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Interview with General Robert E. Pursley, Part IV
November 6, 1997

Trask: This is Part IV of an oral history interview with Lieutenant General Robert E. Pursley, taking place at the Pentagon on November 6, 1997. General Pursley, in the three previous interviews we covered your work with Secretaries of Defense McNamara and Clifford and started to discuss your experiences as military assistant to Secretary Laird. Thus far we have discussed your transition to the Laird era and Laird's management and organizational approaches, and we began talking about Laird's working relationships with you, the deputy secretary of defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Today we want to begin by asking you to comment on Secretary Laird's relationships with the service secretaries and how they differed, if at all, from the McNamara and Clifford approaches.

Pursley: Melvin Laird had a very close relationship with all the service secretaries, in no small part because he had appointed each one of them personally. You may recall that earlier we discussed how Laird handled his closest appointees. Laird had made it a condition of his appointment as secretary of defense, when President Nixon asked him in December 1968 to take on that position, that he would have full rein and complete authority to handle all his appointments himself. That was different than the way it happened in later years. I think McNamara probably had substantial input into many of the appointments during his tenure, though it is my impression it was not as complete as Melvin Laird had.

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Goldberg: McNamara told us that he had made that a condition, but that he did get some suggestions from the White House, and that at least once or twice he turned down suggestions from Kennedy.

Pursley: I believe that's true; he's told me the same. One name that would come to mind was one of President Roosevelt's sons, to be secretary of the Navy. Secretary McNamara declined that one and made quite a point with the White House in the early Kennedy days that if that was the way appointments were going to go maybe they should get a different secretary of defense. So he confronted that issue early on.

But in the Laird case it was perhaps a bit more difficult to impose that condition and hold to it, given what we now know about the Nixon administration, with the high politicization of many processes during the Nixon period. I think that for Laird to have held to that general proposition and to have made it stick during the period assured that there would be a very close relationship with his appointees.

It's interesting that, for example, in the case of the secretary of the Air Force, Bob Seamans, whom Laird knew he wanted from MIT, that Seamans could not leave MIT until probably mid-year in 1969. So Laird prevailed upon Harold Brown to stay over as secretary of the Air Force. Holdovers are interesting, and again, when there is a heavy political element to an administration coming in, the very presence of holdovers raises certain questions and becomes a bit of an irritant to some folks from the White House. The irritation is shown not necessarily by the president, but by others who want to ensure that people are supporting the president as a person and not just the office. In any event, Harold Brown stayed over and Seamans came down later. Another interesting holdover was Secretary of the Army Stan Resor.

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Goldberg: That was for much longer, too, wasn't it?

Pursley: Yes, and Laird had wanted him to stay on, mainly for his expertise in the area. I think also, although he has never told me this, that Laird had an idea that at some point, after Bob Froehlke had more seasoning in the Department of Defense, that an old friend as close as he was would be a logical choice to put in one of those positions. I think he wanted to have the Department of the Army administered well, and I feel fairly certain that he had that spot marked for Bob Froehlke very early; it happened eventually. This, again, was in the face of a number of suggestions from the White House about other people that should come in and occupy that spot. One, for example, was Bo Calloway. He later made it to that position, but not while Laird was in DoD. Laird resisted that adamantly, not because there was any animus between the two, but because he thought there was better talent around. Then, again, Governor and later Senator John Chafee was a great favorite of Mel Laird's and one that he thought exceptionally capable, and so he brought him on board as secretary of the Navy.

Goldberg: He had a good reputation.

Pursley: He was a superb individual, a hard worker, great public servant, one who would have been stalwart in any administration. John Warner was brought in as under secretary of the Navy. He was a person known to Laird and had been a protégé. You will find Mel Laird connected to almost anything that has ever happened in John Warner's career. They, Chafee and Warner, came in almost as a team.

Again, one would start from the proposition that there would be close relationships between Secretary Laird and each of those principal appointees and that

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they were brought in for specific reasons and with the idea that they would make very substantial contributions.

That raises an interesting additional issue about personal relationships, and that is the philosophy of the secretary of defense about the role of the individual services as opposed to the role of, say, the JCS or OSD, and whether one would adhere to the traditional view that the services are there to obtain, equip, train, and provide trained forces to the CINCs, the various commanders in chief. I think Laird held to that. He would probably not be pushing a continuing rapid evolution away from that, to hand over some of those roles to either the JCS, the CINCs, or even parts of OSD. I think over this century we have seen a continuing evolution away from strong individual service entities, with many of the service roles slowly evolving to the various other parts of the Department of Defense.

Goldberg: There are those who would take issue with that. One is General Krulak, with whom I had a conversation about this very point.

Pursley: The young General Krulak, the head of the Marine Corps?

Goldberg: The present commandant. He said that the notion that the services are in decline by comparison with the JCS, the chairman, the unified commander, OSD, and such, is not right. He said, "We have a lot to say with the unified commands. The unified commanders come to us as individual chiefs of the services when they have a problem or want something, they don't go to JCS so much." I don't know if the other chiefs agree with that or have that experience, but this was his view, strongly expressed.

Pursley: I think it is an important point. My guess is that it would seem more that way to a current chief looking at some fairly narrow time span and with issues that are arising.

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It would look that way more than if you went back and put a benchmark at the beginning of the century, when there was a Department of War and Department of Navy. Those were the only two, and we had no standing JCS or element like that. By definition there has been some evolution, some diminution in the roles of the individual departments, because we've added entities that certainly took away at least some of the province of those departments.

Goldberg: People do make a distinction between the secretariat and the chiefs of the services; that is, the department as such and the services. Krulak was speaking on behalf of his service and his experience. It is probably so that the service secretaries have declined in significance.

Trask: Did Krulak mean that the unified commander would come to one specific entity, such as the Marine commandant, or Army chief of staff, rather than collectively?

Goldberg: Precisely. For many of the problems that they have and things they want done, they would come to the service.

Trask: Suppose the unified commander was Army, would he go to the Marine, or Army?

Goldberg: More likely the Army, but not necessarily. His point was the unified commander still had a strong attachment to the individual service and would go to the individual chiefs, as distinct from the JCS.

Pursley: As long as we have a planning, programming, and budgeting system constituted the way it has been and currently is, I can understand why a lot of that would happen. If, for example, there is a procurement issue on a specific item, it would be natural for whoever the CINC is to come in to the service shepherding that particular item and try to make the point, as opposed to doing it collegially through a system. I can

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see it also on specific issues, for example total force, the Reserve component issue. I can imagine an Army National Guard or Army Reserve issue going to the Department of the Army rather than going down through some collegial kind of operation. So there are a number of those kinds of things where the services are still influential.

Goldberg: Your general point is correct, I think.

Pursley: I believe it's an important issue that Laird was not going to try to take away from the service secretaries and continue to parcel out things to either the chiefs or to OSD. He promulgated the idea that the services had strong roles to play, in the traditional kind of role of procuring, equipping, training, and providing well-equipped and ready forces. That was particularly true, too, on social engineering, which Laird was very strong on--things like promoting women into the higher ranks, which happened for the first time while he was here. He pushed that hard, and he had to do that through the individual services. The same was true with other minorities. Those were not small issues, and they were contentious. They were not easy to push through, even if one had good friends in those spots.

Trask: Did he consult with the service secretaries collectively, or was it one on one?

Pursley: It was almost always one on one. The way he worked with those kinds of entities was very much in the McNamara mold. He would have one staff meeting on a Monday morning where all of the service principals were together with certain people from OSD--the director of R&E, for example, and some assistant secretaries and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. That was the only group get-together. Otherwise there were individual regularly scheduled appointments. I would emphasize the regularity. Those would typically be meetings in which there were agenda, but not necessarily

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anything that was handed out beforehand. There would really be agenda on both sides. Dr. Seamans might come in from the Air Force with several things that were very important for him to either get decisions on or get the secretary's viewpoint on. Laird's method of operation was always to let whoever was there present his agenda first and talk through it, and then Laird would have agenda items he considered important. Typically he would keep close track of those and if there were action items that hadn't been reported on as completed or finished he was keen on holding service secretaries' feet to the fire. It might be six months later, but he wanted to know where we stood on all the issues so there would be a running log of accountability from the service secretary on what had happened.

