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Interview with Ambassador Richard M. Helms  
19 June 1989

Interview conducted by Dr. Mary S. McAuliffe at Ambassador Helms's  
office in Washington, D.C.

MSM: I have several questions for you, Ambassador, on McCone as well as on your role, some of your activities, during the McCone years. My first question for you is, how good a DCI was McCone?

RH: Well, John McCone was a good DCI--I don't think there was any doubt about that. He was a very good manager. He was intense in his work. He was a quick study. And I think he ran the organization in those days with a firm hand, there was no doubt about it. He had come to Government, first in the Air Force and then in the Atomic Energy Commission, from having been the owner of a tanker company as well as having been in the ship-building business, and he had learned all the techniques of how you run organizations from that experience. He was a man with a firm hand--there was no question about that. Also, I think that he had good judgment on intelligence estimates and on matters generally, so that I think when it was all added up, he put in a good performance.

MSM: Good. You've mentioned some of his strong points. Do you feel he had any weak points as DCI?

RH: Well, I think that if there were any--if one has to lean on weak points, it would be that he had never been in the intelligence business before. He was inclined to be rather prestige-conscious, and when it came to some of the more low-level activities of the operational side of the business, for example, the one in which I was involved, I sometimes found him wondering why he was spending the time with these unimportant figures. Well, in some cases, these were important figures as far as our operational work was concerned, even though they were not high in the Government they represented. That was one of the things I noticed. Otherwise, I can't say that any weaknesses he may have had were particularly relevant to the job he was doing.

MSM: I understand you have some strong feelings about the DCI's role in respect to policy-making. Did McCone in your view ever cross the line--from provider of intelligence...

RH: Well, John McCone believed that the Director should wear two

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hats. He should have a hat as the head of the CIA; but he also should be in a position to advise the President and other high members of the administration on policy matters. He believed that. In point of fact, when he found out, after some months of the Johnson administration, that he was no longer going to have any role in policy as far as Lyndon Johnson was concerned, I think it was then that he decided to leave. You talk about controversy, it just happens that I personally believe that the Director of Central Intelligence ought to stick to his intelligence last and leave the policymaking to others.

MSM: Who actually ran the day-to-day operations of the organization while McCone was DCI? Did Carter, did General Carter? Did Lyman Kirkpatrick?

RH: Well, McCone.

MSM: McCone did?

RH: Yes.

MSM: He didn't hand it over to Carter?

RH: No.

MSM: Okay. (Pause) What was the extent...

RH: I think--excuse me--it seems to me that one should understand something about McCone, and I would exemplify it by this anecdote. At one juncture, and I've forgotten entirely when, there was some issue, and some of the fellows wanted to get some information from Aristotle Onassis. And they went to McCone and said that they were going to send some individual--I've forgotten now who--to talk with Onassis. And McCone just laughed at them. He said, "If you want to get something out of Onassis, you'd better convince me that I should talk to him. Because I know what tanker owners are like. They're men who are totally in charge of their operation, and I have been one of them." I tell you this anecdote, because it exemplifies the fact that it would never have occurred to McCone to give over the running of an organization to anybody else.

MSM: Well, along the same line, what was the extent of Robert Kennedy's authority over intelligence affairs while McCone was DCI? Did Kennedy indeed hold an "informal watching brief" over CIA and the entire intelligence community? Arthur Schlesinger claims that he did.

RH: That's--what does a "watching brief" mean? I mean, that's one of those rhetorical flourishes that doesn't convey very much. Robert Kennedy, on behalf of his brother, was deeply involved in counterinsurgency--in other words, in all those efforts to organize dissidents in certain countries, with particular reference to Cuba,

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and therefore he was constantly involved in meetings of the Counterinsurgency Group, to see how we could do the job better here, how more emphasis could be placed there. He was accessible to us when we wanted his assistance. He would call up low-level members of the Agency and ask them to do things for him, in certain operational spheres. And, in the latter days of President Kennedy's administration, he also had a lot of dealings with John McCone. And the reason for this was, that when McCone, on his honeymoon, had sent back these telegrams saying that one should look for the Russians putting missiles in Cuba, and these cables ran contrary to the general assessment of all the Soviet experts of the Government that Khrushchev would never try to put missiles in Cuba--in short, McCone turned out to be right, and all the others were wrong--President Kennedy for some reason did not like this, and his relationship with McCone was pretty much brought to an end. So, McCone at that point began to develop Robert Kennedy, and saw him on quite a few occasions, socially and in various other ways. In other words, he was his, what shall we say, his contact at a high level with the Kennedy administration.

