

Interview with Richard Helms

by Robert M. Hathaway

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Tape 1 Side 1

Q: All right, Sir, as I suggested, I'm going to ask you some pretty specific questions, but if in answering the specific questions you want to get into broader areas, please, of course, don't hesitate. I, first of all, am interested in relationships you had, or the Agency had, with a number of individuals. Why don't we start off first of all with the Chilean publisher, Agustin Edwards? I understand that you and [] met with Mr. Edwards, and also Donald Kendall, in mid-September. Do you recall that meeting and can you tell me anything about it?

A: Yes, I do recall that meeting. It seems to me it was in the Madison Hotel, if I'm not mistaken, or some hotel here in town, and it was Agustin Edwards and Don Kendall. Don Kendall was the one who had asked to have the meeting. I don't recall anymore whether this was one of those things that he got the White House to call me to go see him or just exactly how the meeting was set up, but I do recall that we had a meeting, I think it was one morning. Edwards presented what was happening in Chile, what the problems were and so forth. I guess [] went with me, I don't remember anymore whether he accompanied me to the meeting or whether I went alone. He can certainly

straighten that out, he is in town here too; at least I see him on the street all the time. Have you talked to him? It might be useful to talk to Anyway, it was following that meeting that President Nixon called the meeting that was attended by Attorney General Mitchell, Henry Kissinger, the meeting in which President Nixon decided that we should develop what turned out to be the Track II program. A meeting in which I made some notes on a yellow pad while we were meeting with the President. Those notes later were taken out of my personal files and presented not only to the Rockefeller Commission, I think, but also to the Senate [Church] Committee. I've never liked that. Nobody asked my permission to do it, and it was among a lot, not a lot but a tidy number of documents that had been my, sort of my personal property, and when I left the Agency I left them in the Agency's custody but sort of in my name, because some of them were classified and I didn't want to remove them from the Agency and not have them properly protected. So I would have thought that courtesy dictated that I'd be told that somebody had gone through them and had turned them over to various people who were investigating these matters.

Q: Of course, that memo, that set of notes was later published.

A: Yes.

Q: This particular meeting you had with Kendall and Edwards,

do you remember specifically things that were talked about? Was it Edwards giving you information for the most part, his assessment?

A: Yes, I was there really to hear what Edwards had to say, and it was quite clear that Kendall was backing him up, that he had been the moving force in setting up the meeting. The trouble is that so many years have gone by and there's been so much testimony and the air has been blue with allegations and charges of one sort and another that I no longer remember the specifics of any conversation [in] which I participated at that time, and it's sad because it would be nice if it was good and clear in my mind. I did have the impression though that, there were some things said at that meeting that later, I believe, Kendall denied ever having said or been involved in or something but--

Q: This would have been testimony for the Senate?

A: Probably. In any event we're not here to decide who perjured themselves and who didn't, but I unfortunately can't remember the details of that meeting any more.

Q: Did you meet with Edwards other times during this fall?

A: I don't recall having done so.

Q: What about Kendall? Did you see Kendall often in relation to, or more than this one time, in relation to Chile?

A: Yes. Well, once in a while I would see Kendall. I'd see Kendall at the Business Council meetings, for example, twice a year down at Hot Springs. Once in a while I would see him at the White House. So I saw Kendall off and on.

Not necessarily on any specific business, but I would physically see him, since you asked me.

Q: How does he fit into the Chile situation? Was he simply a go-between?

A: He fits in the Chile situation in the following fashion: When President Nixon opened this meeting--when was it, on the 15th of September or something of that year?--he said, "Don Kendall has been in touch with me, and after all," then he turned to Mitchell, "Kendall was my first client when I set up to practice law in New York. He is an awful nice fellow, and I think we ought to do anything for him we can. He is very interested in this Chile matter and business down there and Agustin Edwards and so forth, and we ought to really try to help." That was Kendall's connection with Chile.