Goldberg: Last night I dreamt I was interviewing Ronald Reagan. We were not able to get to Reagan for an interview before he became incapacitated. In my dream he was his usual friendly, gracious self. I was interested in discussing with him the role of the military assistant in relation to the secretary, and we got into a discussion of that; what the military assistant did that was generally more important than what the special assistant or the other assistants did.

Trask: Did he know something about that?

Goldberg: No. Dreams are not all that reasonable. I couldn't help chuckling to myself when I awakened. I think the reason was that we were recently discussing here in the office the desirability of doing a study on the roles of the military assistants, special assistants, and other assistants to the secretaries. We have lists of them. It would be interesting to have a discussion on that subject, the roles these people play and, how

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they fit into the overall structure, the influence they exert, etc. It was obviously on my mind.

Pursley: Unfortunately, some of the more interesting ones aren't alive any more, men like George Brown, for example.

Goldberg: I'm glad we got Cary Randall when we did.

Pursley: You could go back and pick up right there.

Goldberg: Randall was really remarkable. Do you think Brown had as much influence with McNamara as you or Randall with your secretaries?

Pursley: Probably not, because those were the early days. When you go through a number of secretaries, there are early days with each new secretary.

Goldberg: Brown was in the early days with McNamara.

Pursley: Yes, but McNamara, I would guess, would not have been inclined to lean on George Brown the way he would have later, after he learned to know how the system worked and what individual strengths and weaknesses were.

Goldberg: He still leaned on his assistants to a certain extent.

Pursley: It was clear to me from later discussions that Bob McNamara was not particularly satisfied with the way some of the military assistants worked out. What he would do was not be unkind to them, but to just ignore them. He did that with a lot of people. That was his method. You knew when you weren't playing the game anymore, when you were being ignored.

Goldberg: That's when they got unhappy with him, when they were ignored. He did have some competent special assistants.

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Pursley: Joe Califano, and Adam Yarmolinsky, before that.

Goldberg: Henry Glass did a lot of work for him.

Pursley: Yes, a different kind of work.

Goldberg: He got his two cents in on a lot of things, thereby.

Pursley: Anyone writing those posture statements has a potentially influential position.

Goldberg: He probably played a more important role than people supposed that he did, especially in the early days with McNamara and when he started doing the posture statement, which McNamara never acknowledged that he did.

Pursley: Most people truly familiar with the DoD probably knew of Henry Glass's role.

Trask: I want to ask about Laird's relationships with the State Department and with Secretary of State Rogers--generally, the kinds of relationships and issues on which he dealt with the State Department, contacts with the secretary, etc.

Pursley: In my judgment, the relationships between State and Defense were to a substantial degree dictated by the White House and the issues that the White House continued to focus on, whether it was through the National Security Study Memoranda, or the various adjuncts of the National Security Council system. There were various interdepartmental groups, and the numbers of those entities were fairly large. There were probably one or two dozen, depending on how you define them. So the State-Defense relationships were to a substantial degree colored and dictated by that kind of an organization . The two departments met in that kind of forum more than they did in other ways.

A second influence, and one that I think diminished the contact of State with Defense under Laird, was the relatively lesser strength of the assistant secretary for

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international security affairs under Laird as opposed to what it had been, say, during the McNamara years when we had a Paul Nitze or a John McNaughton. There were people like Bill Bundy floating around through earlier systems, substantial people well-known in the foreign policy field who were practitioners over here and were therefore going to have influence one way or another just by dint of their personalities and reputations. The Laird administration had fewer people with that kind of background and professional acumen and therefore saw their role vis-à-vis State and their intercourse with State on a variety of issues diminished.

Mel Laird's personal relationships with Secretary Rogers were strong, but it was clear that Rogers was being relegated to some degree to a back seat in the foreign policy arena. Laird fought taking any kind of back seat; he resisted any attempts to push him to the background. Therefore, the secretary of defense and the secretary of state were operating in different orbits and we didn't see Rogers over here as much as we would have seen other secretaries in other years, nor would the secretary of defense be over at the State Department for a variety of things. Those would be at least two distinguishing characteristics that were different under Laird than under either Clifford or McNamara.

Trask: Was Kissinger's role as national security adviser a factor in all this, too, in the sense that he overshadowed Rogers, or was it that Nixon paid a lot more attention to Kissinger?

Pursley: I think undoubtedly the latter was the case. I think that was done intentionally by the White House.

Goldberg: But Nixon and Rogers had been good friends.

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Pursley: I understand that was the case.

Trask: It was surprising that Rogers stuck to the job as long as he did, the way he was being treated.

Pursley: It is surprising.

Trask: His problems were even obvious at the time. But he stayed for at least four years.

Goldberg: Four and a half years.

Trask: Until Kissinger took over the secretary's job.

Pursley: At my much lower level as military assistant, relationships with State were fairly constant. With the executive assistant to the secretary of state--Ben Reed and then others—there was a fairly close and constant dialog back and forth. We would get together from time to time, and had telephone contact daily, or at best very frequently.

Goldberg: It's interesting that Rogers is the only person who outright refused us an interview. Others have delayed, and put us off. We have never interviewed Cy Vance. We get very polite and friendly answers from him that he is terribly busy now but will try to make it later on, but Rogers said he didn't think it would serve any serious purpose at all.

Pursley: It would be interesting to know if he gave his own historians in the State Department the same kind of treatment.

Goldberg: I could certainly ask if they ever got an interview with him.

Pursley: It would be interesting to see what his viewpoint was on some of the issues that have been most prominent in your interviews here, even if he expressed it to somebody else. And Cy Vance would be an important one to get before too much longer.

Goldberg: Yes, I agree, but he is a busy man.

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Trask: Could you comment on Laird's relationship with President Nixon? That's a big subject.

Pursley: I would have to qualify anything I would say about that by first explaining that the times I have seen them together or worked with them together were very few. Laird wasn't with the president all that much, and even when he was, it would be at Cabinet meetings and such, which, of course, I didn't attend. Laird's relationship with Nixon had grown over the years quite apart from any time he spent in the Department of Defense. It would have been colored and influenced by all of that and those would probably be the most important years, when they were coming up through the party together. For example, Laird had been chairman of the Republican platform committee and very influential in Republican politics; Nixon, of course, had been a consistent Republican figure in the 1950s and 1960s. They were, therefore, frequently bumping into each other, but much of that experience was completely off the screen, as far as I was concerned. And I heard Mel Laird talk about President Nixon so much that in a way my views are sort of Mel Laird's views.

Goldberg: That's really what we are looking for.

Pursley: I will pick it up in 1968, the summer campaign, which looked to be an interesting and close campaign in which perhaps the Democrats had some advantage, as the incumbents usually do. The Republicans were continually casting about for things to do. Laird in his inimitable style made a note to the press after the Republican convention that indeed the Democrats were trying to implement a brand new strategy in Southeast Asia that would broaden the chances of increased warfare. Laird didn't know whether that was true or not. It was the old saw of putting something out to see if

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someone reacts to it. It they do, you know more than you did before. Laird felt comfortable enough in his relationship with Nixon that he could go out and do those kinds of things. Laird felt a close enough relationship with Nixon that he didn't have to clear things with the candidate. Another anecdotal point is the appointment, after Nixon's election, of the deputy secretary of defense. Laird not only picked Dave Packard, but announced it. He got a call from President-elect Nixon saying he had seen that we had a new deputy secretary of defense nominated and he would like to be told about the new people and meet them. Laird apologized and put Dave Packard on a plane to Key Biscayne. Nixon was pleased with Packard, but it was symptomatic of what Laird thought was a close relationship with Nixon. Even though they might have had philosophical disagreements, he thought he knew President Nixon well enough that he could do those things.

A third anecdote is that after Nixon won the election Laird and Eisenhower talked at Walter Reed about how Laird should work in the transition. Laird made reference to the fact that he hadn't talked with Dick about it and Eisenhower reacted strongly by lecturing Laird that he should never refer to the president by his first name, but only as "the President" or President Nixon." It's a lesson that Laird never forgot, but it is symptomatic of the closeness in his relationship with Nixon. He also felt comfortable enough to set the conditions of (1) appointing his own people, (2) of having direct access to Nixon, and (3) of only serving four years, and also about telling Haldeman and Ehrlichman and everybody else that they were not to intrude in Defense. He made that very clear and made it stick. There were exceptions, but there weren't many; not enough to get us involved in Watergate and things like that.

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Goldberg: But this relationship did change once they were both in office and things began to happen, didn't it?

