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James Schlesinger Interview Transcription

10 December 2007

Timothy Naftali

Hi, I'm Tim Naftali. I'm director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. It's December 10, 2007. We're in Northern Virginia, and I have the honor and privilege to be interviewing Dr. James Schlesinger for the Richard Nixon Oral History Program. Dr. Schlesinger, thank you really a lot for participating. Thank you so much.

James Schlesinger

My pleasure.

Timothy Naftali

Did you know Henry Kissinger at Harvard in the '50s?

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James Schlesinger

Only very distantly, I believe I met him once. And I got him to know him somewhat better because he was either a consultant or a visitor at the RAND Corporation when I was at RAND.

Timothy Naftali

When you were at RAND, it was after the Cuban Missile Crisis. What did the strategic environment look like with the Soviet Union in the 1960s? What were the issues for you?

James Schlesinger

The -- ultimately at RAND, I became the director of strategic studies, and my principal concern was that development by the Soviet Union of a counter-deterrent that could attack American cities might lead, in particular, our European allies, to think that we would be unable to provide the nuclear umbrella over Europe. That, of course, had been encouraged by President de Gaulle, who kept inquiring whether the Americans were prepared to trade on New York for Hamburg. And, as the Soviets built that counter-deterrent, which really came a lot later than the Cuban Missile Crisis, we needed to change our strategic doctrine. And in particular, what we announced to the world was our strategic doctrine. I should add that the Soviet move into Cuba was a reflection of the fact that they did not, at that time, have a Soviet Union-based nuclear deterrent against the United States. That was 1962. And indeed, it was the Cuban Missile Crisis that persuaded, one, the Politburo to get rid of Khrushchev, and two, to bring in Brezhnev, who was determined to develop a real Soviet counter-deterrent based on ICBMs in the Soviet Union. That took a long time. Indeed, it took as much as a decade before they began to deploy ICBMs that could match the American ICBMs.

Timothy Naftali

You worked on -- in a sense, you were elaborating the flexible response that, I guess, Maxwell Taylor and Robert McNamara worked on. What kinds of changes were you trying to make to that concept?

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James Schlesinger

Well, the flexible response had two components. One is that we had to have a solid, conventional deterrent on the ground in Europe to preclude any ambitions on the part of the Soviet Union with its Warsaw Pact allies to move against Western Europe, either northern Norway or the north German plain as the case might be. And, of course, during the years that we were in Vietnam, our own contribution to a solid conventional deterrent in Europe had eroded, and the forces in the U.S. Seventh Army were sadly depleted, and our European allies had taken notice of this. In fact, by the time we were in the depths of the Vietnam War, they had acquired considerable contempt for the capacity of the Seventh Army. And so, as we came out of Vietnam, I felt that my principal task must be to rebuild that conventional deterrent. Our allies were fearful, and particularly our German allies, were convinced, in fact, that we would gradually draw down our forces in Europe. In my first contact with the German Minister of Defense and the German Ambassador here, they asked me how quickly we were going to draw down our forces. I said, "Draw down our forces? I intend to rebuild our forces in Germany so that we have a solid conventional deterrent."

Timothy Naftali

This was once you had become secretary of defense?

James Schlesinger

Once I'd become secretary of defense, yes.

Timothy Naftali

Let me ask you about counterforce strategy. In his --

James Schlesinger

That's the other aspect.

Timothy Naftali

Okay.

James Schlesinger

That is the other aspect. If we were to execute the SIOP, the Single Integrated Operational Plan of the Strategic Air Command, we would have wound up bringing, as the Soviet Union developed its missile forces, an attack on U.S. cities, and we did not want to do that. So, the notion was that, behind our changed strategic doctrine, that we would avoid attacking any Soviet cities and give the Soviet leadership a powerful incentive to not attack American cities. Alternatively, we would go after military targets. We might go after those military targets selectively, but the important thing was to convey to the Soviet leadership and, above all, convey to our European allies that the strategic forces of the United States were indeed linked to the protection and deterrence of attacks on Europe.

Timothy Naftali

How much of this was designed to provide political reassurance and how much of this was actually a warfighting doctrine?

James Schlesinger

It was both designed to provide political assurance and to design how we would respond in the event that we were called on to use nuclear forces. Recall that a principal objective, as the Soviets built their counter-deterrent, was for us to build a stalwart conventional capability that would deter Soviet attacks. The precise notion here is that the Soviet Union, believing that it had conventional superiority, might think that a quick thrust into Western Europe, which would bring the collapse of -- a quick conventional thrust might bring the collapse of the Western alliance. And indeed the allies tended to think that a quick conventional thrust was going to bring the end of Western Europe as we had known it.

Timothy Naftali

To what extent was our threat perception of the time shaped by events in Czechoslovakia?

James Schlesinger

I beg your pardon?

Timothy Naftali

To what extent was this threat of the Soviet Union shaped by events in Czechoslovakia in 1968?

James Schlesinger

The events in Czechoslovakia were encouraging, and, I think, even encouraging to our skeptical, unhappy European allies, who always said, "If they attack conventionally, there is nothing we can do but respond in a nuclear way." What we saw in Czechoslovakia was that the Soviet Union was really not that good at conventional attack, that the Soviet Union took a long time to put its forces into place and that it moved very slowly against the rebellious Czechoslovakia. The consequence was that, if they could not deal effectively and immediately with Czechoslovakia, the notion of a sudden movement westward against Germany would seem to be even more difficult for them to accomplish. And, therefore, it encouraged to some extent all of us with regard to that conventional deterrent. However, the notion of a solid conventional deterrent was well established as a doctrine in the RAND Corporation, even in the days that the alliance was based upon the threat of immediate nuclear retaliation.

Timothy Naftali

I see. To what extent do you think Vietnam was what made us concerned about our ability to deter the Soviets in Europe, the fact that we had drawn down -- let alone what the allies thought, but that we ourselves felt vulnerable in Europe because of our commitment to Vietnam in the late '60s?

James Schlesinger

I think that the fact of Vietnam was less relevant than one might think with regard to Europe. It was important politically back here in the United States, in that a large and articulate section of the American public was looking for an alternative to our deployments in Europe. And that was behind the Mansfield Amendment and all the pressures to draw down our forces. Politically, Vietnam was a severe blow, but in terms of military strategy, it was much less severe, in that we -- if the Soviets moved and attacked American forces, in particular, there was nothing that we could do but to respond. Vietnam had dragged on for seven, eight, 10 years from the time that we initially went in, and the reality was that the American public got weary of that war. But in the event of a sudden attack in Western Europe, we were there. There was nothing that we could do but to respond.

Timothy Naftali

Let's shift to 1968. And you meet Richard Nixon in 1968?

James Schlesinger

No.

Timothy Naftali

When do you meet?

James Schlesinger

When we went to Mission Bay, and I was down there for a day or maybe overnight, the candidate, as we all referred to him, was in a remote location, very few people had access to him. That was part of the Nixon style. He tended to enjoy the notion that he was remote and not accessible to large numbers of people, and it was particularly noticeable at that time. Other political candidates tend to be much more gregarious. Mr. Nixon's strength was not his being gregarious.

Timothy Naftali

So, what -- then you'd provided some assistance to the campaign?

James Schlesinger

Yes, amongst other things, I wrote a paper advocating a speech for Mr. Nixon, supporting the nonproliferation treaty, which was then being negotiated. It would be very much in our interests for there not to be the spread of nuclear weapons to other countries. Mr. Nixon, in the early years of his administration, was not particularly strong on nonproliferation, partly because of his sympathy for Charles de Gaulle, who, after the defeat of Mr. Nixon in California in '62, was one of the few world leaders who treated him exceptionally well.

Timothy Naftali

[REDACTED]

James Schlesinger per sec 1.4(d)

[REDACTED]

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Timothy Naftali

How is it that you come --

James Schlesinger

Henry Kissinger, by the way, had, as far back as the 1950s, had expressed support for limited nuclear warfare in his 1957 work for the Council on Foreign Relations. And he, too, had to be brought about to be convinced that a nonproliferation policy for the United States was essential.

Timothy Naftali

So he thought it was in our interest to allow our allies to have nuclear weapons?

James Schlesinger

Basically, yes. At least the French. Now, you must remember that the efforts of the Kennedy administration to head off the French were, in some ways, ludicrous, in that we kept saying, we the United States, or we the American government, kept saying that the French really didn't have the technical or fiscal capacity to build a nuclear deterrent. This did not discourage Charles de Gaulle; it simply provided an incentive for him, given his nature.

Timothy Naftali

Yeah, but once they tested in North Africa, it was all over. We knew that they had it.

James Schlesinger

The previous government had, of course, developed reactors and had moved slightly in the direction, in a token way, towards a nuclear deterrent. It was Charles de Gaulle coming into power that led to the construction of the gaseous diffusion plant at Pierrelatte, which was the basis of major production of fissile material and an essential step toward the creation of the Force de Frappe.

Timothy Naftali

Was there any -- do you remember Henry Kissinger or President Nixon believing that the West Germans should have nuclear weapons?

James Schlesinger

Oh, certainly not. Happily, the West Germans were foreclosed from developing nuclear weapons by the Treaty of West European Union in the first place. I think that they regarded that as a desirable restraint on Germany. And, of course, Germany was the only other nation in the NATO alliance, other than the British and French, who had gotten there, who were likely -- who had the capacity, the immediate capacity to move towards nuclear weapons.

Timothy Naftali

And by the late '60s, we knew there was nothing we could do about Chinese nuclear development. That --

James Schlesinger

I think that we understood that, but there were those who did not embrace the thought. It was only the Chinese nation in 1964 that convinced us that they were well on the way. And we were -- in this respect, I think, that we and the Russians shared the view that the Chinese move in this direction was less than desirable.

Timothy Naftali

Yes, how is it that you come to join the Bureau of the Budget?

James Schlesinger

Let me see, how did I come to join the Bureau of the Budget? I was -- I had been out there at the RAND Corporation. I had the pleasure of developing doctrines which, incidentally, I was -- when I became secretary of defense -- I was in the position to implement. And I mentioned the stalwart conventional capability in Europe and the shift in our nuclear doctrine. But I was invited by Mr. Mayo to come be his right arm, as it were, on national security policy and to deal with the Department of Defense and other national security agencies. And I had been at RAND, the work was advisory. I was -- if I moved into the government, I was in a position actually to move forward with some of those things that I had thought about but was not in a position to implement.

Timothy Naftali

Tell us a little bit about Mr. Mayo.

James Schlesinger

Mayo?

Timothy Naftali

Yeah.