Q: What about John McCone? I believe you saw John McCone a number of times in the summer and fall of 1970 about Chile. Can you describe--

A: Well, he would call. He kept himself as a consultant to the Agency and I had no reason to change his status. He'd been consultant under Admiral Raborn. He used to come in from time to time and talk about the fact that we ought to be on the ball about Chile and we ought to be pushing to see that Allende didn't get elected and so forth. In other words, as a director of ITT, McCone was thoroughly versed in the problems of Chile. He didn't want to see ITT's interest down there hurt, and besides he was aware of what had happened during the Kennedy administration

when actually we had had a very successful covert action program going in Chile, which saw to it that Frei became the president. I think that he, McCone, was rather hoping or expecting it would be a rerun of that operation. Unfortunately, this time the administration decided too late that they wanted to prevent Allende's advent. The Agency, including myself, had tried a year earlier to impress upon Kissinger the fact that if anything was going to be done about the election in Chile, we'd have to have plenty of lead time in order to get the assets in place and to do the necessary things to become effective in any political campaign. He frankly didn't take the matter seriously until much too late. He's admitted this. I think the record's clear that he made a mistake.

Q: To what degree was McCone privy as to American actions, or Agency activity in Chile?

A: I don't know but I don't think he was privy to the details. If he was, he didn't get them from the Agency.

Q: But he was dismayed, then, at what he perceived as a lack of effort, extensive efforts to work against Allende?

A: McCone was a hard man to dismay but he kept pushing--let's put it that way.

Q: Prior to the first round of voting on the 4th of September, Agency officers in Santiago seem to have worked fairly closely with ITT representatives, helping ITT to funnel funds into the campaign of the conservative candidate. Were you personally aware of that or was this a minor operation which never got back to Headquarters?

A: My recollection consistently has been that what the Agency was doing in those days was not some effort to destabilize any government. It was an effort to promote in the private sector, and obviously the public sector as well in Chile, a sort of forward-looking helpful campaign. In other words, if you examined what the Agency was doing, there was no rough stuff in there and we weren't behind any particular candidate. We were simply pleading for the democratic process and things of this kind. That's my recollection of this program. Now, who they were using as conduits for money and how they were organizing those things and so forth, I don't know that I knew at the time or whether I cared. I was leaving that to Karamessines and the people in the DDP. But when later I was charged with not having told the truth and all the rest of it, the interesting thing about it was that I was, certainly I was not telling the whole truth but I was certainly not lying. I was telling what I understood the program to be. Now people might interpret the program as being different, but I don't know how they could. It was designed at that period to be a constructive program for democracy in Chile and if the record shows it was something different and so forth, I may have been misled, but I don't think I was.

Q: Let me pick up on something you just said. You said, "At this time the United States, particularly the Agency, was not supporting any particular candidate." Now, do you see a contradiction between that and the fact that Agency

people in Santiago were helping ITT funnel funds to a particular candidate?

A: Not particularly, no. I think you can split hairs, you can argue and debate about matters of that kind, but as I sit here, I don't recall this having been an issue that crossed in front of my vision: that ITT had their own candidates and were using the Agency to get money to them. Now it may have been, I'm not denying it, Bob, for a moment. I just don't remember. This is something that Halpern and [] and people like that can help out with. If you are writing a history of this period, you obviously want to try to get it as accurate as possible, and I have no interest in tilting it one way or the other. I'm interested in having it show what was there.

Q: I understand. And this brings up a problem we've got. We've not so much interested in writing the full history as we are in writing about the things that crossed your desk. Thus some of my questions that I am going to ask: What did you know? what level of details did you know? Simply because we'll be writing from that perspective. What about Agency predictions before the 4 September voting? I have seen indications that the Agency said it was too close to call. Several published accounts, on the other hand, say that the Agency, up to the very moment of the election, said that Allende would be defeated, the conservative candidate Alessandri--

A: No, no, I don't recall any Agency predictions that the conservatives were going to win. My recollection is that

we were all worried about, that it was too close to call and we rather suspected that Allende was going to get in. And in a three-way election that this was going to insure it for him. No, I think we were very worried about it.