Pursley: Probably so. I'm sure, with what Nixon was hearing from both Kissinger and Haig about what the DoD was doing and how they were not carrying out his wishes, that that was the case. There would not have been a week gone by without some call during the day telling us to fire someone because the president had seen something in the morning paper and wanted to know by 5:00 that afternoon what we had found out about the leak and what action had been taken. Those calls were ignored right across the board. So your point is well taken, that the relationship had to be changing some.

Goldberg: It would be interesting to see what's on the Nixon tapes in this connection.

Pursley: There was a function out in Marshfield, Wisconsin, a month or so ago in which the Laird Center was dedicated. The Laird Center is part of the Marshfield Clinic. Among others, Henry Kissinger, President Ford, Bob Michel, John Rhodes, and Dave Broder were there. All of those mentioned gave some remarks and emphasized what great respect they had for Mel Laird. I think Kissinger also spoke for President Nixon in expressing admiration for Laird, but also ". . . a certain level of exasperation." I think that probably characterizes the whole climate. Laird was going his own way with Vietnam policy and certain personnel policies; he certainly had a strong role in strategic arms limitation talks. In almost every major national security issue there was the White House and then there was Laird. Laird had certainly as much, and in many cases more, influence with Congress than the White House did. This was awkward. But the level of national security accomplishments was immense.

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Goldberg: I think Kissinger's remark was very mild; he probably put it more mildly than he actually felt.

Trask: Just yesterday I was reading sections of Walter Isaacson's biography of Kissinger that deals with this. If he is right, Nixon and Kissinger said some really rough things about Laird.

Pursley: I'm sure they did. You can imagine how much that affected Laird. He not only took it with good humor, but it was almost like getting a merit badge. He would have felt put off if they hadn't felt strongly.

Trask: But then Kissinger goes out there and participates in the dedication of the center, posing as a friend of Laird.

Pursley: In Laird's book that will be out later I think he will probably take Henry on in ways that Henry hasn't been handled before by anyone.

Trask: Does Laird have a book coming out?

Pursley: It's in the earliest stages, a proposal will be going to some publishers next week or the week after.

Trask: Is he doing it himself?

Pursley: He has some help.

Goldberg: Are you working on it?

Pursley: I will be involved with it in some way, if Secretary Laird wants me to be.

Goldberg: You will be able to use these interviews in connection with it.

Pursley: If you don't mind, a lot of material is available over here.

Goldberg: Not at all, we've done it for others. We worked on McNamara's book; we critiqued it and his researcher did a great deal of research here.

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Pursley: Brian VanDeMark?

Goldberg: Yes.

Pursley: He's pretty good, too, he's quite accurate.

Goldberg: I think that McNamara was well satisfied.

Pursley: And Clark Clifford, too, thought well of him.

Goldberg: He handled himself well.

Pursley: He's still teaching at Annapolis.

Goldberg: Yes.

Pursley: In any event, there have been fits and starts about a Laird book. I think the chances of it happening are higher than ever. It will be interesting to see the kinds of things that Laird will say anecdotally that will probe where there haven't been probes before. Henry Kissinger is, of course, a sensitive individual.

Goldberg: We had arranged an interview with him and set the date. We were going up to New York for it. Just before we were to go, it was called off. The reason, we think, is because a biography, maybe Isaacson's, had just come out and he was very unhappy with it. He still hasn't agreed to an interview.

Concerning Kissinger and other officials, some, such as Schlesinger, had the same type of adversarial relationship with him as Laird had.

Pursley: I can see Jim Schlesinger taking him on more directly and confronting him intellectually. Laird was a bit more clever about it than that. He would go his own way and let Kissinger wonder what in the world he was doing. I'm sure Kissinger would hear bits and pieces coming back from the Hill or from the military and he would wonder what was going on. Schlesinger would be more inclined to state the points he disagreed on

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and where he felt Kissinger was wrong. They would be capable of shouting matches along those lines.

Goldberg: Laird was a political strategist, and Schlesinger wasn't.

Pursley: At that affair in Wisconsin, President Ford came the day before and stayed overnight with Mel. During that time one of the things he kept bringing up was Jim Schlesinger and how deeply Schlesinger had offended Ford. President Ford still feels that way.

He thought Schlesinger talked down to him like he was some dumbo.

Goldberg: On the other hand, during recent years Schlesinger has mellowed. We've interviewed him at length.

Pursley: Or at least, he views those things with more good humor. I see both Harold Brown and Schlesinger, not frequently, but periodically. I have immense respect for both of them.

Goldberg: Brown changed between the first time we interviewed him and later interviews.

Pursley: I think both of those people had great talents, but their personalities probably didn't help them. Laird was a very different kind of person. Criticism and political heat didn't bother him very much. He went his own way and always in terms of what he considered best for the country.

Goldberg: He was good at dealing with people.

Pursley: And you earlier used a good word: strategist. A lot of people thought of Laird as a guy who came in on the last load of hay, and he cultivated that. I think he thought that if people underestimated him it gave him a bit of an advantage. You would see it in

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his approach when making remarks. He would almost go out of his way to make a little mistake or two, grammatically or otherwise, so he would be just like everybody else.

Goldberg: Eisenhower would do that, too.

Pursley: Laird would do it knowingly, he had such a technique. That gave him a rapport that others couldn't have. You couldn't imagine Henry Kissinger doing that sort of thing.

Goldberg: Eisenhower was deliberate, too. He had a reputation for being ungrammatical and wandering off, but it's quite clear now that a lot of it was deliberate, especially at press conferences when he was leading people around Robin Hood's barn and never answering the question. In fact, on one or two occasions he said, "Don't worry, I'll see that they don't get anything. They won't know what I'm talking about."

Pursley: When Secretary Laird left the Pentagon, the press gave him a football that said on it, "Laird, 194--Press zero." I believe that illustrates the high regard the media had for Laird's public affairs capabilities.

Trask: This is a good time to bring up the question of wiretaps, talking about Laird-Nixon-Kissinger relationships. Again, it's something that Isaacson deals with in great detail, including tapping your phone. Can you talk about that a bit? The phone tapping started in May 1969 when Kissinger got excited about some reports of operations in Cambodia.

Pursley: That's obviously when they started it. Apparently the genesis included early requests to the FBI asking for ideas on what individuals they might start tapping. They got Mort Halperin's name, for example. My name didn't show up on any of those FBI lists. The FBI didn't know who I was. It is clear that someone in the White House added my name to the list, and the only one who would know who I was or what my role was

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would probably have been Al Haig. The president certainly didn't know me at that time, and Henry Kissinger wouldn't have been that aware of my role as military assistant. I'm guessing, but I'm apparently the only one of those 17 names that the White House sent back over saying, "Add that one." The reason Al would have done that probably had very little to do with the bombing in Cambodia or the possibility of leaks. It probably had more to do with competitiveness in military careers. Al is Al. He's wrong in a lot of ways and he has some curious motivations, but he's still a friend. I think he saw a chance to give me a black mark. That's my guess, and that's all it is. Whoever was reading those FBI logs got a bit of an insight into Laird; I don't believe that was the key reason for the tap. In any event, the first tap was only on my house phone.

Goldberg: Were you the only one in OSD?

Pursley: Yes, the only one in the entire DoD. We did notice that we were having home phone troubles, the phone wasn't working well.

Goldberg: The tappers didn't work well, either.

Pursley: Probably not. One of the things that was noticeable on the FBI logs was that apparently the system went through to head sets where someone the FBI hired was sitting in a room listening. Those people were clearly not qualified to understand national security issues. For example, they never did recognize who Melvin Laird was. They knew someone I talked to had a son named David, but they never identified Mel Laird. There were lots of conversations.

Goldberg: Did they tape them?

Pursley: I don't know; they apparently were taking notes. To show you the caliber of those people, you may remember that Apollo 11 was to be launched in July 1969. The

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first wiretaps were established in May 1969. One of the FBI "listeners" found that I was being asked by an individual to talk to a Los Angeles Times reporter. He wrote that down as if it were significant. The background was that Buzz Aldrin, an old friend, had called me to say he was going to work with a man on the Times to do a piece and maybe a book about the moon landing and asked me to talk to him. I said I would be happy to. The FBI thought it was important, but they said they didn't know who Aldrin was and couldn't find out. Buzz Aldrin was going to the moon, and they didn't know who he was. And I guess they weren't paying a lot of attention to it, anyway. There were stacks and stacks of written notes, and it's mostly just drivel.

