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Program of Oral History



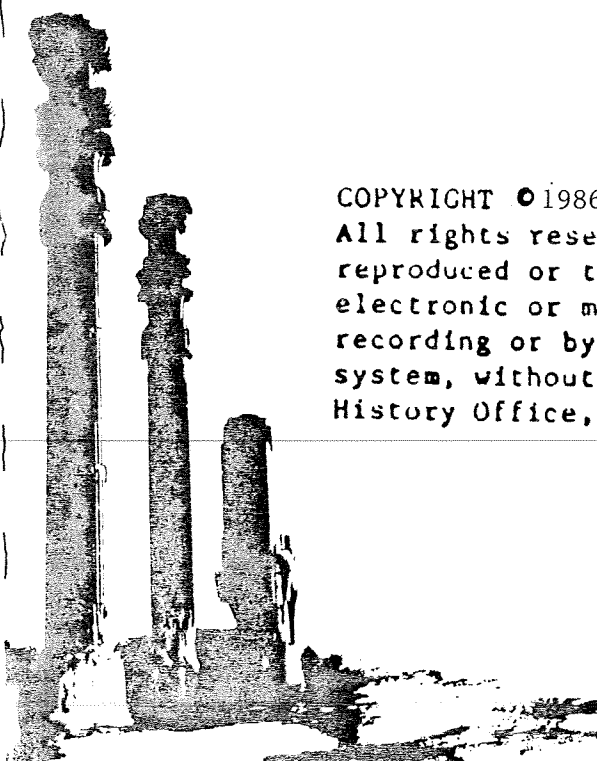
بنیاد مطالعات ایران

Foundation for Iranian Studies

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD HELMS

INTERVIEWED BY WILLIAM BURR

WASHINGTON, D.C. JULY 10 & 24, 1985



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IRANIAN-AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
THE REMINISCENCES OF
RICHARD HELMS

Foundation For Iranian Studies

Oral History Archives

and

Oral History Research Office

Columbia University

1986

Preface

The following oral history memoir is the result of two tape-recorded interviews conducted by William Burr with Richard Helms on July 10 and July 24, 1985. This interview is one of a series on Iranian-American relations in the post World War II era conducted as part of a joint project between the Oral History of Iran Archives and the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. Similar projects have been undertaken in England and France

Mr. Helms has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind, however, that what he or she is reading is essentially a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Richard Helms joined the CIA in the 1950s. His career in the CIA culminated in his appointment to the Directorship of the Agency during the Nixon presidency. In 1973 Mr. Helms was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Iran, a position which he held until 1976.

Mr. Helms' experiences with Iran date back to his time in the CIA, where as an intelligence officer he became acquainted with the Events of 1953. His subsequent visits to Iran and meetings with the Shah as a ranking member of the U.S. intelligence establishment made him privy to the progress of Iranian politics in the 1950s and the 1960s. Mr. Helms' tenure of office in Iran co-incided with a period of change in the country. Mr. Helms' insights into Iran's weapon procurements from the U.S., assumption of a greater role in the region and socio-economic progress are highly illuminating. Moreover, Mr. Helms' reminiscences are instructive with regards to both U.S. and Iranian foreign policy making.

Form H

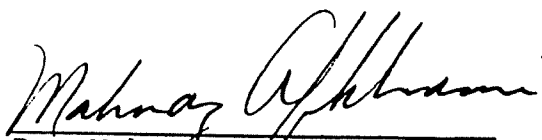
Dear Dr. Grele:

This letter will confirm my understanding and agreement with the Foundation for Iranian Studies Oral History of Iran Archives and Columbia University with respect to my participation in a series of interviews conducted by the Columbia University Oral History Research Office.


1. The interviews will be taped and a transcript made of the tapes. The transcribed interviews will be maintained by the Oral History of Iran Archives and the Columbia Oral History Research Office.

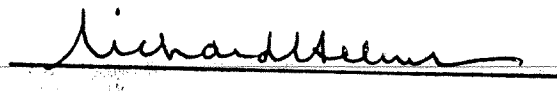
2. I hereby grant, assign and transfer to the Oral History of Iran Archives all right, title and interest in the interviews, including the literary rights and the copyright, except that I shall retain the right to copy, use and publish the Work in part or in full until the earlier of my death, ~~or~~ _____ ~~to~~.

3. The interviews will be made available for use by researchers at both institutions in accordance with Foundation and University rules and general policies for research and other scholarly purposes with (no) ~~(the following)~~ restrictions.


Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami
Foundation for Iranian Studies

Very truly yours,


Ronald Grele
Oral History Research Office


Date June 9, 1986.

CORRECTIONS

- P.1 line5: "went to school".
P.1 "Mossadegh" should be "Mossadeq".
- P.21 "Ansary" should be "Ansari".
- P.21 "Amouaegar" should be "Amuzegar".
- P.22 "Hassan Toufanian" should be "Hasan Tufaniyan".
- P.22 "Manouchehr" should be "Manucheher".
- P.22 "Taghi Mossadeghi" should be "Taqi Mossadeqi".
- P.22 "Assadollah Alam" should be "Asadollah 'Alam".
- P.29 "Ansary" should be "Ansari".
- P.29 "Amouzegar" should be "Amuzegar".
- P.29 line3: "centralized" should be "centralize".
- P.31 "Shapour Bakhtiar" should be "Shapur Bakhtiyar".
- P.34 "Mossadegh" should be "Mossadeq".
- P.35 "Amouzegar" should be "Amuzegar".
- P.36 "Faisal" should be "Feysal".
- P.42 line8: "Q: I have some ..."
- P.44 "Faisal" should be "Feysal".
- P.45 "Mossadegh" should be "Mossadeq".
- P.48 "Hassan Toufanian" should be "Hasan Tufaniyan".
- P.49 line12: "lo" should be "all".
- P.51 line5 from bottom: "gurantor or stability" should be "gurantor of stability".
- P.53 "Murani" should be "Maroni".
- P.54 "Faisal" should be "Feysal".
- P.56 "Assadollah" should be "Asadollah".
- P.58 line11: "pssed" should be "Passed".
- P.63 line4: "know" should be "knew".
- P.74 "Toufanian" should be "Tufaniyan".

IB

Interviewee: Richard Helms Date: July 10, 1985

Interviewer: William Burr

Q: The following interview with Ambassador Richard Helms is a joint project of the Columbia University Oral History Office and the Foundation for Iranian Studies. The interview took place on July 10, 1985.

Is it true that you went school with the Shah in Switzerland in the 1920s?

Helms: No, it is not true. The fact of the matter is that I was about four years older than the Shah and had left Le Rosey before he came. It was my brother Pearsall who was in school at the same time as the Shah.

Q: During your years at the CIA, one of the Agency's activities was the 1953 coup against Mossadegh. Did you take part in any of the discussions or planning for this effort?

Helms: I was not intimately involved in the planning. I was aware that the effort was going to be undertaken because my position in Agency at the time entitled me to know about it.

Q: What was that position so we have it for later?

Helms: Well, at that time, I was the number two in what was known as

the Directorate of Plans. At that time the Directorate of Plans was headed by Frank G. Wisner and I was the number two: my title was Chief of Operations. Kermit Roosevelt, who eventually ended up running the operation in Tehran, had the title of an Assistant Deputy Director for what amounts to covert operations. This is something that I'd rather not be directly quoted on because I don't remember his exact title anymore.

Q: That's okay.

Helms: I just know that he would have been generally under my jurisdiction. That's what I meant by the fact that I was in a position to know about this operation.

Q: When the discussions and planning took place in, I guess the spring of 1953 or early--

Helms: I don't remember when they were anymore.

Q: When there were debates over the desirability? Was it pretty much an across-the-board consensus that this should go on? Were there any doubts?

Helms: I don't have any recollection of that anymore. The only thing I do know was that a decision was made at the highest level of the American and British governments that this effort should be made and it was to be a joint effort and it was to be under American

leadership.

Q: So the British had a junior partner role on this, basically, or was it more equal?

Helms: Well, I don't recall any longer whether it was a senior or junior partnership. I think that it was agreed that Roosevelt would head the field operation and that the British and American officers would work under him on this.

Q: Now besides Kermit Roosevelt I've read that some of the people involved in the coup effort were Joseph Goodwin, Howard Stone, Roger Goiran.

Helms: They were all involved in it as far as I'm aware. And I think they're all alive and they are people with whom you could talk about it. At least I think they're all alive.

Q: Did you monitor the progress of the coup as it developed?

Helms: Yes, to a certain extent I did. I was aware of the major developments in it.

Q: Did they keep tabs by cable?

Helms: Yes. We were getting reports by cable from Tehran as to what was happening.

Q: Were there any worries at that time that you recall that it might not come off, that it might--?

