

RICHARD HELMS

A. Interview conducted by: Robert M. Hathaway, Staff Historian
Date: 8 November 1984
Place: Helms's office, Washington, D.C.

27 pages
1 tape

B. Helms was interviewed in connection with the chapter in the Richard Helms history pertaining to relations with the [redacted]
[redacted] As is the case with most of the Helms's interviews, he shares a number of useful anecdotes, but the transcript contains few introspective passages and little in the way of personalities.

C. Principal topics covered:

pages 1-5: [redacted]
6-13: Six-Day War.
13-15: Israeli attack on the Liberty.
15: [redacted]
16-20: [redacted] CIA handling of this information.
20-22: [redacted]
22-24: [redacted]

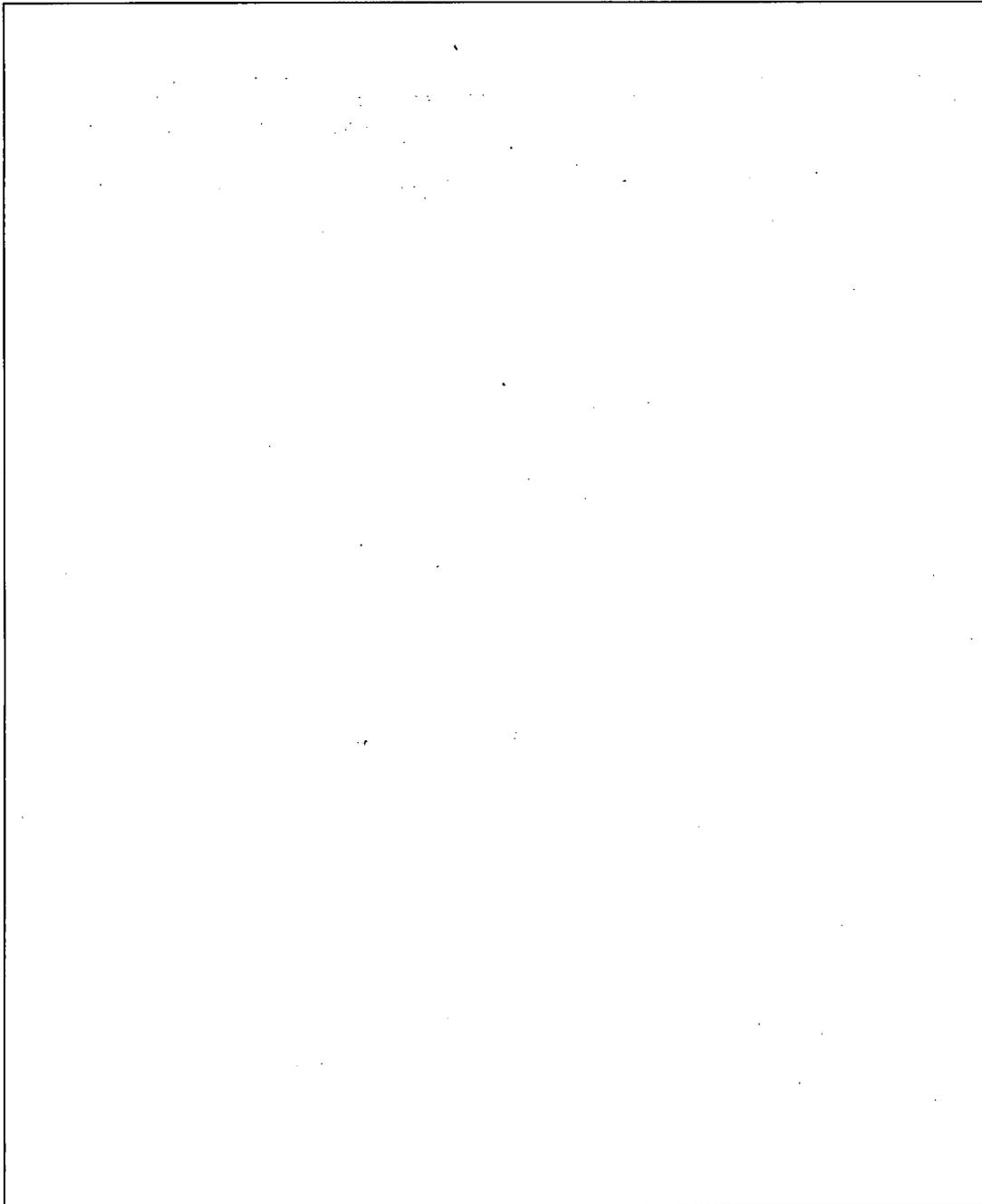
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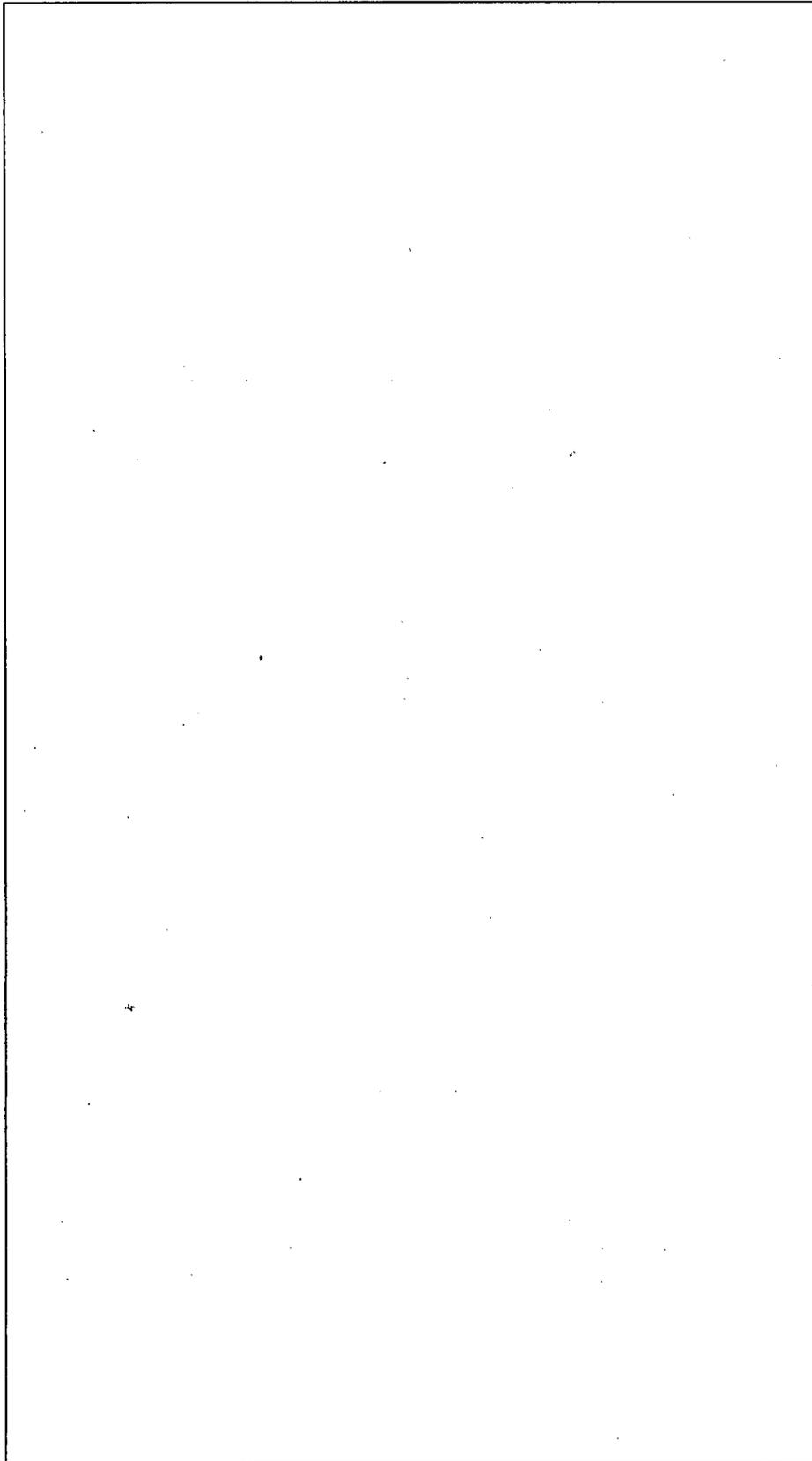
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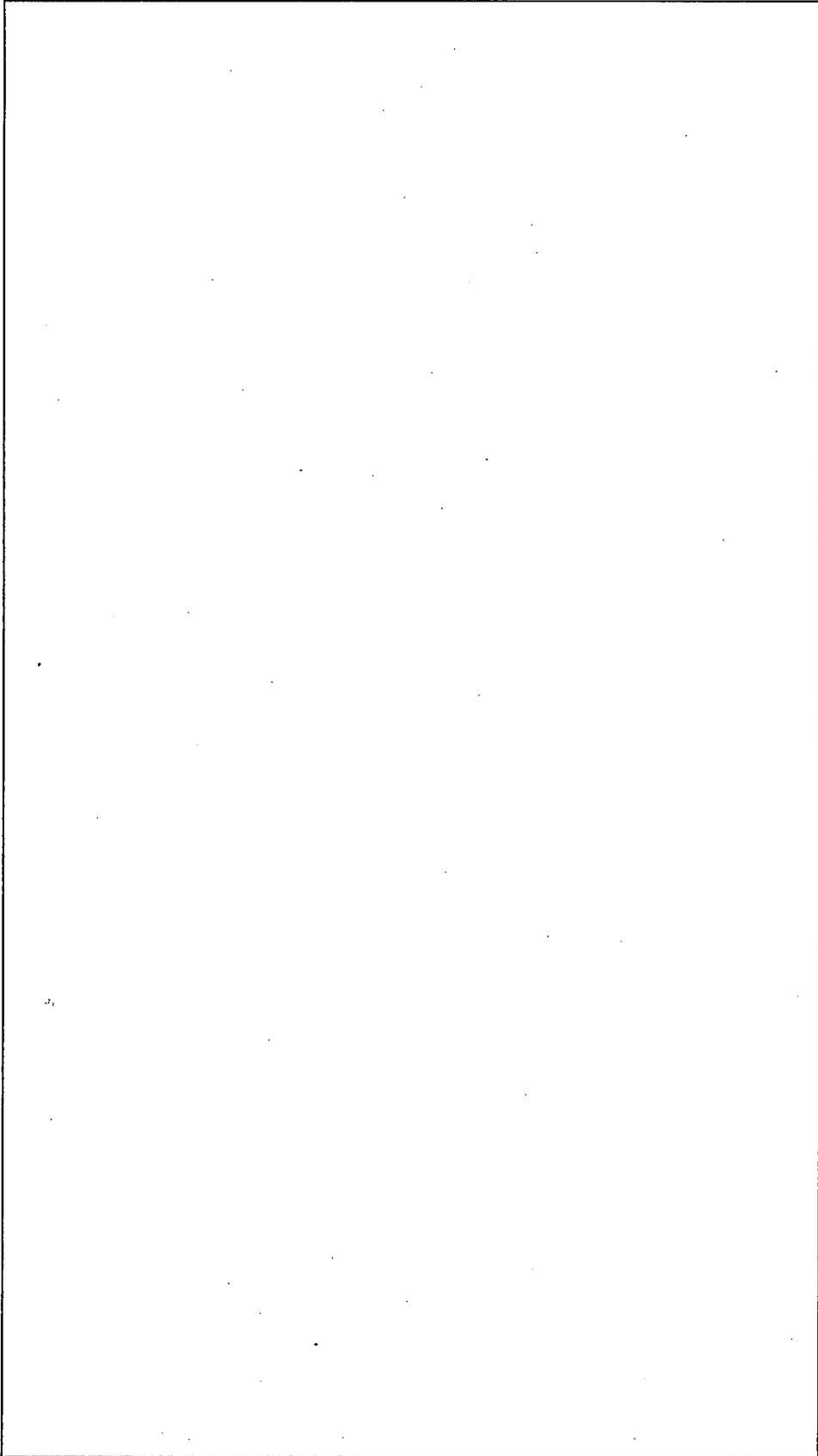
Interview with Richard Helms
by Dr. Robert M. Hathaway
8 November 1984