Goldberg: I don't think we talked with Haig about this.

Pursley: Al would deny his role in establishing the wiretaps, obviously. I think he's on record as removing himself from that whole operation. In my own judgment, there isn't anyone else who would have had reason to identify me. They could have identified a number of other people, I think, or the secretary himself.

Trask: Isaacson gives him a role.

Pursley: The only point I'm making is that the reason I think I was brought on was very different from the conventional wisdom--that it was a way to get at what Mel Laird was doing. I was later put on the wiretap list again, and Mort Halperin and I were the two who were tapped for the longest period of time. The second time, they put a tap on my office phone, too. There are a lot of blank pages in the only logs that the FBI is willing to show me, so I guess we'll never know all that the FBI and the White House received. Even President Nixon was on record that the wiretaps produced nothing of importance.

Goldberg: If you wait long enough, you might.

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Pursley: Mort Halperin finally got access to every single piece of paper that had his name in it. He asked me if I wanted to join him in that suit, but it wasn't that important to me. The only thing I want is to have a ban put on the FBI releasing those papers. There are so many errors in there, so much of it is so blatantly bad, I don't want anyone to think there is anything credible about the FBI records. For example, when the tap was on the office phone they would frequently have me talking to reporters around town, many of whom I didn't even know. In those cases it was usually Dan Henkin, the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, coming in for his morning meeting. He would come by my desk often, use the phone, and it would be on the FBI logs as if I was talking to a reporter. It is interesting and ironic in a way that the closest thing in that log to my divulging anything I shouldn't have, or compromising national security, would be the conversations with Al Haig. He and I would have long conversations, identified in the logs, and on both sides the charge could be made that we went over the security classification boundary.

Goldberg: Did you ever get the impression that he was leading you on?

Pursley: No, I didn't then, or now. I don't think Al is that clever, quite frankly. I know he has a lot of capabilities. A lot of those conversations were later, when he probably had forgotten the tap was on. That would be the only thing, at least in all the transcripts I got, that even came close to security violations. But there are so many errors and garbage in the rest of the wiretap that one wonders why in the world they persisted in letting a system like that grind on and on. They got a transcript each day, and as time went on the stack must have gotten very high.

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Goldberg: In our Haig interviews he would really go after people, and then say he was a very good friend of theirs.

Pursley: Mel Laird would be one of those people he would go after hammer and tong, I am sure. As a matter of fact, in one public interview he went so far as to call Laird a traitor.

Goldberg: He was more restrained about Kissinger, but he also was critical of him.

Trask: I want to ask about Yeoman Radford in the military liaison office. Apparently Laird didn't like that operation in the first place, and then there was the slip called spying. Can you comment on that whole episode?

Pursley: Laird had asked, even before he became secretary of defense, that that whole liaison chain between the chairman's office and the White House be disbanded. The Air Force fellow who had served the prior chairman, General Wheeler, was benign. He would traffic back and forth between the National Security Council offices in the White House and the chairman's office as a courier or messenger, and occasionally get involved in some policy aspects. But Laird was very quick to recognize that in the wrong hands that system could really undermine the secretary fairly severely. Laird sent Bill Baroody, one of his assistants, over in early January 1969 to sit down with me and draft a letter for Laird to send to Henry Kissinger asking that the whole liaison operation be disbanded. The secretary would willingly cooperate in making sure that the National Security Council people were well advised on what was going on with the chairman and no one needed a separate channel. The Laird proposal went nowhere. I don't think Henry even replied. The fellow who picked up the main part of the liaison burden was Admiral Robinson, while General Wheeler was still chairman. Robinson was probably a

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bit more cut out of the Al Haig mold, even wearing a Navy uniform, than some other people. So already we were beginning to run into difficulty in terms of who was getting him what kind of information and when and how. Deceit and deception were under way. All Secretary Laird could do was try to police the liaison the best he could and try to find out from time to time what they were trafficking in and what was being said and to whom, that kind of thing. I don't think any big issue was made after that first attempt to get it totally disbanded.

Goldberg: What did it consist of at that point?

Pursley: It consisted of one individual. He didn't have any staff. I think Yeoman Radford came later.

Goldberg: Representing the chairman?

Pursley: Yes, the chairman alone, not the Joint Staff or the JCS. I think that's the way it had operated for a number of years. I think its nature changed a bit when Admiral Moorer became chairman, and he probably saw the opportunity to make some inroads in gaining some intelligence that nobody else would have.

Goldberg: Are you only guessing?

Pursley: I'm relating what others have told me.

Goldberg: You weren't aware of it at the time?

Pursley: Not of the yeoman's activities nor any specifics of the admiral's actions.

Goldberg: And Laird was not aware of it at the time?

Pursley: I don't think so. When someone is purloining papers from the president, I can't imagine Laird sitting still for that. Laird pushed pretty far to get Leonard Chapman appointed as chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I think if he had known of any kind of activity

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on any chairman's part along the lines of obtaining illicit information it would have been a big persuasive argument to go ahead and push Chapman all the way and make him the chairman. He wouldn't have tolerated a chairman known to be spying on the president.

Goldberg: You mean in 1970?

Pursley: 1970 or 1972, because Moorer was reappointed. That was going to be contentious anyway, because there had been enough activity. I think it would have been in 1972; in other words, Moorer would have been a one-term chairman.

Trask: Why would Moorer run the risk of being involved in that kind of an operation?

Pursley: My opinion is that he felt strongly about our national security policies, particularly those in Vietnam, and felt that if he could gain any advantage at all in influencing the presidential decisions, either through the NSC process or directly with the president, it would be a plus. I think that was just a part of Admiral Moorer's personality. I saw one other place where a similar kind of personality evolved, and that was with the F-111B, which the Navy wanted to kill. But the Navy wanted an airplane like it, so in effect much of the F-111B materials were provided to Grumman and the F-14 evolved from that, really, as an F-111B under a different name. This was pure Admiral Moorer and Admiral McDonald, the two together. They were very capable of that kind of subterfuge, or that kind of deal. You raise a good question, when you think of the risk involved.

Trask: This means running around the secretary of defense.

Pursley: Secretary Laird could live with some of that, because that went on all the time. But to talk about purloining materials from the president is a whole different operation.

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Goldberg: But remember, the services were used to spying on each other. They had been doing it for years and they kept on doing it.

Trask: That's one thing, but when you involve the secretary of defense--

Pursley: I don't think that worried him so much, but with the president, that's where the difference in degree becomes a difference in kind.

Goldberg: It probably was Kissinger they were spying on.

Pursley: I don't know.

Goldberg: Actually, most of the materials seem to have come from Henry Kissinger.

Pursley: I don't know if Radford was making that distinction or not. That's about as far as I can go in all of that. It was clearly an operation that appealed to the chairman and also to most of the main functionaries on the NSC side.

Goldberg: It also may have been another manifestation of the Navy siege mentality.

Pursley: That could be part of it.

Goldberg: It does reflect that kind of outlook.

Pursley: Apparently Mr. Forrestal must have expressed that kind of view before President Truman appointed him secretary of defense.

Goldberg: Before Forrestal was through, he felt utterly humiliated by the behavior of many of his former friends from the Navy. He lost their friendship and respect, and they had nothing to do with him. He said so, this came through and weighed heavily on him. There was one admiral still reasonably friendly to him, Admiral Blandy.

Pursley: Along those lines, I would be interested in your view of Tim Hoopes's book on Forrestal, did you think well of that?

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Goldberg: We did a very thorough job on it. We corrected errors and made recommendations. He took it very well. It is well written and a good piece of work, the best thing there is on Forrestal.

Pursley: How many other secretaries of defense have had books written about them, either autobiographical or biographical? Obviously, McNamara has three or four now. Clifford has his own.

Goldberg: Weinberger, Marshall.

Trask: There is a book about Charlie Wilson; Brown wrote a book, too, a think piece.

Goldberg: Weinberger's book is about his tenure in office.

Pursley: So out of 20 secretaries, there are maybe 6 or 7. That's quite a gap. Elliott Richardson would have been there such a short time that his would be grouped in with other activities.

Goldberg: Bruce Geelhoed was going to do Gates, but he didn't; he was the historian who did the Wilson book.