James Schlesinger

Mr. Mayo was a marvelous boss. He was courageous. He ultimately ran into trouble and was -- ran into some trouble in terms of retaining support of the administration, partly because of a combination of courage and outspokenness and partly because he had a sense of reality. In 1971, he -- Arthur Burns said that the 1971 budget was not tough enough and that the deficit was too large, and Arthur Burns had considerable sway with President Nixon. And at that point, there was an attempt to reduce the expenditures in the '71 budget, which fell largely on the Department of Defense, which infuriated then deputy secretary David Packard, who said, "We've put this thing together and, at the last moment, in December, you tell us to begin to cut." In any event, that episode with regard to the '71 budget, I think persuaded President Nixon that he needed a different person as he moved from the BOB to the OMB. And so, after the budget was submitted, Mr. Mayo ultimately departed, and I became the acting director as the old Bureau of the Budget went out of existence.

Timothy Naftali

Please explain the source of -- please explain the courage that Mr. Mayo showed. What did he do that was courageous?

James Schlesinger

He was just very candid with regard to agencies. He would tell the president what could be done with regard to the expenditures or, alternatively, what couldn't be done without imposing severe penalties on the agencies. That is, as a good budgeteer, he would make clear the consequences of cuts in the budget, and that persuaded some in the White House that he was not forceful enough in reducing expenditures. And the '71 budget, by the way, was the first balanced budget that we had had in more than a decade.

Timothy Naftali

Well, in fact, if you look at the expenditures on Great Society programs, they don't decline. Candidate Nixon had said he would cut these, but they didn't decline.

James Schlesinger

Well, that is correct, and, in fact, in some areas they were increased. A program for hunger -- as you may recall, Pat Moynihan was one of his counselors in the White House, and Pat Moynihan was a great patron of a campaign against hunger, which grew somewhat substantially. I can remember Pat, while Mr. Mayo and I were sitting there in the Oval Office, coming into the Oval Office and describing the splendid consequences of expanding the hunger program. And the president listened to him with great attentiveness and said, "You just keep on going, doing what you're doing, Pat," or words to that effect. And Moynihan left the Oval Office, shutting the door. And the president said, "Listening to this stuff kind of makes you sick," he said.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, gosh. When you arrived at the Bureau of the Budget, was it assumed that we would be drawing down our troops in Vietnam rather quickly and that those would be savings we'd be getting?

James Schlesinger

It was a -- the president had decided on that, and he conveyed that. I'm not sure whether it was January or February, but he conveyed that to the Bureau of the Budget and said, as a consequence of that, we could substantially reduce military expenditures and reduce military manpower. And it was that, as is usually the case, that helped move that budget from substantial deficit to balance.

Timothy Naftali

Also from, even from well before Guam, the Guam speech, I mean, from January '69 he'd made this clear.

James Schlesinger

Well, he didn't give orders to the Bureau of the Budget until we were all ensconced in the bureau.

Timothy Naftali

When were you -- when did you arrive at the bureau?

James Schlesinger

Well, I think I was working there in the end of 1968, after the election. I did not become a government employee until, I think it was early January or February, because I needed to get my six years in at RAND in order to draw my full pension from RAND.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

James Schlesinger

So I was a consultant from the end of December into early January, but I spent my time in Washington.

Timothy Naftali

Did you work on the space program budget? Was the space program budget --

James Schlesinger

A what?

Timothy Naftali

The space program, Apollo. Did you work on --

James Schlesinger

Oh yeah, that was, as you may recall --

Timothy Naftali

-- Apollo budget.

James Schlesinger

I had the responsibilities for the NASA program. The president was determined to shrink the program as we approached the man on the moon, and I was, as they say, an observer to the space council, the space council being under the control of Vice President Agnew, who was the chairman. And Vice President Agnew was a strong booster of space. He would give little speeches at the council saying, "This is appealing to the public. It's clean; it shows American at its best." Meanwhile, the president was determined not to allow the space program to expand, certainly not in the direction of going to Mars. And he told me, he said, "Now, you're going to be an observer on the space council. What you must do," he said, "is to treat the vice president with utter deference, but don't let him spend any money," he said, which of course is a difficult task. But one of the early actions we took at the Bureau of the Budget was to stop spending money on the Saturn V, the Saturn V being the very large booster that had helped us get to Mars. And this was resisted down there in the Gulf, where the Saturn V activities took place. But we did bring to an end the production of the Saturn V, and, of course, that meant, in effect, that we weren't going back to the moon, and we certainly weren't going to go on much planetary exploration with human beings.

Timothy Naftali

Did you --

James Schlesinger

We also killed, at that time, the MOL, the manned orbiting laboratory, but that was in the Department of Defense. It was not part of the NASA budget, but it was part of space.

Timothy Naftali

Did the president explain why he wanted to shut this down? Why he wanted to decrease the number of moon flights?

James Schlesinger

The president felt that this was, I believe -- I cannot speak for him, for his private thoughts -- but I think that he felt that this was a very costly activity and that, if we were going to get the budget overall into good shape, we could not allow the space program to go on growing.

Timothy Naftali

Was there a sense of how many -- because ultimately there were six moon missions -- was there something magical about that number, or was it that it took you a long time to close down the Saturn V production? Why were there six --

James Schlesinger

Oh no, we had a number of Saturn Vs, and what this meant was an end of the production line. But we had enough Saturn Vs to carry out the complete set of moon missions. And, at least from the standpoint of the administration, once the moon mission was accomplished, that there was not any reason to go further in space. Now, of course, the space enthusiasts' appetite grew as a result of the success of the moon missions, and he was, I think, wisely determined that he was not going to let that appetite blossom.

Timothy Naftali

Just to be sure, he put you on the space council before Apollo 11 landed on the moon.

James Schlesinger

I assume so; I just can't remember the precise date. But basically the space council was organized from the beginning of the administration.

Timothy Naftali

So the sense that you had to restrict the number of moon landings was something that really President Nixon came into office believing.

James Schlesinger

I don't know that he wanted to restrict the number of moon landings. He did not want the program to continue. I think that there were the scheduled launches and that they would go ahead and that then we would have kind of a cap on our moon exploration.

Timothy Naftali

Let me ask you about ABM for a minute. Was it assumed that -- when I interviewed Mel Laird, he gave me the sense that the ABM vote was a vote really to have something to trade with the Soviets, that the assumption was we weren't really ever going to build this. Were your assumptions, when you were looking at this program, were you planning to actually build it?

James Schlesinger

Well, of course we started to deploy the ABM system. And, if you don't start to deploy, you don't have something convincing to trade. We'd deployed the PAR radar in North Dakota, which incidentally caused some difficulty later, because when we did not proceed with the ABM system, Senator Milton Young of North Dakota was just infuriated that he had put his credibility on the line. I think that it was an insight from the very first that this would be tradable material in the strategic arms negotiations, quite rightly so. What was happening was that we were building up our offensive forces to overcome the Soviet deployments, particularly around Moscow, of an ABM system.

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And, indeed, Secretary McNamara had moved in the direction of MIRVing our missiles as a way of overcoming that defense of the Russians, and then we moved into it. And the Russians, the Soviets always assumed that American technology was somehow or other marvelous and superior to their own. So they worried a great deal about our ABM capabilities, as they would be deployed. The consequence was that, when we went to the arms control negotiations that culminated in May of '72, the Soviets were exceedingly anxious to get us to terminate our ABM activities, and we were anxious to get them to stop expanding their missile forces, their offensive missile forces, which is another story incidentally. Because -- I'll come back to that later if you --

Timothy Naftali

Sure, yes, please.

James Schlesinger

-- if you wish. But indeed the negotiation was a success, in that sense, in that we traded the ABM system for a cap on their missile forces. The problem with the ABM system was that both systems were going to be leaky, and neither side could assume that its offensive forces would encounter leakiness. So both sides tended to expand their offensive forces as a way of overwhelming the defense, and that the deployment of ABM systems thus tended to encourage the expansion of offensive forces. The agreement in May of '72 led to a cap on ABM, on offensive missiles with the agreement that we would basically not expand the ABM capabilities in the United States. Subsequently, we shut down the PAR radar in North Dakota.

Timothy Naftali

We'll get to SALT in a minute. Tell me --

James Schlesinger

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per sec. 6.2(a)

Timothy Naftali

So this ABM system, our ABM system --

James Schlesinger

The president felt it was necessary to test the Spartan warhead if we were to demonstrate the credibility of our determination to move ahead on the ABM system, unless we had an agreement with the Russians.

Timothy Naftali

But it was a bit of political theater, though.

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James Schlesinger

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per sec. 6.2(a)

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Of course there would be greater worries today, because we have a much expanded space capability and other nations, other non-hostile nations, now have space capabilities, all of which might be damaged by a nuclear detonation in space. That is the reason that in our recent ABM activities, we have moved towards "hit to kill" rather than using nuclear weapons in space.

Timothy Naftali

But -- so, in this period the technology or at least the theory was to use a nuclear weapon, to detonate it in space and then --

James Schlesinger

Near enough to incoming warheads that you could kill them.

Timothy Naftali

Fall out? What

James Schlesinger

No, you're not -- there's not a problem of fall out because it was up in space. There was a consequence, though, for any communications satellites that we might have in space. And of course we now have all sorts of space capabilities, the GPS system is now dependent upon satellites that continuously circle the Earth, but in those days the use of space was far more limited.

Timothy Naftali

Okay, let's talk about the AEC. How, again, how did you move -- first of all, I was going to ask you about the "M" in OMB. What effect did the shift, from your perspective, what effect did the shift from the Bureau of the Budget to OMB bring to the U.S. government? What was the consequence of that?

James Schlesinger

Well, I think that, in my view, you did not need to create a new agency in order to expand the management functions of that agency. So, you could have moved in the direction of including management activities much more in the old BOB without abolishing the BOB and creating the OMB. Moreover, the strength of the OMB today is the control of the budget, and its ability to influence management activities in the agencies is much more limited. And I think that there is a great deal of exaggerated expectations about what including "M" in the OMB was going to accomplish.

Timothy Naftali

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Was there an expansion in the number of people when you went to OMB? Did you --

James Schlesinger

A very modest expansion. The "M" part of OMB, if I am correct, was quite limited. And indeed, the budget work consisted of about 600 people, if I recall correctly.

Timothy Naftali

Now, was it while you were at the Bureau of the Budget that you did the study of the U.S. intelligence community for President Nixon?

James Schlesinger

Yes, sir.