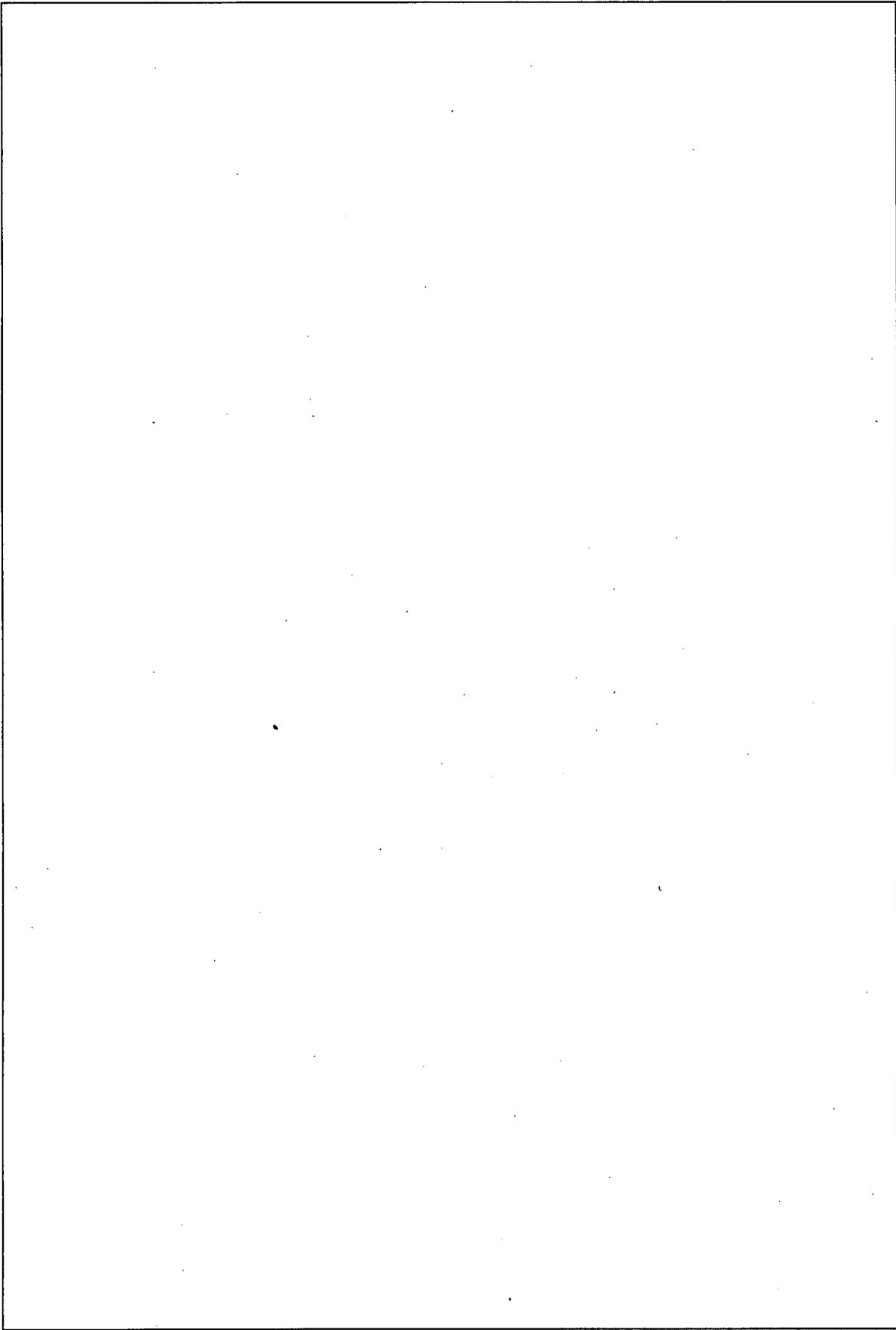
TAPE I of I - SIDE I

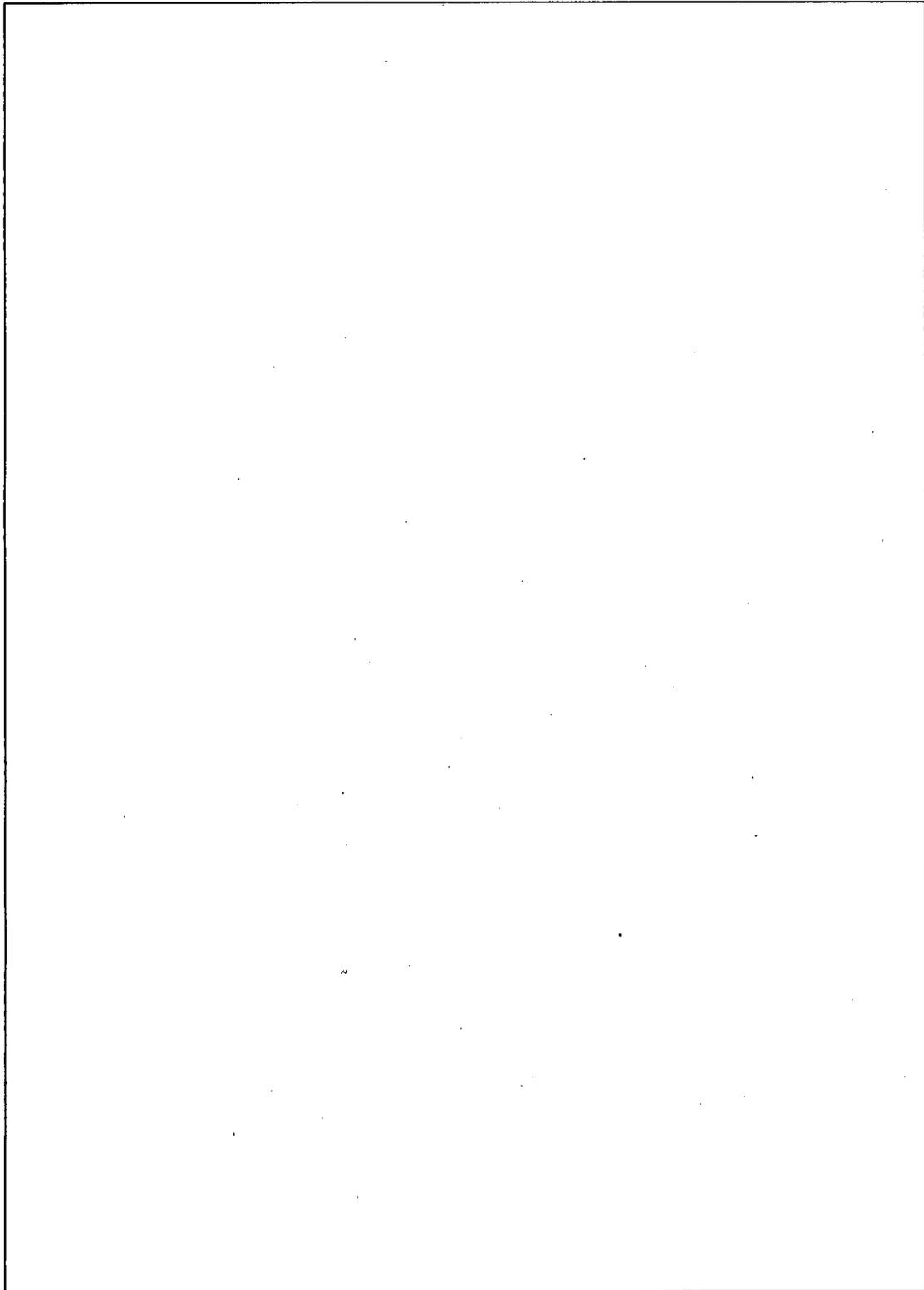
Hathaway: I thought we would start out today, if you didn't mind, by
simply getting you to talk about the nature of relations











Hathaway: That probably is an understatement. Let's talk a bit
about the Six-Day War. I'm aware of the fact that you

have said on other occasions that the information you were able to give Lyndon Johnson first made Johnson aware of the importance intelligence could have for the United States. I think it's also accurate to say that on the basis of CIA's performance during the Six-Day War, you were ushered into the inner circle of Johnson's advisors-- I believe you began to attend the Tuesday lunches . . .

Helms: After the war, that's correct.

Hathaway: I'd like to get your thoughts on why the system, the intelligence system in this country, worked so well. Why were we able to be, how were we able to be so accurate in our assessments before and during that war?

Helms: It's my recollection that in the DDI there was an on-going study which was up-dated periodically about the military balance between the Arabs and the Israelis; that this on-going study, which was constantly up-dated, was therefore ready and available for those estimators who have to assess what might happen if the two went to war. Therefore, it was possible when Abba Eban came in to see Dean Rusk with an Israeli estimate of the condition that they were in and we received from the Israeli Intelligence the same estimate . . . within a matter of hours it was possible for Sherman Kent and his boys to take a look at that Israeli estimate and then comment on it with an estimate of their own, which was very short but they had the facts and the figures and so forth. My recollection is that the first paper they produced said that the

Israelis could beat any combination of Arab forces that could be thrown against them within two weeks. And after a famous meeting at the White House in which President Johnson was surprised by this estimate but nevertheless wanted it gone over and, as he put it, "scrubbed down," then we came back a few days later saying it would be in seven days. So it was having that material available, using good sense and judgment about the balance of forces and the ability of the Israelis to fight a certain kind of war and the inability of the Arabs to fight a certain kind of war and so forth which lead to this accurate appraisal. Where I think it was valuable to President Johnson was that the Israelis were trying to get him to come out overtly on the Israeli side--provide weapons . . . I don't know what exact kind of help they wanted, but certainly they wanted public moral support. And President Johnson didn't want to have to do that. He wanted to maintain a more even-handed position between the two. So I think that this estimate made him more comfortable about not getting involved directly with the Israeli side of the war. It was, I think, this aspect of it which when he thought about it, realized that intelligence did have a contribution to make to presidential decision-making. We had a talk not long after that--not only about this but about what was going on in the Soviet Union and things of this sort . . . it was a private talk I was having with him because I was reporting on something he asked me to do.

And I think at that time he'd made up his mind that it would be a good idea to tie intelligence into the inner circle of his policy-making and decision-making process. So starting from that time he began to invite me to the Tuesday lunches, and I remained a member of that group until the end of his administration.

