INTERVIEW I

INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD HELMS

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

DATE: April 4, 1969

PLACE: Mr. Helms' office in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: You are recording now. Let's begin by letting you simply identify yourself and your position.

H: My title is Director of Central Intelligence, not Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. When the agency was established by law under the National Security Act of 1947, the individual who held my job at that time was given the title of Director of Central Intelligence. This obviously includes his capacity as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, but it is intended to give him a wider responsibility--in this case, chairman of the intelligence community. This is manifested by the other hat that I wear as Chairman of the United States Intelligence Board. As Chairman of the United States Intelligence Board, I have no command authority over other elements of the intelligence community, but I have a coordinating responsibility. Therefore the title of Director of Central Intelligence was, as I understand it, picked to indicate that the man holding this position had these two jobs, which I have already enumerated--one, as director of the agency, and the other as the coordinator of the intelligence community.

It is indeed true that I have been with the Central Intelligence Agency since its inception in 1947. I was the deputy to the Deputy Director for Plans for several years until 1962, when I was made Deputy Director for Plans, which is the title given to that element of the agency which deals with its secret overseas operations.

In 1965 I was appointed in April by President Johnson as the Deputy

Director of Central Intelligence on the same day that Admiral Raborn was made the Director of Central Intelligence. Then in June of 1966 after Admiral Raborn had resigned, I was made the Director of Central Intelligence.

M: That clears it up in an exact way. That's what we want, fine. Also, for the record here, you had no close contact with Mr. Johnson when he was a senator and you were simply a member of the agency here; nor very close contact while he was Vice President, you said.

H: No. As a matter of fact, I have a rather vivid recollection of the first time I ever met Mr. Johnson. It was under the most casual circumstances at what was then, as I recall the name, the Congressional Women's Club, or something of that kind, which was located just off 16th Street. I happened to go there one evening with Congressman Sieminski [Alfred D.; D/N.J.] from Jersey City because my son and his daughter were attending a dance. As we walked up to the dance floor, which was on the second floor of the building, I recall Congressman Sieminski introducing me to Senator Johnson. We walked very slowly up to the second floor because it was just after Senator Johnson had recovered from his heart attack. And, although I don't remember the year or the month, I remember that he was compelled to walk very slowly even when walking on the level.

That was the only time that I recall seeing him or speaking with him until, in point of fact, I attended a meeting with him just prior to the time--when he was Vice President--that the problem arose about President Diem's administration in Viet Nam, and the problem existing at the time that had been created domestically in the United States by the fact that several Buddhists had immolated themselves in Saigon. Following two or three meetings in one week which the Vice President then attended, I do not recall having seen him or spoken to him until I was taken by Mr. John

McCone, who was then the Director of Central Intelligence, to see President Johnson. Then, I think it must have been some time in the winter in 1965.

M: This was just as Mr. McCone was resigning?

H: Mr. McCone had indicated that he had wanted to leave government. I had been taken there to be introduced to President Johnson, I can only assume, because maybe someone had the idea that I was a possible candidate for one of the top jobs in the agency. I had a brief conversation with President Johnson, and then I went in as an observer to a National Security Council meeting. That was the last time I saw him until I received a call in April from Marvin Watson asking me if I was the Richard Helms who had seen the President some days before. I said that I was. He then said, "Would you please come down to the White House right away? Don't tell anybody you're coming."

So I did go down to the White House, and Marvin Watson ushered me into the President's office. I sat beside his desk, and he told me that he had decided that he wanted me to be the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, and that the Director of Central Intelligence, whom he was going to appoint, was Admiral Raborn. We then entered into a discussion of what the job entailed, and how he would go about announcing it.

M: It has been frequently assumed that there was at least an informal understanding that Mr.[Adm.] Raborn's tenure would be short and that you would succeed him. Was that explicitly understood at the time?

H: President Johnson said to me that he wanted me to come in as Deputy Director, that I was not very well known, that he really had it in mind that if all went well and there weren't any undue problems, that he'd asked Admiral Raborn to come back from civilian life, that Admiral Raborn had had a heart attack, and that he didn't want him to strain himself and

make too great a sacrifice physically to undertake this job, and that he did not know how long Admiral Raborn would stay, but probably only for a limited period of time--and that all else being equal, I might move up to the job. It's of historical interest to say that that was the first and last conversation we ever had on the subject until totally to my surprise in 1966, he announced at a press conference that he had just appointed me Director, although he had not communicated with me about it at any time in the interim.

M: He liked to make his appointments with unusual circumstances like that. You mean, he didn't talk to you at all?

H: Not a word. That was the first and last word we had on the subject.

M: Had you known that Admiral Raborn was leaving?

H: He told me that he was going to resign, but I had heard nothing about what the President had decided to do. He had been in office for fourteen months, and since I had heard no word, I didn't know whether he intended to go ahead with this or not. He obviously assumed, which I learned about President Johnson later, that when he told you something he meant it. Although he had a reputation sometimes for saying something and then taking it back, I never found in my relationship with him that this was ever the case. When he announced my appointment, totally to my surprise at this press conference, (a), I didn't know he was going to announce it, and, (b), he didn't tell me he was going to announce it.

M: That's remarkable. This, in spite of the fact that your actual meetings had become more frequent during that period when you were Deputy.

H: Well, during this period that I was Deputy I attended all of the National Security Council meetings with Admiral Raborn. In fact, the President had made it clear that he wanted me to come to both of these things

because he wanted me to get some exposure and some experience in these meetings of the various kinds. So I had seen him with quite some regularity during that period.

M: And still he hadn't seen fit to call it to your attention again.

H: No.

M: This is really a very subjective kind of evaluation, but what kind of man is Mr. Johnson to work for in a close way as you did?

H: I found that Mr. Johnson was, in the first place, in my opinion, a first-class boss. I had had some experience in the outside world from the time I graduated from college until the time that I went into the Navy during the war and went on and stayed in intelligence, and had worked for a variety of bosses, not only outside the government but inside the government. It was one of my observations that a good boss was a man who made it clear what he wanted you to do, and when you did it then he was generally satisfied with your performance. In this respect I found Mr. Johnson absolutely first-class. From the time we entered into this relationship, particularly when I was Director--but even when I was Deputy Director--whenever he asked me to do anything, he made it explicit what he wanted. When I had produced what he'd asked for, that was fine with him. I know of no instance during this period when we had any differences over this. In that sense I felt that I knew where I stood with him.