Timothy Naftali

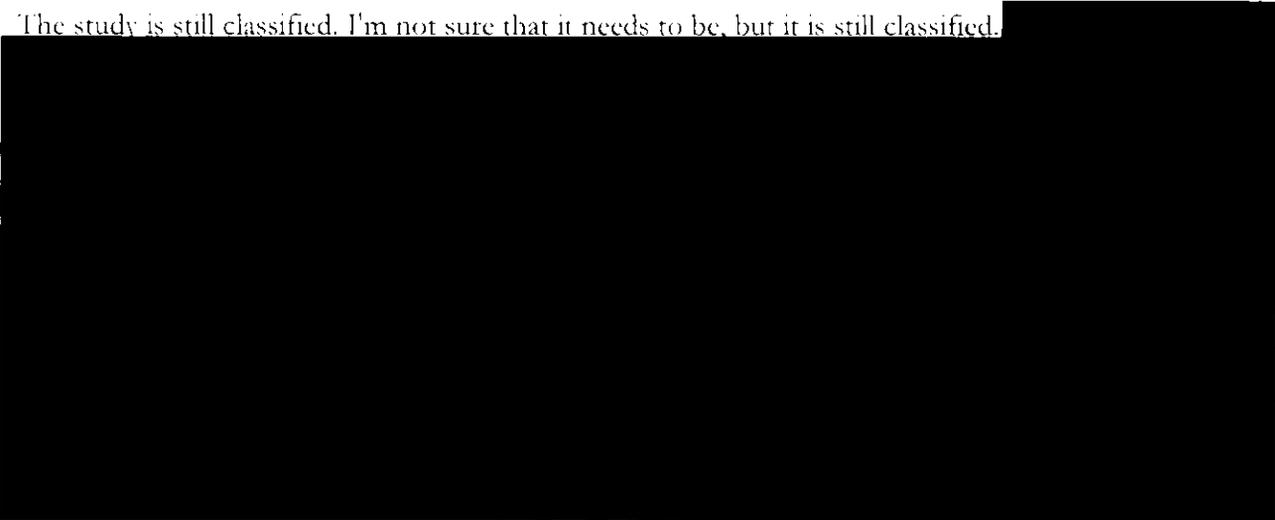
Could you tell us about that, please?

James Schlesinger

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per sec. 1.4 (c)(d)

The study is still classified. I'm not sure that it needs to be, but it is still classified.



Timothy Naftali

But wasn't that the period when we were spending more money on satellites, because there was a period of great

James Schlesinger

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

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So it must have been a real challenge to bring down the --

James Schlesinger

Manpower is a high cost, and so, we were moving in the direction of improved satellites, both SIGINT satellites and in the direction of improved photographic satellites, and accomplished both.

Timothy Naftali

Did President Nixon explain why he felt that the intelligence budget was a target of opportunity?

James Schlesinger

Well, he didn't have to explain that it was a target of opportunity. In large degree, he felt that the immense expansion of our numbers of people in the intelligence community as a result of the Vietnam War would shrink as we came down in Southeast Asia. And that -- he didn't articulate that, but that was the area in which we found that expenditures could be significantly reduced.

Timothy Naftali

I asked you because, I mean, presidents generally complain about the quality of the intelligence they get, and he was no exception.

James Schlesinger

He was no exception, and he had a particular feeling, I could put it, about the Central Intelligence Agency, going back to the campaign of 19 --

Timothy Naftali

'60?

James Schlesinger

'60, yes.

Timothy Naftali

So he really believed that they had --

James Schlesinger

I don't know. He never discussed that, but he did reveal on several occasions a certain animus about the CIA.

Timothy Naftali

So his solution to the poor intelligence was not to spend more on intelligence.

James Schlesinger

Right, one of the points that I had made in the study that I did for him was that the big expenditures were in the collection area, and that if we were to improve the quality of intelligence, we had to put it on the analytical side, and that what we needed was more competition in analysis, rather than having a single overall perspective, a point of view that I have continued to cherish over the many years as Congress has sought to create a charter, at one point, for the intelligence community, which would lump everything in under the director of central intelligence. And he would, according to the charter, control the budgets of State and Defense and so on. I thought that this was a mistake, because each secretary, the secretary of state -- indeed, what became the energy department, but, at that time, was one of the predecessors of the energy department, the secretary of defense, all needed to have intelligence capabilities that were tailored to their particular responsibilities. And sort of the notion of lumping everything in together and not having separate analytical staffs for the various agencies and departments was, I thought, a mistake. Moreover, it was a mistake because, whatever you did, these departments were going to have intelligence activities of their own, whether they were announced or they were -- what shall I say? -- under the table.

Timothy Naftali

You mentioned though you wanted to strengthen the DCI. So, you wanted the DCI to be able to task these departmental intelligence -- to task them --

James Schlesinger

I think that the -- if I recall correctly, we're talking about an assessment of how effective they were and what kind of monies were supposed to be given to them. Of course, the DCI did do the tasking for NSA, which was collecting -- which was our principal collector at the time. And he was, after I became DCI, he was the chairman of the NRO. Up to that point, the deputy secretary of defense had been the chairman of the NRO.

Timothy Naftali

So what you wanted to do was to expand his control over budgets. That's how you would expand --

James Schlesinger

And in the case of the NRO in particular, which there was the arrangement between the Department of Defense and the CIA to expand his direct influence. He was -- if he were chairman, he would be more influential in determining the direction in which the NRO was to go than if he were simply a member and, in a sense, subordinate to the deputy secretary of defense. I should confess that, when I became secretary of defense, I was not quite as enamored of the shift of power as I had been when I became DCI.

Timothy Naftali

Let me ask you a couple questions about AEC, please. What were the challenges you faced when you took the job in 1971?

James Schlesinger

The biggest challenge that we had, aside from the weapons activity, we were launched, at the time, on the most substantial production of nuclear weapons associated with the desire to MIRV the missile forces and, in particular, the enormous expansion of the number of warheads associated with moving from the Polaris Program to the Poseidon Program. So, I think that I still have the record for producing the most nuclear weapons in one year, that would have been 1972, of anyone in history. Now, that was part of the challenge. My concern was to move the AEC more in the direction of laser activities because we were beginning to top out, as it were, in terms of the improvement of the design of nuclear weapons.

per sec 1.4(g)

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[REDACTED] Whereas lasers represented a new area and, I thought, at the time, a most promising area in terms of growth of capability. Now, the other part of the program was, of course, the activity with respect to nuclear power, and, when I moved to the AEC, I was greeted by the decision of Judge Skelly Wright in the Calvert Cliffs case, in which he said that the AEC had moved beyond its powers, in that it had ignored the National Environmental Policy Act when it was granting licenses. So, we had to react quickly to that, and I turned the laboratories, all the laboratories into a position of producing environmental impact statements for the many, many applications that we had on hand to build nuclear plants. We had a surge of orders in that period, and then, of course, subsequently, in 1978 or '79 we had the accident at Three Mile Island, and that terminated not only new orders, but terminated many of the ongoing projects.

But in the period that I was at the AEC we had a surge of orders in term -- and thus a surge of impact on the staff of the AEC, the regulatory staff, which was housed in a separate facility well away from Germantown, and I discovered that, when I went down there, that it required a Q clearance to get into the regulatory facility. And I said, "We're going to end that." No requirements that -- with regard to security, getting into the building. The public must have access if the public is to have any confidence in nuclear power, so we abolished the requirement that those who went to the regulatory agency of the AEC would have to have these clearances. And we opened up the activities of four nuclear power -- we were being besieged at that time by environmental protests, and we had to work our way through the licensing process for each and every plant. I recommended at that time that we move towards standardization of plants, but the resistance from the industry was -- and particularly from the people who designed plants -- was just too firm. We have now moved in the direction of standardization of plants.

Timothy Naftali

Do you think that, had there been a standardization of reactors, that Three Mile Island would not have occurred?

James Schlesinger

No, no, the Three Mile Island accident reflected a number of problems. What we had -- are we on?

Timothy Naftali

Yeah.

James Schlesinger

What we had was the -- a typical problem of the American system of governance, which is that we believe in equality. We believe in equal opportunity, and everybody should have a chance to build a nuclear reactor. Well, most utilities in this country were pretty small, and most utilities in this country did not have the qualifications to build a reactor. In France, to take the extreme case, everything was turned over to the Electricity de France, and only the Electricity de France built their reactors. But going back to the illusions, of the naive illusions after Hiroshima, we, as a country wanted to turn nuclear power into something that was directly useful for mankind, and, therefore, you had the Joint Committee pushing the development of reactors. And the Atomic Energy Act, when it opened up nuclear power for use by the utilities, said everyone should have an opportunity to make an application to the AEC. That was a mistake. There should have been a much more limited number of companies, and the utilities needed to take nuclear power seriously. For many of these utilities, they just regarded nuclear power as a kind of funny way of making steam, in the same way that you did with a coal fired plant.

Timothy Naftali

So do you think there was a missed opportunity for a -- well, was there a missed opportunity for nuclear -- civilian use of nuclear energy in the '70s?

James Schlesinger

There probably was an opportunity. This Three Mile Island accident was sui generis, and the standardization would not have headed that off. Standardization would apply to reactors that would come in the future, not to reactors that were already being constructed, and the -- what we saw at Three Mile Island created a kind of panic. I can recall Dan Rather on CBS talking about the hydrogen buildup in the reactor, and the intimation for the public was that this was somehow or other equal to a hydrogen bomb, which it was clearly not. It was -- the release of the buildup of hydrogen is serious, but it's essentially a chemical rather than a nuclear problem.

Timothy Naftali

Were you secretary of energy during the Three Mile Island?

James Schlesinger

I was the secretary of energy and got somewhat beaten up up on the Hill as a result of that. I pointed out, on the Hill in this moment of, what shall I say, overreaction that we were going to need the nuclear option in the long run and that they should not take the actions at Three Mile Island as permitting us to discard the nuclear option. That was perhaps injudicious of me to use that particular time and place to make that observation.

Timothy Naftali

Back to the AEC period, did you bring Dixy Lee Ray on board? Is that when she came?

James Schlesinger

I did, I did. The president -- when I left the AEC, the president -- actually it was Haldeman, I believe, informed me that the president had decided that the next chairman should be a woman, and that it was my obligation as I moved off to the CIA, that it was my obligation to sell that notion up on Capitol Hill. And I went to see Chet Holifield, a Democrat from California who was -- had been the guiding force behind the Joint Committee for many years and he and I had been very close in my years as -- at the AEC. And I said to him that the president has decided that he wants Dixy Lee Ray. He says, "You're not coming here to sell a woman to me," he said. "No, no, no, no." And I said, "That's what I'm here for, Mr. Chairman. I'm here to explain that the president is going to nominate Dixy Lee Ray." And he said, "But this is an important agency. Put women at the head of some other agency," he said. Anyway, there was not much that he could do about it once the president made that nomination.

Timothy Naftali

You were at AEC during the SALT negotiations.

James Schlesinger

Right.

Timothy Naftali

And you wanted to mention something about that.

