was reaching for it, among the military?

Helms: G-2, largely.

Goldberg: Army--they had the longest experience and background.

Helms: That's right.

Matloff: As part of his restructuring of intelligence in late 1971, Nixon, in effect, put the general supervision of American intelligence in the National Security Council staff headed by Kissinger, the National Security Adviser. Were you consulted on that at all?

Helms: I don't remember it, but I can't believe that there wasn't some discussion about it.

Matloff: On the one hand, he is giving you a directive with a rather immense leadership role, and on the other hand, he is putting general supervision in the White House National Security Staff.

Helms: Yes, but you must recognize that President Nixon felt that he was a man beleaguered, and in his second administration he saw to it that there was a counselor or an assistant in the White House for every part of the Executive Branch, by the time he got through. So he had really circled the wagons around the White House--with Kissinger for National Security, Shultz for Treasury and other things, Jim Lynn for Housing and Urban Development, Haldeman for this, Ehrlichman for that. There was

no question that he distrusted the Executive Branch and he was going to have somebody responsible to him right there in the White House who was going to do the job for him and keep track of these things. So this doesn't surprise me at all.

Matloff: Did this put you in an uncomfortable position at all, in relation to that?

Helms: Yes.

Matloff: To shift to working relationships, you have indicated that Nixon was unhappy with the information being furnished him by intelligence. You mentioned your role in the Tuesday Cabinet. To pose a quotation from Ray Cline's book: "A Vietnam-obsessed President Johnson and a secretive President Nixon never gave Dick Helms much of a chance to be the kind of DCI that Dulles was for Eisenhower and McCone was for Kennedy. They both viewed Helms and CIA primarily as an instrument for the execution of White House wishes by secret methods." That comes out of his book, Secrets, Spies and Scholars. Does that ring true?

Helms: That isn't quite accurate. Ray Cline is a friend, and I like him very much, but his view of the world is pretty much through his own prism. He had no way of knowing how these things actually were working on the inside.

Matloff: Did your relationship with Walt Rostow differ from that with Kissinger? Kissinger was apparently reaching out for more power in the intelligence field. Some people would say he was trying to use that whole intelligence community as his private staff.

Helms: That isn't true. Kissinger was a very busy man when he was in the White House. Certainly, he wanted to be his own intelligence officer, because he thought everybody was wrong except him about the Soviets and their strength. He ended up by trying to get all kinds of raw material sent down so that the White House could make its own assessment of missiles and other things. There is no question that he liked to feel that he was in charge of everything, but there are only 24 hours in a day, and by the time he got through taking care of the President's wishes in openings to China and things like

that, and last but not least the time he spent talking on the telephone with newspaper people, he didn't have time to do a lot of these things. A lot of it was bluff.

Matloff: Was your relationship with Walt Rostow in any way different from that with Kissinger?

Helms: It was different because Rostow operated differently. He was a fast brief and absorbed the material very rapidly. He was much more optimistic about Vietnam than the rest of us were, so there was a certain amount of friction as to what the real facts were. But we didn't have any trouble with Rostow. I think that he has a first-class mind, and the fact that he was so optimistic and constantly saw things through rose-colored glasses was what he had decided for himself was his role with President Johnson.

Matloff: Since every agency in government felt an impact during the Watergate period, and a good part of it happened to come on your watch, how did you try to handle your agency during that period? Did you try to distance your agency from the impact of Watergate?

Helms: That is exactly what I did. From the first day, I did my best to combat the leaks which came from the FBI about the role of certain former Agency people in the Watergate break-in. It is a long story. It took about ten years for the Agency and Richard Helms finally to be left out of press stories written on anniversaries of Watergate, because, now that all the facts are in, it is clear we had nothing to do with Watergate. The former Agency fellows that did the break-in did so on their own. They had no affiliation with the Agency at that time. The cover-up was nothing, it seems to me, on the part of President Nixon, but a piece of stupidity. If he had admitted that this had happened in the first 24 hours and had thrown it over his shoulder, we never would have heard any more about Watergate. It was a decision made in the White House to cover this thing up. His decision to try to use the Agency about the money laundering in Mexico turned out to be the smoking gun, that famous meeting that

Walters and I had with Haldeman and Ehrlichman. So my entire interest was to preserve the integrity of the Central Intelligence Agency. I recognized clearly in the period that it would be the end of the Agency, if it turned out that we had been implicated.