Pursley: Then there is the needed work, in my judgment, of writing not about them as individuals but about the office of the secretary and how each individual was effective or not effective.

Goldberg: Roger did that twice, but we have not distributed this latest book yet.

Trask: The book is The Department of Defense, 1947-1997: Organization and Leadership. Al did an extensive section on the history of defense organization and then there are shorter essays on all the secretaries of defense up to the present. That is a revision of something put out twelve years ago.

Goldberg: It is not in great depth.

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Pursley: Do you get into the sorts of areas in which there are questions, for example, on how did the Department in the early days of DoD, in 1947, address such issues as composition of forces vs. modernization vs. readiness and how such an issue would change over time to get into such functional areas as intelligence?

Goldberg: It touches on some of these things.

Trask: The essays are brief, particularly for the earlier secretaries. The ones that I did in the last year, starting with Weinberger and including Cohen, are much more extensive than the early ones.

Goldberg: The new book was not intended to be in depth, it was done relatively quickly for observance of the 50th anniversary.

Pursley: What do you think the importance or utility would be of a broader scale study, looking at how the main functionaries in the Department of Defense have participated in helping to shape national security policy, where such broad but important questions as the fundamentals of national security are concerned? It is more common now for people to use the phrase, "the economy is the bedrock foundation of national security." Harold Brown used to say that a lot. How many secretaries have gone so far as to get involved in economic policy as part of their national security role?

Goldberg: Some have.

Pursley: It hasn't been a constant, certainly, and it isn't articulated, nor is it institutionalized in any way.

Goldberg: The point Roger makes is that all these people were different, had different effects, different influence, and worked in different ways, so there were different results.

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Pursley: There is, for example, the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS), an institutionalized procedural process, so every secretary has participated in that. They tweak it. But once it gets institutionalized to a degree, then it is tweaking rather than saying we'll do it a different way.

Trask: I think what you are talking about you can get to a large degree in these individual volumes on the History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, three of which are published, and that is an ongoing series. That's where you will find tremendous detail on all of these things.

Goldberg: But you don't get the full picture from one volume. It would be interesting if at some time there was a synthesis, looking at a 50-year period. What have been the big trends on these basic fundamental issues of national security, and what has occurred?

Pursley: How intelligence was handled would be another. Still another would be arms control and the role that it plays in national security policy and views and counter-views on that. I think that synthesizing could really throw the spotlight on some things where there ought to be procedural changes made.

Trask: It depends on who the secretary of defense is and what events are taking place during that first term that determine whether issues like that get more or less attention.

Goldberg: There are some studies which treat these matters, but they are much more limited in time, so you don't get the long-term picture.

Trask: I want to bring up the question of backchannels, from Nixon and Kissinger to General Abrams and others. What was the nature of that operation, did Laird know about it, and was it an issue?

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Pursley: Yes he did, and it was an issue. The phenomenon is one that gets back to the earlier point of never being sure what you don't know; trying to police that is a very difficult thing. Those run the range from being just annoyances to being very important and affecting fundamental policy. The annoyances and irritations get ignored, but one example of something not known at the time is the instruction involving the changing of orders on B-52 strikes so that bombing could take place in Cambodia but under the ruse that it was taking place in South Vietnam. The backchannels went out through the chairman instructing the people on the ground who were controlling the B-52 strikes to change the coordinates of the actual strike, but make it appear that the drops had been made in South Vietnam. The B-52 crews would be briefed originally in Guam on the set of coordinates for drops in South Vietnam but in the air were given a new set of coordinates. Obviously the drops were made in Cambodia, but all the logs would show they were made in South Vietnam. That is an exceptionally serious issue, in my judgment, because you are attacking and undermining the very ethic of integrity in the whole military structure. You are telling people blatantly to lie and falsify records. I don't think you can have anything much more serious than that. The secretary of defense, I know, did not know that was going on. So a backchannel like that is exceptionally serious. Laird, in his attempts to police that, had understandings with most of the intelligence arms--both the directors of DIA and NSA--that anything through those channels going either way would be reported directly to the secretary. Laird got a lot of material, for example, that was supposedly backchannel out of Vietnam going to the White House, supposedly around him. Particularly, Noel Gaylor at NSA would come in and give him material. So Laird was getting a lot of material that a lot of people didn't

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think he was getting, but you probably can't get all of it going either direction. The one I cite is a most egregious example, I think, of misusing communications channels and abusing authority.

Trask: When he got this information from NSA or elsewhere, did he then take steps to counteract it?

Pursley: Secretary Laird let it be known that he knew what they were doing.

Trask: So he was able to stop some of it?

Pursley: Exactly. That became very helpful on an ongoing basis in the strategic arms limitations talks where Nitze was SecDef's representative in that whole process. Gerry Smith was ostensibly the number one man, but Henry Kissinger always let it be known that as far as the real working group was concerned he was the number one man.

Goldberg: He barred Smith from the office afterward.

Pursley: Roy Allison was the chairman's man, so there was lots of communication traffic going back and forth. I think Laird kept pretty close contact with what all the positions were. I believe that he found in his individual discussions with Paul Nitze that he was pretty well up to speed. There wasn't much communications traffic that Laird didn't have one way or another. It's an odd way, though, to run an operation. Maybe that doesn't change much over time, but the degree probably goes up and down some. There probably is that kind of phenomenon going on all the time.

Goldberg: People in high places want to have their own channels of information.

Pursley: Another place where it turned out to be more important than it deserved to be was the situation in 1967 leading ultimately to the Tet operation. There was a lot of traffic going back and forth between the chairman and MACV; between George Carver,

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the CIA man in Saigon and the CIA; and everybody with the White House on what the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong strengths really were and what the implications of that were. All this led ultimately to the unfortunate situation with Westmoreland and CBS, 60 Minutes, and so on. Much more was made of that because, I think, in some ways they were all right and all wrong in every case. They were talking about what the implications and nuances were, and Westmoreland was talking more than might have been well-advised in trying to color it a bit for public purposes, but it wasn't that he was trying to delude anyone or didn't know that everybody else didn't know what the forces were; he was trying to rack it up in a way that the media wouldn't kill him with how strong the forces really were. Those kinds of backchannels went on and we couldn't keep track of everything all the time. It was impossible. It was pre-Laird's time, but I'm sure a lot of that same kind of thing went on while he was secretary. And you couldn't anticipate when something like 60 Minutes would step in and ultimately give everybody a black eye, including CBS.

Trask: How did all of this affect Laird's relationships with Nixon, Kissinger, Haig, etc? Obviously there was disagreement between Laird and the White House on the Vietnam policy and other things.

Pursley: The relationship became increasingly contentious with each succeeding month and became a little more difficult as a result. It didn't break down totally. Laird went out of his way to try to maintain a decorum and an ongoing substantive dialog with the White House. On the other side, the White House consistently tried different kinds of approaches to isolate Laird, and some of it was organizational. For example, they established the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG), in my judgment, as a way to

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isolate and get Laird out of the circle—(1) by making the deputy secretary of defense the fellow who would attend WSAG meetings; (2) never posting beforehand what the agenda for those meetings would be; and (3) always having a surprise, in effect a fait accompli, announced so that it would put the secretary of defense in the position of always trying to play catch-up, asking the chairman and the deputy what went on.

Goldberg: He had Packard there.

Pursley: That's not like being there.

Goldberg: That's true, but Packard was an honorable man.

Pursley: Yes, but not always prepared on the issues. The issues were not those that the deputy secretary of defense participated in on an ongoing basis. He was there as a one-time substitute. They set it up exactly that way, knowing full well that what they were doing was isolating the secretary.

Goldberg: This would have been Kissinger's doing.

Pursley: Absolutely. This is good stuff. There were protests made about it when it was set up, because it was pretty clear what would happen. It came down to a presidential decision, ostensibly to give the White House better impact on operational issues.

But on the question of how things changed over time, very early in Laird's four years he tried, and we tried to help him, stay very involved in some of the major substantive issues. The question of how we were going to handle chemical and biological weapons came up in a National Security Study memo. Fairly large and important studies were started and, as so often happens, those issues were turned over to interdepartmental study groups. They get pretty far down the road and take policy in a whole new direction. Some of the alternatives looked at are narrow and can take policy

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decisions away from principals just by narrowing or abusing the kinds of things being looked at. Laird decided early on to try to obviate that kind of activity by getting very involved and staying involved with principals on these interdepartmental groups to find out early on what they were really doing. In one particular case, he, by his participation, caused the whole study to be stopped and started all over again because the direction in which it was going wasn't satisfactory, at least in his eyes. He didn't do that much in the last three years; it took a lot of time and effort. The whole system was then too large, there were too many studies going on, and it became too burdensome to police that. It would be good if the secretaries or their principals could participate that way more often.