The part about that estimate on that day which I have used in a couple of talks I have given at various times which was rather amusing was that that evening, the evening that the estimate from Israel came into Washington . . . it came in in the morning and we were . . . it must have been six or seven o'clock at night that we were down at the White House waiting for President Johnson to return from opening the Expo Exhibition in Canada. And Dean Rusk turned to me and said, "Have you read this estimate that your people have turned out, or this paper?" And I said, "Yes, I have," and he said, "Well, do you agree with it?" I said, "Yes, I do agree with it." And he looked at me rather quizzically, and he said, "Well, Dick, I just want to tell you one thing: if this is a mistake, it's a beaut, in the words of Fiorello La Guardia." Well, the reason for this is, [this] sensationalize, that he, as many people, believed that the Israeli assessment would be more realistic than our own assessment, and Abba Eban had delivered the Israeli assessment to Rusk and he had read it that morning. So I think he too was somewhat surprised that it turned out the way it did.

Hathaway: And I believe you were present once the war broke out, I think it was June 10th, when the message from Kosygin came over the hot line. Would you fill us in on that episode?

Helms: Well, before that, we were having daily meetings about the war as it ran that week. At one of these meetings I reported where the Israeli advance was and where their tanks were and so forth, and President Johnson turned to me and said, "How accurate is your intelligence on these military developments?" I said, "It's very accurate, Mr. President, and will continue to be as long as the Israelis are winning." Which brought a scowl from Johnson and a big smile from Dean Acheson, who happened to be sitting there and who thought it was not only the proper answer but to him a rather amusing answer. In any event, on the last day of the week--in other words this was Saturday--I got a message to get down to the White House Situation Room the first thing in the morning because the hot line had come up and Kosygin was going to be on the other end and Johnson was going to be on this end. I got down to the Situation Room and Johnson had not come in yet. The understanding about the hot line was that the President of the United States and whoever was on the other side in the Russian arrangements--in this case, I guess Kosygin at that time . . . was he prime minister or chairman of the Council of Ministers? I don't know which job he had. But in any event the arrangement was that when the man was sitting in the seat in which he was supposed to be

sitting, then a message was sent that they were both in place and then the exchange would begin. Well, the Russian message came in and was very rapidly translated. I guess . . . it was a relatively short message but the general tenor of it was that the Soviet Union wanted the United States to stop the Israeli advance across the Golan Heights. Imbedded in this was something of a threat, to the effect that if the United States did not stop the Israeli advance, then it would be necessary for the Soviet Union to take whatever action seemed appropriate under the circumstances, including military action. Well, there was some period of time in the morning in which various people were asked to translate this message because the President wanted to be absolutely certain that they had said "military," that there wasn't some euphemism or something that you could interpret that way but they didn't actually say it. But it was agreed by all the Russian experts that that was exactly what it was.