Helms: Well, I believe there was a period--and you would have to consult the official record on this which I assume will be public before too long--that when it looked as though the operation might not be successful the Under Secretary of State, General Walter B. Smith, attempted to call the operation off. From what I learned later, whether these instructions did or did not actually reach Roosevelt, I believe that he intended to see the operation through to the end, in any event, and went ahead with it.

Q: I see. How determining or how important was the CIA role of bringing General Zahedi to power in restoring the Shah. Was it a crucial factor or was the local Iranian participation more important? Or can you measure the CIA contribution?

Helms: At this late date, I would not be able to make any sensible comment about that. My impression is that bringing the Shah back and putting General Zahedi in as Prime Minister were generally popular in Iran. It is also my impression that the crowds that came into the streets in support of this measure came there wanting to see this outcome. This operation, I know, has been regarded as being far fancier or larger than it in fact was. There was really not an awful lot of money spent. And it was mostly an operation in which the people involved on the American and British side organized things in

Iran rather than--[tape interruption]

Q: I guess I was meaning to ask if the coup could have succeeded without the CIA role.

Helms: This is very difficult to know. My impression was that the organization provided by the Agency was rather important in this, that otherwise things would never have come to a boil. I don't mean to, and I'm not interested in making generalizations, but organizing groups of people has not been big in Persian life. It isn't that kind of a country. Emphasis had tended to be on individual prowess rather than on group activity or sports. Team sports developed after World War II.

Q: Okay. After the Shah's return to power, did the Agency continue to give him special support or assistance? To the Shah?

Helms: Well, I think the proper way to identify that relationship is to say that the Shah was the chief Iranian intelligence officer as well as being commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Little could be done of any importance in Iran, particularly with a foreign country, without the Shah's blessing. Now, as far as the CIA was concerned, I think the Shah was impressed with the way they had handled that operation in the early 1950s and, therefore, he assumed that they had good and able people, which was true. He didn't favor the CIA in any particular respect, except one, and that was that over the years he was prepared to receive the station chief in Tehran in

audience alone. In other words, he did not insist that the ambassador or somebody from the embassy come along. So that gave the station chief a sort of a cachet, if you like, of some interest.

Q: This is the case through the 1970s, this relationship?

Helms: And the various ambassadors did examine this unusual arrangement. Some of them looked at it, I think, with a certain concern, but nobody attempted to turn it off. Nobody did turn it off, let's put it that way.

Q: I read of one activity the CIA was involved in, I guess, late 1950s, maybe, where it was helping to establish the SAVAK, the police force, internal security force, there?

Helms: My recollection of that was that when the Shah decided that he needed an internal security force and also a force that might do some foreign intelligence work for him, he did enlist the Agency to help train the people. I don't know the extent to which the Agency was involved in setting it up as such. I believe it was more on the issue of training these people on how to do their job.

Q: Technical assistance, sort of?

Helms: Yes.

Q: Was Kermit Roosevelt involved in all of this thing now?

Helms: He may have been. I don't recall. But some of these other men that you will talk to would know more about this than I.

Q: Okay, fine. Did you visit Iran at any time during the mid to late 1950s or early 1960s?

Helms: Yes. The first time I visited Iran, I believe, was in 1957. I was on a longer trip and Iran was one of the stops that I made. And that was the first time I ever met the Shah.

Q: Do you have any impressions of him at that time in the 1950s that you can pinpoint?

Helms: Well, I think that the impression I had from that meeting was the beginning of an impression that I had during the entire subsequent period of almost but not quite twenty years and that is that he was an extremely or an unusually well-informed individual, that he seemed to be reasonably confident. Certainly this was in a period when life was not too easy for him in Iran but nevertheless he seemed to be doing rather well. I came away with a favorable impression of the man.

Q: Did he discuss with you his objectives for a society or was it more sort of like business, intelligence business?

Helms: Well, on this particular visit, I don't recall very much

discussion of domestic affairs in Iran. I think it was more a discussion of geopolitics, conditions in the world, things of this kind. I remember that one of the things about that particular meeting which interested me (it's one of these little human details that one notes) was that both the Shah and I smoked at that time. And he would offer me a cigarette, which I would take. And then the next time around when I would offer him a cigarette, he would decline it and then maybe smoke one of his own later. This didn't make much of an impression of me until I thought about it later and then I realized that this was one of these questions of, "If I don't smoke the other man's cigarette, nobody can give me something that would be bad for me." That interested me, the care with which he handled such matters. And, in that part of the world, it's abundantly necessary.