Goldberg: A lot of those studies fall by the wayside. Something happens and they never get finished.

Pursley: That particular one ultimately led to us disbanding a fair amount of our stockpiles. You have to pick your shots.

Trask: With all the backchannels, wiretaps, and such going on, did Laird ever consider resigning any time during his four years?

Pursley: No, not at all. I never saw one inkling of that. I think that deep down he knew that what he was pushing, in terms of getting the Southeast Asia issue resolved, required someone to shepherd that thing and get troops brought back in a steady kind of way. He felt that unless he stuck around national security policy it would abort, and it was too important to him. I don't think he ever gave one scintilla of thought to leaving.

Goldberg: He had an unusually effective relationship with Congress, which hardly anyone who has held that job has had. He had unusual influence.

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Pursley: Yes, with both Democrats and Republicans, and with almost all the major committees that he needed to be involved with. One person who gave one of the nicest talks at Marshfield was Senator Gaylord Nelson, a Democrat. When both those men started in politics they were in the State Senate in Wisconsin. They became very good friends then and maintained a close working relationship as well. Laird had and maintained meaningful friendships.

Goldberg: Those were the days when members of both parties could have that kind of relationship with each other. There were personal friendships and less of the kind of acrimony and nastiness that seems to prevail today in Congress.

Pursley: Mel Laird and Mahon, for example, on the Appropriations Committee. They could be so close, and trust each other. While Laird was secretary of defense they would come to him on any kind of issues far more often than they would go to the White House.

Goldberg: In those days, if your word wasn't good, you were dead.

Pursley: That's right.

Trask: Were the bulk of Laird's relationships with Congress informal and one-on-one rather than testimony? How did it break down?

Pursley: It was all of that, and he relished all of that. It was interesting to watch him get prepared to go to the Hill to testify, versus the preparation that Bob McNamara or Clark Clifford would put in. McNamara worked exceptionally hard getting ready to testify--one, to have a grasp of the issues, and two, to be sure he was right. Even with what Henry Glass would have in the Posture Statement, we would have many sheets of material on issues to get added detail or to check that what Henry had was right.

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Goldberg: He wanted to demonstrate that he was on top of everything.

Pursley: Laird, on the other hand, would spend minutes, whereas McNamara would spend hours just to get a general familiarity with it. He didn't feel it was important to demonstrate that he knew how many Bulgarian tanks there were.

Goldberg: He didn't mind being able to call on other people, either to get the information or to send it up afterward.

Pursley: I don't recall him taking other people with him. It didn't bother him, or the Hill, either. He would never dissemble with them, but by the same token accuracy down to the third digit wasn't important to him at all. And it didn't seem to bother people on the Hill; they would take general judgments.

Goldberg: McNamara did have a grasp beyond almost anyone else who held the job.

Pursley: That is true; but I can tell you from a military assistant's viewpoint, Mel Laird was easier to work with, because someone who has such mastery of everything is daunting. What can you contribute, other than analyses and syntheses? With Mel, it was general directions. He did, and still does, sometimes ask for a list of five or six things that he might want to press on. He would do it for testimony on the Hill, or for Meet the Press, etc. Before going down to the secretaries of defense meeting in Atlanta a couple of weeks ago, he called me to ask for a fax of some things he might want to focus on. He might use them, or not, or integrate them in some way. He's such a quick study he can take those things and go with them.

Trask: McNamara was precise and detailed; Laird was more general and congenial. Which was more effective?

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Pursley: Laird always had a strategic view and ultimately, if you went back and reflected on what he had presented and how he had presented it, it was in the context of strategy. You could put your finger on that as a political strategist or even in the national security area. To talk about Southeast Asia--Laird would put it in the context of what we were trying to do, where we were going, and how we were moving. He would go back over the sets of objectives and resources and how they meshed together and the feasibility of other alternatives. He might not do it exactly in a one-two-three way, but it would be in a strategic context.

Goldberg: He also concentrated on certain specific things that he wanted to see done, he did not try to do everything. Laird gave Packard a real job to do and Packard did it. Packard ran the department for him.

Pursley: On some issues, like procurement issues, some intelligence operations, Packard had full sway. But on running the Pentagon, I wouldn't undersell Laird.

Goldberg: I'm just saying that Laird left a lot of the administration to Packard.

Pursley: It didn't bother him that someone else would get credit. In fact, he went out of his way to make sure that Dave Packard got a lot of credit for a lot of things, some that were probably not even Packard's province. He wanted so much for the world to think well of and reward Dave Packard for the contribution he made while he was here.

Goldberg: I have no doubt that Laird was in charge, overall.

Pursley: He knew far more about what was going on than many people gave him credit for.

Goldberg: But he didn't become as deeply involved in many matters and issues as did McNamara.

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Pursley: Not to belabor it, Laird was the only one who met with the chairman, all the service secretaries, all the assistant secretaries in OSD, and DDR&E on a regular basis. But with Laird, if he delegated it, he delegated it.

Trask: To move on to the question of threat perception, what was Laird's perception of the basic threat to national security when he became secretary of defense? Obviously there was Vietnam, but there were some broader issues.

Pursley: Laird's perception was that the Soviet Union constituted the principal national security threat. I feel certain that that was one of his problems with Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia was diluting our capability to meet that kind of threat. Nearly a third of our whole defense budget, some $25 billion out of $70 billion to $75 billion, was being directed towards Southeast Asia, and it must have been having some impact on our capability to handle the broader threat posed by the Soviet Union. By the same token, in Laird's approaches to individual issues, it was clear that he was alert to other kinds of activities. Obviously, North Korea would come to mind, and Laird was first to institute one-on-one annual or semiannual bilateral meetings with ministers of defense to address those specific threats. Considering Northeast Asia, he established regular bilateral visits not only with the South Koreans (and those became institutionalized), but also with the Japanese. When the Japanese director of the defense forces, Nakasone, came here in 1970, that was the first time such a visit had occurred since World War II. Laird had wanted to have such a bilateral with Grechko of the Soviet Union. Henry Kissinger put the kibosh on that; he didn't want our secretary of defense going that far. But Laird had that kind of strategic thought pattern and that way of trying to deal with and get sharper focus on threats, and in some ways by personal relationships perhaps

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ameliorate to some degree what those threats were or at least change the direction in which they would go.

In reference to Korea, it is interesting that the only time we have had any reduction in force since 1953, when hostilities finally ended, was during the Laird years. Laird went about, in his inimitable way, saying we were going to reduce our force levels and took out a third of the force, sixty thousand to forty thousand, and said it was going to be part of an ongoing pattern. That was done in the wake of an early bilateral with the South Koreans. Laird's logic was that if the threat was no larger than stated and growing no faster, then the South Koreans must have the capability, given their economy, to handle it. If we pulled out it shouldn't impede our joint capability to handle all of that. But if they said we couldn't pull out, then either the threat was much more severe and imminent, in which case the intelligence was wrong or they were not telling the truth about their own capabilities. That raises the question of what happened to all the money we kept pouring into this thing? Where had all that gone, if not into capability? So he said we could reduce, and the way it was structured it would be part of an ongoing stream of reduction. Carter tried to continue that and goofed by not talking to anyone about it first.

Trask: In his earlier career, how much attention did Laird give in public statements or his activities in Congress to the Soviet Union? We know that Nixon made his early reputation on anti-Communism. But Laird wasn't in that kind of mold, was he?

Pursley: Not that sharply, but you will find a lot of material concerning Laird expressing views about the dangers of Communism and the Soviet Union. There are a lot pieces by Laird along those lines. I don't think he attracted a lot of attention when he gave those

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kinds of speeches or talks. Even after he was appointed secretary, a lot of people in the Pentagon didn't even know who he was. That shows that those individuals weren't awake.

Goldberg: But he got out and around the building more than most secretaries did, didn't he?

Pursley: Yes, but when he was in Congress he was not that visible as a spokesman on national security issues. My guess is that at that time he didn't become a household word around this building (the Pentagon).

Goldberg: But he was visible as a strong Republican partisan.