So various people were assigned various jobs. The Secretary of State went out to try and convince the Israelis to stop their advance. The Deputy Secretary of State was working with some of the embassies in town. I was ticked off to find out where the Israelis were on the Golan Heights if I could. In other words, various jobs were given to the participants in the meeting. So after a couple of hours of this or so, the President, who had been eating his breakfast in the Situation Room, got up and

left the room. The people in the room sort of left over, or at least physically present at that time, were Bob McNamara, who was the Secretary of Defense, and Llewellyn Thompson, who was our ambassador to the Soviet Union but happened to be in Washington, and myself. McGeorge Bundy, I think, was running in and out of the room but the three of us began to discuss what would be an appropriate response to this Soviet threat. In other words, was the United States simply going to ignore it? Would it simply pretend that it didn't hear it? Was it going to make some move to indicate that you can't threaten us without taking chances of your own? Just exactly what was involved? And as we talked about it, the sensible thing to do seemed to be to direct the Sixth Fleet, which was orbiting in the Mediterranean, and I can't remember any more whether it was around Sicily or around Crete, but that's a matter of historical record. But just kept going around and around and around, and direct that fleet to head for the eastern Mediterranean. The idea being that since the fleet was always shadowed by one and possibly two Russian spy ships, that the minute the fleet changed directions, this would be flashed to Moscow. So that you were taking an action which in almost real time would be relayed to the Russians. In other words, there wouldn't be any doubt or any ambiguity or any sitting around wondering did they get the message about this. Thompson thought this was a balanced and sensible response, McNamara did. I thought it was as

well, and I liked the idea that those shadowing spy ships were there because the message would be sent immediately and I knew that.

So when President Johnson came back and resumed his seat, McNamara put this proposition to him. I recall that President Johnson never said a word, he simply nodded his head two or three times like this. So he accepted McNamara's recommendation. McNamara went to the phone right there in the Situation Room, called the Pentagon, and within a matter of minutes the Sixth Fleet was headed toward the eastern Mediterranean. Now obviously the Sixth Fleet was loaded [redacted] it was a very powerful battle fleet. So this was no idle gesture. And this, if I may say so, is one of the most unsettling things about Arab-Israeli wars, that they tend to involve the Russians and the Americans even up to the point of military alerts, moving atomic weapons around, threatening each other militarily, and so forth. Nothing has ever come of it. There was some of this business again in 1973, I gather--I wasn't here at the time but from reading the newspapers. But nevertheless, it does tend to make the two superpowers glare at each other. And there is built into that an obvious danger. This is a bad idea to have them glaring at each other, and it's Arab-Israeli wars that tend to cause this. Fortunately for everybody, the war ended a couple of hours later on Saturday, and the crisis was all over, and the Sixth Fleet was brought back

or whatever happened, I don't know. In President Johnson's book he does not describe this incident as dramatically as I have described it to you, and I'm sure that I'm accurate about this because about six months ago I happened to be out somewhere with McNamara and I ran over this story and he agreed with all the details of it. So I have some corroboration of that as the way the events took place, not the way exactly that President Johnson has it in his book The Vantage Point.

Hathaway: Good. It's good to get that on the record. The ship the "Liberty" also came under fire during this same week. Did you have any sort of involvement in this after, of course, it had taken place?

Helms: Well, actually not, because the Israeli attack on the "Liberty" was a naval matter. Here was a large fleet in the Mediterranean, and you know, they should have been capable of dealing with this matter. So I don't have any recollection of being called upon or even considering the fact that this was a responsibility of the Agency and that we should be worried about this one way or the other. This was a military matter. I do recall that despite the fact that allegations have been made that President Johnson was very pro-Israeli and was influenced by some local American Jews, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]-that he was extraordinarily irritated at the way the New York Times, for example, played down the

attack on the "Liberty." In fact he said this to me one day, he said, "Look at that damn New York Times. They've put it on page 20 or something," anything as important or as outrageous as this thing, this attack. But in any event whatever he may have said to me along those lines, I could only assume from what I've read in recent years that he became involved in some kind of a cover-up of Israeli responsibility for this attack. I recently read a book by Donald Neff called Warriors for Jerusalem in which there's laid out the fact that the dead were buried; there were no ceremonies. In other words everything possible was done to keep from the American public really the enormity of this attack on an American naval vessel. I know that various newspaper writers have attempted to get me to make statements about what I thought about the "Liberty" thing. But since this is for the Agency's record, I don't think there can be any doubt that the Israelis knew exactly what they were doing. Why they wanted to attack the "Liberty," whose bright idea this was, I can't possibly know. But any statement to the effect that they didn't know that it was an American ship and so forth is nonsense. I have always assumed without knowing the truth of the matter that somebody in the Israeli hierarchy figured that the ship was monitoring what the Israelis were doing in Syria, and that before they attacked in the Golan Heights, they didn't want the United States to try to stop them from getting on with the job, so the thing to

do was to take out this vessel and stop our ability to hear the transmission of their messages. That's just my surmise.

Hathaway: I think that's probably the accepted story today. You mentioned [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] I believe, if I'm not mistaken, that decision was made in the White House. I've got some memoranda that you and . . .

Helms: That is my recollection, that I actually checked this out with President Johnson, I think. Was he in office at the time?

Hathaway: Yes.

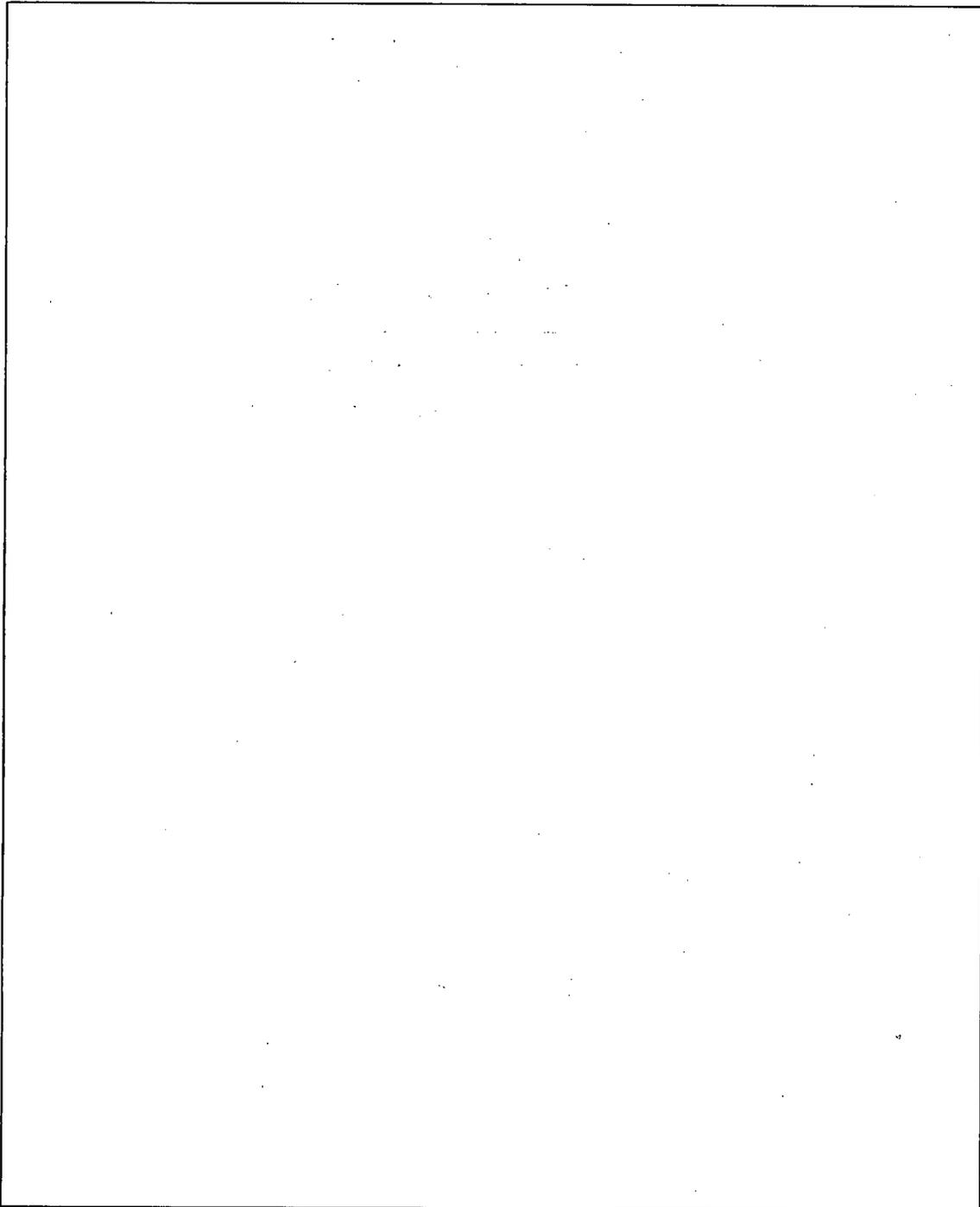
Helms: I said we've been doing this, [redacted] [redacted] what was his feeling about it, and so forth. My recollection is he said, "Go ahead and do it."