In addition, I found him an excellent executive in the sense that an executive is an individual who runs and deals with his subordinates in a way that makes it clear what is expected of them. He never went behind my back in the agency or in the intelligence community. When he wanted something he asked me for it and expected me to get it. He never told me how to run the agency. I simply assumed that he wanted me to run it.

He had so indicated, and I took him at his word. I did run it, and I dealt with my responsibilities in the community as best I knew how. I was never criticized by him for it. He never asked me to make an accounting of how I was spending my time or where I was spending it or on what I was spending it. I found that, in that sense, I was no exception in government; that he dealt through his cabinet officers, and he dealt through the heads of agencies; that he did not do what President Kennedy used to do, of going behind these people to lower down individuals whom he either knew or had some regard for their technical competence or something of this kind.

Interestingly enough Mr. Johnson gave me such a free hand, if you want to put it that way--and I don't mean free in the sense of permitting me to overplay it--but such a free hand that I do not believe that he really had the faintest idea how the Central Intelligence Agency was organized, or how the intelligence community was organized. He expected me to produce the goods. When I produced them, which I think I did with regularity, he never asked any questions about where they came from.

We had hoped to get him out to the agency on our twentieth anniversary, which occurred in 1967, but at the last moment because of a crisis which had arisen in the domestic field he was not able to come. So he sent a congratulatory letter instead. I was disappointed at this because, at least, during my tenure here he never had an opportunity to visit the agency.

Another aspect of my relationship with him. He clearly understood that I was not a part of the policy-making aspect of his administration. In fact, I am not sure how keenly aware of this he was, but I am sure he was somewhat aware that the Congress--senators and congressmen--do not like the Director of Central Intelligence to be involved in policy making

in any way. He, too, was not keen on this. The net result is that on no occasion in all the meetings I attended with him did he ever ask me to give my opinion about what policy ought to be pursued by the government. He asked for information about the facts in the case, what was happening in the overseas area under consideration, what I thought the opposition might do, what I thought the people might do in other countries. But he never asked me to make a statement about what he ought to do as President or what policy the administration ought to follow. Even during the most intense decisions and difficult decisions over Viet Nam and other problems, he never deviated from this.

I have often thought that once he had focused--I use that word because I can't think of a better one at the moment--on what intelligence could do for him, he then realized that I probably had a role to play at various meetings that were held in seeing to it that--and I'm not attempting to use a phrase which in any way characterizes anyone or is an unpleasant phrase, it's simply a descriptive one--I helped to keep the game honest. Those individuals in government who have policies to espouse, policies to pursue, policies to defend, have a tendency as all human beings do to kind of fudge the facts in an effort to support these policies; and having the government's intelligence officer there, who knows these facts just as well as they do and who can correct them at the proper time or draw attention to a series of facts that have been overlooked or something of this kind, does indeed help to keep the game honest. Although President Johnson never said anything about this to me, I rather got the impression that this was what he wanted from me; that he wanted to be sure that what he was hearing was the truth, and the more detailed the information, and the more information he had, the better he was able to make his decisions.

In fact, I heard him say on many occasions that the decisions that a President made were no better than the information he had on which he made them. So this, I think, was a role which he felt was important; that the fact man, if you want to put it that way, was sitting at his elbow and that he was dealing with right sets of facts.

M: It has been published, for example, that he was less interested in intelligence, generally speaking, than President Kennedy had been. Do you think that's inaccurate, based on what you've just said?

H: No, I think this is true. From the time that he took over as President, he started off by having John McCone brief him every day. I think that lasted for about ten days immediately after he became President, and then it was stopped. As John McCone told me on more than one occasion, one of the reasons that he left the government was that he was dissatisfied with his relationship with President Johnson. He didn't get to see him enough and he didn't feel that he had any impact and he didn't have sufficient influence. This just didn't suit John McCone's way of life or interest, and this was why he left as Director.

But to answer your question in more precise terms, I think that President Johnson came to understand what intelligence could do for him during the events leading up to the June War of 1967.

M: That late?

H: I'm sure that he had been reading the information on Viet Nam and other things prior to this, and I don't mean that he'd not been reading his intelligence publications because, as you know, President Johnson didn't like to be briefed very much. He did not like to be talked at very much. He much preferred to read his intelligence. From my standpoint I thought this was infinitely preferable because a written document can be a much

better balanced document than anything an individual can give orally. It can be more closely reasoned. Subtleties can be identified, which is very hard to do in a conversation. Last, but not least, for better or for worse, President Johnson, when he had something on his mind, simply wasn't listening to what one had to say to him. You could tell this from a variety of signs, and if he wasn't talking to you about some other subject, he wasn't listening to what you were saying. But when he read, he read carefully, and he hoisted aboard what he read. So during the time that I was Deputy Director and principally since I've been Director, I saw to it that he got the right publications put in his night-time reading. I could tell from the questions he asked later that he did read it and read it very carefully. That was the way I communicated with him in the intelligence field. In my opinion this was absolutely fundamental; that if we had not had this system of insuring that he read the intelligence on Viet Nam, on the Middle East, on a variety of other subjects, that he would not have been well served. But he was far better served by having the written word than he would have been if I had come down there every day. And I am quite satisfied with this.

I put this in at this point for this reason. I was constantly asked, particularly during the first year that I was Director, "How often do you see the President," because there is a feeling loose in the land that unless you're in the President's presence a good deal you don't have any influence on him. It was my distinct impression that the influence that I had with President Johnson was the right kind of influence, i.e., not my personal influence [but] the influence of the publications and the written documents and the intelligence reports, analyses, and estimates which I sent to him, and which he read. That was the right kind of

influence to have, and it was influence applied in the right way. He could make intelligent judgments about them. He had time to study them. He could later ask questions about them, and they were closely, well-written documents all the way from the President's daily brief, which he got every night and which gave him a quick rundown on important things in the world which he should know, through the longer studies and periodicals and so on. So I was quite satisfied with my relationship with the President in this respect. Put another way, the President of the United States paid attention to what his intelligence officer gave him to read, and this is the most important relationship you can have, in my opinion.