James Schlesinger

Well, I testified to the Joint Committee about the consequences of the May 1972 agreements that had been reached in Moscow. And the -- I have mentioned, I believe, the fundamental trade that was being made as a way of capping the Russian deployment of additional missiles, and I think the Joint Committee was quite satisfied with that testimony.

Timothy Naftali

Did you, did you see President Nixon on a regular basis when you were head of the AEC?

James Schlesinger

per sec 1.4(h) **SANITIZED**

Very irregular, very irregular. I saw him after I was sworn in at the AEC. I came to visit with him only once to indicate that we had developed laser separation, which had major implications for the nonproliferation policies, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] And I did this on a classified basis, and I explained all of this with General Haig present. And our view was we will

just keep this totally classified so that nobody hears about it.

Timothy Naftali

Because it made acquiring weapons grade plutonium that much easier.

James Schlesinger

That's correct. Of course, it made acquiring weapons grade U-235 that much easier, but there were other ways of doing it.

Timothy Naftali

What did -- how did, how did President Nixon, in your own observation, how did he come to accept nonproliferation? You said that in the first two years he was reluctant or skeptical.

James Schlesinger

I don't -- I think that he had an instinctive distrust for activities that might be -- what shall I say? -- excessively idealistic. And that -- I think that it became plain, particularly as the -- after the Chinese detonation and other nations moving in the direction of weapons, that he recognized that, if you had large numbers of nuclear powers that the situation would become much more unstable than when you had a couple of nuclear powers.

Timothy Naftali

Wasn't this the time when the Indian program --

James Schlesinger

The Indian program was moving along. As a matter of fact, I, to the distress of some of my fellow commissioners, or one particular fellow commissioner, I discouraged the sale of reactors to what were then called third world nations like Egypt and India, and some of the commissioners felt that their responsibility was to promote nuclear power all over the world. And my saying that we weren't going to provide any encouragement to third world countries that were proliferation-prone to acquire nuclear reactors came as something of a shock to, as I say, one of my entrepreneurial fellow commissioners.

Timothy Naftali

Was this -- was there concern about the South African program at this point, too?

James Schlesinger

I don't recall that there was concern.

Timothy Naftali

How did you find out that you were being considered to become DCI? How did that arise?

James Schlesinger

Well, it was somewhat of a surprise to me, because I was very happy at the AEC. And, in fact, I -- after I became DCI, I went back to testify before the joint committee on the budget, which would have been the '74 budget, I believe, because there was no one else to do the testimony, but I did it as the DCI. And I was quite content at the AEC, and suddenly I had a call from, I think it was Haldeman, who said the president would like you to move over to Langley. And I talked to Haldeman at some length and I said no -- actually, they brought me up to Camp David to discuss the prospect -- and I said, "Well, Dick Helms is going to be 65 in April or May. He is an old-time civil servant, and thus, it would not be a surprise if he were to retire when he reached 65. Why don't you just let him stay in the job? Well, that was not the intent of the administration. The administration's intent was more or less to show the dominance of the president over the senior people in the administration, so they wanted me to move in to the DCI slot immediately. I said, "Look, I've got lots of things to do up here at the AEC; you can wait." Well, they didn't want to do that, and they had me prepare a document, which may be in the archives, describing what I would do when I went in and what I would recommend doing when I -- when and if I went in as DCI. This would have been just around Christmas of 19 --

Timothy Naftali

'72.

James Schlesinger

'72. And then I became the -- was sworn in as DCI on February 2, 1973. And, of course, I had to get the approval of the, of the joint -- of the Armed Services Committee, which had control of the budget at that time. Oh, they flew -- Tom Korologos and I flew down to see John Stennis in Mississippi, John Stennis being the chairman of the Armed Services Committee. And he had been -- he hadn't been resistant so much as unknowledgeable about the idea of my becoming DCI. And then he recognized me from, from my -- "Oh, I know that man!" he said. "He's a fine man," he said to Korologos. "We will, we will proceed with it." But he had to be reassured before my confirmation. At the confirmation hearing, one of the senators had the notion that the CIA was experimenting in thought control and would I look into that, and I promised to look into any activities in that direction, weather control, that sort of thing. The notion of the range and power of the activities of the CIA in those days was much more impressive than it is even today. What else can I tell you about the CIA? I would go -- since that armed services was the oversight body, and this illustrates how much things have changed -- I would go to see Chairman Stennis and I'd say, "Mr. Chairman, I want to talk to you about some of the things that we're doing." He'd say, "No, no, my boy, I don't want to hear about it, don't want to hear -- you just do what's right and don't bother me. I don't want to hear any of these activities." Well, of course, it has totally turned over in the subsequent years, and particularly in the period since the Church hearings.

Timothy Naftali

One of the things you had to do was fire some people. You had to impose some of those manpower reductions --

James Schlesinger

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

-- that you had talked about at the Bureau of the Budget.

James Schlesinger

Well, the manpower reductions, when we were at the Bureau of the Budget time, primarily took place in the [unintelligible] community that was governed by the NSA. The -- I had actually -- I had -- the president had wanted to slice some tens of millions of dollars off the CIA budget, and I had resisted that at the time when I was at the Bureau of the Budget, and then it turned out that Dick Helms went to see the president and the president persuaded him to accept those cuts. When I arrived there, of course, we were coming out of Vietnam, and we had expanded substantially, and there was a reduction, particularly for the directorate of operations. But there was another problem, which was that the CIA had become almost the oldest agency of the U.S. government in terms of its age profile. And people, understandably, when they entered the career, they weren't going to go someplace else. As a result, the age of the staff kept growing up. And that meant that the promotion opportunities for younger people were extremely limited, and this was a morale factor in terms of younger people. So I said that the three deputy directors should begin to find out who was the dead wood and move them out, and that was not exactly popular and, in particular, was not popular with the directorate of operations.

Timothy Naftali

I'm sure.

James Schlesinger

But it was popular, by the way, with younger people because it gave headroom to younger people who finally saw the opportunity to advance, for example, in the Directorate of Intelligence instead of the people who had joined the agency back there in the late '40s or early '50s being around forever and blocking appointments. You have to move people out and you have to, at least in my judgment, reduce the age profile of the CIA, which, at that time, was the oldest in the federal government, except for the Interstate Commerce Commission, I believe.

Timothy Naftali

You once -- I remember you once telling me that you became --

James Schlesinger

[Unintelligible]

Timothy Naftali

I remember you once telling me in another occasion that you became James Angleton's best friend because you kept him around.

James Schlesinger

I don't know that I became his best friend. He was rather angry with me when I ended the mail watch. See, the mail watch was against the law, and we had been engaged in the mail watch. And Bill Colby said, "Why don't you stop this since we are breaking the law." And so I said, "Well, we will put an end to it." And Angleton came and complained about that, vociferously complained. And I said, "Jim, it's not a question of principle here. It's a question of whether the risks are worth the gains. So show me some of the benefits that we have gotten in intelligence take from the mail watch over the years." Well, of course, it turned out that there was very little, and they didn't show me any substantial gains so we abolished the mail watch, for which I got excessive credit subsequently, and -- when this came to light during the Rockefeller years. But Angleton, I don't think, forgave me for that while I was at the CIA. But in subsequent years he would appear each year at my doorstep with a salmon that he had caught, every Christmas he would appear with a salmon. One year, I guess of the declining populace of salmon in the Northeast, he came with some other fish that he had caught in the Great Lakes. But he became my pal after Colby fired him. I think that Colby's handling of that, of Jim's departure, was not very gracious, but that goes back to a dispute that they had long had. I did not get involved in that dispute. I only got involved with Angleton's activities with regard to the ending of the mail watch.

Timothy Naftali

Did you end the mail watch? I'd like to get the chronology straight, if I could. When you discovered the Dr. Fielding -- about the break-in at Fielding's office in Beverly Hills, you -- tell us what -- how you reacted to that news. I mean, it happened, of course, before your time but it came out in '73 when you were DCI.

James Schlesinger

Well, it came out, and I suddenly, after a month, I was only effectively at the CIA for four months before I went to the Pentagon. I wasn't confirmed in the Pentagon, but with Senator Stennis' permission, I essentially ran the department, but I could make no public announcements until such time as I was confirmed. But a month or a month and a half into my tenure at the CIA, the activities surrounding Watergate began to break into the open. McCloud, was it?

Timothy Naftali

McCord.

James Schlesinger

McCord began to testify before Judge Sirica, and every few days there would be a new headline about the supposed activities of the real and imaginary activities of the CIA. So, suddenly I was drawn away from substantive activities simply to defending the agency both on the Hill

[1:19:13 JUMP CUT/FLASH FRAME]

and in the media. And the -- one of the things that came out was, of course, the activities of Howard Hunt and the break-ins in the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist. And there were extended hearings which Senator Jackson managed to steer into the Appropriations Committee, because Senator Stennis had been stabbed, as you may recall, or shot, and he was in the hospital, and that the Armed Services Committee was not the ideal body to be dealing with that problem at that time. So the investigation took place under the Appropriations Committee, which was chaired by Senator McClellan, and there were comical aspects of that hearing, extended hearing on the break-ins, which I can't go into now because they're still classified.

Timothy Naftali

You -- tell me the story, tell us the story, please, of what you asked Colby. I think it was Colby, to do when you heard about the Plumbers' operations.

James Schlesinger

Well, the -- there had been one thing after another suddenly appearing in the press as a result of McCord's testimony, which sort of broke the dam and the horde of journalists descended on the CIA looking for things, which it had, of course, started with the break-ins and then the indication that the break-ins had taken place as a result of former contract employees of the CIA. And I didn't know what was going on, so Bill Colby wrote this document, which said anybody -- "as you may know, there have been questions lately, and anybody who knows anything about this or other activities should come and let me know." Because, you know, I would read about something in the morning in the papers and by the afternoon, I was being called up to the Hill to explain it. As my assistant for Congressional relations, Jack Morey [phonetic sp], comfotingly told me, he said, "You're, you're just one jump ahead of the sheriff, and I think he's gaining," he said, which I didn't find as comfoting as he might have thought.

Anyway, I signed this document, thinking that everyone would understand that this was an allusion to what was going on with regard to the -- any relationship between the agency and the activities of the Plumbers. And -- but there was in the document this phrase "and other activities." And there's a consequence -- without my intending that it be so, this was used as a way of uncovering all sorts of activities from the past, rather than simply the Watergate phenomenon, which became part of what was called the family jewels. And then, subsequently, Colby revealed the family jewels to the White House and the -- I don't remember whether the president made that public or not, but they became public, which I found just doubly unfortunate. First, because it was, it was my thinking that everyone would understand that I was alluding to the Watergate problem and that I wasn't really interested in unearthing things from the past and then the -- that this would be taken to the White House and become public. So I was, by that time, well away from the agency but I was mortified by the way things turned out.