Goldberg: What was the FBI trying to do to you?

Helms: Hoover had died, Gray hadn't been sworn in, and the FBI was monkeying around. Under Hoover they had seldom leaked, but then they started leaking all over the place. Hoover had a directed leaking arrangement, but these new leaks came from the FBI offices around Washington and were very damaging to the Agency while they were going on.

Matloff: It is fascinating to see what Laird was doing in this period to keep his agency from being involved and trying to limit White House contacts to only certain individuals in Defense that he could identify. So a number of agency heads were finding themselves in the same position during this period.

Helms: We had no choice. If you had your head screwed on, you recognized that this was a disaster looming in front of you. Walters would be called down by John Dean and asked to put up unvouchered funds to go bail for the men in jail. Absolutely the end of the line, if it had happened. At one point Walters came to me and said, "They've punched my ticket easily enough, why don't I make myself the sacrificial lamb?" I said, "Don't you dare do something like that. I'm not going to have anybody around here do anything silly like that. The whole world would then believe that you and we were guilty." It seemed to me that I spent a lot of time in those days just trying to keep the Agency out of trouble of one sort or another. And there isn't any doubt that Nixon was furious with me, although he never said a word about it.

Matloff: Some of your experiences may have influenced your successor, Schlesinger, even though he was in for only a brief period, when he came over to Defense and was catching the full brunt of that transition and worrying about a possible coup. Some of

his follow-up on what you had encountered may have influenced him later in the Secretary of Defense job.

Helms: I have made a real effort with McDonald [CIA Historian] to make all this clear about my involvement. If you ever need that, I am sure you can get it over at the Agency. I have done a lot of work with the historians there, and you will find a lot of material about some of these controversial things available there.

Matloff: Turning to your working relationships with the Secretary of Defense and top officials in OSD, did your relationships with McNamara, Clifford, and Laird differ in any way, one with the other?

Helms: McNamara was very helpful to me. He was supportive of the Agency and its estimates, and I found him very good to work with. Clifford wasn't there long enough to have any issues come up between us that were particularly complicated. Clifford and I basically disagreed about what caused the wind-down of the war. You will find that in my statement at the end of that transcript about what Johnson felt was the truth. It wasn't the Clifford version. As far as Laird was concerned, we had a good relationship. I used to have lunch with him periodically to talk about problems that we had. Laird was not combative, in the sense of turf, or anything of that kind. He was so busy with Vietnam, Nixon, crowds in the streets, and the rest of it, that it would have been silly to have small wars going on with the Agency. I liked Laird and got along with him. He was a complicated fellow.

Goldberg: He was a politician, used to getting along with the opposition.

Helms: To put it in the proper context, I was sitting with President Nixon one day in the Oval Office and the other people were leaving the meeting and he wanted to talk to me about something. Laird was the last one out, and, as he left, Nixon said, "There goes the most devious man in Washington." That's a spade calling a spade.

Matloff: That whole triumvirate of Nixon, Kissinger, Laird--and also Mr. Haig--you have Byzantine lines out all over the place.

Goldberg: Laird did very well, all things considered, in handling that group.

Helms: Yes, Laird is a very bright man.

Goldberg: He knew how to use that congressional connection and did. It really was his salvation in the job.

Matloff: What were the major sources of differences or competition during this period with the Defense agencies? Did you feel any of that? You mentioned before reaching for the espionage function.

Helms: That was not a big deal; it was not one of those things that blew up into controversy. It was just an ongoing, peaceful adjudication. The real battles that took place between the military and the Agency were over the estimates--the positions of the Air Force and Navy on some of the issues. This was an ongoing struggle, always; friendly most of the time, it didn't usually get nasty. Every year there was another struggle about something or other.

Goldberg: Wasn't Danny Graham capable of getting nasty?

Helms: Yes, and when he was working for the Agency he could be very nasty to some of the men in the Pentagon. But those tended to be personalities, and you were asking more about issues.

Matloff: Did the lack of Cabinet status weaken your hand in dealing with the Secretaries of Defense?