M: Rather than paying attention to the intelligence officer as a man.

H: Who's a man, and whose personality inevitably gets involved in these issues when he's sitting there. I've heard all kinds of opinions on this, but I have my own opinion. I hold to this quite firmly, that there is a tendency in life for the human personality to unduly influence what is being said, and this can be very misleading to the President. It may not make so much difference with the Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense, but the President who has to make the ultimate decision should be dealing with a set of, if not solid facts, at least conceptions which he understands; and with a man like President Johnson one communicated with him much better through the written word.

M: This more or less answers one of the questions 'way down the list here regarding how you keep your intelligence estimates from being policy-advised. This is, I assume, one way--what you're saying is that you keep the human element out of it here.

H: That is right, and he has a chance to see that this is an estimate. It's labeled as such. When those important documents, particularly on the

Soviet strategic offensive forces and strategic defensive forces and general purpose forces--those three major National Intelligence Estimates which are produced each fall, they are clearly labeled on the cover sheet--National Intelligence Estimates--no one is under any illusion as to what they are designed to do. They are our best effort in the intelligence community to tell the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense, "Here's what the Soviet Union has as a military force. This is what you have to deal with." Now, they're estimates, because we do not know with precision every single tank, every single plane, every single submarine, every single missile. But we believe this to be the case, and we believe this is the direction in which they're going, and we believe this is what it's going to look like two years from now, or three years from now, or five years from now. So he has every opportunity to deal with this problem in the proper context.

M: This also avoids, I take it, any highs and lows of personal being in-favor or out-of-favor that might influence judgment.

H: That is right, plus the fact that anyone who ever watched President Johnson spend his day realized that this was an enormously active and restless man who had many contacts that he was making, whether by telephone or personally or through his assistants, and that the world around him was the world of action and of motion. Attempting to stop that action and motion to get him to listen with great precision to a long disquisition on some subtlety of Soviet weaponry was more than one could expect.

And you're quite right about the personality aspects of it, that in human relationships inevitably one has one's good days and one's bad days. There are certain days when you like a certain individual and certain

other days when you'd prefer not to have to see him. And the Presidency of the United States, being the peculiar office that it is--and I say peculiar because all the power in the Executive Branch derives from the Presidency. Cabinet officers don't have any power; heads of independent agencies don't have any power except what the President allows them to have at any given point in time. I think Secretary Rusk described this as being the flow through government of the President's interests, which is another way of saying, "He's permitting you today to run your business," or, "He's not permitting you to run your business." But in and of yourself you have almost no power at all. And since the President is also a human being, the more one can do to permit him to deal with concepts, facts, policies, if you like--separated from the man who's espousing them--the better chance there is that he will come up with an answer which is satisfactory to him personally which, after all, is the object of the exercise.

M: He's accused quite a lot of being volatile and of having tantrums when someone crosses him. Did you find this in your particular relationship to happen occasionally, or ever?

H: No, I can't say that I ever did. There were times when I, in meetings, was obliged to give him the results and studies or analyses that we had made which did not conform with his opinion. At these times he obviously challenged me, and we might have an exchange back and forth. But I invariably found that he had a remarkable ability, in my opinion, when he finally realized that the facts were right and had been accurately presented and that his conception was wrong, to simply swallow and accept what you had told him and not refer to it any more--simply go on about his business, having changed his view about what this series of events

either portended or what had happened.

This happened, for example, in connection with the amount of damage that the air bombardment of North Viet Nam was accomplishing. On two or three occasions he felt that we were unduly pessimistic, or--to put it another way around because I don't like the word pessimistic, it doesn't convey anything--that our analyses of what was actually happening were short of the actual facts. But when he finally became convinced that we had the information and he was simply dealing with what he believed to be the case, he never made any problems about it at all.

I found this about him, that when he taxed one with having done something or not having done something and the facts were different, that it behooved one to go right back at him, and go back at him forcefully and without any undue amount of kid-glove work so that he clearly understood your side of the case. President Johnson did not like being opposed, but I think he liked far less any individual for whom he didn't have any regard and whom he didn't think could stand up for his side. So when he attacked, if you had reason to counterattack, one better counterattack right there and then, so that it was clear to him that you heard what he said and that you didn't agree with him, that the facts were different and you were giving them right back to him. On such occasions when this may have occurred, he never held it against me; he listened to what I had to say; he may have shrugged his shoulders; he may not have agreed. But this never got into any personal pique on his part. He never ostracized me; he never said anything to me that indicated that he wanted to avoid me; and I just felt that from this standpoint that one got along much better with him if you were a man and stood up to it and took it as it came, because I think he, like every human being I've ever known, liked to

be agreed with. But I think that he had a very great disdain for people who held other views but still agreed just because they didn't want to cross him.

M: What about an instance like when you first became director, you got into the press with an episode regarding the Fulbright letter in the paper? Did he then respond by calling you up and saying, "Watch out, don't do that any more," or this type of thing?

H: I never discussed the Fulbright letter with him, ever! When the trouble came on the floor of the Senate one afternoon--it was as I recall a Thursday afternoon that Senator McCarthy got up and drew attention to the fact that this letter had been published in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat--quite a ruckus started on the Senate floor. I called various people in the course of the afternoon to get some advice as to how I should deal with the problem. I called Bill Moyers; I called Dean Rusk; I called Nick Katzenbach; I called J. Edgar Hoover--two of them, Katzenbach and Hoover, because I had had indication from Moyers that it would be a good idea to get in touch with them and get their advice. I assumed from the way he put it that he'd talked to the President about it, and this was what the President was suggesting.

M: Katzenbach was still in the Justice department?

H: He was then the Attorney General. But I never spoke to the President about it, and he never spoke to me about it personally. Since this question will obviously arise in your mind I will go onto another episode.