Timothy Naftali

Was this around the time when you heard about, I think it was HTLINGUAL, the mail opening?

James Schlesinger

I'm sorry?

Timothy Naftali

This is the time that you heard about the mail opening?

James Schlesinger

No, I heard about the mail opening as soon as I moved in in February. And I may even have heard about it from Colby, who was the executive director before I came in. And I think I had a conversation with Dick Helms on that particular subject, in which he kind of shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't think this is getting us very much, and it is illegal." "So take a hard look at it" was basically what he said.

Timothy Naftali

Did -- President Nixon had suspicions that the CIA was somehow involved in letting Watergate -- letting the break-in fail. Did he, did he share with you, when you became the head of the CIA, his --

James Schlesinger

Oh, no, oh, no.

Timothy Naftali

His suspicions?

James Schlesinger

I knew nothing about that until -- and I only began to develop suspicion because on the, perhaps the second day that I was at the agency, after being sworn, in I had a call from John Dean, who was the counsel in the White House. And Dean said, "We would like you to call back the file of the CIA from the Department of Justice and leave in the file only the words removed at the request of the CIA." And I talked to Dick Walters, who was the deputy DCI and -- about the implications of that, and he said, "All that would do would be to leave a large arrow pointing in the direction of Langley," he said. And so I sent Walters down to tell John Dean that we were not going to accommodate that. We were helped by the fact that Senator Mansfield had put out this order, or at least expressed the strong sentiment of the Senate, that no papers should be tampered with in any way. So I could point to the Mansfield injunction and say just leave it in the files, as it were. But the effect of doing what Dean suggested would have been precisely that, it would have been a large arrow pointing towards Langley suggesting, strongly suggesting some additional complicity of the CIA, which had been, by and large, trivial in providing red wigs to the people who broke in at Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and ancillary things of that sort. We were not -- the CIA was not directly involved.

Timothy Naftali

I'm sure -- well, you heard from Walters. Walters would have explained to you the pressure that he and Helms had been under.

James Schlesinger

He did, indeed, he did. Almost immediately when I arrived there, he handed me his book of memoranda for the record so that I understood the kinds of pressures that they had been under. And I subsequently -- even when Walters was being pressured, investigated by the House, the new, newly formed House Committee on Intelligence, I had subsequently given him a medal commending him for his performance under those circumstances, because without those memoranda I would not have understood at all the kinds of questions that had come up. The memoranda were written in a very cagey fashion without -- they were simply factual, what was requested and what was said and so forth, without making direct accusations, but leaving it to the reader to draw his own inferences.

Timothy Naftali

Mr. Helms once told me that he had had a taping system.

James Schlesinger

He had what?

Timothy Naftali

A taping system.

James Schlesinger

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

I understand, though, that he didn't -- I think he told me he destroyed his transcripts.

James Schlesinger

Destroyed --

Timothy Naftali

His transcripts of the taping system.

James Schlesinger

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That's right, he got rid of them just before I arrived and they were engaged in destroying those transcripts. I got rid of the taping system. I didn't - I'm kind of a boy scout. I wasn't going to get involved in that sort of thing.

Timothy Naftali

Yeah, well, you would later learn about another taping system.

James Schlesinger

I later learned about another taping system.

Timothy Naftali

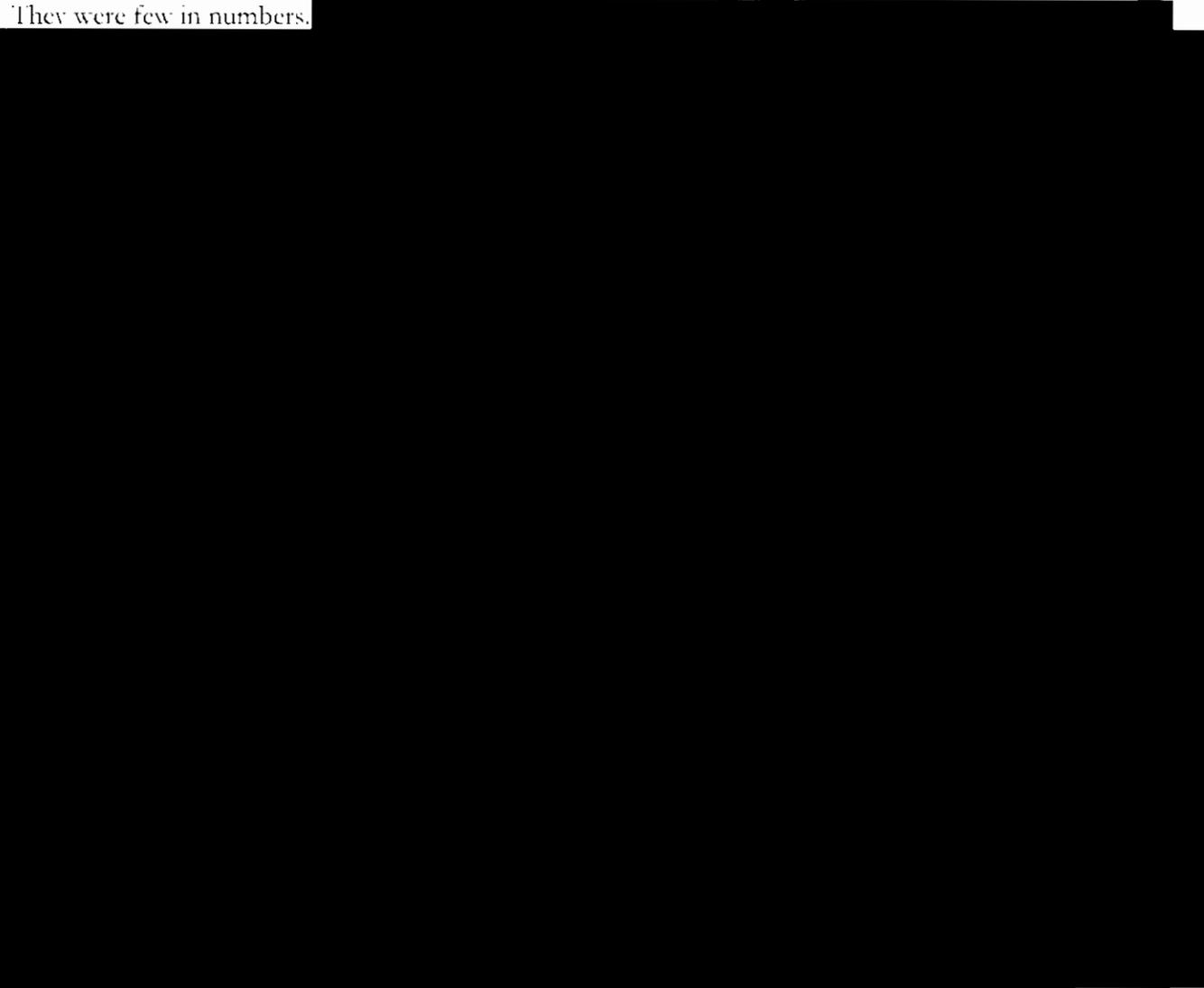
What do you recall of meetings you had with President Nixon as DCI?

James Schlesinger

per sec 1.4(c)

SANITIZED

They were few in numbers.



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James Schlesinger

SANITIZED

per sec 1.4(c)

[REDACTED]

Timothy Naftali

SANITIZED

per sec 1.4(c)

[REDACTED]

James Schlesinger

SANITIZED

per sec 1.4(c)

[REDACTED]

Also, he was much influenced by Senator -- former Governor Connally, who by that time was a former Treasury secretary, who was on the, on the PFLAB and Connally had the notion that the CIA should get much more deeply involved in economic matters than it had been. And we had very carefully steered away from doing intelligence work about economic matters. First, that the kinds of activities that were appropriately public activities were handled by the Treasury or by the Council of Economic Advisors, and this was all stuff in the public literature. And that, to the extent that there would be intelligence directed at -- against technology that was being developed by other countries, it wasn't clear, in our system, which is a free enterprise system, what one would do with it. One couldn't give that technology to a particular company. You couldn't give it to General Motors and not give it to Ford, so that Governor Connally enthusiasm for this activity would not have been -- could not become very productive from the standpoint of the United States.

[REDACTED]

But I had relatively little contact with him.

per sec. 1.4 (c)(d)

Timothy Naftali

SANITIZED

He was interested in that? In the - I guess those were black bag jobs?

James Schlesinger

I don't know that you'd say he was interested in the details, but he thought that this was a, what shall I say, a useful activity for the United States.

Timothy Naftali

Besides the natural work that cryptanalysts do.

James Schlesinger

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Besides --

Timothy Naftali

But besides cryptanalytical work.

James Schlesinger

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

SANITIZED

per sec. 1.4 (c)(d)



Timothy Naftali

Oh, what about --

James Schlesinger

Remember that Nixon -- of course, you remember Nixon had been vice president to Dwight Eisenhower who had substantially revolutionized American intelligence operations, and he was a great admirer of President Eisenhower. He would frequently cite what Eisenhower felt about this or that or the other thing, and he had learned a great deal during that administration. Well, one of the things that he had learned very well was the range of intelligence operations.

Timothy Naftali

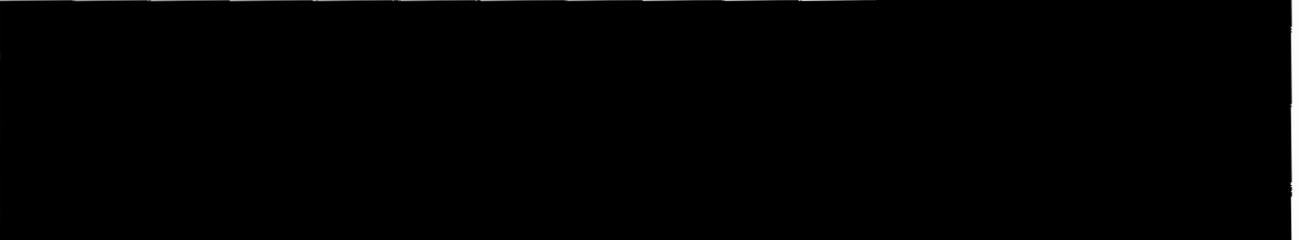
Did he put pressure on you about Chile? Did he talk to you about Chile?

James Schlesinger

per sec 1.4(c)

SANITIZED

I never had a conversation with him about Chile. No, I think I may have had a conversation about his concerns about the Allende regime, but it was after the initial activities.



Timothy Naftali

So we weren't talking to the part of the military that overthrew Allende?