Hathaway: Again, my sense from looking at the documents is that we're still talking about such a small [redacted] that it's . . .

Helms: [redacted]
Hathaway: [redacted]
Helms: [redacted]

Hathaway: What did we get in return?

Helms: [redacted]

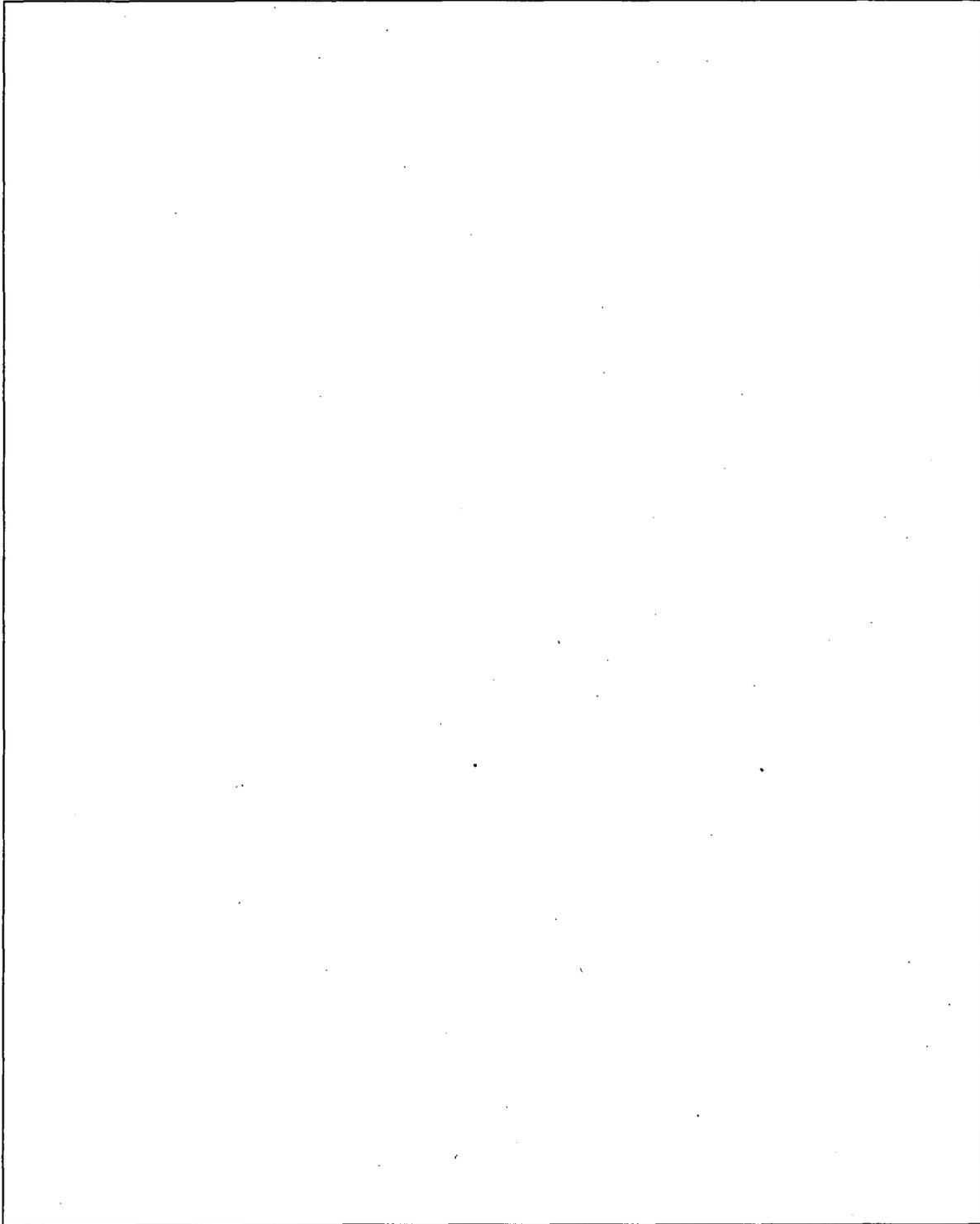


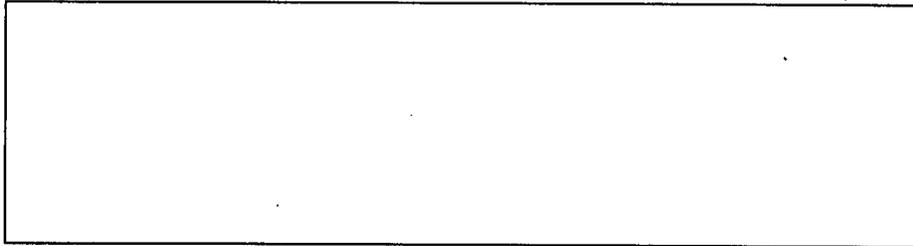
Hathaway: Well, my question is can you give me any help . . .