Pursley: I think that's right.

Goldberg: Certainly by the '60s he began to become known as a fairly influential member of the House.

Trask: But probably more on domestic issues.

Pursley: In 1964, for example, he headed the platform committee for the whole Republican party. As a matter of fact, the person that he talked Barry Goldwater and the rest of the Republican Party into bringing out to help write the foreign policy part of the platform was none other than Henry Kissinger. That was the first time Henry got introduced to the Republicans. And Henry participated.

Goldberg: The Rockefellers had taken him up long before that.

Pursley: Yes, but to get him involved at a different level.

Trask: How did Laird feel about Joe McCarthy, from Wisconsin?

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Pursley: I can't tell you in any depth. He had known McCarthy. That kind of extreme politician and Wisconsin kind of go together, don't they? Some of the La Follettes weren't particularly the main stream, or at least that's my impression.

Goldberg: The La Follettes were quite progressive Republicans.

Trask: They were very solid.

Pursley: McCarthy was clearly off the edge.

Trask: How much attention did Laird pay to overall strategic nuclear policy and planning?

Pursley: Quite a bit. It raises the question of where in DoD does anyone really engage in pulling all those things together. One of the first places where you can see Mel Laird's imprint in those areas is in arms control and the strategic arms limitations talks. We were stepping right into the area of MIRVs, the multiple independent reentry vehicles. This was to be our big new answer to what the Soviet Union was doing in their major step up in the strategic arena. It ties back with the point we made earlier, that while we were spending so much of our defense budget, literally almost a third, on Southeast Asia, our ability to keep up in the strategic area was being called somewhat into question. It was very clear that at least by our intelligence estimates, the Soviet Union was beginning to accelerate markedly, both in different types of strategic armaments and their technology, so that the numbers and the arithmetic were changing, at least potentially, rather dramatically. One of our answers to all that was multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRV). Laird was very tuned to all of that dialog. He thought the importance of SALT was exceptional and that we needed to go down that avenue. I think he felt strongly even then, way before it became such a major part of the whole

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dialog, that if we could control the defensive side so that we weren't urging both sides, either us in response to a Soviet defensive system or the Soviets in response to our defensive system, to accelerate these offensive arms even more than they would otherwise--that was going to be the answer. If they put in a defense, we would just overwhelm them with even more offense. Laird was very attuned to that and saw the importance of stopping or controlling that kind of advance on the offensive side by in effect saying we wouldn't have defenses or they would be minimal tokens. That is a strategic judgment that people would argue with today, and it is certainly counter to the whole Reagan approach. I think it has, however, stood up well over the test of time, particularly as we've gone through increasing increments of START and gotten at least a possibility of getting nuclear arms brought down to substantially lower levels of 3500 or thereabouts. It would have been hard, I think, to do that without that first step of SALT, I.e., limited defenses. I think the Melvin Lairds and those who pushed hard for that first round did a great service by providing that kind of first step. Beyond that, in terms of trying to manipulate the various parts of the triad or articulate to a degree whether we should have Midgetman, I don't know that Laird spent a lot of time thinking about the inner workings and mechanisms in pros and cons or going that way versus a mobile missile and so on, except as individual issues would arise. There was always a proponent for some system or another and he would deal with them. But as a broad overall blueprint strategist, I think where you can see his footprints a lot would be on the defensive side. It raises the issue of where in the DoD do you find the strategic strategist? Today I would say it is probably Walt Slocombe and Jan Lodal, two very good minds. I am pleased to have those kinds of people. I suppose Fred Ikle when he

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was here would have said he was the strategist. During the Laird regime I don't know if you could put your finger on someone other than Laird.

Trask: You can point to some secretaries of defense, like Schlesinger and Brown, who paid a lot of attention and did a lot of work in this area. What you are saying is that Laird was knowledgeable and interested but it was not as central for him as it would have been for Schlesinger, for example.

Pursley: Right, except that he did give the introduction of MIRVs the importance of trying to put some kind of control on that. That's pretty impressive, and Laird went far out of his way in a very contentious arena to help the SALT treaty pass. There is evidence of how he helped persuade the final votes, which were exceptionally close, to come out in favor of that. He worked awfully hard on that.

Trask: The Nixon administration talked about something called "strategic sufficiency," which I think is saying you don't have to have more than the potential enemy, but enough to maintain the deterrent. That's consistent, I assume, with Laird's approach?

Pursley: Laird's defense reports were full of that sort of thing, picking up on those kinds of themes, and the whole concept of total force under the Nixon doctrine that we use not only all the sinews of our various kinds of force, particularly all the civilian elements as well as the purely active duty military elements. Also that we form alliances and be sure that we're shored up by burden-sharing in various arenas. He picked up on all those themes and used them a lot. To be frank, those are good concepts, but some of that was window-dressing. You know the whole question of realistic deterrence, that sort of thing. It makes for good press and keeps concepts and ideas floating around, so that debate can take place, but I don't know that it goes a lot deeper than that.

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Trask: Each administration in that period had a different term that they used, but they were essentially talking about the same thing.

Goldberg: We haven't followed up on Vietnam and Indochina--the basic differences between the White House and Laird: Laird pursuing Vietnamization as hard as he could, the White House, with Kissinger in the lead, full of doubts much of the way through, certainly not as consistent in his attitude as Laird. Is that correct?

Pursley: I think it's fair to say that Nixon made a great point during his 1968 campaign that he had a strategy and a different approach for Southeast Asia without articulating what it was. The fact was that he didn't have anything, and Laird knew that he didn't. Laird felt strongly that it was his province and responsibility to come up with a strategy. He made a trip to Southeast Asia in March 1969 and as a result settled strongly on what his disposition might have been anyway--that we had gone past the time when even the remotest thought of military victory was possible and that the American people were beyond the point where they were going to support much more in the way of high U.S. cost and high U.S. casualties. They weren't as convinced as they might have been a few years earlier that our interests were so involved in that part of the world that we should pursue the role we had been pursuing. I believe Laird felt that whatever new direction U.S. policy toward Vietnam or Southeast Asia might take, there were certain essential elements. One, that we should buy some time with the American people and with Congress, and that one essential for doing that was to start some withdrawal from Vietnam to provide a physical demonstration that we were getting out rather than accentuating and moving the other way as the repeated 200,000-force request that had come about a year earlier would have shown. The second was that the strategy perhaps

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ought to change rather markedly to a point that would be consistent with Republic of Vietnam self-determination, which was still being touted as one of our key objectives, if not the key objective. I think Laird's reasoning was that if self-determination was the principal goal we would have to be focusing sharply, directing ourselves toward providing them the sinews and capability for self-determination, whether it be politically, economically, or, most importantly, militarily. The U.S. objectives militarily should be to shore them up to the point where they could sustain themselves not just in the short-term, but over an extended, almost indefinite period of time. If we could do that, if they could develop that capability militarily, we would have checkmated the North Vietnamese. Rather than the North Vietnamese confronting us with their endless capability, we would have confronted them with the same sort of thing and with our ability to support the South Vietnamese as opposed to the Soviet Union's capability, which would be much less, to support the North Vietnamese. We were now each dealing with a pawn, in effect. If the South Vietnamese could be built up to a point where they at least could sustain themselves, self-determination, that might be an effective resolution, at least from a military standpoint. It might mean war going on for quite a period of time, but at least it would have been one way to check the North Vietnamese aggression. That all sounded like it would have been a good strategy if it had started maybe six years earlier, but to start in 1969 as we were pulling out, could we do that? It was anybody's guess. Laird talked to a lot of people on what their judgments were.

Goldberg: What was the White House position?

Pursley: Absolutely devastated. In 1969 the White House position still focused on ways to win a military victory. I think Nixon's, and even Henry Kissinger's, gut feeling was that

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there should be some way the U.S. could pull the thing out militarily, i.e., by U.S. military action. They were casting about very markedly to do that. The early NSSM 1 or 2, looking for alternatives, pointed to how we could improve U.S. military participation to win it militarily. Laird's inclination was totally opposite to that.

Goldberg: How did the White House then proceed?