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James Schlesinger

I'm sure that there may have been conversations, but by that time, I think that Pinochet and others had come to distrust conversations with the Americans about specific moves, and they certainly were not cutting us in on their plans.

Timothy Naftali

Well, a good segue to your move to the secretary of defense would be to talk about rumblings in the Middle East. As DCI, you began to see evidence that Egyptians are up to something.

James Schlesinger

per sec 1.4(b)(c)

SANITIZED

The -- well, of course, there were always the questions about whether we should sell aircraft to the Saudis. Things came up in the WSAG, the Washington Special Access Group, and Henry would ask me whether I thought we should do such things. And of course, that was not -- these kinds of policy decisions were not supposed to be part of the intelligence operations, but I said, "I think that you ought to sell aircraft to the Saudis."

And this was basically dismissed as more posturing, but it turned out, as you know, to be an accurate forecast, because in October the Egyptians and the Syrians simultaneously moved against Israel.

Timothy Naftali per sec. 1.4 (c)(d)

SANITIZED

James Schlesinger

per sec. 1.4 (c)(d)

SANITIZED

If we did -- well, we had lots of information, which tended to be dismissed for a number of reasons.

the Israelis were queried about the activities, and, basically, the Israelis coming back saying, "Oh, they're dismissing the possibility of an attack," because they were convinced, as countries tend to be, that the -- by their own axiom, that the Arab states would never attack until such time as they were able to offset Israel's air domination. That was a conviction on the part of the Israelis. It turned out that they were partly right but that the Arabs had acquired SAMs that substantially mitigated the advantages that Israel had previously enjoyed in the air, as in the 1967 campaign. And as a -- the Israelis tended to be dismissive at the same time that some of the intelligence community, and I don't know the full story because Colby was the DCI at the time, but some in the intelligence community were saying something is happening and going to break. But the attack on October the 6th, 1973, turned out to be a surprise to the administration, as it had been a surprise to the senior levels of the administration as it had been to the Israelis at that time.

Timothy Naftali

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So in effect, we accepted the Israeli estimate.

James Schlesinger

Pardon me?

Timothy Naftali

We accepted the Israeli --

James Schlesinger

per sec 1.4(b)(c)

SANITIZED

We accepted the Israeli estimate. In fact, that's a long-term problem of U.S. intelligence, that we tend to turn to friendly parties, who may or may not be under attack, and ask them, in effect, "Are you going to be attacked tomorrow?" Or "Are you going to be attacked in the near future?" And, of course, the natural tendency is to say, "No." And we saw that again in 1990 at the time that we turned to the Arab states, all of which, Kuwait in particular, Saudi Arabia, that the Kuwaitis assured us that Arab states don't attack one another. Well, it's very easy to fall into that belief if you say, if Saddam Hussein attacks Kuwait, we are done for. He will overrun this country. And that is something about which one does not express a detached judgment.

In fact, I thought Saddam was going to do something simply on the basis of what he was doing in the oil market, because he had threatened the Kuwaitis, saying that they must curb their oil production. And the Kuwaitis then proceeded to curtail their oil production in order to propitiate Saddam Hussein, and he went on with his threats. So, after they had accommodated him, the - - Saddam Hussein was still as, as aggressive before, having gotten what he nominally wanted. And I sent a message to the White House. I said, "Saddam is seeking is pretext for war," [unintelligible]. And, apparently, we would be ultimately surprised, once again, when he did move.

Timothy Naftali

Now, the first two days of the Yom Kippur War, we thought Israel would regain the advantage quickly.

James Schlesinger

That's exactly right. They -- there is on Saturday and Sunday, if I recall correctly, the Israelis assured us "Once we have mobilized, let us at them. We will take care of them very quickly." And that was a good deal of reassurance - or assurance, on their part, which we found no reason to doubt at the time. And then, as a result of their use of surface-to-air missiles and anti-tank missiles, they were substantially weakening the capacity of the Israelis to defend themselves and were imposing much higher casualties than the Israelis had ever experienced. And, as a result, by Wednesday of that week, if I remember correctly, they had -- the Israelis had turned around and expressed considerable alarm that, unless they got additional supplies, that they would -- they might go under.

Timothy Naftali

There was some difficulty in getting them supplies.

James Schlesinger

There was no difficulty in getting them supplies. The original order from President Nixon was, "Give them anything they want as long as they pick them up in El Al aircraft or chartered aircraft." And we were told -- or we told the Israelis that they had to remove the Star of David from El Al aircraft. Well, when we started shipping Sidewinders, we did it out of Oceana Naval Air Station down here in Southeastern Virginia. And there was an El Al aircraft with a large Star of David on it, and various TV cameramen with telescopic lenses pressed up against the gate at Oceana, taking pictures of the El Al aircraft taking on supplies from the United States. But the hope of the administration, Dr. Kissinger's hope that we would be able to get charters, and we had the Secretary of Transportation as well as the Department of Defense working on it, just never materialized. Pan American, for example, said, "We are perfectly prepared to use our aircraft as long as you declare a national emergency."

Well, we were trying to keep our hand hidden, and declaring a national emergency was not going to help the United States keep its hand hidden under those circumstances. So Pan Am and the others said, in effect, "We're not going to charter our aircraft. Pan Am flies into Cairo West every day and for the -- for Pan Am aircraft to be delivering supplies to Israel to fight the Egyptians is going to make our pilots unsafe, so no thank you." We could not call up the kref [phonetic sp] without declaring a national emergency. And, by Thursday night, it was plain that we would not get any serious chartered aircraft. We got two aircraft, I think, from World Airways, which was not regularly flying to the Middle East. So on Friday I took the view that, if you want supplies to get in, you are going to have to use U.S. military airlift all the way.

Timothy Naftali

You said President Nixon said --

James Schlesinger

Well, wait, let me finish on the --

Timothy Naftali

Okay.

James Schlesinger

By Friday, I simply told the White House, "If you expect these supplies to get there, we're going to have to use U.S. military air lift all the way." And Henry was not eager to see that done, because he wanted to -- we had been hoping to keep the Arab states pacified, more or less, by non-involvement, which ended the next week, by the way, when the Soviet's supplies were beginning to add up, and the president called for military aid to Israel, which led to the Arab oil embargo. But on Friday night that first week, which would have been the 12th, I believe, of October --

Timothy Naftali

12th, yeah.

James Schlesinger

-- I said that if we're going to get these supplies in, we're going to have to use military air lift all the way. And I was told that, "You can do that, but you have to get the planes in under cover of darkness, unloaded, and out before day

." So I had General Gour come in from the Israeli Embassy and I said, "We are going to start shipping supplies, and we will land the supplies, but we will land under the cover of darkness. And you will get those planes unloaded, and we will get the planes out before daybreak in order to continue the, at least the fiction, that we were not involved." Well, as it turned out, the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft a-gley, as Bobby Burns tells us, and there were crosswinds in the Azores, so our planes, as they came from the depots in the Mid-West and the mountain states, began to pile up here, at Dover Air Force Base, preparing to go into the Azores, but the winds delayed the departure of those aircraft. The first aircraft did manage to get into Israel under cover of darkness. The Israelis, as they said, would unload the planes and permit them to get out. But, because of the delays imposed by the crosswinds in the Azores, the later aircraft began to arrive in daylight. And there was the C-5A, which was the largest aircraft that any Israeli had ever seen, or anyone in the Middle East, flying these supplies in, and half of the population of Tel Aviv then turned out at the airport, cheering, as they watched these planes come down. Well, of course, you had the big white star of the United States Air Force on these planes, and the notion that, somehow or another, we had kept our hand hidden disintegrated at that point.

Timothy Naftali

When did President Nixon -- first of all, when did he approve this air lift? Were you with him when he approved it?

James Schlesinger

He approved the airlift Friday night, Friday evening I should say.

Timothy Naftali

Were you in communication with him?

James Schlesinger

No, I got it directly from Henry, and I talked to Al Haig at the same time. I said, "Look, Al, if you want supplies there, we're not going to get the supplies there without using military air lift." And Al, then, I think, helped persuade Henry that it was the only way to be done. And I don't know what their communication was with the president at that time because he, as you may remember, had become more remote and had disappeared into the residence as was clear at the time of the alert, subsequently.

Timothy Naftali

We'll get to the alert in a moment. I want to be sure of the chronology. You said, I think, that on October 9th, on the Wednesday.

James Schlesinger

I don't remember if it was Tuesday or Wednesday.

Timothy Naftali

Tuesday or Wednesday, President Nixon said you could fly?

James Schlesinger

No, no, he said that immediately on Sunday. He said, "You give them any supplies that they want, but they must use their own aircraft for transportation," all chartered aircraft. Now, this turned out to be a non-starter, partly because they couldn't get the charters, but there was no way of getting the aircraft there. They would have had to fly into the civilian airport in the Azores, and the Portuguese didn't want that. And we never got the permission from the Portuguese to land military aircraft at the Lajes Air Force Base in the Azores until Saturday. There was a fellow in the State Department by the name of Sy Weiss [phonetic sp] who had called me on Thursday and said, "We must get permission from the Azores and would you" -- from the Portuguese -- "and would you support it?" But nothing happened until Saturday, when the president sent a sharp communication to the Portuguese leader saying, "We must have the right to move our aircraft through the Azores," and he acquiesced. But the notion that we were prepared to move supplies before Saturday is undermined by the fact that we never asked permission of the Portuguese till Saturday.

Timothy Naftali

So I guess that would be the 13th of October.

James Schlesinger

That was the 13th. Remember, permission was granted at the night of the 12th, and the aircraft were beginning to build up in the wee hours of the morning of the 13th here at Dover Air Force Base.

Timothy Naftali

And we still hadn't permission --

James Schlesinger

We still did not have the permission from --

Timothy Naftali

So even if there hadn't been crosswinds, we couldn't have flown through the Azores.

James Schlesinger

Pardon?

Timothy Naftali

Even if there hadn't been crosswinds, we couldn't have --

James Schlesinger

Well, we should have asked for permission immediately, as a matter of fact, mid-week when Weiss raised the question.

Timothy Naftali

You mentioned that the president also shifted in his approach -- at what point did he say you could send them heavy stuff, tanks and planes and...

James Schlesinger

Basically, we never had that during the war. The president called me on Thursday, I believe, to say that the Israelis were asking for some F-4s, which had been -- which they had purchased and were sitting at McDonnell facilities in St. Louis. They wanted those four aircraft and we... He said, "Release them" and we let those go, but up until then, I had orders, "No heavy equipment items." Now, subsequently, if I remember, we began to give them aircraft -- what was the -- the Sky Hawk.

Timothy Naftali

A-4s?