END OF SIDE I, TAPE I

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TAPE I - SIDE II



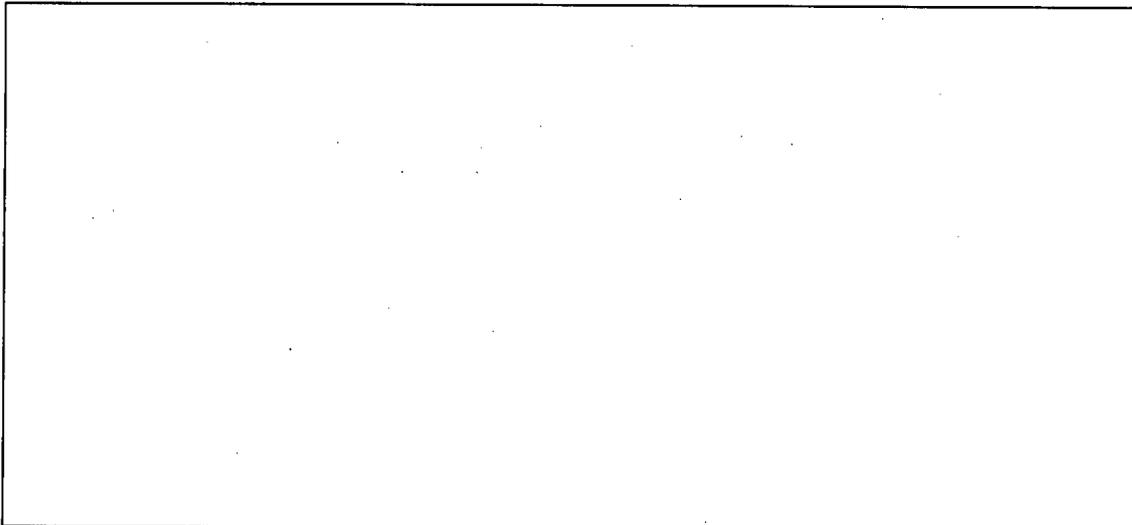


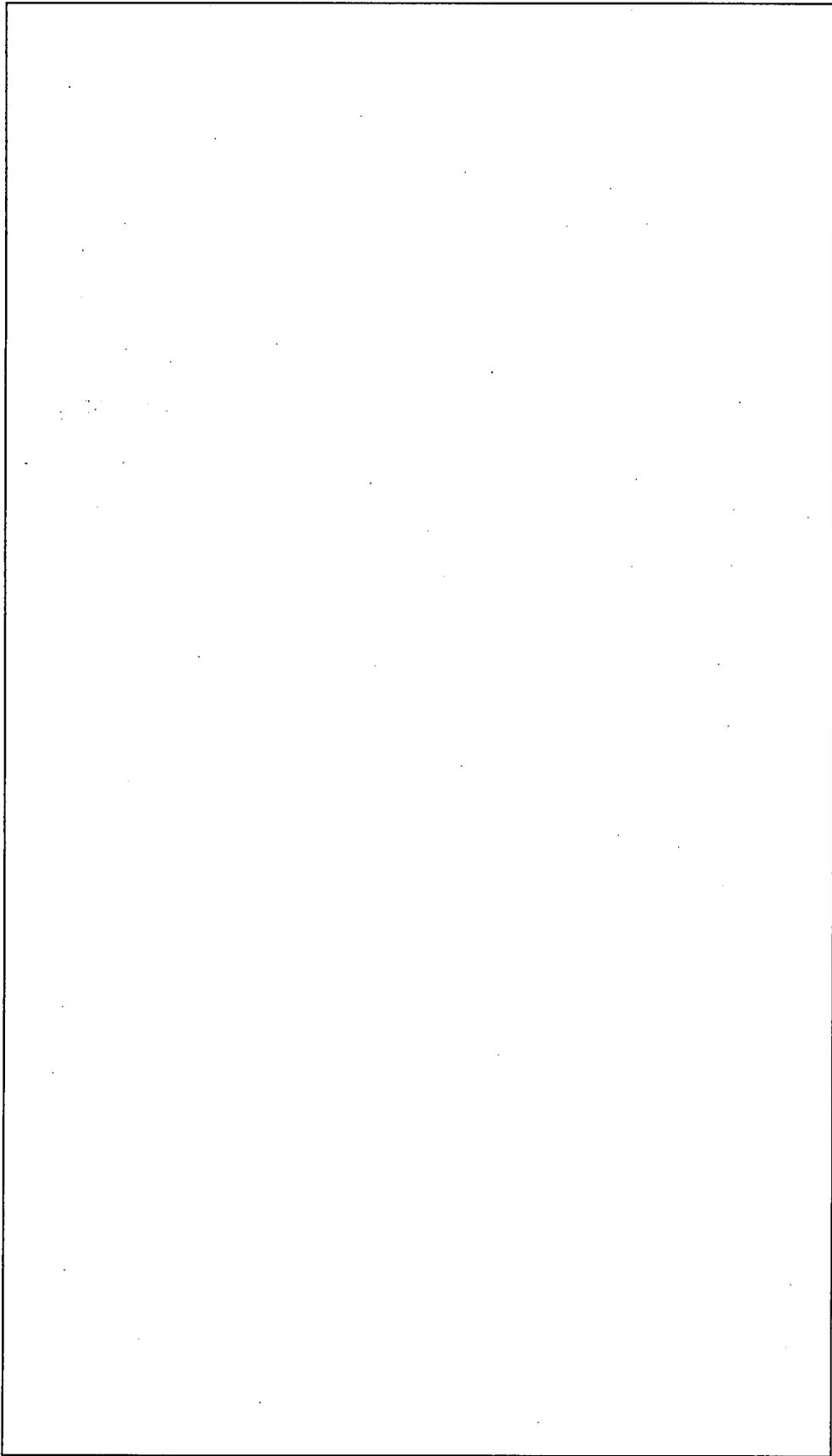
Helms: Duckett has told me that story and insists this is what I said and this is what I did and so forth, but I don't recall it that way. The reason I say this is that I don't remember a lot of things that happened but I do remember the conversations with Johnson which would have the purport of something like this. And I don't recall this. Duckett claims I came back and reported on it and so forth. He could be right--I can't for the life of me deny this, but if he heard about it, certainly other people in the Agency would have heard about it. If you can get another source for the fact that that's what I said, why, ok. But I wouldn't rely on Duckett totally on this matter.

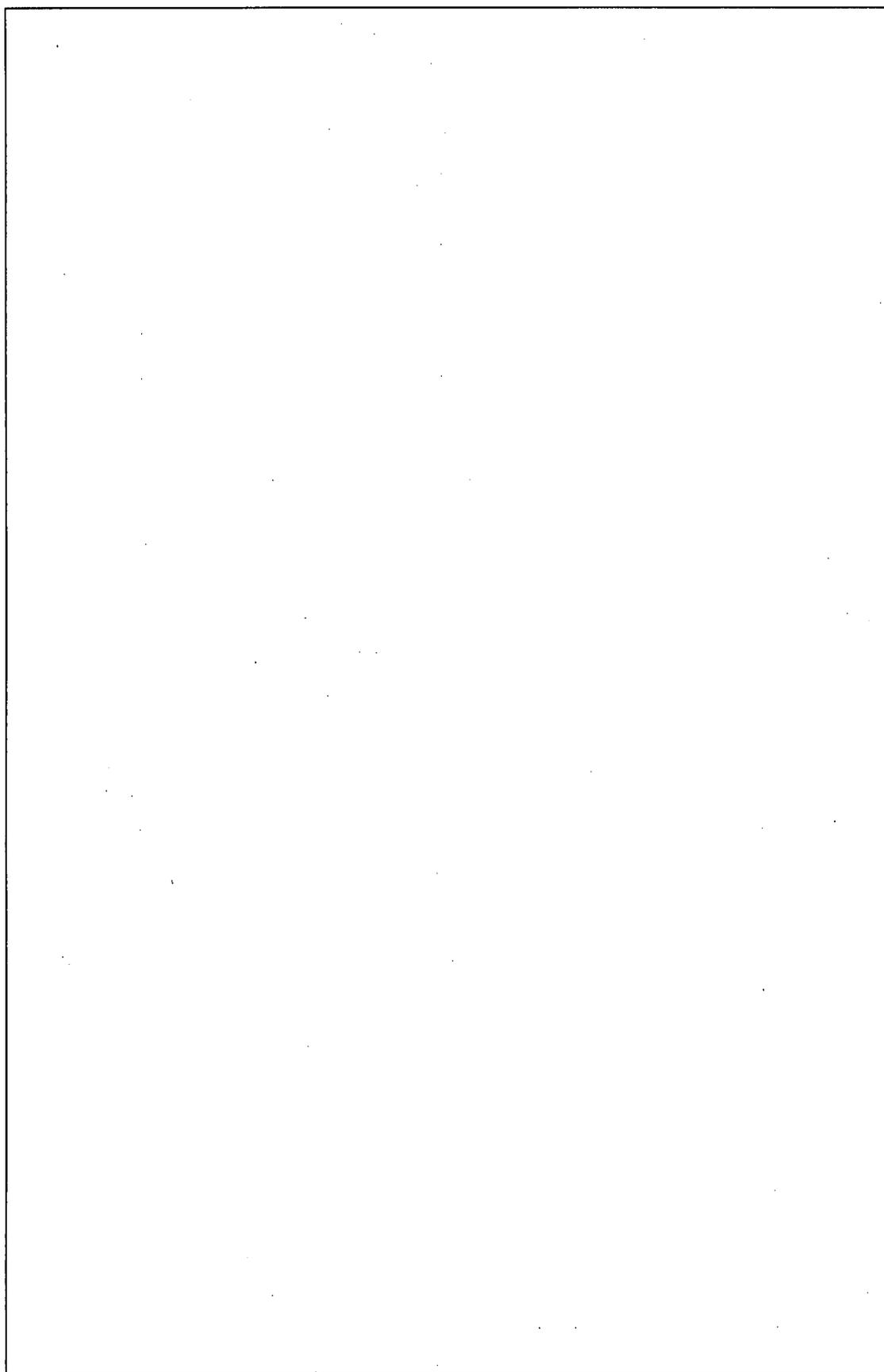
Hathaway: I have no other sources.