Pursley: They very reluctantly proceeded, because Laird had pushed the whole idea of incremental withdrawal from Vietnam so far and hard that they almost had to go along. The Midway meeting in June 1969, where President Nixon met with President Thieu, put the seal of approval on that, but very reluctantly. General Wheeler, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, also was very reluctant. Laird had gotten, at least through that March trip to Southeast Asia, an agreement with Abrams that that could be done. Laird didn't care if it was 3,000, or 5,000, or 10,000 men; his consistent edict was to never make a prediction or commitment on withdrawal that we couldn't meet or beat. None of this business of saying we would pull out 40,000 and then come out later with an excuse why we could only do 37,000. His consistent expression was that we would never get credit for anything if we didn't meet or beat what we said. All anybody would ever remember was that we couldn't meet our target.

Goldberg: So he had to drag the White House along all the way?

Pursley: All the way, kicking and screaming. I remember flying up to Camp David when the second increment came out, around September. Mel Laird was at Camp David. That was when the president still let Cabinet members use it. Wheeler and I got on the helicopter together at the Pentagon on Saturday morning to ride up and talk to Secretary Laird about what the second increment would be and how we would do it. Bus Wheeler

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was so upset he didn't say a word the whole way up there. He was terribly upset that we had started down that road and that it was clear we were going to do a second increment. He argued that we should be going the other way.

Goldberg: How about the other chiefs?

Pursley: I think they supported Wheeler; certainly Moorer did. There would have been a time when General Johnson, earlier chief of staff of the Army, would have been sympathetic with the Laird strategy. He was a sharp thinker.

Goldberg: So Laird was really prevailing, in spite of almost unanimous opposition at the highest levels of government.

Pursley: In part it was Laird and Congress. It was very clear that he had two things going for him. He had talked to Abrams enough to know that Abrams was of such high integrity that he would not dissemble in any way. He probably thought we should have been doing more in the way of Vietnamization anyway. That had been Abrams's job under Westmoreland when Abrams was number two out there. In any event, he felt strongly about it, so it was easier to convince him that we could go that way. The other piece was what Laird had in the way of persuasion with Congress.

Goldberg: And perhaps above all, the tide of public opinion.

Pursley: Yes, and the absence of any other strategy. No one else had one. The strong sentiment was, in part tied into the Nixon and Kissinger mentality, that they all wanted to do things in 1969 to rattle the Soviet Union and make them uncertain as to how crazy Nixon really was and what he might do next. To create great uncertainty, they thought they could use military implements. This came up after the EC-121 shootdown by North Korea, which was also March or April 1969. The White House wanted to retaliate, but

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Laird almost alone stepped in front of that freight train. In effect, he made the argument that if we did retaliate against the North Koreans, a number of things could happen. Someone would certainly ask what created the incident and what the EC-121 was doing there. The answer would be "not much." There wasn't any good reason to have it there, because there were other even better ways of gathering intelligence. It would expose us to a risk that probably wouldn't justify another war. And if there were a two-front war in Asia, how would we handle that? We would have to mobilize; we had not mobilized up to that point.

Goldberg: Haig had all the answers for that. He was in favor of a very strong, powerful reaction, a virtual ultimatum to the Soviets. For that, and the Pueblo, too. He said we'd go to the source.

Pursley: I don't know how assured you would be by that, but as I read back through what happened during the Cuban missile crisis, somehow I don't take great comfort from these great ultimatums that we're somehow going to put people in their place and they will stay there. That's not very reassuring to me, particularly if it happens to be wrong.

Goldberg: I'm simply relating that in the White House, one of the people with this attitude of using strength in all of these crises, was Haig, pushing Kissinger and Nixon.

Pursley: In the EC-121 case it got more complicated, because we didn't have any way of retaliating, we had no force immediately available. Even using B-52s we didn't have an immediate way to respond. And how many days have to go by before it is not retaliation any more, but initiative on your part? You don't know, that's an uncertainty. You have to answer all those questions. That one just drove the White House up the wall, because Laird asked the tough questions.

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Going back to Vietnam, I think Laird's view was that a strategy of trying to work with Vietnamization was not an idle public relations gimmick but a serious attempt at a strategy that even President Kennedy gave credibility to in 1963. President Johnson abandoned the strategy in 1965. Laird thought it was our best hope to provide the means for self-determination. It was consistent with an honorable way of resolving our activity there and getting us back into synchronization with a worldwide strategy where the principal threat was the Soviet Union. He thought it was a plausible strategy that we needed to pursue.

Goldberg: His role is well known but he has never been given the credit he probably deserves for pushing this through and having a major effect on the national and world situation.

Pursley: When Sy Hersh was doing the research for his book, The Price of Power, in which he took Henry Kissinger on pretty severely, Henry asked me to join him for breakfast at the River House in New York. He would never invite me anywhere, but he was interested in what Sy Hersh had asked me about him and how Hersh would treat Henry in his book. Henry was interested, I believe, in his own persona. At the conclusion of that breakfast Henry said to me, "You and Mel Laird were right about Southeast Asia. We were wrong. The approach that you had laid out was the way we should have all gone and everybody should have jumped on board that early on." He said that again, at the Mel Laird function, privately, but I'm sure he would strongly deny it if it came to light.

Goldberg: That's a great concession, isn't it?

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Pursley: Unbelievable. But I think he really believes that now, and that if they had jumped on board there was a better chance that it might have worked.

Goldberg: He has perspective now that he didn't have then.

Pursley: That if we hadn't given Thieu and Ky encouragement that they could continue in their old ways but that they really did need to generate all of their resources, really get in the game, and be honest with us about how much it would take, because we could regulate our withdrawal. The fact that it was going on, and our casualties were coming down, was buying us some time.

Goldberg: It would still have been a close call, because the rot had gone so deep.

Pursley: It was a strategy that was probably right, but about six years late.

Goldberg: After all those people had gotten killed and after all that destruction, what real commitment did most of the people of South Vietnam have to any regime? How many were willing to get killed for it? It's a pity. It should have been done even 8, 9 or 10 years before, in the Eisenhower administration.

Pursley: If it had gone that way before we had started putting in those large increments in 1965-66, maybe there would have been some chance. At that point the North Vietnamese still didn't have their main units down there. We were still dealing with the Vietcong, and they got wiped out at Tet.

Goldberg: But the problem is that once you get started down that road, as we did, with first some materiel, then people to help show them how to use the materiel, then advisers, and on down the line, you wind up the way we did.

Pursley: We made it our war.

Goldberg: We wanted them to succeed, we made a huge investment, we got sucked in.

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Pursley: We volunteered our way into that.

Goldberg: Yes, but once we were in we kept getting sucked in deeper and deeper.

Pursley: We had a lot of military people, such as Gavin and Ridgway, saying we should not want to do that.

Goldberg: We didn't want a land war there.

Trask: I have a question on interservice competition. Did it have any impact during Laird's tenure on operations, policies, programs, etc?

Pursley: I don't know if there is any evidence of diminution of that even though Goldwater-Nichols talked about jointness, but I don't know that on the other hand there were any significant flare-ups of any real contentious issues during that time of one service taking on another. It would have been unusual for the service secretaries or the uniformed military to take Laird on, the way he operated. Most of them would have been disposed to go out of their way to settle any real contention.

Goldberg: But no big ones came up?

Pursley: I don't recall any at all. It would have taken some pretty gutsy performance on the part of some uniformed person. That's not to say that there weren't issues that the services didn't like and want any part of. The first woman admiral, for example, the Navy fought that tooth and tong. They came up with all sorts of reasons not to do it, and they were going to make her a commodore, that kind of thing.

Goldberg: They had done away with commodore rank.

Pursley: They were going to bring it back.

Trask: Later on, that rank was brought back.

Goldberg: Then they got rid of it again.

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Goldberg: I remember an incident of which I had some first-hand knowledge, where the Air Force was getting classified information leaked to it from a Navy office, and the Navy found out about it. Zumwalt sent a memo to Ryan saying, "Jack, if you want this kind of information, just ask me and I will get it to you, you don't have to come get it some other way." That sort of thing was going on all the time, and people knew it. They all had their spies in each other's offices somehow or other, or had some way of getting information.

Pursley: Admiral Zumwalt was a pretty good friend. He would sometimes come and debrief me a bit on some of the things going on down in the tank, particularly some of the unkind things said about me.

Goldberg: And you could tell him some things said about him. We had a good interview with him.

Pursley: A lot of people found great fault with the way he handled the Navy as CNO, and the White House thought he was beyond the pale.

Goldberg: Things that he did were undone as soon as he left.

We've held you as long as we should; we appreciate your time and this interview.