James Schlesinger

Yeah, Sky Hawks, but we only shipped one or two tanks, and we did that for what you might call psychological reasons, in that we took an M-60 tank, and we put it in a C-5A, and we flew that tank all the way to Israel. Now, we couldn't have done that in any number, and the only thing on board that C-5A was that one tank, but we managed to get all the way to Israel with that one tank, and we advertised that. And this was taken note of, I was told, by Egyptian officers saying, "Good Lord, they can ship tanks by air!" So it had the psychological effect, but it had no serious effect on the military balance. Tanks did not move until well after the war. Aircraft did move. What we did was to station aircraft carriers in the Atlantic so that you could take Sky Hawks, and you flew them from one Carrier 1, and then they flew on to Carrier 2 and so forth all the way in.

Timothy Naftali

How long did it take you to set that up?

James Schlesinger

Very quickly, in fact, Henry commended us for it. He says, "You guys are very good when you decide to do something," he said. We hadn't decided to do something; we were permitted to do something. Basically, most of the military was strongly pro-Israel and eager to get started.

Timothy Naftali

Because in Henry -- in Dr. Kissinger's book, he says that the Pentagon believed that Israel had enough supplies and was in no hurry to provide assistance in that first week.

James Schlesinger

Well, that happens to be true. Well, it was in no hurry to provide assistance -- they had assured us they had enough supplies, and they had based their assumption about supplies on the use rate during the 1967 war, and they had two or three times as much supplies as they had required on a daily basis during the Six-Day War. Of course, it turned out that the consumption of supplies was much more rapid, and that's why, after two or three days, they became alarmed about their supply conditions. So, it is true that the Pentagon thought they had enough supplies, partly because we had been assured by the Israelis that they had enough supplies. And they were in no hurry to deliver -- you know, we were operating under the rules which were established, which were we give them all the supplies that they needed provided that they carry them off in their own aircraft or in chartered aircraft.

Timothy Naftali

The supplies, but light supplies, not heavy. I mean, you didn't get authorization until later in the week that you could send them planes, for example.

James Schlesinger

We did not get any authorization until later in the week. As you will recognize, up until Saturday, actually Sunday morning, because of the time difference, it was not clear how deeply involved the United States had become in providing supplies, and it was only thereafter that the Israelis concerned about the loss of aircraft did get Sky Hawks, if I recall it. But the issue of tanks didn't come up until later on, and it led to an unseemly event down in Durham, North Carolina -- is that where Duke is?

Timothy Naftali

Yes.

James Schlesinger

When General Brown [phonetic sp] began to talk about the problems of draw-down of tanks from our inventories for the benefit of Israel. You might look into that particular episode.

Timothy Naftali

I just want to -- because you mentioned off-camera that when President Nixon said to you, "Give them everything they want," he said, "Give them everything they want, except for heavy material."

James Schlesinger

Except for heavy material, all supplies, any consumables, as it were, but not heavy equipment items.

Timothy Naftali

That's what he said at the beginning of the war.

James Schlesinger

Yeah, that was said on Sunday, because on Saturday we were just getting organized.

Timothy Naftali

Let's move to --

James Schlesinger

I laid it out all in a memorandum that six options -- five or six options -- starting with, the first option being that they get supplies but they did it in their own aircraft; second option being that they get supplies and heavy equipment items, but we couldn't get heavy equipment items there for a while. And the third option -- the final option would be delivery by U.S. military aircraft. Sunday, Henry came back to me saying the president has chosen option one, or maybe it was option two, that I'd laid down, option one being don't provide them with supplies, et cetera.

Timothy Naftali

So, this would be on the 7th of October, that's back on the 7th.

James Schlesinger

That would have been the 7th of October.

Timothy Naftali

The alert, tell us how that happened. The alert, the nuclear alert that happens a week later.

James Schlesinger

Well, the nuclear alert reflected -- once again, this was a psychological problem, in that, on Saturday night, you had the so-called Saturday Night Massacre in which Elliot Richardson resigned and Ruckelshaus resigned or was fired -- I can't remember the exact sequence. But anyway, they were gone, and the first calls for Nixon's impeachment came from Capitol Hill by Monday morning. These days, you get threats of impeachment against Clinton and threats of impeachment against Bush, but back there in 1973, cries for impeachment hadn't been heard since 1867 with then President Johnson. We then -- Nixon then got this letter from Brezhnev, which essentially said, "The Middle East is in turmoil. We are prepared to go in. We will go in company with the United States or we will go in on our own."

And, at the same time, there was a stand-down of their aircraft, most notably in East Germany, in which the best Soviet divisions and equipment were located, and we took that very seriously.

And we were concerned, because of the domestic situation, that the publicity and the uproar associated with the Saturday Night Massacre and then the calls for Nixon's impeachment might persuade the Russians that we were incapable of reacting to what we regarded as Brezhnev's threat. And so the so-called alert, which was raising the DEFCON level of the forces, was our way of conveying the message, "We are quite capable of reacting; don't you dare do anything."

Timothy Naftali

What role did President Nixon play in the alert?

James Schlesinger

You would have to -- I did not talk to him because, as you may know, he was in the residence at that time. But Al Haig was going back and forth between our meeting and the situation room and the White House, and he would come back from time to time and say, "The president has agreed to this" or "The president has not agreed to this."

Timothy Naftali

You didn't see the president during this period?

James Schlesinger

The president was in the residence.

Timothy Naftali

We interviewed Donald Rumsfeld and he mentioned that the Europeans were not informed ahead of time of the alert.

James Schlesinger

That is correct, and that was part of our misfortune. They heard -- suddenly their forces -- our forces were put on the alert. The one exception was that Henry had talked to Lord Kromo [phonetic sp], the British ambassador, so the Brits had been informed, but it was an unfortunate way, if not a shabby way, of treating our allies, on whose territory our forces were then stationed. Now, some of the raising of the DEFCON level was, in a sense, irrelevant because it involved our Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, but the Germans were rightly concerned that our forces in Germany itself, on German soil, would be placed in a higher readiness condition, and they had not been consulted or informed.

Timothy Naftali

How much of a crisis was this?

James Schlesinger

Well, of course in retrospect it is always easy to dismiss it, but at the time, given our concern about what the Russians might think was going on in the United States and our concern about the situation in the Middle East and the fact that we did not want the Russians to be there, Russian forces to be in the Middle East, which was the threat and that this would change the balance of power in the Middle East, that we thought it was a crisis.

Timothy Naftali

Whose idea was the alert, the raising of the alert? Do you remember?

James Schlesinger

I think it was Henry's idea, just raising the DEFCON level. Now, we talked a little bit about the extent to which this would go on, and the Alaska command and the Southern commands were not included in that alert level. He also turned to Admiral Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and he said, "Tom?" He says, "You can keep all of this quiet, can't you?" And Admiral Moorer said, "Well, of course, Henry, we will do that." And I looked at Moorer in amazement, and I think he was just trying to reassure Henry, but the sort of -- the notion that we could do all this and place a couple of million people on higher alert status and that this would all be kind of kept a secret was just not on. In fact, you start with the reserve forces -- we alerted the air defense forces which were largely reserves -- so you have people getting a phone call, families getting a phone call saying, "Return to base, we have been mobilized and put on alert status." There you would have the husbands, at 2 a.m., going out to a nearby airfield and his wife saying, "What are you getting dressed for? What are you getting dressed for?" And he was expected to say, "Oh, I'm just going out for a while." No way, what do you do?

Timothy Naftali

Well, it appeared in newspapers.

James Schlesinger

And so, immediately, sort of, this got into the local press. The first episode, if I remember, was some sergeant down in Homestead Air Force Base who was zooming back to his base, exceeding the limit, and he's stopped by a cop and the officer said to him, "Where do you think you're going?" And the sergeant says, "I'm going to Homestead Air Force Base. We have been placed on a higher alert status. And the police officer, I can imagine, said, "I've heard every excuse now." And the sergeant said to him, "Here's a quarter, go call the base." And the sergeant then called the base and they said, "Yes, indeed." And the next call went to the "Miami Herald" saying, "Did you know that we have a higher alert status here at Homestead Air Force Base?" There's no way that you can keep this kind of information secret. Well, the next morning I was at the Pentagon, and Henry called me in a rage saying, "The news has gotten out." He had been shaving when he heard this on the radio and, "How did the news get out?" I said, "Henry, there's no way that you can put two million people on alert worldwide and keep it a secret."

Timothy Naftali

So we just wanted the Soviets to know and nobody else?

James Schlesinger

Pardon? Yeah, he just wanted the Soviets to be aware of it.

Timothy Naftali

A few more questions, one Watergate-related. Was this around the time that General Haig asked you to get the National Security Agency to copy all the tapes? Did he ask you that?

James Schlesinger

He did that in the summer of 1974. It would have been after the revelation about the tapes. Remember that? That came in June or there about --

Timothy Naftali

Of '73, the tape revelation was in June of '73.

James Schlesinger

Oh, you're quite right, but this would have been as things were getting serious in 1974, and I said, "We're happy to have NSA do the copying of the tapes, but there must be somebody from the special prosecutor's office there to observe it. We're not going to do this without informing the special prosecutor."

Timothy Naftali

And then what did he say?

James Schlesinger

Well, I don't remember precisely what he said, but it was an expression of exasperation.

Timothy Naftali

This was in the summer of '74 that --

James Schlesinger

I think so. It's now thirty-odd years ago. It was late in the game.

Timothy Naftali

I read somewhere that -- did you call George Brown [phonetic sp], General Brown, into your office and tell him not to take an order from the president?

James Schlesinger

No, no, you can't do it. First of all, the president is commander-in-chief. What I was concerned about was what I'll call the integrity of the chain of command. The president gives orders. The secretary of defense gives orders. White House staff does not give orders. And I told General Brown that the chiefs should be aware -- all the service chiefs should be aware -- that, if there were any messages from the White House, that I should be informed immediately.

Timothy Naftali

What had led you to -- why did you assume that this had to be said or done?

James Schlesinger

Well, I had to protect the integrity of the chain of command, in my judgment. There is always the possibility of hotheaded free-lancers in the White House, and we were not going to allow that to happen without my knowing about it.

Timothy Naftali

Was this in July of '74?

James Schlesinger

I don't remember whether it was June or July. It may have been -- in fact, it may have been late May or June, somewhere in there.

Timothy Naftali

Was this the time -- did you look into moving the 82nd Airborne or were you concerned about the movement of the 82nd Airborne at this time?

James Schlesinger

I don't remember that I was concerned about the movement of the 82nd Airborne. The 82nd Airborne -- there had been previously, sometime earlier, there had been disturbances in Detroit, and we thought that, despite Posse Comitatus, that we might have to use military forces to -- and the 82nd was the designated military element that would, if necessary, go into Detroit. But I don't recall that we were concerned about the 82nd being moved.