MSM: That's interesting. I've heard that before, and then I've had some people that contradict that.

RH: Oh, it's absolutely true.

MSM: That he lost his access to the President at that point?

RH: Oh, there wasn't any question about it.

MSM: Not in terms of meetings. He had the same number of meetings with the President as before.

RH: No, but he didn't have access to him in the personal way that McCone liked, so that he could influence him in his decisions and so forth. That's what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about sitting in the same room with him or going to the White House or any of that thing. I'm talking about this one-on-one influence which McCone liked to have on policymakers.

MSM: Do you think it was as bad a break between him and Kennedy as it was between him and Johnson later?

RH: The break was different. With Johnson, it just--when Johnson came in, McCone used to go over in the morning and brief him on what was going on in the intelligence world. Then these briefings became less frequent. Then they stopped entirely. Then McCone very rarely saw Johnson--maybe in meetings, but certainly not one-on-one. And gradually McCone got the feeling, and told me, that he seemed to have no effect on the President or influence with him and so forth, and he really didn't think that he wanted to continue as Director of Central Intelligence. And I think that's why he resigned.

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MSM: Was Special Group Augmented simply Special Group 5412 plus Robert Kennedy?

RH: Yes, it--Special Group Augmented was this counterinsurgency group.

MSM: Was it invented to accommodate the Attorney General, to bring him in to Special Group 5412 for oversight...

RH: Oh, I think they called it Special Group Augmented for bureaucratic reasons, so that it would be recognized that the people who came to a Special Group meeting Augmented were not necessarily the same ones that came to a Special Group meeting, that's all.

MSM: I see. What was McCone's attitude toward covert operations?

RH: Well, he was in favor of them, and spent a reasonable amount of time understanding them and trying to assist with them. Whatever Robert Kennedy wanted, he tried to do. So, there was no opposition on McCone's part to special operations. Or covert actions--actions or covert operations, whatever you want to call them.

MSM: How much oversight did he exercise? Over covert operations?

RH: Well, a good deal of oversight. As much as any Director. He certainly had to defend them in these Special Group meetings. And all covert actions or Special Group activities, whatever you want to call them--I don't know how you best define them in your history--all of those had to be passed on by the Special Group, and he was a member of the Special Group, and therefore he knew about all of them. Nothing was kept from McCone. I mean, there's a sort of a myth that's got going, due to those Church committee hearings, that he was kept in the dark about certain things. But I discovered to my astonishment one time, when I was called back from Teheran to testify on some issue or other--one of the counsels for the Republican part of the Church committee took me aside and said, "Don't you know what's going on?" And I said, "No, what's going on?" He said, "Well, you know Walter Elder, who used to be a special assistant to McCone, is one of the ones that passes on the material that comes up here to the Hill. And he's been briefing McCone on what's up here and what's not up here, so that when McCone denies knowing certain things, he's in a very good position to feel that he is safe, because there's no records in the committee that indicate this." I said, "No, I wasn't aware that this was going on." "Well," he said, "it is, and you ought to pay attention to it." Well, there was nothing I could do about it--I was coming back and forth to testify from time to time, but I was not sitting here in town and couldn't do anything about anything. But I just wanted for the record to say that I don't recall anything that was kept from McCone. I think he was briefed on all the activities of the Agency. And if he claims that he was not, and particularly on these assassination issues and so forth, he and the good Lord will have to

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decide about that.

MSM: That was one of my questions--that when you had told the Church committee, and I'm quoting here, "He [McCone] was involved in this [Castro assassination attempts] up to his scuppers just the way everybody else was that was in it." And then you also said, "I don't understand how it was that he didn't hear about some of these things that he claimed he didn't." Did you discuss this topic with McCone? You indicate you have.

RH: Sure.

MSM: Okay.