Q: Powers, Tom Powers's book, for example, mentions a specific figure of 42%. Alessandri was, according to his account, predicted to win 42% of the vote.

A: Well, I don't know who he talked to.

Q: I've never seen that so I was curious whether you, if you have any idea--

A: I don't know who--You know, it's awfully hard with these books like Tom Powers and Seymour Hersh and so forth, to know whom they talked to to get information from, whether the witness is credible or whether he knew what he was talking about.

Q: Which is why we're so appreciative to be able to come straight to you.

A: It is my recollection, at that time we were worried that Allende was going to get it and no prediction would have said the conservatives were going to get it that I was any party to.

Q: Well, that squares with the papers I've seen, so I guess that in a way that's what I wanted you to say.

A: In other words the mistake here, Bob, was that if Allende was to be kept from power in that election, work had to have started a good year or a year and a half before the election, and it wasn't started, and that's why it was not

possible to really have any, let's say, major or significant effect on the outcome of the election.

Q: So if we were trying to draw lessons from this whole episode, you would certainly place that up there.

A: There was no question about it. If one is going to get into covert political action, particularly involved with elections in anything approximating the democratic process, one's got to be in there very early because it takes time to put in the plumbing, to get the agents, to get the conduits set up, and all of those things which help to give you the leverage to affect the election.

Q: Fair enough. Well, let me go back to these accounts, then, such as Powers. I think Powers specifically says that the White House felt it had been misled by the Agency and had expected. . .

A: That is nonsense.

Q: OK, that's nonsense. Powers furthermore goes on to say that as a result of feeling it had been lulled into complacency by the Agency, the White House was infuriated by the Agency. Any. . .

A: The White House, I have no doubt, was upset by Allende's victory, but they weren't misled by the Agency. They may have been misled by the State Department or by themselves, but it's the White House's fault. It's President Nixon and Henry Kissinger's fault that we didn't get involved in that Chilean election in time to have some effect on it.

Q: You mentioned the State Department. Let's talk about the State Department's role. I gather that the Agency and

State Department did not see eye to eye on the proper approach to things during this election?

A: Well, I can't remember how much controversy there was over that. A fellow like Halpern would have a much better recollection of it. But then they seldom do, there are always deviations as to emphasis and whether you want to use the banks to accomplish certain objectives or whether you don't or whether it's going to be bad for our relations with a country. When you get involved in an affair of that kind, frequently there is a substantial difference between State's view of what might be done and the Agency's view of what you ought to do if you're going to accomplish your objective. I haven't any doubt there were differences at this time, although I've forgotten what they were.

Q: One which specifically recurs from time to time is that Ambassador Korry down in Chile and the State Department here were very vocal in not wanting to back any particular candidate. You're quoted, I think by Powers, to the effect that "you can't win with nothing; you have to win with something." In other words, you've got to back a particular candidate. Do you recall any. . .?

A: Well, I don't recall that specific statement, but I have no doubt I made it because I believe it. In other words, if you are going to go into a campaign, you've got to back a candidate.

Q: True, true. . . . Another quote from Powers. I keep coming back to Powers because I think his is the most

extensive account. I'd simply like to play off some of the Powers' things and get your opinion on them. Actually this is not Powers, this is Hersh's new book. Hersh quotes an anonymous CIA official, who says: "We had staked our reputation on keeping Allende out.

Alessandri's loss hurt our standing in the White House."

Do you have any comment on that particular quote?

A: Well, I don't, I think it's very difficult to make that type of judgment. President Nixon and Henry Kissinger were obviously upset over Allende's victory, they were looking around for scapegoats, there wasn't any doubt about it. They didn't want to accept the responsibility themselves for not having gotten on with this thing properly. And I have no doubt that it might have made the Agency standing with Nixon sink. Nixon tended to be a man who poked fun at or was sardonic about all kinds of agencies of government. His attitude was that the only bright, really intelligent fellow in town was himself. In fact, the greatest irony in history is the fact that Nixon was so stupid about Watergate, because he was constantly disparaging everybody else about their abilities to do anything and the only smart fellow was himself. Then he comes along and makes these really stupid decisions in connection with Watergate and out of office he goes. So it was ironical in the extreme and it may be that Chile did make him feel sour about the Agency. Easier to blame it on the Agency, they didn't bring it off. But it was Nixon's own fault.