When the problem of the National Student Association arose in February of 1967, I happened to be out in Albuquerque. I was doing something in conjunction with the Atomic Energy Commission, and I got a message from Walt Rostow saying that the President thought that since this thing was

about to break that I ought to be back in Washington. So I returned to Washington within two or three hours. But from that time to this, the President never called me, and I never had any conversation with him about the whole episode. My testimony in the Congress, my dealings with the problem in the context of the Katzenbach-Gardner-Helms committee, and all the rest of it--I never had any conversation with the President about this. A period of three or four weeks must have gone by, and one day he called me on the telephone. I thought, "Well, he's calling up about all this trouble that the agency has had in the last few weeks." When he got me on the phone, he said, "Dick, I need a paper on Viet Nam, and I'll tell you what I want included in it." When he finished telling me what he wanted, he said, "Thank you very much," and hung up.

M: And that was that.

H: So there was no discussion of the student business of the covert funding or anything else--absolutely no discussion at all. He left this entirely to me to deal with. Obviously, in appointing the Katzenbach Committee to deal with the matter, to try and come up with some recommendations etc., that was his action but he did not discuss the action with me. He simply established the group, and we went to work.

M: He didn't give it a specific charge as to what--

H: Well, he gave it a charge, but he gave the charge to Katzenbach, not to me. When we came up with a report and went and discussed it with him, I had a disagreement about one aspect of the report, and I presented to him in writing my disagreement with it. But he never called me back. He had Harry McPherson talk to me about it. I'm not, in this sense, saying that he <u>should</u> have called me back. I don't think necessarily that he should have. I simply had the feeling when the episode was all over that he

wanted me, and obviously I had his backing--otherwise he would have said something about it--but he wanted me to make my own way and establish my own foundation under me, and to get through this thing as best I could because that was going to be much better for me and for him in the end than if he told me how to run it.

M: Do you think that perhaps he might have taken this too far sometimes and perhaps there was a problem of accessibility ever?

H: No, I can't say there was ever a problem of accessibility. If I had wanted to talk to him, I'm sure he would have talked to me, but I did not ask to talk to him.

M: Were there any long-run results of that that hampered the agency's operation from those disclosures?

H: Certainly, in closing down some of these operations and changing the financing of others and so forth, that made problems for the agency. They may have stopped some activities which were desirable activities. But the agency was fortunate, lived through this thing without any trouble, and I think as of 1969 one hears very little conversation about the problem any more at all. I think that it simply has passed over. I have to say, in connection with the way the President dealt with this, that in retrospect I think it was the right way because I never had any conversation with him about how he dealt with human beings, or why he did one thing in one case and another thing in another. But I had the distinct impression that he, having been in Washington as many years as he had been here, had learned that either a man can make his way by himself with proper kind of support in the background, or he can't, and that one had better find that out fairly soon.

M: You mentioned the second of your jobs as Chairman of the National

Intelligence Board. Is that an adequate means of coordinating the intelligence community to avoid interagency competition and strife that is typical of some of the domestic agencies, for example?

H: This is such a complicated problem that I don't think that it would be terribly useful to include it in this interview. My reason for saying this is this: the intelligence community is made up of a variety of agencies. Several of them are under control of the Secretary of Defense; others, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which has its internal security arm which in effect does intelligence work; the Atomic Energy Commission, which has an intelligence side to it; the State department, which has its intelligence entity. The relationship among all of these is quite manageable in the current context. The work can be coordinated. It's a collaborative effort these days. During the period that I've been Director I can simply say that this has been a harmonious relationship, and I'm not in any sense making a self-serving statement here. After all, I inherited the work of a great many individuals. But at this period in history that aspect of government is working rather smoothly.

But when you ask me, "Is this coordinating authority enough to run the intelligence community?" I have to answer that it's far more complicated than that. I don't run it all that well. As I pointed out originally, I don't have any command authority. There are other ways that one might organize this which might make it run, if not more effectively, perhaps more cheaply. I don't know. But these are ongoing problems that are going to be with us for some years, and I don't think they really have any part in the historical record.

M: I suppose what I'm really meaning there is in regard to the Johnson Administration. Did it frequently occur that different members of the intelligence community made estimates that were considerably at variant?

You mentioned, for example, your estimates regarding the effectiveness of the bombing sometimes being different and--

H: Well, most of those estimates that were made then were made jointly between the agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, and therefore they were joint estimates. I know it was played up in the newspapers, that there were differences between the Pentagon and the agency, and so forth, on these matters. These differences were minimal. From time to time there were differences on certain intelligence matters between the military command in Saigon and the agency. But I think that one can play those up to a point where they not only will become exaggerated, but they would give a false impression of what was influencing the President. Those differences, such as they were, were not permitted by me to loom large in the President's mind, because when these questions came up I told him what the disagreements were and what the possibilities for error were, what the dimensions of the problem were, so that if he wanted to, he could take the worst case any time. So I think this had no influence on his making of policy.

M: That's well to establish--even a negative answer in that sense for the purposes here.

H: That's right.

M: That's what we're trying to do. In the same line, the problem of congressional control? Did Mr. Johnson get involved when Senator Fulbright was making the attempt to broaden or add to the watchdog committees of the Congress?

H: If President Johnson was involved, I am not aware of it. He never said anything to me about the controversy. If he said anything to anyone, it must have been one of the senators. But this never came back to me and

I have absolutely no information on this at all. All I know is what I saw in the public record, and that was that Senator Russell and Senator Fulbright closed the doors of the Senate, had a debate one day, voted, and the resolution--or whatever the proper terminology is that Senator Fulbright or one of the other senators had introduced--was defeated. But then immediately thereafter, Senator Russell invited the three members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to sit with the CIA Select Committee, as he calls it, under his chairmanship. These individuals were the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Fulbright; the number two man on the Foreign Relations Committee, which in those days was Senator Hickenlooper--in other words, the senior Democrat and the senior Republican--and then Senator Mansfield as the Majority Leader. He's also on foreign relations, as you know. Those three were invited to sit in the meetings of the CIA Select Committee, and they did from that time on.

M: And that has been a continuing practice?

H: That has been a continuing practice. Each time they're invited to come to the meeting.