RH: As far as I knew. As I say, I don't recall anything...

MSM: I mean, you actually discussed it? It wasn't a matter of passing on a piece of paper or something that was ambiguous or something of this sort?

RH: You know, when you're talking about some historical things in any organization, you think that you've done the complete job. Maybe you have, maybe you haven't. Maybe you forgot something. Maybe there was something that you didn't think was important, but it was long since past, or something of this kind. I'm not saying that the briefings that McCone got were necessarily one hundred percent. I'm just saying that I don't recall any of these important issues that got so much attention that he didn't know about. That's all.

MSM: I see. I'm glad to have that for the record. Did operations under William Harvey and Task Force W in any way threaten the President's handling and resolution of the Cuban missile crisis? Raymond Garthoff has indicated that...

RH: Well, I've never been able to understand what this charge was. The activities of Task Force W were undertaken at Robert Kennedy's request, with Special Group Augmented request. I'm sure the President was well aware of what was going on. He wanted something done about Castro, there's no question about this whatever, it was just as clear as a bell. Every effort was made, and passed on. And the allegation that Castro, hearing about these efforts against him, and so forth, therefore was disposed to do something against President Kennedy, and therefore this got wound up in Kennedy's own assassination--these are circumstantial weavings together of threads that I don't think necessarily should be woven together. I've never seen the evidence to support this at all. William F. Buckley, Jr. wrote a book--I've forgotten the name of it now--about this whole business.

MSM: Mongoose.

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RH: Mongoose.

MSM: Yes. R.I.P.

RH: And that's fantasy at the end of the book. I mean, he's entitled to put it together any way he wanted for fiction. But in the real world, the contention of some of the Senators that the efforts against Cuba of Harvey and Task Force W and so forth had something to do with the assassination of President Kennedy, I think is drawing a very long bow indeed. And nobody has yet come up with any information to my knowledge that Lee Harvey Oswald was necessarily put up to this by the Cubans. A much better case can be made that he was put up to it by the Russians. So, since that's unresolved, I don't think that these Ray Garthoff conceptions--and Ray has got all kinds of these. I mean, this isn't the only one. He floats these about one a year.

MSM: It seems to me, though, in looking through some of the documents from the period, that there were two operations that have perhaps been getting confused in people's minds after the fact. And possibly because they have access only to a limited amount of information. There was a re-run of an operation on Matahambre that took place, that began, during the height of the missile crisis and, according to William Harvey, was known and approved by everyone--by Kennedy, by you, by McCone. And this was what actually blew up after the crisis was over, along about November 13 or so--the operatives were captured by Castro, and this was announced. Yet, there was another operation that Harvey apparently sent in during the missile crisis on his own--three intelligence teams, for which he apparently did not have prior approval. These were sent in, as I understand it, to collect intelligence on the missile sites...

RH: I don't know, I don't remember anything about it, but I can tell you right now that if these were purely on intelligence missions, he didn't have to get approval. Because NSCID 5 gave the Agency the right to run intelligence operations without going around the Government.

MSM: I think this is what Garthoff is referring to, though. I think he is getting the two mixed up, and here were three teams sent in, two of which could not be recalled. McCone apparently hit the roof over it, because he had told Harvey that he wanted Special Group Augmented's permission before these went, and Harvey didn't get it--he just sent them in and couldn't recall them.

RH: Well, this I can't help you with.

MSM: Okay. This is too detailed. You weren't aware of this? You don't recall this particular episode? Okay. Apparently there was a bit of a flap over it. That's why I bring it up.

RH: Somebody like Sam Halpern might remember about it.

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MSM: Yes, we talked about it. We talked about it a bit. He remembered part of it, a portion of it. Why do you think that the Kennedy's continued Operation Mongoose right through the missile crisis? They didn't end it [Mongoose] until it [the crisis] was over.

RH: They wanted intelligence. I mean, they were desperate for intelligence.

MSM: Was it intelligence they wanted, or were they continuing operations, though? This was operations.

RH: Oh, I think that during the Cuban missile crisis, for that whatever period of time that lasted, that they were desperate for intelligence. And I don't think that they figured that the missile crisis necessarily had any effect on their need for this.

