

Getting it Right: CIA Analysis of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War

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This article originally appeared in *Studies* 49, No. 1 (March 2005). It is reprinted here as a reference to a review in Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf of *The Arab World and Western Intelligence: Analyzing the Middle East, 1956–1981* by Dina Rezk, which appears on page 68.

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With all the attention paid of late to intelligence failures, it is easy to forget that sometimes the intelligence process has worked almost perfectly. On those occasions, most of the right information was collected in a timely fashion, analyzed with appropriate methodologies, and punctually disseminated in finished form to policymakers who were willing to read and heed it. Throughout those situations, the intelligence bureaucracies were responsive and cooperative, and the Director of Central Intelligence had access and influence downtown. One such example that can be publicly acknowledged arose in 1967 in a familiar flash point area—the Middle East—and put Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Richard Helms in the position of making or breaking his, and the CIA's, reputation with one of the most difficult and demanding presidents the United States has ever had—Lyndon Johnson.

In his memoir, Helms wrote that

Russell Jack Smith, former director for intelligence [analysis at the CIA], has described my working relationship with President Johnson as “golden”—in the sense that it was close to the maximum that any DCI might hope to achieve. However comforting, this assessment is too generous. It was not my relationship with LBJ that mattered, it was his

perception of the value of the data and the assessments the Agency was providing him that carried the day.¹

Certainly the key intelligence achievement that “carried the day” for Helms and the CIA under Johnson was the Agency's strikingly accurate analysis about the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967. It was one of those rare instances when unpoliticized intelligence had a specific, clear-cut, and immediate impact on US foreign policy. The CIA was right about the timing, duration, and outcome of the war; the judgments quickly reached US leaders in an immediately usable form; and the Agency did not temper its analysis when faced with policymaker resistance. The whole 1967 war intelligence scenario demonstrated that well-substantiated findings advocated by a respected DCI with access to the White House could win out over political pressures and policymakers' predilections.

Relations with the White House

It was especially important for Helms and the CIA to impress Lyndon Johnson because he had

¹ Richard Helms (with William Hood), *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003), 295.

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little experience with or interest in intelligence when he suddenly became president in November 1963, and his attitudes had not changed appreciably during his early years in office. Johnson's selection of the hapless William Raborn to replace the strong-willed John McCone as Agency director in April 1965 clearly indicated where he placed the CIA in the power structure of his administration. He preferred getting "VIP gossip" from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover instead of facts and analysis from the CIA.² At the time he appointed Helms as DCI in June 1966, LBJ was not yet convinced that intelligence could advance his policies, and he already was annoyed at the Agency's negativism about Vietnam. In addition, after the public scandal in early 1967 over the CIA's funding of political covert action programs—the so-called *Ramparts* revelations³—Helms was anxious to redeem the CIA with the president.

Johnson was a hard sell, however, and a harder mind to penetrate. Helms's director for analysis, R. Jack Smith, has told of his own frustration over a White House assignment to evaluate the pros and cons of a new US initiative in Vietnam that involved substantially stepping up the war effort:

² Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 309–10.

“
President Johnson was a hard sell and a harder mind to penetrate.

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If one based one's decision on the conclusions of our study, the result was obvious: the gain was not worth the cost. Nevertheless, the President announced the next day that he intended to go ahead. Distinctly annoyed that an admirable piece of analysis, done under forced draft at White House request, was being ignored, I stomped into Helms's office. "How in the hell can the President make that decision in the face of our findings?" I asked.

Dick fixed me with a sulphurous look. "How do I know how he made up his mind? How does any president make decisions? Maybe Lynda Bird was in favor of it. Maybe one of his old friends urged him. Maybe it

³ In February 1967, the radical publication *Ramparts* exposed the CIA's longstanding secret relationship with the National Students Association. The mainstream press picked up the story and soon compromised the Agency's elaborate system for funding political action operations through a network of American private organizations, foundations, and cutouts. The embarrassing controversy that ensued prompted President Johnson to direct the CIA to stop providing covert funds to domestic-based voluntary groups. The *Ramparts* affair seriously disrupted the Agency's covert political operations and damaged its reputation at home and abroad. Sol Stern, "NSA and the CIA," *Ramparts* 5 (March 1967): 29–38; US Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities [Church Committee], *Final Report, Book 1, Foreign and Military Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 181–87.