Q: Nixon must have been a very difficult President to work for.

A: He was not easy.

Q: Can you expand on that a bit for us?

A: Well, I think that's at another time. If you want to interview me some time on the Presidents I worked for, I'd be glad to try to do a chapter on that, but I don't want to do it in the context of Chile.

Q: Fair enough. One more quote and then I'll get away from these quotes. This same anonymous official whom Hersh quotes before then says that as a result of the September 4th balloting, Allende became the object of "a personal vendetta" by top CIA officials, including Richard Helms.

A: A personal vendetta? Oh, no, nothing personal about it. As a matter of fact, it was not long after he was elected that I left office. [Note: Mr. Helms is incorrect here. Allende was inaugurated in November 1970, while Helms remained DCI until February 1973.] I didn't have time to get personal about Allende particularly. I'd worked against Allende in the early '60's in the Kennedy time. We tried to defeat him this time, but there was nothing personal about the vendetta. This is childish, this is novelizing.

Q: Good enough. Let's move to another type of topic. Apparently Senator Fulbright contacted you some time in the fall of '70, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and asked you, "I understand CIA's heavily involved in Chile." Do you have any recollection of that?

A: Yes, I do recall that conversation with him. It was a private conversation we had down in his office. I told him we had a program going there that was designed to help the democratic process and so forth. But the conversation with him took place before we got involved in the Track II, or even the more complicated aspects of Track I. So this was not a question, as I recall the circumstances, where he followed up on this until hearings much later.

Q: As far as you can recall, was this meeting before the initial 4 September election?

A: I think so. I don't remember when it was anymore, but I remember the conversation because I believe it was on this occasion that he said to me, "I just want to tell you something. Anytime I catch you fellows doing something of which I don't approve, I'm going to get up on the floor of the Senate and say that I don't approve and that will blow your operation and you won't be able to do anything after that." I said, "I understand that, Mr. Chairman." But it was an interesting object lesson in what any congressman or Senator could do to your operations if he chooses to do it.

Q: I gather this must have been a recurring problem, how much to tell. . . .

A: Well, it wasn't a recurring problem in my time particularly because most of them were pretty good about it. The committees we reported to, we didn't have any difficulty with. And as far as Fulbright was concerned, he threatened to do this but I don't know that he ever

did. My point is that the principle is there, that a senator or congressman on the floor is immune. You can't get him for any reason. He can blow any covert operation anytime he wants to.

Q: Now as well as in the past, of course.

A: Oh, sure.

Q: I want to move up into the middle of September now. You go and talk with the President and Kissinger and Mitchell on the 15th. We have, everyone has seen your handwritten notes. Did you make any other memorandum about that meeting?

A: Well, it seems to me that I came back to the Agency and had a meeting with some of the people there, and I believe notes were made of that meeting, but I didn't make them.

Q: I've seen notes of those meetings. I wondered if you recalled making a memorandum of your meeting at the White House.

A: No, I don't think so. I think I just reported orally.

Q: After that 15 September meeting, what other guidance did you get from the White House about Chile?

A: I don't know that I got any other guidance. At least I don't recall any. I believe that at the time I put Tom Karamessines in charge of attempting to carry out this Track II approach. He and Kissinger were to deal with each other--in other words, to keep the security of the operation, to keep it from getting all over the place. Karamessines and Kissinger were to deal on whatever basis was necessary in order to get whatever guidance was

required or to report as desirable or whatever the case might be, and I rather stood aside from the thing at the moment so that I wouldn't get the lines all crossed up. I thought it was better to have Karamessines, who was running it, in touch with Kissinger, rather than going through me, which simply complicated the business.

Q: Do you recall going back to the White House at all on Chile?

A: I may have on some occasion or other mentioned to either the President or Kissinger that we had done this or that, but I did not get any more guidance that I recall. Is there any evidence that I did get other guidance?