MSM: Okay. I was intrigued to discover that on the morning of the first day of the crisis, Robert Kennedy pushed for more action against Cuba. And on the second day, JFK approved of a proposed step-up, except for the proposal to mine the Cuban harbors. This I found intriguing.

RH: I think they wanted to get rid of Castro, there wasn't any doubt about it. Anything they could do to weaken him, they wanted to do. You know, this is one of things that so many of the critics of this period talk about, and I find it absolutely baffling, because, if you read the speech that President Kennedy gave down in Miami when the Bay of Pigs brigade was released from Cuba and came back, and that speech in which he said that "We'll plant your flag in a liberated Cuba," and so forth--if anybody reads that speech, they couldn't possibly come to the conclusion that Kennedy wasn't still dedicated to getting rid of Castro. I mean it's hard to read the language and not believe that. So where all this mysticism comes from, that he was--you know, all these things were all mounting to cause trouble for him, and in the end involved with his assassination and so forth--it's just, you know, it's just fantasyland.

MSM: How useful, how effective, were Special Group 5412, Special Group Counterinsurgency, Special Group Augmented--these special groups?

RH: How...?

MSM: How useful were they? How effective were they?

RH: Well, they were the approval mechanism.

MSM: Okay. And it worked?

RH: Uh huh.

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MSM: Why were the Agency's relations with Lansdale so strained?

RH: Strained?

MSM: Uh huh. Is that not the appropriate word?

RH: Is this during Operation Mongoose?

MSM: Yes.

RH: Oh, I don't think it was anything all that serious. I think that what that amounted to was that you had some powerful egos involved in these operations. You had a powerful ego in Kennedy, you had a powerful ego in McCone, you had a powerful ego in Harvey, you had a powerful ego in Lansdale, and I don't think it's anything more than that. Everybody wanted to be top dog.

MSM: Yes. Yes. (Pause). On Vietnam--skipping a bit here, from Cuba to Vietnam--this is the telegram, Deptel 243, and there's been some confusion, at least in my records, on what happened on that day on August 24, 1963. Someone from State called you, I believe, about this telegram to Ambassador Lodge concerning coup-plotting in Saigon. It's since been referred to as "Lodge's marching orders." Who called you? Was it Hilsman, or was it Harriman?

RH: Doesn't the record show who called me?

MSM: I haven't been able to locate it. You don't remember?

RH: I don't know whether it was Hilsman or Forrestal or who it was, but it was somebody who, when they called me, told me that this had already been approved by the President, and that they were just checking around to see if there were any dissents.

MSM: So it wasn't really coordinated with the Agency in any meaningful sense?

RH: Not in any meaningful way. Just a telephone call. I don't know where McCone was that weekend...

MSM: He was in California.

RH: This was a Sunday night, I think.

MSM: A very slow, summer weekend.

RH: Yes. And this telegram, as I recall it, was the brainchild of Averell Harriman, and was it Hilsman?

MSM: Hilsman.

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RH: And Forrestal?

MSM: Hilsman, Forrestal and Harriman.

RH: The three of them?

MSM: Uh huh.

RH: And, obviously in retrospect, it was a very bad idea. What McCone would have said about it if he'd been called on that particular occasion, I can't say. It's easy to be a Monday morning quarterback about something like that.

MSM: Yes.

RH: But I didn't feel that I was asked to give any particular thought, or check around with people or do anything like that. This was just sort of tipping their hat to the Agency, that they'd called everybody.

MSM: Right.

RH: I think, since you're a historian, this comment from me might be of interest to you. And that is, that Americans are so untutored in the cultures, religions, and social manifestations of so many foreign peoples, that we make a lot of mistakes, and this was one of those mistakes. That if we had really understood about the Buddhists, and all this business of burning themselves, etc., etc., we would have taken it far less seriously than Kennedy and Harriman seemed to think. I mean, after all, Buddhist monks did things like this. It wasn't all that important.

MSM: Just a totally different approach to the value of human life, and so forth?