*was something he read. Don't ask me to explain the workings of a president's mind.*⁴

The period before and during the 1967 war gave Helms an opportunity to act on two of the several elements of his intelligence credo, which he often expressed in catch phrases: "You only work for one president at a time" and "Stay at the table." Helms well understood that each president has his own appreciation of intelligence and his own way of dealing with the CIA. A director who does not learn to live with those peculiarities will soon render himself irrelevant. Helms also knew that a CIA director must remember that he runs a service organization whose products must be timely and cogent to be of value to the First Consumer. Because Helms was keenly attuned to Johnson's take on the CIA and already had its analytical apparatus in "task force mode" by May 1967, the Agency could immediately respond to White House questions about the looming crisis in Arab-Israeli relations.

The Middle East Heats Up

On the morning of 23 May—the day after Egypt closed the Gulf of Aqaba, Israel's only access to the Red Sea—President Johnson summoned Helms from a congressional briefing and tasked him with providing an assessment of the increasingly volatile

⁴ R. Jack Smith, *The Unknown CIA* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1989), 187.

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Middle East situation. Here was a chance for the CIA to seize the day analytically. Only four hours later—just in time for one of LBJ’s “Tuesday lunches”—Helms had in hand two papers: “US Knowledge of Egyptian Alert” and “Overall Arab and Israeli Military Capabilities.” Those memoranda, plus a Situation Report (SITREP), were delivered to him in the ground floor lobby outside the White House office of presidential adviser Walt Rostow. The remarkably rapid turnaround was possible because the Directorate of Intelligence’s (DI) Arab-Israeli task force, in existence since early in the year, already was producing two SITREPs a day, and the Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) had for months been keeping a running log of the two sides’ relative strengths and states of readiness. The second paper Helms had brought—the “who will win” memo—was the crucial one. It stated that Israel could “defend successfully against simultaneous Arab attacks on all fronts . . . or hold on any three fronts while mounting successfully a major offensive on the fourth.”⁵

Two days later, Tel Aviv muddled this clear intelligence pic-

⁵ J. L. Freshwater (pseudonym), “Policy and Intelligence: The Arab-Israeli War,” *Studies in Intelligence* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1969; declassified 2 July 1996): 3, 8; Smith, 188; CIA Office of Current Intelligence (OCI), “Overall Arab and Israeli Military Capabilities,” 23 May 1967, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XIX, The Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2003), doc. 44. [Hereafter cited as *FRUS*.]

ture by submitting to Washington a Mossad estimate that claimed the Israeli military was badly outgunned by a Soviet-backed Arab war machine. The Israelis may have been trying to exploit the special relationship

would listen to its judgments on Arab-Israeli issues over those of their own intelligence services

Helms had the Office of National Estimates (ONE) prepare an appraisal of the Mossad assessment, which was ready in only five hours. ONE flatly stated: “We do not believe that the Israeli appreciation . . . was a serious estimate of the sort they would submit to their own high



Freshly informed by CIA assessments contradicting a supposed pessimistic Israeli estimate of Arab military capabilities, Johnson, in the presence of Secretary McNamara and other senior officials, hears out Israeli Ambassador Abba Eban on 26 May 1967.

they had with James Angleton, chief of CIA counterintelligence. For years, Angleton had run the Israeli account out of his Counterintelligence Staff, without involving the Directorate of Plans’s Near East Division. That unusual arrangement may have given Tel Aviv a sense that Washington accorded its analyses such special import that US leaders

officials.” Rather, “it is probably gambit intended to influence the US to . . . provide military supplies . . . make more public commitments to Israel . . . approve Israeli military initiatives, and

⁶ Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior: James Jesus Angleton: The CIA’s Master Spy Hunter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 49, 362.

Military Capabilities of Israel
and the Arab States

59a

Summary

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Mandatory Review
Case # NLJ 04-53
Document # 50a

Israel could almost certainly attain air supremacy over the Sinai Peninsula in less than 24 hours after taking the initiative or in two or three days if the UAR struck first. It would lose a third to half of its airforce. Armored striking forces could breach the UAR's double defense line in the Sinai in three to four days and drive the Egyptians west of the Suez Canal in seven to nine days. Israel could contain any attacks by Syria or Jordan during this period.

I. General Assessment

1. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are at a numerical disadvantage to the combined strength of its Arab neighbors in terms of aircraft, armor, artillery, naval vessels, and manpower. Nonetheless, the IDF maintain qualitative superiority over the Arab armed forces in almost all aspects of combat operations. The high quality of training and maintenance,

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First page of the draft of the "special estimate" that predicted the outcome of the war.