Q: No. I am reasonably sure that you and Karamessines went back together on the 18th to talk to Kissinger.

A: That may well be. Maybe that was when we were setting up the whole approach to this thing, and getting an agreement that Karamessines and Kissinger would work together.

Q: Other than that I don't have any other. . . . You left the country for several weeks, of course. You went to the Far East, in October, and I think you were gone for two weeks, or slightly more than two weeks.

A: Is that the time I went to the Far East?

Q: Yes. So this again gets back to the problem I mentioned earlier: what was Richard Helms's role in all of this? Because we're not interested in writing the history of Chile; we're interested in writing the history of Richard Helms. Given the fact that you did tend to turn over day-to-day operations to your deputies, given the fact

that you were out of the country, how would you answer that question: What was your personal role in the whole Chilean episode?

A: Well, Karamessines kept me reasonably informed as to what he was doing, which is what I wanted him to do. He was doing the best he could to do what we had been asked to do, and it seemed to me that my role was supervisory and in this respect I wasn't up to my armpits in day-to-day. It was one of the things I found most trying in various testimony, at least during the Church Committee hearings, that every young lawyer up there seemed to feel that the paper that interested him should have been my total absorption. I had hundreds, if not thousands of pieces of paper to deal with every year, and I couldn't give equal treatment to every one, so I did my supervising as adequately as I could. I tried to put in the hands of capable people certain jobs to be done, and I just followed up on them to see that they were doing their best to do them.

Q: This, I gather, is the Richard Helms method of administration?

A: That's right.

Q: And in that sense, Chile is no different from other types of problems?

A: That's right.

Q: Were you conscious of being under pressure from the White House, if not you directly, Karamessines?

A: Everybody, we were under pressure from the White House, there was no question about it. When you read those notes, what do they say? If that isn't pressure, I don't know the nature of it. What does the President have to say to get you stimulated? I'll put it that way. So, of course we were under pressure, a hell of a lot of pressure, on that, on Vietnam, various things from time to time. Those two stick out particularly.

Q: Moving into Track Two now, what would you say were the principal problems facing the Agency in trying to implement the President's desires?

A: The time element. There was so little time in which to bring it off, get it organized. That, I think, was the major difficulty.

Q: Did the President's requirement that you not inform State, that you not inform the Ambassador present particular problems?

A: We were not to inform State or Defense or the Ambassador. Of course it created problems. It made it more difficult, it took more time, it made communications trickier. Those things always are, the more you isolate a particular action or operation for security reasons, and cut a whole lot of people out of it, the more difficult it becomes to operate. Usually because you can't get their help or use their facilities or whatever the case may be. And it was so in this case. It created a lot of unnecessary, well I don't want to say "unnecessary," it created a lot of

problems setting up channels so that these people would not be aware of what was going on.

Q: Were you conscious, or do you recall being conscious at the time that "I wish we could work through regular channels, or I wish we could consult with Ambassador Korry, or it would be easier for us if we had the cooperation of State Department"?

A: Well, we didn't bother to argue with the White House, or the President about the way he wanted it done, we just tried to do it. I don't know that it would be useful to argue with him, because no matter how we went at it, it was going to be a very tricky thing to pull off in the time available to us. We did the best we could and it didn't work.

Q: One certainly gets the sense in reading the memoranda from the time involved that you all were not very optimistic.

A: Correct. As a matter of fact, I thought there was very little possibility from the very time we were asked to do it. But since it was a Presidential order, I thought it was incumbent upon us to do the best we could to fulfill the order.

Q: I want to throw out two hypothetical propositions simply to get your reactions. The first is, that Richard Helms recognized that this probably was going to be a losing proposition and therefore deliberately distanced himself from it, not taking a day-to-day interest, delegating responsibility. How do you react?

A: You sound like some young lawyer on the Senate Committee. (laughter)

Q: Well, I don't, I consider that an insult because I don't mean to be lawyerly in the least. But allegations like this have been made.