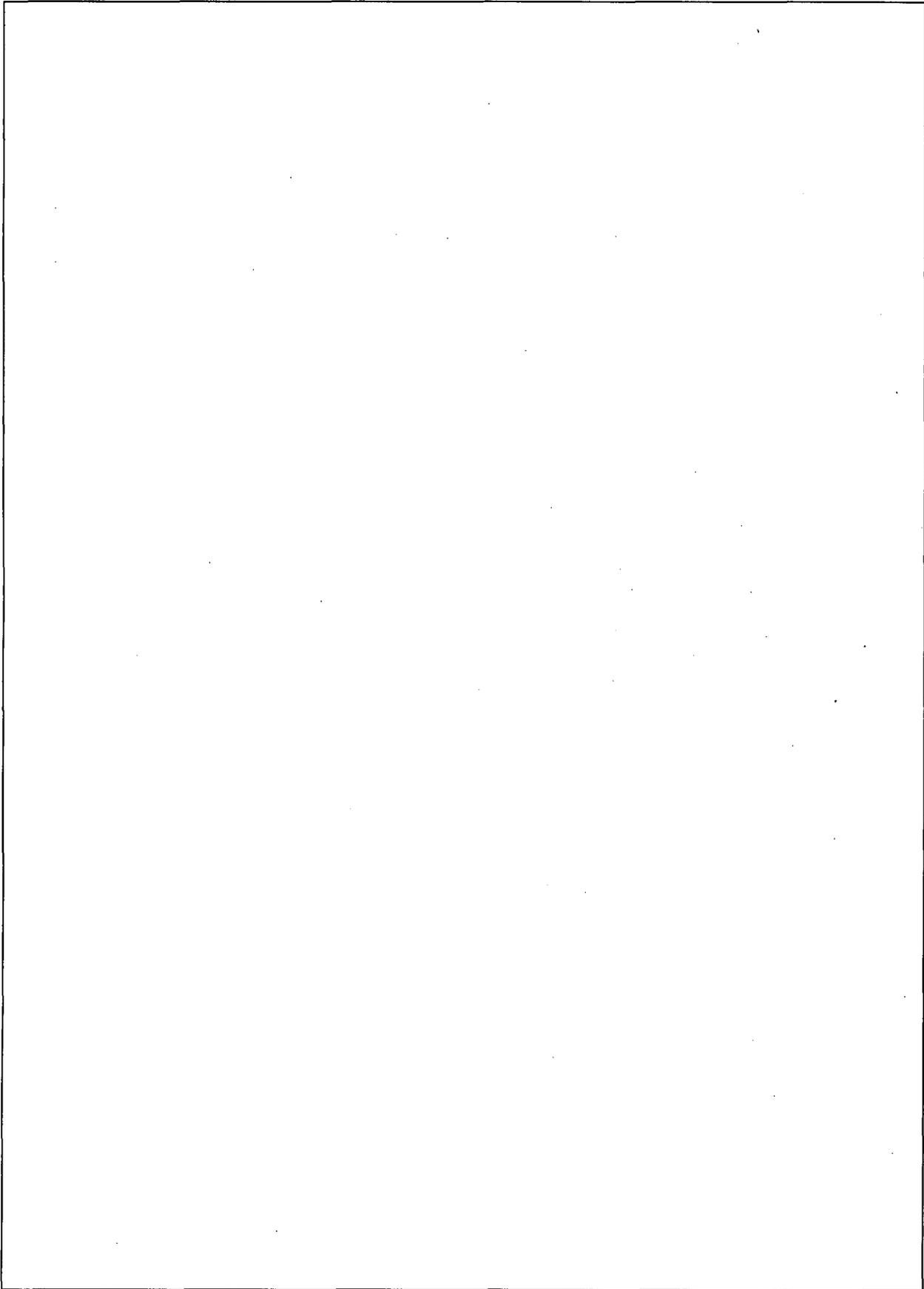
Helms: Well, you might ask some of the people in DDI who got . . .

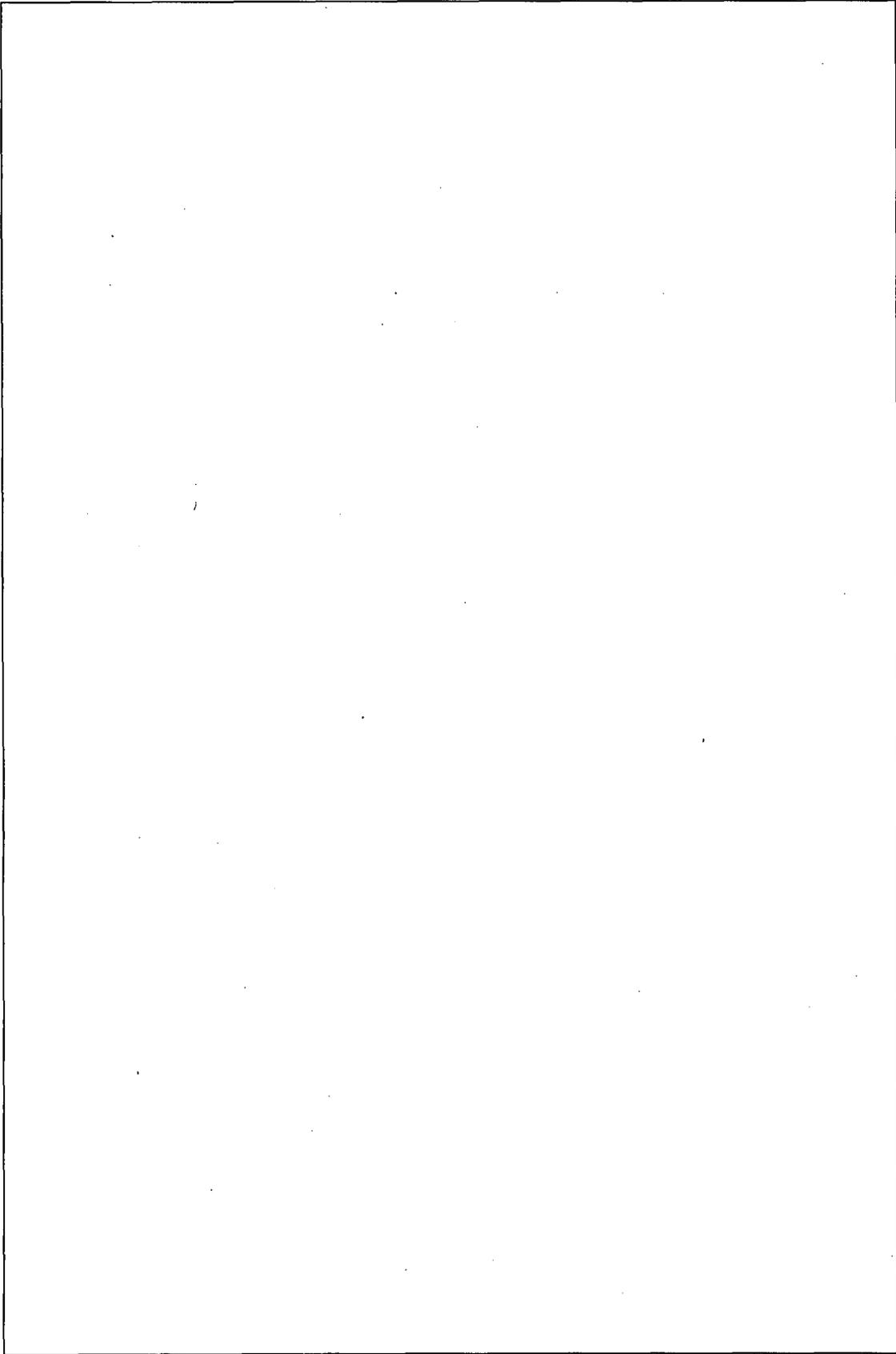
Hathaway: I shall do so.