Q: Was this visit before or after the coup in Iraq? We might have talked about that. But I can't remember the chronology of that.

Helms: I've even forgotten the exact time in 1957 that it was. I think it was in the late fall, however.

Q: I can't remember the year of that coup, maybe 1957.

Helms: But the Shah at that time still had his office in that downtown palace which is now a museum. I think it was called the--I don't know what it was called. I thought it was the Marble Palace, but it may be something else.

Q: During the course of the 1960s, did you discuss Iranian issues or the Shah with President Kennedy or Johnson? Was that a real subject of discussion? Or was it pretty much not a major issue of discussion at any point?

Helms: Well, President Kennedy was involved with Iran to the extent that he was attempting to put pressure on the Iranian government to be more liberal, more democratic. And I have to confess that I've forgotten what the precise issues were, but they certainly are of record. All I remember is that the Kennedy Administration put a lot of pressure on the Shah to appoint Ali Amini as the prime minister. And the Shah did so. And I remember that in later years he would refer to this with a rather sour look on his face and point out that Amini was a poor prime minister. But the exact issues I don't recall. I just know there were some.

Q: Okay. And President Johnson's approach for policy with Iran?

Helms: I do not recall Johnson being particularly interested in Iran or of my ever having talked with him about that problem per se.

Q: Okay. During the mid to late 1960s, were there any other further visits to Tehran or Iran?

Helms: I think that I stopped in Tehran in 1964, if I recall. Yes, I did. And I believe I saw the Shah at that time. My recollection is that I had to go down to Ramsar to see him because he was down

there for some summer holiday or other. My recollection is that on that occasion I had lunch with him at a little palace that he had in Ramsar.

Q: Do you recall the purpose of the visit?

Helms: I was just traveling through and he was polite enough to receive officials of the Agency of sufficient rank. I was at that time Deputy Director for Plans. I assume I was identified as that to him by whomever the station chief was. In any event, he did receive me and he received me alone down at Ramsar.

Q: Do you have any particular impressions of Iranian politics, the situation in Iran, the general stability, questions from that period?

Helms: I don't, and I think it would be a mistake for me in this interview to try and reconstruct in my own mind exactly what was going on in Tehran in any particular year during the 1950s and 1960s.

Q: Okay. During the 1960s and 1970s, if not earlier, the U.S. used sites in Iran as listening posts on Soviet Union missile tests. Now, do you recall how early this started? Was this fairly early in the 1950s, or [do you have] any sense of when this activity could have got going?

Helms: I'm sorry I no longer know when this started. I know there was one listening post that was there for quite some time. Then

another listening post was added when the United States and the Turkish government had disagreements over some of the activities that the United States had in Turkey and we lost a particular listening post, the name of which I've now forgotten. It was a very important one because it looked down on the Soviet missile range, an ICBM range, I think it was.

Q: This is the one that was in Turkey that did that?

Helms: Yes, I think so, and therefore they needed to replace this. The only place that could be found was in Iran. So, with the Shah's permission, another listening post was established. The names of these I now do not remember and it would be a mistake for me to try and guess what the names were. They are easily ascertainable, I would think. I do know about the last one put in, because I had talked with the Shah about it in Washington on one of his visits to the United States. He agreed that he would sponsor it, and what he decided to do was to make the installation an Iranian Air Force installation, have the Iranian flag fly over it, and then have the Americans do their work there under the guise of advisors and consultants to the Iranian Air Force.

Q: This agreement was made sometime in the 1960s or maybe a little later?

Helms: Yes, it would have been made sometime in the 1960s.

Q: He was very cooperative on these efforts, though?

Helms: Very cooperative.

Q: Now, there are particular reports on this matter. Some people have charged that the CIA said they would not spy on the Shah in order to get access to listening posts. Have you heard these?

Helms: Oh, I've heard these reports, that there was some sort of deal allegedly made that, in exchange for assistance and cooperation from the Shah, the CIA would not work on Iranian domestic intelligence targets. Well, that simply is not true. There was never such an arrangement made. Not only that, but it's been alleged that I was the one who made the arrangement. And I know I never did. I never gave into the Shah on any of these matters. When something came up, perhaps about the activity of an officer in the embassy being involved in some domestic affair or with some opposition group, I would entertain the Shah's complaint or the Prime Minister's complaint but I never gave into them. I remember on one occasion speaking to the officer involved and saying that he should be more careful about what he said to local Iranians. But no deals were ever made. I don't know how this canard got started, but it certainly is not true.