... put more pressure on [Egyptian President] Nasser." ONE further concluded—contrary to Tel Aviv's suspicions—that "the Soviet aim is still to avoid military involvement and to give the US a black eye among the Arabs by identifying it with Israel"; Moscow "probably could not

openly help the Arabs because of lack of capability, and probably would not for fear of confrontation with the US." It was this latter ONE judgment that caused Dean Rusk to remark to Helms, "if this is a mistake, it's a beaut." The same judgment triggered an order from the president to

Helms and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Earle Wheeler to "scrub it down." Helms returned to CIA headquarters and told the Board of National Estimates to produce a coordinated assessment by the next day.⁷

Making the Right Call

That paper—issued the following afternoon with the title "Military Capabilities of Israel and the Arab States"—is the illustrious "special estimate" in which the CIA (in collaboration with the Defense Intelligence Agency) purportedly called the war right, from its outcome down to the day it would end. It actually was a memorandum, not a Special National Intelligence Estimate, and although drafts had said that the Israelis would need seven to nine days to reach the Suez Canal, that precision was sacrificed in the coordination process. Instead, the paper estimated that Israeli armored forces could breach Egypt's forward lines in the Sinai within "several" days. In another memorandum issued the same day, ONE doubted that Moscow had encouraged the Egyptian president's provocations and concluded that it would not intervene with its own forces to save the Arabs from defeat. As one senior Agency analyst who helped write these papers later remarked: "Rarely

⁷ Office of National Estimates, "Appraisal of an estimate of the Arab-Israeli Crisis by the Israeli Intelligence Service," 25 May 1967, *FRUS, 1964-1968, XIX*, doc. 61; Freshwater, 3-4; Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 299.

has the Intelligence Community spoken as clearly, as rapidly, and with such unanimity.”⁸

Informed by these assessments, President Johnson declined to airlift special military supplies to Israel or even to publicly support it. He later recalled bluntly telling Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, “All of our intelligence people are unanimous that if the UAR attacks, you will whip hell out of them.”⁹

Having answered one crucial question of the president’s—how would the war end?—Helms also was able to warn him when it was about to begin. According to several published accounts, Helms met on 1 June with a senior Israeli official who hinted that Israel could no longer avoid a decision. Its restraint thus far was due to American pressure, but, he said, the delay had cost Israel the advantage of surprise. Helms interpreted the remarks as suggesting that Israel would attack very soon. Moreover, according to Helms, the official stated clearly that although Israel expected US diplomatic backing and the delivery of weapons already agreed upon, it

⁸ Freshwater, 6.

⁹ Board of National Estimates, “Military Capabilities of Israel and the Arab States” and “The Middle Eastern Crisis,” both dated 26 May 1967, in *FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX*, docs. 76 and 79; Freshwater, 5–6; Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 293. UAR stood for the United Arab Republic, a union of Egypt and Syria from 1958 to 1961. Johnson used the outdated term as a shorthand for Israel’s Arab antagonists.

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Because of CIA support,
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would request no additional support and did not expect any. The official abruptly left the United States on 2 June along with the Israeli ambassador. That morning, according to published accounts, Helms wrote an “Eyes Only” letter to President Johnson, forewarning that Israel probably would start a war within a few days.¹⁰

War!

Helms was awakened at 3:00 in the morning on 5 June by a call from the CIA Operations Center. The Foreign Broadcast Information Service had picked up reports that Israel had launched its attack. (OCI soon concluded

¹⁰ Freshwater, 6; Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 299–300; Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 146, citing interview with and writings of Meir Amit; Meir Amit quoted in *The Six-Day War: A Retrospective*, ed. Richard B. Parker (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 136, 139; Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel’s Secret Wars: A History of Israel’s Intelligence Services* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 220–22; Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel’s Intelligence Community* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 161; Andrew and Leslie Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 145; Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem: The Six Days That Changed the Middle East* (New York: Linden Press/Simon and Schuster, 1984), 190, citing interview with Helms on 2 August 1982; *FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX*, doc. 135.

that the Israelis—contrary to their claims—had fired first.) President Johnson was gratified that because of CIA analyses and Helms’s tip, he could inform congressional leaders later in the day that he had been expecting Israel’s move.¹¹

During the brief war, Helms went to the White House every day but one, reporting to the NSC and the president’s special committee of Middle East experts, using the outpouring of SITREPS from OCI (five a day), DI special memoranda, the *President’s Daily Brief*, and other analytical products. “In the midst of one meeting,” Helms recalled,

LBJ suddenly fixed his attention on me in my usual seat at the end of the long table. “Dick,” he snapped, “just how accurate is your intelligence on the progress of this war?” Without having a moment to consider the evidence, I shot from the hip, “It’s accurate just as long as the Israelis are winning.” It may have sounded as if I were smarting off, but it was the exact truth, and it silenced [those around] the table. Only an amused twitch of Dean Acheson’s mustache suggested his having noted my reasoning.