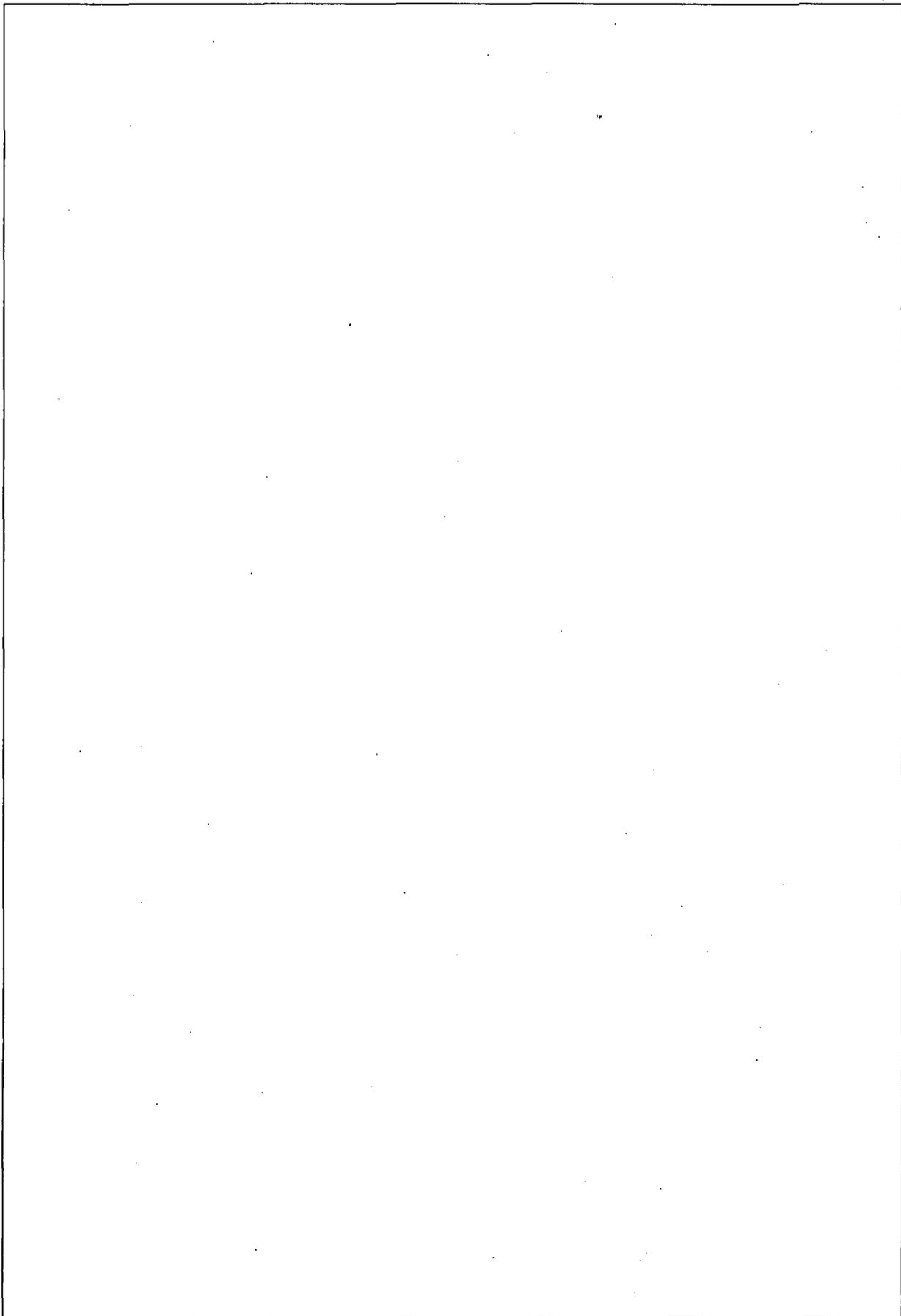




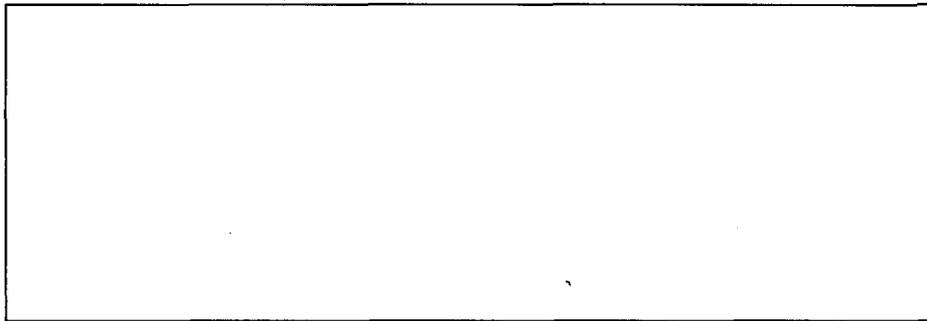








Helms:



Hathaway: I want to ask you about the shift in American administrations in January '69. I understand that once Lyndon Johnson leaves the White House, you've got a different . . . obviously, you've got a different relationship with Nixon than you did with Johnson. Does the introduction of the Nixon-Kissinger factor change the nature of relationships between CIA and the Israeli services?

Helms: No.

Hathaway: Not at all?



Helms: It didn't make much difference.

Hathaway: OK. Fine. Nixon and Kissinger have stated on several occasions that they came to believe that CIA was too heavily tilted towards the Israelis. They tended to see Middle East affairs . . .

Helms: Where did they say that?

Hathaway: I think Kissinger has said that in his memoirs. I know I've read it, I believe it was in Kissinger, one of the volumes of Kissinger's memoirs.

Helms: Tilted too much toward the Israelis? I can't imagine that's in his memoirs. .

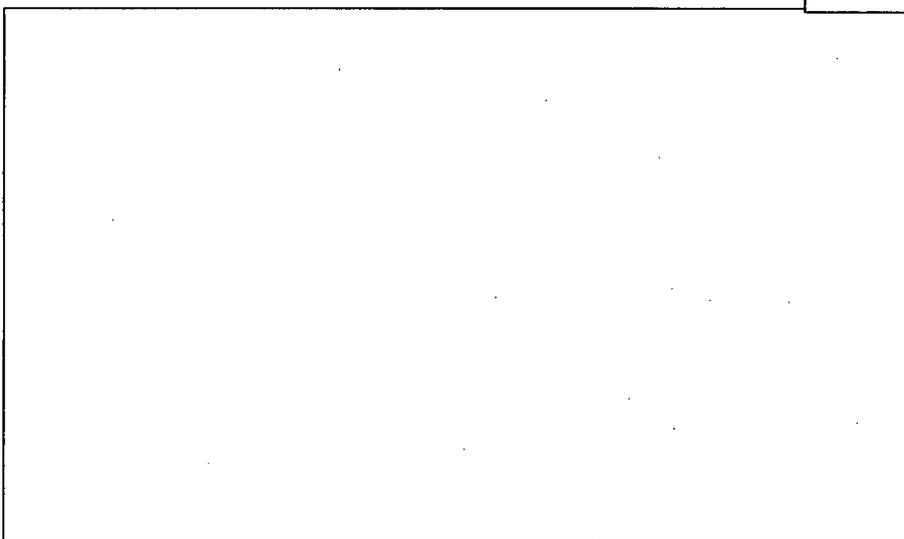
Hathaway: I can find the citation for you.

Helms: I wish you would because I never heard this allegation.

Hathaway: Well, I was going to ask you to comment on that.

Helms: I never heard it. He never mentioned it to me.

Hathaway: You never had any sense of that? Well, that's essentially what I wanted to hear . . . Well, I think that comes to the end of my questions. I do have one more. It goes back to something we talked about at the very start,



Helms: I wrote this?

Hathaway; No, you didn't write it, but they were saying the Director has expressed an interest in it.

Helms: What year was this?

Hathaway: This is 1969.

Helms: I don't remember what was in my mind at the time. It may have been that I figured that there should be a little bit more space between the CI Staff and its work and the It may have been something like that. But I don't recall any more what the details of that were. I have the idea that it was that I was shooting at.

Hathaway: Well, I don't have any other evidence either.

Helms: Well, I'm sorry but I just don't have any recollection of it.

Hathaway: Well, that exhausts my questions. What would you like to add?

Helms: I'm surprised at this so-called statement of Nixon's or Kissinger's, because neither of them ever mentioned this to me, that I could recall. I remember that when Nixon came to office, he told me one day, he said, "You know, 94% of the Jewish vote in this country went to Hubert Humphrey, so I don't owe them a thing." But then he never did anything about the Israelis or the American Jewish community, in the sense that he kept policies going in that area which were essentially the ones that Johnson had pursued. In other words, he wasn't picking any fights with the American Jewish community. And Kissinger obviously, despite the fact that on occasion when he was doing his shuttle diplomacy was inveighing against the tendency of the Israelis to be so stubborn and unwilling to see the possibilities in certain peace gestures that over the long run would be advantageous to them and so forth. There isn't any question that basically Kissinger is very sympathetic to Israel. So this is a most unlikely comment.

Hathaway: I know I can run it down, I'll let you know. But you've certainly given me what I was going to ask about that question anyway.

Helms: But I don't have anything else to contribute, Bob. I think that's about it. If you have anything when you get down to the writing time and so forth, why I'd be glad to make a crack at it, but I don't think I've got anything else at this time.

THIS ENDS INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD HELMS