Helms: No. The only person who has ever had Cabinet status was Casey. None of the rest of the Directors ever had Cabinet status. The Cabinet as an institution has almost ceased to exist. Granted, they get a slightly higher salary than the Director, but it really has nothing to do with the conduct of business. If I had been sitting in the Cabinet, I would have felt that I was wasting my time. I was an observer on the National Security Council, that's where I wanted to be, that's where the decisions were made that were important to the Agency.

Matloff: Did you ever have any dealings with the Deputy Secretaries of Defense-- Vance, Nitze, Packard, Rush?

Helms: Yes, lots of dealings, with Vance, Nitze, Packard, Rush, because it was a period when the NRO, the National Reconnaissance Organization, meetings were chaired by the Deputy Secretary of Defense. That was, in my opinion, the better way to run it, because they had money. They controlled the budgetary process; they could see what was going on in these meetings. When it was put down to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, it lost standing, in my opinion. So I had a lot of dealings with them on these matters.

Matloff: How about with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence?

Helms: I never had much to do with Hall, but I had a lot to do with the Deputy Secretaries: telephone calls, and all kinds of things. We sat on Deputies' meetings at the White House together; we sat in countless National Security Council meetings. The whole government is run by the deputies, really. In the Nixon administration, there were all kinds of subcommittees of the National Security Council; we all met together.

Goldberg: These Deputies were a pretty high-grade lot during this period.

Helms: Very high grade. They could have been Secretaries of anything.

Matloff: Were you dealing very much with DIA and NSA heads?

Helms: I didn't do much dealing with them, but I dealt with them in USIB and on USIB matters, but not much else.

Matloff: How about with the Director of Defense Research and Engineering, John Foster?

Helms: Not very much; the DDS&T Deputy dealt with him.

Matloff: How about the Comptrollers in Defense?

Helms: They dealt with our Comptrollers.

Matloff: Did DIA become a serious rival to CIA in this period in its estimative functions?

Helms: I never felt so.

Goldberg: What about NSA? What was CIA's attitude toward NSA? I have heard some expressions on this subject from NSA people.

Helms: I don't recall that there was any great difficulty with NSA. The espionage people were always working hard to steal foreign codes to help NSA out, but I don't recall other issues. What are some of the things you have in mind?

Goldberg: The major criticisms from NSA people were that the CIA wanted to remain dominant in analysis and was objecting to analysis from NSA.

Helms: The answer to that is that a lot of people thought that when DIA was set up that these were going to be military organizations and the analyses were going to be used by the military people. When it was discovered that not only DIA, but NSA as well, were sending analyses down to the White House, it seemed rather silly to a lot of people, including the congressional committees. But they never did anything in particular about it, to my knowledge, and the President seemed to like having all this material available, so that was the way it continued.

Goldberg: It continued into your period, too?

Helms: Yes.

Matloff: Mr. Fitzhugh had said back in July 1970 in a press conference, while doing his work on the reorganization of Defense, "I believe that the Pentagon suffers from too much intelligence. They can't use what they get because there is too much collected." Did that seem to be the case, from where you were sitting, or would you have any impression of that?

Helms: I don't know, but it has been the feeling now for a long time that the amount of information that comes into the United States government is absolutely enormous. As far as the Director of the Agency was concerned, I regarded that big organization out there as the organization I needed to handle all this material. The important stuff came to me. It takes that many people to analyze it all.

Goldberg: As far back as 1941, at the time of Pearl Harbor, the government was getting more information than it could handle.

Helms: This is a critical matter these days; it is no joke. With computers, rapid communications, and so forth, there is just too much of it.

Matloff: Did the creation of that Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence position, from where you were sitting, change the coordination of military intelligence in any way?

Helms: It had an effect on it, yes. But not very much, because he didn't sit on USIB, and the Chiefs of DIA, NSA, and the three services were there to fight the military battles. They were the ones that did it.

Matloff: To what extent was the U.S. intelligence community dominated by the Pentagon during your tenure as CIA Director?

Helms: I didn't feel that it was dominated by the Pentagon.

Matloff: Who would you say dominated it?

Helms: I don't think anybody dominated it. I didn't feel threatened at any time by the Pentagon during the six and a half years I was Director.

Goldberg: You were really dominating on national estimates, weren't you--you and the organization?