M: So you were never called upon to take a position yourself, even on the Hill?

H: I was not only not called upon, but I have been scrupulous in avoiding taking any position any time I've been asked this question--whether by a newspaperman or by a senator or congressman or anyone else. I have "It is the Senate's business to organize itself as it sees fit, and I will report to any committee which is duly constituted and which I'm told to report to."

M: Does the control mechanism allow proper executive understanding of what

the agency is doing? For example, the committee that authorized the NSA things is what comes to mind here--the Undersecretary of State, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, and yourself, which ten or fifteen years ago instituted the policy. How is the information about those policies broadcast into the proper executive channels over time?

H: What you're referring to, I think, is what at one time was known as the Special Group. Then when that term appeared in a book--I think it was The Invisible Government--the name of the committee was changed to the 303 Committee. That name simply derived from the fact that McGeorge Bundy issued a NSAM which established this committee "de novo," and the number of the NSAM was 303, so it became known as the 303 Committee. And that was composed of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs as the chairman; the Deputy Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs as the Secretary of State's representative; the Deputy Secretary of Defense; and the Director of Central Intelligence. And it was indeed that committee which has the responsibility for passing on or approving not only the covert action operations of this agency, but starting in 1961 in the early days of the Kennedy Administration, it also took on the responsibility for approving reconnaissance activities, whether by the Navy or the Air Force or whoever might be conducting them. In that context, it was that committee which would have passed on the Pueblo mission.

M: But are there techniques for--like Mr. Johnson comes into power suddenly--he can be apprised of past authorizations by that group? Is there a means of doing this so that he knows what was authorized in 1958 or '59 and has been ongoing, doesn't get surprised by something like the NSA disclosures?

H: I see what you mean. In an imperfect world it is always possible that

something has been approved that someone omits or overlooks to report to a new President. In the case of the NSA business, Mr. Johnson was forewarned that this was coming over the horizon well before it did because we had indications that this was going to create a problem. He was briefed about it, and he was informed about it. So he was indeed ready for the trouble when it began.

M: That was the point I was driving at, perhaps not very clearly.

H: But in retrospect, after the initial shock and publicity in the newspapers and so on, the thing that quieted that storm down, particularly in the Congress, and which in my opinion caused it to blow out to sea, was when Senator Russell made a public statement that he had known about these things and that he'd seen nothing wrong with it and that it seemed to him that there was a great deal of fuss and fury about something that was useful, and so on. Then a few days later Senator Kennedy, who was up on Long Island, I think, on this particular occasion--

M: This was Robert Kennedy?

H: Robert Kennedy. He, having been Attorney General for a time, and therefore had known about the deliberations of this 303 Committee, had known about our relationships with student organizations--youth organizations--and certainly others, made in effect a statement that he had known about these things, and that they had gone on since the early days of the Eisenhower Administration, and that they'd been approved by each President as he had come to office. When both of these individuals, the elderly Russell and the young Kennedy, had both come out with this--after all, they knew about these things--it immediately stopped the congressional attacks. I mean, within a matter of hours almost, one ceased to hear anything about it.

M: What about the Rusk Committee? Were you a member of that?

H: No, I was not. It was explicitly arranged that when the Rusk Committee was established as a result of the Katzenbach Committee's recommendation, that none of the members of the Katzenbach Committee would be members of the Rusk Committee. So I never sat in any of those meetings, nor did I have anything to do with their deliberations.

M: How frequently did you attend the Tuesday lunch sessions during the time you were Director?

H: Whenever I was invited.

M: How often were you invited then?

H: I have the impression, and I can only give this as an impression because--well, I will come to that because there's a point I want to make about the whole Tuesday lunch operation--it was my impression that starting in the summer of 1967 that I was at the Tuesday lunch when there was a Tuesday lunch or the corresponding equivalent. In other words, at that point I started to be invited. Admiral Raborn, I think, went only once or twice, so that the man in this job became a regular attendee at these meetings, starting about in the summer of 1967.

Since we're on the subject of the Tuesday lunch, let me give you my impression of this. And in giving you my impression, I am literally talking from my personal point of view, and I'm not being influenced by what I've read in various documents or magazine stories or books and elsewhere. I'm simply talking about what I observed and what I drew from those observations. However the Tuesday luncheons may have gotten started, as time went on I had the impression that President Johnson liked this as a mechanism for dealing with national security affairs which encompassed foreign affairs and military affairs because he was able, by inviting individuals to lunch, to limit attendance in the way that he

wanted to limit it. To put this in another way, the National Security Council by statute has certain members. They are stated in the law--the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, the Director of the Office of Emergency Planning--it's now Preparedness, but in those days it was Emergency Planning. In addition, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of Central Intelligence regulary attended as advisers in their respective capacities. Through the years other individuals have been invited, and if you want to put it this way, got used to attending. In the Johnson Administration the Secretary of Treasury was usually invited; the Director of the United States Information Agency was usually invited.

Now, a man with President Johnson's preoccupations, not only with security, but with leaks--in other words he liked to be able to discuss a matter with a group of his advisers in whom he had confidence and trust,(a), that they would not leak stories about it; but(b), and I think even more important, that they were not interested in using anything they heard there for selfish purposes--in other words, purposes that would in any way do him harm. I'm sorry. I believe that that's a slightly awkward way to state it, but I think it's an accurate way to state it.

In any event, if he invited individuals to come to lunch with him, this was something to which no one could possibly object because they couldn't, at that point, say, "Well, I've got a right to be there. The law says. . ." So he didn't call it the National Security Council, but what he had there invariably was that part of the National Security Council which he wanted and which had something to contribute to his deliberations--because the normal attendees were the Secretary of State, Mr. Rusk; Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara, then Mr. Clifford; the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who during all this period was General Wheeler; Walt Rostow was his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs; George Christian as his press secretary; Tom Johnson, the assistant press secretary. But Tom Johnson was really there to make the notes.