A: Allegations like that are bullshit for the simple reason that anything that went wrong, I was going to be responsible for. There was no way that I could distance myself from Chile or Vietnam or any of the things the Agency was doing. I was the boss, I was in charge, I was held responsible, everybody in the Agency held me responsible, the Government held me responsible. It was not possible to distance myself from it.

Q: That's what I wanted. . . . What about David Phillips? Do you happen to remember why he was chosen to head the Task Force?

A: Well, he had lived in Chile at one time, it seems to me, and he knew his way around. He had been a newspaperman there or something. We were looking for people who knew the country and who knew the people and could speak the language and Phillips was one of the likely candidates. Why, is there some particular reason?

Q: No, I'm just trying to get a sense of the reasoning, the line of reasoning after you walked out of the White House on the 15th of September.

A: Well, we had a meeting, we got together, Karamessines and various other people--Broe, I think, was there and some others. We just put our thinking caps on as to who the people would be who could best carry out this kind of

mission. This is what we came up with. Whether it was good or bad judgment, it was the best we could do.

Q: Had you had dealings with Phillips in the past?

A: I knew him. He seemed like a steady officer that could possibly bring off something like this. At least he'd give it a good shot.

Q: What about your relationship with--and again, this may be below your level, I don't know. It seems that the Agency established a particularly or unusually close working relationship with the military attache in Santiago. A man by the name of Col. Wimert. Are you familiar. . .?

A: I don't remember why. But comes down here every once and awhile, doesn't he, from Princeton? I saw him at a lunch not long ago. He could tell you all these things very easily. Or call him on the telephone and talk to him. You could get that kind of thing just by raising the phone. But I don't recall why they were in touch with him or what exactly, I don't remember anymore what role specifically he played.

You know this Chile thing, in my opinion, has now been blown out of all proportion. It has been blown out of all proportion by Nixon and Kissinger's mistake of not getting into the thing in time. But the Hersh book about Kissinger, the allegations that Kissinger lied about Chile, all of this business has got that Chile thing now in letters of light on the wall, and it doesn't deserve to be there in the context of what was going on at the time, life on this globe, our problems with Vietnam, and all the

other things that were going on. It is just amazing to me that people are still trying to sort out that business about Chile. As though there was some fancy little moral or gem or saying or rubric or something that someone was going to find at the bottom of the pile: that A, you shouldn't do things this way or yes, you should do things that way, or you shouldn' do this, or you shouldn't do that. It has me mystified to this day. Why all this attention on Chile? Because, and I can answer my own question, I think, it's been made into a big moral issue, by a lot of people who didn't like the fact that Allende lost his job, or that the Agency was trying to keep him from coming to power or whatever these things are. And therefore, a whole series of issues have come up as though this was the great game in town, as though this was the deification of a saint, or some really monumental problem. Actually it isn't any monumental problem at all. We're simply trying to run some operations under very difficult circumstances and doing the best we could. But to think everything else was dropped in order to deal with Chile, except for a very brief period, simply isn't the case.

Q: I think that's a very important point.

A: I think this ought to be reflected in the history that there has been so much of this, that this really didn't play all that big a role in the Agency's life.

Q: That's a key point. Perhaps the explanation, or partly the explanation is that so much documentation has been released on this. So it's easy, it's much easier to write about something. . . .

A: And people have now gotten, it's become a kind of a game. Was it this way or that way, this way or that way? No, no, you're right, you're wrong, you're up, you're down. . . . You know, it isn't that important.

Q: And I suspect the recent publication of the new Hersh book is simply going to stir all this up again.

A: Undoubtedly it will. Undoubtedly it will.

Q: I think you've just made a crucial point by your saying that it was only one of many issues.

A: There were all types of things going on at the same time. It is difficult to pull people off, to concentrate on that for a period, and to make it work. Just the wrong context in which to try to conduct covert operations. That's all there is to it.

Q: Let me follow up that point by leaving our chronological period and going into '71 and '72, after Allende's inauguration. The Agency continues to run some political operations, propaganda in Chile. Is it fair to say that this is clearly not among the pressing problems facing you in those two years after Allende was inaugurated?