RH: Yes, in other words, it's a different view of life, and we simply don't understand it. We don't understand Islam, we don't know anything about it. It's idiotic the way Americans react. The other day somebody was saying to me, "Were you surprised at that extraordinary outpouring at Khomeini's funeral?" And I said, "Not at all, if you know anything about Shiism, if you know that that's the kind of religion it is." So, we've got a lot better educational process to do in our Government departments if we're going to really run a sensitive and sensible foreign policy.

MSM: Yes. (Pause). Did McCone tell you at the time that he had recommended you to be his successor as DCI?

RH: Yes.

MSM: He did?

RH: Yes.

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MSM: Was it a surprise--it must have been, then--when that didn't happen?

RH: Well, he did tell me he'd recommended me. As a matter of fact, he took me down to meet President Johnson. I'd seen President Johnson before, but he took me down to actually see him--or he introduced me to him at some point or other. And then Johnson called me down when he'd made up his mind what he was going to do, and told me that he was appointing Admiral Raborn, and that I would be the number two, and that I was to come to all the meetings with Admiral Raborn, and that if all went well, then maybe at some point he'd make me Director.

MSM: You were given this promise, then?

RH: And, that was in a private conversation that he and I had. And so I did go to all the meetings with Admiral Raborn and so forth. And the only reason I'm telling this story is that, on the Saturday morning that President Johnson at a small press conference told the press he was appointing me as Director of Central Intelligence, he hadn't even bothered to call me or have anybody call me, so I heard it from the newspapers.

MSM: You never were told?

RH: I never was told.

MSM: Was there any indication, when Raborn was appointed and you made his Deputy, that Raborn's appointment was meant to be an interim appointment?

RH: Yes, that was the intimation.

MSM: That was the implication?

RH: In other words, President Johnson was quite frank and open about this. He said, "You have no contacts on Capitol Hill. You're not known in this town. And in order to have a job like this, you've simply got to have the acquaintance of certain Senators and Congressmen, and so forth. And this is an opportunity for you to become acquainted with these people. And that's what I want you to do." So that the implication was that it was interim. The implication was that I would get it. But he was very careful never to say how long Raborn was going to be there. He might be there a long time, or a short time--this was left quite fuzzy. But he made it abundantly clear to me that he wanted me to get known around town. That's why he was making me Deputy, so that I would show up in these places with Raborn."

MSM: Was Raborn aware of this?

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RH: I have no idea. I doubt it.

MSM: What was it like to work for McCone? Was it terribly difficult?

RH: No. McCone was not difficult to work for. McCone was very explicit about what he wanted. He kept one to high standards, but not unreal standards. He was an exacting boss, but certainly not an unreasonable one. And, as a matter of fact, I rather enjoyed working with him, because you usually knew where you stood with McCone.

MSM: Yes, I can imagine. Even now, at what is he--eighty-eight?--I knew where I stood with him.

RH: Is he eighty-eight?

MSM: Yes, I think he is. Yes--eighty-seven, eighty-eight.

RH: I'm sorry he's so ill.

MSM: Oh, he is, yes. But he won't admit it.

RH: No, no. He's a feisty fellow.

MSM: He's a fighter.

RH: And he's got a lot of courage.

MSM: Yes.

RH: But I gather from what you say that he's going downhill. Do you want to turn that off?

(Tape turned off, as Ambassador Helms reviews his notes, then turned back on)

RH: Here's one item that I think might help to lighten your history, and that is, that McCone had a trick which at least I, and I guess the other deputies, but certainly I, caught on to after a while. And that was that, if on Thursday or Friday, you got a call from him giving you a whole list of things that he wanted done and done right away, you then knew that he was going away for the weekend.

(laughter)

RH: Let's see. I have down here about his relationship with Pat Carter. And I've never known exactly what that relationship amounted to. I know that he was irritated with him, because he hadn't fought harder to get his so-called "honeymoon cables" accepted at the White House. But other than that, I think that John

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McCone, whether he liked or didn't like, or regardless of what his relations with Pat Carter were, they would have been the same with anybody else. In other words, he was the boss, and whoever was the number two really was not a matter of great consequence to John McCone.

MSM: Yes. I think with Carter you had a chain of command guy, and with McCone you had something very much different...

RH: That's right.

MSM: And the two simply were not compatible.

RH: So I think that covers it, Mrs. McAuliffe.

MSM: Okay.