M: I was going to say, did Mr. Johnson keep, so far as you know, fairly complete--

H: Yes, he did. Let me come back to that. The other person was myself. So that this, interestingly enough, was human beings that were invited there. It was not people with certain jobs. If, on occasion, Secretary Rusk was away, Katzenbach might attend; and if General Wheeler was away, maybe General McConnell would attend, or General Johnson, depending on who was senior in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But frequently I noticed the meetings would be cancelled if one or the other principal participants were not in town because the President didn't want to just have a meeting, he wanted to have certain human beings there. So the regular people were the ones I've enumerated--the President, Rusk, McNamara or Clifford, Wheeler, Rostow, Christian, Tom Johnson, and Helms.

Now I didn't during this period attempt ever to send anybody else or suggest that Admiral Taylor, who was my deputy, be invited because I stayed in town during the period that I've been Director simply because I had the distinct impression that this is where I could do my job best. When President Johnson reached for his intelligence officer, he was reaching for me. He was not, I don't think, ever particularly good at dealing with people he didn't know. He didn't like to for some reason. I think he felt uncomfortable. I don't know whether he felt uncomfortable, but anyway he didn't know that fellow and he didn't know what he stood

for. Therefore he didn't know whether he could say certain things or wanted to say certain things.

M: That's consistent with why you say he liked the Tuesday lunch. He knew the people.

H: Yes. So that I just stayed in town and did not travel during these years because I felt I could serve him best that way.

During all the time that I attended the Tuesday lunches, the detailed notes were kept by Tom Johnson, and that's why he was there. He, in fact, had a secretarial pad, and the minute he sat down at the table he started to write. I know from what he told me that he had those notes typed up and that there is a detailed file somewhere in the Johnson Library of the minutes and remarks and general conversational topics of all of those Tuesday lunches that I attended. What went on before this I don't know.

Now you get down to the question of the decision-making at these lunches, or at the National Security Council or the Cabinet or wherever the case might be. One of the things that impressed me, starting in this summer of 1967 and going through to the end of the Johnson Administration, was that I had not understood really the way government operates before. But it did dawn on me during this period--I'm not using a self-denigrating phrase, I mean it did take a little time for this to sink in, if I may put it that way--that a President of the United States does not make his important decisions in an orderly way or the way the political scientists say they should be done or the way the organization experts would like to see them done or, in fact, the way 99 percent of the American people understand that they are done. This is a highly personal affair. A President may sit at the Tuesday lunch and a matter may be posed and he

may reply and say, "We'll do this," and he has made a decision.

President Johnson might listen to a debate at the table over perhaps the bombing of some target in Viet Nam and then not make any decision at all. He would get up from the table and then at some point he would make a decision. But I never knew whether the debate that went on at the lunch decided him in his mind as to what he was going to do, or whether he had talked to six other people on the telephone in the course of the next two or three days, or had consulted Mrs. Johnson, or talked six more times to the Secretary of Defense, or read two or three intelligence papers, or what were the final sum of ingredients that went into the decision. All one knew was that when something had happened, he had made up his mind that this is what was going to happen.

This is the thing that is simply not understood about the presidency, in my opinion, and that is that this man is in the constant process of deciding things, but that no man likes to be forced into a straitjacket as to where he has got to decide something. And President Kennedy, whom I worked with, and President Johnson just refused to be buckled into this. Therefore you never knew when you went to lunch whether any decision was going to be made, or seven decisions were going to be made, or twelve decisions were going to be made. The Secretary of State would raise a matter--I've heard President Johnson say, "Well, what do you want to do?" I want to do this." "Well, let's think about it." I assume that at some point he finally decided the matter, but it was certainly not decided at that luncheon. On other occasions a question is raised; a little discussion has been held; he says, "All right, fine, let's do it."

M: That is a clear decision.

H: That's a clear decision. I've seen situations in which the Secretary of

State and the Secretary of Defense disagreed. When he'd heard enough of it he would say, "Now, look, you fellows go off and talk about that and see if you can't get this agreed and come back to me and tell me what you want to do." It was very clear over the years that President Johnson did not like to make decisions when he had to decide between one or the other of his Cabinet officers. He wanted them to agree and give the decision to him, which was jointly endorsed, and then he would make up his mind whether he wanted to follow it or not. But he did not like to choose up sides, and he did not like to cut the Gordian knot when there was a disagreement. He invariably sent the subject back for further examination, further study, or further discussion away from him!

M: Did the Tuesday lunch, being so personalized, perhaps encourage--not Mr. Johnson, but the participants who were there regularly--to perhaps disagree less with one another than they might have?

H: No, I think it encouraged frank talk. It encouraged saying what was on one's mind. One could afford there to disagree without being impolite or indicating to the world that there was this disagreement. That was encouraged. Everyone was encouraged to say what was on their mind, and I think within reasonable and human limits they did. I would think that this one of the reasons that he liked the discussions there, because he was keenly aware that the people were very careful what they said in his presence or in the presence of each other because this gets out in the newspapers and there's trouble. It's impolite and there is the sense that maybe one is being rude and so on. It was made very clear by him that he didn't want people to hold back for any reasons of that kind. When he saw that there was a disagreement, he just didn't want to decide the disagreement. He didn't like to do it that way. He liked a consensus.

He always liked a consensus, and he liked his Cabinet officers to agree about these things.

M: There was a question later about what had been decided, and the way you describe it that would not be a problem, it would seem.

H: There has been a contention in the government that these Tuesday lunches were bad because the working level in the government--the assistant secretaries of State and so on--really didn't know what was decided; how much was discussed; what was decided; what was said. So therefore they felt that they were not able to do their jobs properly, and they were very critical of these lunches. Well, I know why they were critical, because the principals involved--and I'm not being critical here, I'm simply citing what I know to be a fact--were such busy men that when they got back to their departments they didn't adequately report to their subordinates what had happened.

I remember that Walt Rostow used to go downstairs and call up Ben Read in the State department and give him his rundown of what had gone on at the meeting. But that is not the same thing as hearing directly from the Secretary of State, if you're the Assistant Secretary, exactly what the Secretary says that the President wants you to do. They're two quite different things. This is influence, innuendo, and so on. I think that, particularly the State department, where these things tend to be slightly more complicated and more ephemeral, had difficulty with Dean Rusk on this score because he was so busy dashing from one meeting to another that I don't think he really adequately reported what had gone on. It was for this reason rather than the fact that I was sitting there and knew what had gone on, I knew what had been decided. I didn't have any trouble with this. So I think that was unfortunate in the sense that

the flowback from the meeting was inadequate. It wasn't because there was any lack of clarity. And when there was a lack of clarity, you knew why there was a lack of clarity.