A: Yes, I mean, a. it was no personal vendetta, and b. he was in office and we would have liked to have made life as unpleasant for him as we could because after all, we figured, he brought in the Russians and the Cubans and everything else which he did. We didn't like seeing that in this hemisphere. There was no reason why we shouldn't be opposed to it. But I don't recall after the election period, the Chile thing taking very much of my time.

- Q: Now, again, trying from our standpoint, what was Richard Helms's perspective?
- A: These were things the administration wanted done. We went on doing it, but it seems to me in '71 and '72 I had my mind on other things. When was that election, the fall of '70?
- Q: Fall of '70.
- A: The election itself? When was Allende eventually overthrown?
- Q: Fall of '73, after you've left.
- A: So in '71 and '72 he was in office.
- Q: That's correct. Well, I apologize for going back to what other people have said, but that's the way I need to proceed.
- A: Sure.
- Q: One of the other things I'm going to ask you is something the Church Committee suggested which was, the Church Committee perceived a conflict between the Agency's responsibilities as a producer of intelligence and the Agency's responsibilities in the covert action field. Specifically, the Church Committee suggests that the NIEs and the SNIIEs being produced don't portray a level of threat that would justify covert action or covert political action in Chile. Were you, you're familiar with what the Church Committee says, I think. Were you conscious . . .
- A: No, I don't recollect what the Church Committee says anymore, and frankly, Bob, I don't think I ever read it.

But let me just say this. In Washington on any day of the week, you can find somebody to contend almost anything about something. The Church Committee's view of these matters is of really small consequence. They're just another bunch of staff members who churned around, and decide this is the right way to go, this is the way they were taught at Howard or Princeton or Columbia or California or something. And this isn't the issue. The issue is that the elected President of the United States, who by the Constitution is the maker of U.S. foreign policy, decided that he wanted something done about this. That is what has to influence one. It isn't what some staffer or some Senator thinks about something. There are a hundred Senators down there. They've all got their views on these matters. They can have a vote any time they want a vote on something and say "here is the sense the Senate." They still aren't running American foreign policy. So one should be polite and genuflect and say, "Marvelous, Senator, this view of yours," but it doesn't have any standing. It's an opinion. It's like the editorial opinion in the Washington Post and the New York Times. So if we turned out a hundred SNIEs which said "Allende is a lovely fellow; just leave it to him and things will just bloom in Chile," that would have made no difference if the President wants something else done.

Q: You, on the other hand, don't recall any of this alleged conflict?

A: Well, if there was any conflict, it would have been static in my ears, but it wouldn't have had very much influence. In other words, Bob, these people who make these assertions, should, because they feel strongly about it, be permitted, I would think, to sit down with the President and face him with this and try and convince him that he's wrong. Now, this is going on today in this town. People are trying to convince President Reagan that he's wrong about El Salvador. That it really is the misery of the people, it is not the Cuban influence that is causing the insurgency. Now, all the people that think that, probably they would like to have a session with the President, hoping they could change his mind. Chances are they wouldn't change his mind at all. He's got a case on his side. I have no doubt that there are papers coming out of the Agency which don't paint the picture as black as the President and Ambassador Kirkpatrick would paint it in their way. So what are you going to do about this? You go with the President or you get out of the government and you can go back to Harvard and write papers.

Q: What impact on the Agency would you say this whole affair had, and I realize that you have other things to do and I am almost at the end of my questions. Looking at the Chilean situation now from, I suppose, March of 1970, when the 40 Committee first begins to focus on Chile, up through November of '70 when Allende is inaugurated: the United States has failed, the Agency at least in the perspective of the White House has failed to prevent

Allende's inauguration. Does this have an impact on the Agency?

A: No, not that I'm aware of.

Q: No impact of the Agency standing in the White House?