Timothy Naftali

Into Washington, D.C.

James Schlesinger

Into Washington, D.C.

Timothy Naftali

Did you take any other precautions in that difficult period?

James Schlesinger

No, I did not take any other precautions. I thought that it was sufficient that this was a very sensitive period and that anybody in the White House -- the president would never get himself involved in a direct order of that sort. You might have somebody or other in the White House deciding that this was a time to have something of a show of force.

Timothy Naftali

When was the nuclear football moved from President Nixon to President Ford? How did that transition occur?

James Schlesinger

The president resigned on August 8th or 9th or whatever it was, and he ceased to be president at some particular point, and the football was moved. I had a concerned call from somebody on the White House staff about the president, when he left on Air Force One from Andrews Air Force Base, that there was not a general officer out there to see him off, that his departure was followed by a colonel. I had a call, I think, from Air Force One, in effect, complaining about that. But that was not something that I anticipated that I should have told the normal protocol people out there that protocol will be normal, because we wanted to treat him, until such time as he ceased to be president, as the president of the United States.

Timothy Naftali

Because I think he ceased to be president somewhere over Missouri. It was during the flight that he ceased to be president. Mel Laird told us that he was concerned about -- in the time that he was the secretary of defense -- about late night calls to the Pentagon and that he had put his people in -- I think there's an op-center in the Pentagon -- and that they were told to alert him whenever the White House ordered the movement of troops.

James Schlesinger

Mm-hmm.

Timothy Naftali

Had that been a concern of yours? Was that a concern?

James Schlesinger

You mean at that time or in general?

Timothy Naftali

In general.

James Schlesinger

I had not been concerned about that, by and large. That I think was largely a matter of the interplay between the Department of Defense when Mel was secretary and the White House over the issue of withdrawal of our ground forces, our military forces, from Vietnam itself, but you'd have to talk to Mel about that. I think that, as you may know, or as he may have told you, that the White House and the president and Hague, and Kissinger were all concerned that he was withdrawing too rapidly. He wanted to withdraw too rapidly. I suspect that that particular point about the movement of troops and being consulted might have been related to Southeast Asia.

Timothy Naftali

Well, he also mentioned, he told a story about 1970, September 1970, during the Middle East crisis. The White House had wanted to take action in the Middle East and Laird didn't.

James Schlesinger

Mm-hmm, well, I -- that sounds right.

Timothy Naftali

You weren't there.

James Schlesinger

I just don't -- wouldn't know.

Timothy Naftali

How did you -- just after you left CIA, we began to get evidence, increasing evidence, that the Soviets were planning to MIRV more of their missiles than we had anticipated and had three new missile systems that were MIRVable and another one that had something similar to a MERV, four new systems. CIA hadn't anticipated this. People began to worry about the Soviet first-strike capability.

James Schlesinger

Right.

Timothy Naftali

As secretary of defense, to what extent did you begin to have some concerns about our arms control strategy after SALT I?

James Schlesinger

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James Schlesinger Interview Transcription

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] And Henry was annoyed, to say the least, with me and said, "You're not supposed to do net assessments. You're supposed to just confine yourself to what the Soviets are doing." But Nixon was -- found it very interesting. And he said, "Make sure you per sec 1.4(b)(c) brief this down on the Hill," he said, in line with his tendency to want to get the Hill to understand the full complexity of the Soviet threat.

[REDACTED]

You have a testing of all the new missiles after 1972. When I went to Defense, I proceeded to develop the so called MX, which had been on the drawing boards, but I said, "We are going to proceed with the MX." And this was in connection with the change in strategic nuclear doctrine. And I said, "We are perfectly happy not to proceed with the deployment of the MX, provided that you people on the other side bring down the throw weight on your side so that both sides have limited throw weight." Well, it turned out that not only the SS-18, but the SS-19 was a very sizable missile, and the SS-19 was fully the equivalent of what we wanted in the MX. Now, as yet, the Soviets did not have the accuracy that one feared. But then my then-hope that we could restrain the Soviets as they moved to a MIRV force and a more accurate force from exploiting the existing throw weight in their ICBM force disappeared. And particularly what I had wanted was to cap the SS-9 follow on, which was the 18 and not have that deployed, and then when they began to deploy the SS-19 it was plain that they were going to have a great deal more throw weight than made us feel comfortable. And, as a consequence, we proceeded with the development of the MX missile.

Timothy Naftali

Did you --

James Schlesinger

Now, one thing that you will, in light of your previous questions, recognize is that the concern was as much psychological as elsewhere. The perception on the part of the Europeans that the Soviet missile forces substantially outweighed, as it were, the American missile forces would lead to greater doubts about the ability of the United States to respond against a conventional attack against Europe.

Timothy Naftali

In his memoirs, Dr. Kissinger is a little critical of your relationship with Scoop Jackson.

James Schlesinger

Mm hmm.

Timothy Naftali

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Because he thinks that this fueled some of the Congress' criticism on the follow on the SALT I, SALT II.

James Schlesinger

The relationship with -- between Jackson and Kissinger had deteriorated over the course of the administration. I was an old friend of Scoop Jackson, and, in fact, my first serious involvement in Washington was a consequence of being called on by Jackson to do an analysis of the impact of systems analysis on the Department of Defense. That was back there in, oh my, must have been 1967 or so. Scoop, driven substantially by Paul Nitze and --

Timothy Naftali

Perle?

James Schlesinger

Well, that too, but from outside of his staff by Admiral Zumwalt, whose memoirs you can read on the subject, made more of the -- all of them made more of the old submarine forces that the Soviets had not agreed to abandon when they signed the SALT I agreement. I had nothing to do with all that, and I thought it was exaggerated, to say the least. It was partly Zumwalt, who was a Naval officer, being more focused on submarines and getting Jackson concerned about that. I thought, as I said earlier, I testified in support of the agreements. I got deeply concerned, however, subsequently, when the SS-19 appeared, which was, in effect, a very heavy throw weight missile in addition to the SS-9 follow on, which was the 18. But I don't know what Dr. Kissinger said in his memoirs about Scoop Jackson, who decided on his own with the staff what a problem might be in the arms control area. But as I say, I did not have problems with the SALT I agreement.

Timothy Naftali

Did you -- was the strategic reserve your idea? During the oil embargo, was the strategic reserve your idea?

James Schlesinger

No.

Timothy Naftali

Did you participate?

James Schlesinger

I can't take credit for that.

Timothy Naftali

That is -- but was one of the products, I think, of the oil embargo.

James Schlesinger

Well, I was the one that opened the strategic reserve in 1977, but that legislation had passed I think in 1976, when I was gone from the Pentagon.

Timothy Naftali

Just to close one loop. After you warned General Brown -- no -- did any strange orders come from the White House in the last month?

James Schlesinger

No, no.

Timothy Naftali

Okay. Last question. You were secretary of defense when Vietnam fell, I believe in '75.

James Schlesinger

I was, indeed.

Timothy Naftali

To what extent do you think South Vietnam could have held, survived a little longer, had Congress provided supplies?

James Schlesinger

I thought that it was folly to go after additional funds once the collapse in the Central Highlands and in ICOR had taken place. There was this mythology developed that, somehow or other, we were going to hold Saigon and the Delta, but it was plain -- first of all, the North Vietnamese at that point had introduced 18 divisions, and they were marching on Saigon. And the divisions that were left after the collapse in ICOR and then the Central Highlands were -- the divisions around Saigon itself were basically household divisions, they were there to protect the regime internally rather than against a major invasion from the North. And I told the president at that time that it was all over. The request was made to the Hill for additional aid, but it wasn't going to change things at that point.

Timothy Naftali

In your confirmation hearings in '73, you mentioned the possibility of U.S. military action to force Hanoi to abide by the agreement, the Paris Peace Accords. Do you think had we used military force we might have prevented --

James Schlesinger

Oh, yeah, but that would have been before the collapse that took place in March, as I recall, in the Central Highlands. We could have used military force. In fact, the North Vietnamese were very cautious. At the end of 1974, they began to probe west of Saigon to see how we would react, and we had been forbidden in the Appropriations Act for 1974 to use military force in and over and offshore these states of the former French-Indochina. But I made bellicose statements about, "We're prepared to respond," and so forth, but we were precluded by law from responding. And the North Vietnamese probed west of Saigon, and then they began to move in the Central Highlands. Once they saw that we were not reacting, it was then that the flood came in and that the collapse took place. I had tried to head that off my verbal deterrents, but after the collapse we could not have done anything militarily short of nuclear weapons, if you want to consider that possibility. And the question is, "Could we have used military force beforehand?" The answer is, "Yes." But if they had thought or had seen that we were prepared to use military force, they would not have acted as they did.

Timothy Naftali

But then would -- okay. But the question is if we had bombed them, would this just have delayed the ultimate collapse of South Vietnam? Could we have -- if we had bombed the North?

James Schlesinger

Well, by the summer of '72, when General Abrams left Vietnam, we had essentially destroyed the Viet Cong, and we had neutralized the North Vietnamese. That's why, ultimately, they agreed to the Paris Peace Accords. But then we proceeded to withdraw our forces. We had the air forces, of course. We could bring in B-52s from Guam, and we had the -- I think it was the 7th Air Force down in Thailand -- but we did not have any ground forces. We had told Thieu that we would use our Air Forces in support of his ground forces. And as you may remember, in the previous year, '73, that the North Vietnamese had attempted in the offensive, that with our air help, the ARVN, the Army of South Vietnam, had defeated. And the answer is that if we had been prepared to give the help that we had promised to them at one point, they might have staved off the defeat.

Timothy Naftali

Was there a discussion in the Ford Administration of giving that support and late support?

James Schlesinger

No, because President Ford was part of the agreement that took place in the summer of '73 with regard to the Appropriations Act that prohibited the use of American forces, as I said, over, in, or offshore, the states of the former French-Indochina. So, there was nothing that we were doing. We sent General Ryan out there, and he came back with a somewhat hopeful report. But the fact of the matter was it was all over and that we were kidding ourselves. As the North Vietnamese drew closer and closer to Saigon, I said, "We've got to get our people out. Get the dependents out. And when Tan Son Nhat, the airfield outside of Saigon, falls, we won't be able to move our people." Well, it turned out that the very next day there was -- the North Vietnamese arrived and they began to shell Tan Son Nhat. And we were unable to move -- use the airport to move our people. So, that was a consequence. Now, if we had turned loose our air in support of the ARVN before they had lost all their best divisions, that might have been an entirely different matter.

Timothy Naftali

Dr. Schlesinger, thank you for your time today.

James Schlesinger

My pleasure.