M: This could give rise to their beliefs sometimes that the White House NSC staff, the Rostow shop, was giving the orders too sometimes.

H: That's right. I think that was indeed true.

M: You indicated that was not a problem with your agency.

H: I never had any problems as far as the agency was concerned because, after all, I was sitting there, and I have a very different situation in this agency than most people have. In the first place, there weren't all that number of matters that came up that were of direct interest to the agency. But even when there were, this agency was constructed originally on a kind of vertical arrangement so that the whole agency is geared to have very direct and quick communications with the Director and back and forth. So I have no trouble in communicating with my organization. But I'm lucky in that respect--fortunate, rather.

M: So you didn't have the general relations with the White House NSC staff then that some of the other agencies had where orders were relayed frequently, and sometimes to lower echelons and this type of thing?

H: They called me.

M: Some of the charges, particularly by some of Mr. Johnson's critics, have been that his staff constantly sought only the best face of things, only the--I don't want to use optimistic since you said you don't like pessimistic, but for want of a better word--only the optimistic side of the intelligence picture.

H: I've heard the criticism, but I never made it. And I never paid any attention to it. I had an arrangement with Walt Rostow that if I put the

President's name on a publication and sent it down to him that he would send it to the President without any question, that he would exercise no veto of any kind, which was all I wanted--to be sure that something that I wanted to get to the President went to the President. A lot of other stuff went.

M: But you are confident--

H: But I'm confident of that, and I could see later that the President had indeed seen these things. So whatever Rostow may have done to help the President to reinforce his impressions with facts, figures, statistics and so forth, they weren't necessarily mine, and mine were not kept from the President. And I didn't care who was giving him a rosy picture. I gave him what I thought were the facts and what this agency thought were the facts. And there was no problem about this. The newspapers tried to make a problem out of it, but I am convinced there was none. I've never seen any decision that President Johnson made that he made because he had the wrong facts or the wrong set of facts. Maybe he did interpret things overly optimistically. But I used to notice that before he made the major decisions he spent hours going over the facts and getting opinions and impressions and talking with all kinds of people that you never heard of--and finally, in some strange way, coming to his decision. But anybody who says that they were battling for the mind of the President and finally won as a human being, I've always thought was talking the worst kind of twaddle, because President Johnson had a complicated mind, an enormously intelligent mind, a great capacity to grasp facts. And when he had an important decision to make, he talked to scores and scores of people, I know. And he went over and over and over the facts again until you were exhausted!

M: And he did master the details?

H: He mastered the details down to the last riffle, no question about this. So if there's any conclusion that could come out of this part of our discussion, it is simply that whether you agree or disagree with the decision that President Johnson made on an important matter, you could rely on the fact that he had exhausted all the existing sources, information, and so forth, and that the decision was made because that was where he came out, not because he did it quickly, that he squirted, that he was unconscientious, that he didn't pay attention, that he didn't talk to the right people--he exhausted the subject. I've never seen such a careful man.

M: The other side of that coin is the charge that's also made occasionally, that the agency and other members of the intelligence community were more or less given the conclusions that the staff or somebody in the White House wanted and told to go produce the intelligence to support it.

H: Absolute nonsense! I was never given any conclusions about anything--never! I would have been so offended if anybody had done that that I would have told them what they could do with it. Because there was nothing about the relationship between President Johnson and me as his Director of Central Intelligence that had loaded into it anything except the fact that I was here to do this job. He never intimated to me by word, gesture, or deed that he wanted me to knuckle under; that he wanted to get involved in policy, as I said earlier; that he wanted me to be his prat boy; that he wanted me to do any of those things. He wanted me to stand my ground and give him the best facts I had, and he made that clear. And I had carte blanche on this. There was no problem about that. Nobody would have told me what to do, and never did.

M: That's well to get on the record too in the light of some of the claims

that have been made.

H: Never did!

M: The final thing I have down here that I think you're mentioned in connection with, in public print anyway, is the events leading up to the March 31st decision to institute a partial bombing halt. You're mentioned as one of the participants in those meetings. Can you shed any light on the circumstances that did lead to that? Were there new intelligence estimates that played a major role, for example?

H: I talked to Walt Rostow not long ago on the telephone and told him that I had seen all of these articles; that I had been importuned by various newspapermen to contribute to them; and that I had not done so, and that I had not permitted anybody in the agency to do so, principally because I don't believe in instant history, but also because I really don't know what led President Johnson to come to the conclusion that he came to. It seems to me that this is the case that we've been talking about, or that I've been talking about just a few moments ago; that this man went through weeks of work on this problem. What it was in the end that decided him to go in this direction rather than that direction, I don't know. And until he comes out with his own explanation of this I wouldn't accept anybody's because I don't think that there's anybody that knows. I assume that these articles are generated by certain individuals who wanted to get their side of the story on the record and out in the public domain for whatever self-serving purpose this might have. But I could not accept these as being the truth.

When I say to you that I don't know what went into President Johnson's major considerations, I say this because I believe there were many people who influenced his decisions while he was in the White House that did not

sit in the Cabinet, that did not sit in the National Security Council, that did not attend the Tuesday lunch. There were people whom he trusted, whose advice he valued, and all of this was weighed in the scales. And that this--I come back to it because I think it's the most important point of all--that a President certainly has to have some kind of mechanics or machinery to organize his government, to bring the various and appropriate people to bear on a given problem. But in the end he decides it himself. And I don't think very many people ever know just exactly what decided him to do it.

Now, there may be one President who depended on his Secretary of State to a very great extent. There may be another President who didn't. I don't know. All I'm talking about is President Johnson. And that is, that I had the distinct impression that he was extremely careful not to allow any particular individual, outside of his family, to have undue influence on his decisions, and that he did not look to anybody as his prime adviser; that he heard this from all the proper people; gave due weight when it was the Secretary of State, due weight when it was the Secretary of Defense, due weight when it was intelligence to his Director of Central Intelligence, but that what made him decide to finally do it only he knew.