Q: I read it recently in a foreign policy magazine. It was in an article about intelligence.

Helms: Yes. I welcome the opportunity to set the record straight.

Q: That's right. Now, for the Nixon period--I guess we'll go on to that. From your recollections of any meetings at that time, how would you characterize Nixon and Kissinger's general approach to the Shah in Iran, say, during the late 1960s, early 1970s, mid-1970s?

Helms: Do you mean late 1960s, early 1970s?

Q: Well, yes.

Helms: I think that when President Nixon was in the process of formulating what later became known as the Nixon Doctrine and was looking at the world map, he apparently figured that with the British pulling out of the Trucial States and the Gulf area generally and Aden and that whole area there that there was going to be a vacuum and that the United States did not have the resources or could not make available the resources to police the whole world. So I gather he came to the conclusion that the sensible thing to do was to have the Shah be the sort of "policeman" of the Persian Gulf area and make it possible for him to have the arms and the military power to carry out that mission. And this is what I believe led up to the decisions made during the 1972 visit that Nixon and Kissinger made to Tehran, at which time they talked to the Shah about assuming this kind of responsibility.

Q: I read somewhere that a couple of political scientists have suggested that Nixon and Kissinger saw this policy towards Iran as

like a test case in the application of the Nixon's doctrine of 1969. Was that ever thought out so specifically or was it sort of like just a--?

Helms: Well, it may have been thought about as a test case. I don't know. But I've never heard it referred to in that fashion. You know, if we're going to keep history even reasonably accurate, officials like Nixon and Kissinger very seldom went around giving the public or even the private impression that they were going to test something here and see if it worked and then maybe they would test something over there and see if it worked. When one adopted a policy, one simply went forward with it. And this is what they did in this case: they decided that we were going to support the Shah and the Shah would be our ally in this part of the world. After all he presided over the country with the largest population in the Persian Gulf area and he was the logical man for us to do business with in that region.

Q: One of the decisions made during this meeting was the decision to sell the Shah the F-14 jet, fighter jet?

Helms: I don't know if it's true or not.

Q: That's the impression I've gotten.

Helms: All I know was that while I was Ambassador--and I didn't get to Iran until March 1973 and I was there until the very end of 1976--

but during the period that I was there, the decision of whether to buy the F-14 or the F-15 was going back and forth in the Shah's mind. I remember on one of his visits to the United States, I guess it was the visit in 1973, I went with him and his group to watch a fly-off demonstration of both the F-14 and the F-15. I think it was at Andrews Air Force Base. So it was still a question as to which of these aircraft he was going to buy at that time.

Q: I guess, in any case, though that the impression has been given by political scientists and people who have written about Iran in the 1970s that at these meetings of 1972 the Shah was given more or less what people call a carte blanche in terms of access to U.S. weapons systems and that kind of thing.

Helms: I know that there's been an awful lot of talk about this "carte blanche" business, and about what was said to the Shah at that time. Frankly, I do not know exactly what the record does show about that 1972 meeting because at that time I had a lot of other responsibilities as Director of Central Intelligence. But I noted that when I got to Tehran and had to do with the whole business of weapons sales to Iran, there was a continuing discussion as to what the Shah wanted to buy in the first place. He was getting advice from the ARMISH/MAAG (U.S. Military Mission with the Imperial Iranian Army/Military Assistance Advisory Group), the headquarters of which was located in Tehran. That he was given "carte blanche" to buy anything he wanted, I'd seriously question. I doubt it, because it wasn't necessary to paint with such a broad brush. All President

Nixon would have had to say to him is: If we can help support you, please let us know. (I strongly recommend that former President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger be interviewed.)

Q: I have the impression under, say, Johnson and maybe early Nixon that there was a fairly close review over his arms sales decisions, arms sales to Iran, that there was some vetting by the U.S.

Helms: I know there was vetting in the Nixon Administration as well. Because what would it have profited the United States to have the Shah buy equipment which was simply not useful in the context of his strategic or tactical needs. It was necessary to have U.S. advisors to help the Iranian military.

Q: Okay. It is my impression, also, that in those same meetings of 1972 Nixon agreed to the Shah's request for CIA assistance in arming the Kurds in Iraq. Is that accurate?

Helms: There was no doubt that the Iranians pushed hard not to give the Kurds assistance from their own resources but to have additional support provided by the Americans as well as the British and the Israelis. If there was anybody else, I don't know. But all of these countries contributed something to the support of the Kurds. The Iranians were most interested in this activity.