A: What do you mean? We've been over this. Because the Agency's standing with Nixon was never very good, never has been very good. It starts back at the time of his campaign against Kennedy when there was something called the "missile gap." Nixon held at that time that he was defeated by Kennedy because the Agency came up with a fictional missile gap. He holds the Agency responsible for having done this. Whether the Agency was responsible or not, or whether it was Senator Symington or somebody else who created this myth, the fact remained that it stood in Nixon's mind as a failure on the part of the Agency. As it later turned out, there was no missile gap. So from the very first day he came to office, the Agency had an uphill battle with Richard Nixon. About everything, whether it was covert operations or analysis, because he contended that the Agency's estimates had been bad, that they had not accurately forecast the on-rushing Soviet rearmament program, that there was a great deal that the Agency could have done to have made it a lot clearer that the Soviets were going to go for

End of Tape 1 Side 1

Interview with Richard Helms (continued)

Tape 1 Side 2

A: To continue on, I think President Nixon felt there was more that we could do in Vietnam than we had done. He was very irritated over the fact that we had not properly estimated the amount of goods and material that was coming into Sihanoukville port in Cambodia to support the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. In short, the Agency had, as I said a moment ago, an uphill battle with him all the time, and so Chile may have been one more nail in the Agency's coffin, if you like, but it wasn't all that significant or important in terms of his feeling of the Agency's adequacy or inadequacy. So anybody that focuses on Chile and gets that all out of perspective as being something that really upset Nixon should have a look at a whole lot of these other things that already upset him, or were upsetting him, or were going to upset him.

Q: You mentioned before about lessons. You suggested that one lesson was that if you were going to move in the covert political area, you have to do it early. Any other lessons to be drawn from this whole episode?

A: Well, I think that a case might have been made for the fact that maybe on September 15th what I should have said to Nixon was "we can't do this; let's forget it." That was obviously an option I had. I could have just dug my heels in and said "no, there was no possibility we could

bring this off. Therefore, we're not going to try it and hurt our reputation" and so on. I did not avail myself to that option because I believed the Agency to be a service agency, and I think that it is there to try to do what the President wants to have done and needs doing, and that therefore one should give it the best shot that one could--in other words, the best try that one could, and if you weren't successful, all right, you failed, but at least you'd done the best you could and it might have succeeded. Something might have turned up to help. I know there are big arguments about these things but I'll tell you this: that in this political town these arguments are on both sides by the same people, depending on whether they like the President and what he is doing, or whether they don't like the President and what he is doing. And don't believe a lot of this stuff, a lot of it is political. It's looking for scapegoats, it's trying to get at the guy that you want to get at. It's Hersh after Kissinger, or after Nixon, or somebody. But let's not get these things out of perspective. Let's try to keep this thing in some kind of rational terms, which when you look at it historically, you don't think that Chile was running the world in 1970.

Q: Hindsight, of course, is great. Well, this is my last question, Mr. Helms. What does this episode tell us about Richard Helms as DCI? Anything?

A: Not much that I know of.

Q: Not much.

A: I just told you that those were decisions that I could make, and that I attempted to bring to Kissinger and Nixon's attention early enough that Allende might have a chance of getting in. It was because they realized the problem too late, it wasn't because I hadn't told them. They just fobbed it off, they didn't think it was serious. I did everything I could, therefore, to try and help when we were finally told to go ahead. I did my very best on the Track II thing to see if we could in the last minutes do what the President wanted done. I'm not ashamed of this. I think we gave it a good shot, a good try, and if it says anything about Helms as DCI, it simply says that he was trying to carry out the President's wishes as best he could in the context and with the realities that existed.

Q: You sound like a man who has few regrets.

A: I have no regrets about that.

Q: Fair enough.

A: I would like to have seen it succeed, obviously. Nobody likes to be involved in something that loses or is a failure. This is something that you have to either get used to and accept, particularly in covert action operations, or you just will find yourself a very unhappy human being because you can't win them all.

Q: Is there anything I should have asked you before we cut this off?

A: (laughter) I don't think so. I think you've been very thorough and I admire the way you organized the

questions. I think if you talk to Halpern and []
and [] who are available to you around here, you can
fill in some of those little places which may make your
text read a little bit more smoothly.

Q: Fair enough.

End of Interview