M: All of these accounts do sort of put the political scientist's simplicity of organized decision-making on the thing--

H: They do indeed. And there just isn't any question about it. Let me give you--while we're talking about this decision-making thing--another example of a decision that I saw made that is the kind of decision that one seldom thinks about but does occur. On the Saturday morning at the end of the Six Day War in June 1967, Kosygin came on the hot line. I don't have

precise recollection of the entire message, but the message that came along was to the general effect that unless the United States made its influence with Israel felt and weighed in to stop this war, to bring about a cease fire, that the Soviet Union was going to have to take whatever actions it had within its capacities, including military actions.

Well, it was a rather somber group that was sitting down in the Situation Room of the White House. The President was eating his breakfast, and McNamara was there. Clifford had been brought in as an adviser on this crisis. McGeorge Bundy was there. Katzenbach was there for awhile. Dean Rusk was out of town. Ambassador Thompson, who was our ambassador to the Soviet Union who happened to be back in Washington, was there. Let me change that. I am not sure whether Ambassador Thompson at that point was ambassador to the Soviet Union yet or not. But if he was not, he at least was ambassador-at-large in the State department working on Soviet affairs.

In any event, a message was sent back and the morning wore along and everybody was speaking in a very low tone of voice, and the Russian text was examined very carefully to be sure that the Soviets did say that they intended to take any actions within their capacity, including military--and sure enough, the word was military when translated by Thompson and everybody else. After this had been going on for an hour or so, the President finished his breakfast and excused himself for some reason; went out of the room. While he was out of the room, McNamara--Katzenbach had gone off to the State department to see the Israeli ambassador--McNamara turned to Thompson and said--and everybody was speaking in a low voice--"Don't you think it might be useful if the Sixth Fleet which is simply orbiting around Sicily (You know, they go so many miles in this direction; so many miles

in that; I mean that's the way they cruised in those days), that in light of this Russian threat and so forth, that we sort of make it clear to them that we don't intend to take this and take it lying down. Wouldn't it be a good idea to simply turn the Sixth Fleet and head those two aircraft carriers and their accompanying ships to the Eastern Mediterranean!"

Thompson said, yes, as a matter of fact he thought that would probably be a very desirable thing under the circumstances.

I said, "Well, the Soviets will get the message right away because they've got some fleet units in the Mediterranean and they're sure watching that Sixth Fleet like a hawk with their various electronic devices and others. Once they line up and start to go in that direction, the message is going to get back to Moscow in a hurry."

Both Thompson and McNamara certainly agreed with that. So when the President came back in the room, McNamara said, "We've been talking about this and we'd like to recommend that we head the fleet toward the Eastern Mediterranean."

The President smiled and said, "That's a good idea."

So McNamara went to the telephone and the fleet got headed for the Eastern Mediterranean.

M: A momentous decision made in thirty seconds--

H: A momentous decision made in a very short space of time, so that the might of the United States was headed in a very assertive direction.

I mean there was a decision that was made literally from one minute to the next. There were no papers; there was no direct organization; there was no estimate; there was no contingency plan; there was nothing!

M: That would drive a political scientist crazy.

H: But I think this is interesting.

M: Yes, it is. That, as you noticed, has exhausted the list I had here. I don't want to cut you off by any matter or means, if there are areas of--

H: As a matter of fact, I really think that I've covered everything I had down here except for perhaps a little bit more on the Middle East war, and the only reason I put the June 1967 war--the only reason I had this down here and I adverted to it earlier was that we made a estimate about the capacity of the Israelis to withstand a combined attack of the Arabs if war were to break out. This was about ten days before the war finally did break out. It was quite clear that this estimate was at variance with what the State department thought. At that time it was clear that the Israelis were attempting to get from President Johnson some kind of a public statement of identification with their cause. He obviously didn't want to give this if he didn't have to. Our intelligence estimates, of which we wrote several in this period of time under his aegis--"Are you sure about that? Have you really studied it?" So these estimates were quite firm on this point. In fact, we predicted almost within the day of how long the war would last if it began.

M: Your estimates were the accurate ones.

H: And these turned out to be absolutely accurate. I think the President was sufficiently impressed with what intelligence could do for him in a situation of this kind that from that time on he paid more attention to it.

M: This was what you meant by saying that he learned in June of '67?

H: That's right.

M: I see. If there's anything else that you'd like to get on the record, now is the time to do it. I certainly appreciate the hour-plus that you've allowed me in the middle of a busy afternoon.

H: I really don't have anything to get on the record. I think I've got all

of the main points I wanted to make. I would simply conclude, I think, by saying that from my standpoint President Johnson was a fine man to work for. He was a man of his word. He was a man of great understanding; and I must say that I felt rather keenly that he has been very unfairly criticized in his behavior as a human being. I found him a man of great understanding of human problems. I had one of my own. He couldn't have been nicer about it. He couldn't have been more decent about it. And I have the greatest respect for him as a human being.

M: One more thing. You're in a position where you might be able to add a little bit more on this. What about Mrs. Johnson? Were you in a position where you saw the influence of Mrs. Johnson frequently?

H: I did not, no. What I'd like to say about Mrs. Johnson is that I did come to know her, and I have the greatest regard for her. As a matter of fact, I'm in the vanguard of her admirers not only as a lady, but as a First Lady, and last but not least, as a really extraordinary human being.

M: I think you're in a unanimous decision on that, as a matter of fact.

[ End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Richard Helms

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Richard Helms, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of the instrument available for research in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. At the same time, it is his wish to guard against the possibility of its contents being used to embarrass, damage, injure, or harass anyone. Therefore, in pursuance of this objective, and in accordance with the provisions of Sec. 507 (f) (3) of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) this material shall not, for a period of five years, be available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorization to examine it.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed [signature]

Date July 11, 1974.

Accepted [signature]
Director, Lyndon
Baines Johnson Library
for Archivist of the
United States

Date July 19, 1974