Helms: Yes. And I sat with the President and saw what was happening, so I didn't feel that anybody was pushing my elbow. After all, the only other fellow that sat as observer in the National Security Council meetings was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. And when he wasn't there and one of the other Chiefs would come over, he looked like a little boy that had been brought to the prom. They were nervous; they didn't know how to approach the President, or how to deal with him. There was no competition vis-a-vis the President from any of those military people, and, after all, that's what counts in the end.

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Matloff: Were your working relationships with Gen Wheeler and Adm. Moorer any different?

Helms: They were very good. I had no trouble with either one of them. I liked them both, and we got along fine.

Matloff: How often would you have seen the Chairman?

Helms: I saw them at all these meetings. As a matter of fact, I made my mark with Moorer when he hadn't been in office long and Kissinger was trying to get him to send a message to the Commanding General in Vietnam that bypassed Secretary Laird. I happened to be present when they were discussing this. I told him he couldn't ask the Admiral to do that; the Secretary of Defense would cut his head off; his career would be damaged. Moorer was apparently pleased with me, because he had not been able to convince Kissinger that this was the case.

Matloff: There are instances of end runs like that.

Helms: Yes. There were all kinds of end runs, but they were done in a different way.

Goldberg: Such an end run as Moorer spying on Kissinger.

Matloff: In turn, you have Adm. Moorer learning how to play the game too.

Goldberg: The report on that incident of Moorer and the Navy people working for him spying on Kissinger and getting messages was done by Fred Buzhardt for Defense and the White House. It has disappeared. It is not to be found; there is not a copy anywhere. I have been searching for years.

Helms: I am not surprised.

Matloff: One theory for the renewal of Adm. Moorer's term was that he had been defanged.

If you had to make a judgment about how much of the intelligence community's assets were controlled by the Director of Central Intelligence, vis-a-vis the Secretary of defense and JCS, could you offer any estimate?

Helms: No.

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Matloff: Did you have any difficulty in this period getting information from the JCS or the services?

Helms: It wasn't ever a question, as far as I know, of getting information about these things, but I can't give you a comparison about elements of control.

Goldberg: You know the services withhold a lot of information from each other and from the Secretary of Defense.

Helms: I haven't the slightest doubt. But if they withhold it from the Agency, they are really in violation of the law.

Goldberg: There are a lot of violations of the law, even by the Congress.

Matloff: Were you drawn into conflicts over national security issues between the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, either in the White House councils or appearances before Congress?

Helms: Certainly the Agency estimates would be at variance with both Defense and State, or on one side or the other, but we didn't pay any attention to that and barged along as best we could, particularly on Vietnamese questions. I always got along well with Rusk; I liked him. It was very noticeable in the Johnson administration, particularly, that the man at the table who dominated the situation was McNamara. The Secretary of Defense has an arsenal second to none. He would come in there better briefed and full of information, and Rusk would play catch-up all the time. The Secretary of State has a lot of duties he has to perform that have nothing to do with keeping track of what's going on, so he was at a distinct disadvantage. McNamara really dominated those meetings; there was no doubt about it.

Goldberg: But they got along all right together

Helms: They got along, personally, very well. They were both, as Rusk said to me once, "do-gooders at heart."

Matloff: Did you find yourself generally more in agreement with one agency than the other?

Helms: No, I didn't pay much attention to that type of issue, because it seemed to me inevitable. It would have been a great mistake to let the employees even get the idea that it was State versus Defense or versus the Agency, because that would just cause more intramural squabbling.

Matloff: How about differences over estimates between CIA and Defense? Did State usually support one agency over the other?

Helms: That varied from time to time; there was no pattern to that.

Matloff: How about relations with Congress--on what issues did you find Congress particularly sensitive during these years?

Helms: In my days as Director we had a different situation in the Congress than we do today. I dealt with Senator Richard Russell, who had oversight in the Senate, with Congressman George Mahon, Chairman of Appropriations in the House, and with the Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Mendel Rivers, and then Hébert after that.

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May 28, 1992

Mr. Alfred Goldberg
OSD Historian
Office of the Secretary of Defense
Room 5C 328 - The Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1950

Dear Mr. Goldberg:

Enclosed is the transcript you sent me with your letter of May 22, 1992. I have read it and made certain changes.

As indicated in my previous letter returning Part I, I would prefer that you place this material in Category 2.

Cordially,


Richard Helms

Enclosure

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Holms request for info on
references to MCN in
this interview