

Conversation No. 587-007

Date: October 8, 1971

Time: Unknown between 10:58 a.m. and 12:12 p.m.

Location: Oval Office

Participants: President Richard M. Nixon, John Ehrlichman, and Richard Helms

President Nixon's hostility toward DCI Richard Helms is well known. As such, the DCI was rarely granted the privilege of a personal meeting with the President. One exception came on October 8, 1971, when, in the presence of Ehrlichman (who was there in the capacity of the President's lawyer and therefore bound by attorney-client privilege), Nixon and Helms had a wide-ranging conversation covering past and future CIA operations. Nixon had called in his DCI to find out about previous agreements that had been negotiated with the Soviet Union, such as the one that ended the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Nixon had initially tried to delegate the task to Ehrlichman, who apparently served as Nixon's intermediary with the Intelligence Community. Ehrlichman had, however, been rebuffed by the Helms, who did not want to release the relevant "dirty linen" unless he had assurances about to whom they would be distributed. Over the course of their wide-ranging conversation, Nixon reaffirmed his both commitment to protect the agency, and his support for "dirty tricks": "We have got to be in a position where if the Russians or the Chinese are in a particular little country trying to screw it up, we can screw it up, too." Nixon also conceded that more should have been done to prevent Allende's election in 1970.

[...]

[587-007_Clip1](#) (2.3m, 2:24)

Nixon: Well, here's the thing: I think the real problem that I think you need to know—and I'm glad you came here, because our actual assurance is to talk to you directly, of course—the real thing you need to have from me is, first, this assurance—

Helms: That's all I want.

Nixon: —[*that*] I am not going to embarrass the CIA, because it's terribly important. Second, I believe in "dirty tricks." I think we've got to do it. As we go into this period now, Dick, with the Chinese, and, you know, with the Russian thing, Berlin, and the rest, we don't know what's going to happen there. And I am—I'm going to keep you very closely posted on what's going to happen, because as we do that, the "dirty tricks" thing may become more and more important,

because all over the world, particularly if you look at Vietnam, probably, or the rest, but there is going to be the goddamnedest bunch of, you know, of a rash of screwing up of the Chilean things—that sort of thing. And that’s why, incidentally, I want [unclear] I haven’t told you this, and I want you to talk to Henry about it, but not to state it to anybody else: [tapping desk] I want you to strengthen your department in that area where we work on elections, and so forth and so on. I think you’ve got to do it. I think it’s good, now, that [Thomas] Karamessines—or whatever his name is—

Helms: Karamessines.¹

Nixon: —but, can I suggest that I think that’s going to be a—intelligence gathering is terribly important, see, but I think that we’re going to have to get in with some of the others in the inept State Department fellows—who, frankly, frankly, first are not politicians, and, secondly, don’t have their heart in it, but we have got to be in a position where [tapping desk] if the Russians or the Chinese are in a particular little country trying to screw it up, we can screw it up, too. Don’t you agree?

Helms: Oh, I agree. I do, sir.

Nixon: Good. I think, and would you not agree, we could have won the Chilean [*election*]?

Helms: Yes, I think we could, and it was, it was, it was only one—

Nixon: Right. Yeah, I know you recommended more money than you got—than we gave them, too. Isn’t that right?

Helms: Yeah, we just—you know, we—

Nixon: Well, I may just—

[Unclear exchange]

Nixon: He’s just dying, because, you know, he says, “Well, Dick,” he did, but he said that [unclear] be glad to have it, but, but he was afraid that State would have [unclear] the ambassador is out and everything is fine.

Helms: But I have a message, Mr. President: Let’s—

Nixon: The point that I want is [tapping desk] that I want to know if we can do things you do. Now, the second point is, I will not embarrass the CIA, because I will defend it.

¹ DDCI for Plans, 1967-1973.

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