Q: What was their purpose?

Helms: The purpose of the Shah was to keep the Iraqi troops pinned down by Kurdish dissidents. As long as they were pinned down and had this threat in the north, it was very unlikely that Saddam Hussein or General (Hassan) Bakr would try any military ventures against Iran. The Shah regarded that as an important military and political factor. On the other hand, the United States, particularly Dr. Kissinger, was interested in giving help to the Kurds, because it was figured that this would hold down certain Iraqi troops, which then could not be used against Israel on another front. This was part and parcel of his policy to keep the Iraqis as much out of military operations as possible. And, in this way, he hoped to be able to bring about some kind of a reasonable adjustment looking toward peace in the Middle East.

Q: How did the Shah feel about the Kurds? Was he really sympathetic to their purposes in Iraq, or was it more of just a convenience?

Helms: Well, the Shah was clearly ambivalent about the Kurds, because he had a Kurdish problem of his own. And, as you are well aware, the Kurds have wanted an independent country for generations. Since they live in Iraq and in the Soviet Union and in Iran and in Turkey, all of these countries have an interest in not permitting this to happen because it would take a chunk out of the territory of each one. So the Shah, obviously, had no intention of turning over to the Kurds a part of Iran. On the other hand, he was cynical enough to figure that supporting them militarily--and he did support them militarily--was a sound policy for that period. Actually, that

leads up to the so-called Algiers Agreement of 1975.

Q: Can we talk about that point later on? I'd like to get back to more questions that are related to when you were Ambassador. I guess I had one further question. I read somewhere that the station chief in Iran objected to this decision about helping the Kurds. Do you recall this?

Helms: I think that it is possible that individuals in the Agency were not in favor of this operation for the simple reason that it was difficult to carry out, it involved a lot of logistics support which the Station was not in a good position to offer. I believe there was a feeling among some that it was a generally undesirable operation. But the Agency was overruled. It was the Administration that wanted this operation pursued.

(As a matter of fact, there's one man who knows a great deal about this, Arthur Callahan, who works for Westinghouse in Washington these days. I think that in terms of his oath in the Agency and basic security considerations, he does not talk about these matters. And whether or not someone would want to approach him and ask him if he's interested in talking even about the generalities involved in it, I don't know. But he is alive and available.)

Q: When you became Ambassador to Iran in early 1973?

Helms: I actually arrived in Iran in March 1973. It was about the middle of the month. I certainly got there before Now Ruz, on March

the 21st. Traditionally the Shah went to Kish Island for a little holiday during the thirteen days of the Now Ruz holiday. So I was not able to present my credentials to him until after he returned to Tehran. It was early April before I actually presented my credentials.

Q: How is it that you did become Ambassador to Iran? Can you talk little bit about what led up to your taking that post?

Helms: I think the simplest way to deal with that is to look at the description in my wife's book, which is called An Ambassador's Wife in Iran. In the early part of that book, she discusses as accurately as you will find any place, how it came about that I was invited to become Ambassador to Iran.

Q: Okay. So you first arrived there in March of 1973. What were your impressions of Iran at that time, your general impressions of the country?

Helms: I don't recall that I had very much opportunity to have a general impression until much later, because I had to do some traveling to see what the country was really like. After all, Tehran may have been by far the largest city but it's not very much of Iran. So, as the weeks and months went by and I was able to travel to other parts of the country, I began to get an impression of a country which was still really a century behind Europe and the United States. I got the impression of the Shah's efforts to see if he couldn't bring

it into the twentieth century. But to say that it was backward is to put it mildly. I've forgotten what the figures were on illiteracy, but it was still very high, despite the best efforts of the Shah's administration through the Literacy Corps to try to get out to the thousands of villages and teach the people how to read and write.

Q: How much access to the Shah did you have when you were Ambassador? Did you meet with him fairly regularly?

Helms: Yes. I did meet with him regularly. I almost invariably met with him alone when we had actual "business" to discuss. I obviously accompanied any high ranking American visitors to see him. But he did give me the courtesy of giving me an audience without anybody else present, so that we could have a very frank conversation about what ever the matter was that I had on my mind or he had on his mind.

Q: Did you make records of the meetings like memos, note?

Helms: Yes, I certainly did. There are telegrams in the State Department which I believe cover every meeting I had with him.

Q: One newspaper story suggests that you had considerable influence with the Shah. And if influence means the capacity to change somebody else's mind--that is one definition--do you think that's true?

Helms: Well, I don't know. I think that's very difficult to make a