¹¹ This and, unless otherwise noted, the remaining recollections of Helms cited here can be found in *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 300–303; OCI, “The Arab-Israeli War: Who Fired the First Shot,” 5 June 1967, *FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX*, doc. 169.

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The Kremlin foresaw a ‘grave catastrophe’ and threatened action.

The Russians Weigh In

On 10 June, as Israeli victory appeared near, the White House received a message over the “Hot Line” from Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin. The Kremlin foresaw a “grave catastrophe” and threatened to take “necessary actions . . . including military” if the Israelis did not halt their advance across the Golan Heights.¹² Helms was in the Situation Room with several other presidential advisers when

elaborate projections of maps and photographs on a silver screen, or even any armed guards rigidly at attention beside the doorway. The room itself was painted a bleak beige and furnished simply with an oval conference table and an assortment of comfortable chairs.”

the recommendation of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (endorsed by all present), Johnson dispatched the Sixth Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean—a move intended to convey American resolve without backing the Soviets into a corner. Helms told the president that Russian submarines monitoring the fleet’s movement would immediately report that it had changed course. Moscow got the message, and a cease-fire later that day restored an uneasy peace to the region.¹³

Putting the Intelligence Package Together

Altogether, as Helms put it, “we had presented the boss with a tidy package.” Several circumstances made this success possible:

- *Policymakers asked one clear, basic question:* Who will win if the US stays out? Analysts did not have to advance vague medium- or long-term predictions that could go wrong because of unforeseen or high impact/low probability events.
- *Analysts had hard data*—military statistics and reliable information on weapons systems—to work with, not just “tea leaves” to read. This episode was not a Middle East version of Kremlinology.
- *The evidence was on the CIA’s side.* Israel could not prove its case that the Arab armies would trounce it.



Photo: LBJ Library

The president and his national security team in the White House Situation Room during the Arab-Israeli crisis.

the message from the Kremlin came over from the Pentagon, where the Hot Line teletype was located. Helms remembered the setting as “unlike the Hollywood versions of situation rooms . . . there were no flashing lights, no

Helms recalled the hush and chill that fell over the room after the translation of Kosygin’s message was checked. “The room went silent as abruptly as if a radio had been switched off . . . The conversation was conducted in the lowest voices I have ever heard . . . It seemed impossible to believe that five years after the missile confrontation in Cuba, the two superpowers had again squared off.” On

¹² “Message from Premier Kosygin to President Johnson,” 10 June 1967, *FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX*, doc. 243.

¹³ Neff, 279–80; Harold Saunders memorandum, “Hot Line Meeting June 10, 1967,” 22 October 1968, *FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX*, doc. 244.

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The CIA’s timely and accurate intelligence won Helms a place at the president’s table.

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- *The crisis was brief.* The time span between the reporting of warning indicators and the playing out of key analytical judgments was around three weeks. There was not enough time for the basic issues to become fogged over.

The Payoff

The CIA’s analytical achievement brought short-term political benefits for Helms and the Agency. From then on, Johnson included Helms in all Tuesday lunches—the director had attended them occasionally since his appointment in 1966, but after the 1967 war he was assured of what he

later called “the hottest ticket in town.” It was at these inner sanctum discussions that Helms fulfilled what he regarded as perhaps his greatest responsibility as DCI: seeing that he “kept the game honest”—presenting just the facts and analyses based on them, and staying out of policy discussions. “Without objectivity,” Helms said in a 1971 speech, “there is no credibility, and an intelligence organization without credibility is of little use to those it serves.”

Johnson appreciated that tough edge to Helms’s style, and their good professional rapport helped alleviate some of the tension that the Agency’s discordant analyses on Vietnam were causing.¹⁴

A few years after leaving the CIA, Helms said of the Agency’s analysis of the 1967 war: “When you come as close as that in the intelligence business, it has to be regarded pretty much as a triumph.”¹⁵ The CIA’s timely and accurate intelligence before and during the war had won Helms, literally and figuratively, a place at the president’s table—perhaps the most precious commodity that a DCI could possess. It also is one of the most perishable—a painful lesson that several directors since Helms have had to relearn, to their, and the Agency’s, detriment.



DCI Helms (center rear) at one of President Johnson’s Tuesday lunches.



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¹⁴ Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 295; “An Interview with Richard Helms,” *Studies in Intelligence* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1981): 5; Helms, “Global Intelligence and the Democratic Society,” speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 14 April 1971, DCI Files, Job 80-01284R, box 1, folder 6, Agency Archives and Record Center.
¹⁵ “An Interview with Richard Helms,” 1.