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Interview with General Robert Pursley, Part III
August 15, 1997

Trask: This is Part III of an oral history interview with General Robert E. Pursley, being held in the Pentagon on August 15, 1997. Participating as interviewers for the OSD Historical office are Alfred Goldberg and Roger Trask.

General Pursley, in previous interviews we have talked about your work as military assistant to Secretary Robert McNamara and some about your work in the same position for Secretary Clark Clifford. Probably Clifford's biggest concern was the Vietnam War. Would you start by commenting on what you think was Clifford's attitude towards the struggle when he took over? Then we'll trace through the major aspects of his handling of the Vietnam problem during his short term as secretary of defense.

Pursley: It would be useful to reflect on the fact that when Clark Clifford arrived as secretary it was quite a turbulent period. More so than usual, not only for Southeast Asia, but other events as well. Just prior to Clifford's arrival on 1 March 1968, three important things had happened. We had lost a B-52 in Greenland with nuclear weapons on board. Any situation involving nuclear weapons always creates a great stir. The Department of Defense had dispatched a number of people to Greenland. We felt at the time, January 1968, that it was a very significant event and one that had to be handled with great care. That situation was very rapidly overtaken in terms of critical attention by the capture by North Korea of the Pueblo. An attack upon such a U.S. intelligence target, much less a capture, was ultra-serious not only in terms of the type of event, but also the number of people on board. Moreover, the implications, not only vis-a-vis the North Koreans, but also with the Soviet Union, China, etc., were exceedingly

sensitive and serious. That event was then overtaken literally in a matter of hours by the Tet offensive in Southeast Asia. That clearly was a seminal event as far as Southeast Asia was concerned. So there were three major events sitting on the table as Clark Clifford came through the door and the transition from McNamara to Clifford was made. Despite those specific events, and more especially because of the Tet offensive, Clark Clifford's mission as most of us understood it as given by President Johnson was to make a very detailed assessment of where we stood in Vietnam and to provide some new and fresh recommendations on the next steps. That was perhaps a bit difficult to do in the face of a major offensive that seemed from all media reports to be far more successful militarily for the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese than could be supported in retrospect. We now know that from a military standpoint it was a major North Vietnamese/VC catastrophe. For all intents and purposes the Viet Cong were eliminated. The North Vietnamese had a new set of circumstances on their hands. They really had to move main units in to occupy and take over all their goals or to reassess their entire strategy. Obviously they decided to pursue their original goals and to persist in their military effort despite incredible losses. One of the very factors that Clark Clifford tried to address early on was that the North Vietnamese were betting that we wouldn't stay the course and that they could outlast us even though they were taking such very large losses. It was a political decision on their part. That was understood by Clifford and became an essential part of the assessment. It was very difficult in the face of all the emotion, not only in the press but within the administration, to maintain objectivity. So Clark Clifford had his hands full. Despite the Greenland incident and the Pueblo incident, he focused primarily in his first few days and weeks on Vietnam. He

relied on a number of people, some of whom were assigned to him by the White House and some of whom he chose, to make this assessment. Almost immediately the Westmoreland pitch surfaced for a sizable extra increment of somewhere around 150,000 troops. That was the key thing that really affected Clifford. You could see that it caused him substantial consternation and concern--not only for the near-term policy considerations but also for the longer-term strategy implications.

Goldberg: Did he consult McNamara at any time?

Pursley: Yes, he did. He consulted with McNamara fairly substantially. As a footnote, that was true for both Clifford and Laird. Laird went out of his way to consult with other secretaries of defense. He did it through his entire stay as secretary of defense.

Trask: Including McNamara?

Goldberg: He did it more than any other secretary, far and away.

Pursley: Absolutely. Mel Laird always went out of his way to maintain links and get viewpoints. He did it also to obtain support.

Goldberg: He couldn't possibly have gotten that from his political experience, could he?

Pursley: It was more than just his political experience. I think his intuition told him that it was good management.

Goldberg: It was his political style, anyway.

Pursley: It was a management style that obviously he had seen. I'm not sure who he was emulating in doing that, probably a composite group. But in any event, Clifford spent the first few weeks conducting the Southeast Asia assessment. Nonetheless, with all the dialogue that was going on about Vietnam, and as Tet finally sorted out and simmered down and it became clearer, at least from a military standpoint, what had

happened, Clifford's judgment remained somewhat agnostic. I think he did come in with an objective viewpoint, although he had been a strong supporter of the U.S. military activity in Southeast Asia. The added Westmoreland request for roughly 150,000 troops, as mentioned earlier, had a very significant influence on Clifford. Where in the world would we be if that manpower increment and perhaps more beyond was required to prosecute this conflict? Something was very wrong or somehow our thinking needed a jolt. Clifford seemed to be evolving towards a judgment, much to President Johnson's surprise and consternation, that we were in a conflict that couldn't be won militarily without inordinate costs and risks. Even any favorable or acceptable political resolution could be exceedingly difficult. We needed to be thinking about how to get the conflict stopped and how to allow the U.S. to obtain some separation from the effort.

Trask: Did he come to that conclusion within a couple of months of his becoming secretary?

Pursley: I would say he was very close to that. That became a guiding premise and it would be the burden for those who thought otherwise to convince him otherwise. By the time that President Johnson made his announcement on March 31, 1968, that he wouldn't run again, the impact of Clark Clifford on Johnson about what a mess we were in and the low probability that we could get a favorable or effective resolution either militarily, politically, or both, undoubtedly was major.

Goldberg: Were you in agreement with Clifford?

Pursley: Yes. To jump ahead a bit, not long after March 31 Clifford asked Paul Warnke, the assistant secretary for international security affairs, and me to prepare a paper for him, a private analysis of where we stood in Southeast Asia, a delineation of

alternatives, and an analysis of those alternatives. Paul and I put together the paper--about a 20-pager. We understood that Clifford wanted it just for himself with no copies made. We complied with that guidance. The secretary kept the paper in his upper left-hand desk drawer. The most probable option for the North Vietnamese was to maintain the military effort. They showed every inclination that way, with little regard for the costs. The costs, of course, were so astonishing that it boggled the mind. That was a very telling input as far as Clifford was concerned. The North Vietnamese willingness to take high casualties implied substantial and continuing costs for us, as well. The lack of progress on the part of the South Vietnamese, especially politically, but also militarily, was also a major consideration.

Goldberg: The cost was to the South Vietnamese as well as to the North Vietnamese.

Pursley: Yes, both sides took casualties.

Goldberg: But most of the action took place in South Vietnam, and most of the civilian casualties were there. North Vietnam was willing to use the South Vietnamese to the maximum extent.

Pursley: To the best of the intelligence community's ability to itemize human military costs, the North Vietnamese and particularly the Viet Cong had suffered far greater losses than the South Vietnam military.

Goldberg: I was thinking of the Viet Cong, they were largely South Vietnamese.

Pursley: The North Vietnamese knew what their losses were, they were inordinately high by Western standards, and yet they showed no inclination to stop or even modify their behavior. It's a significant factor if you are being opposed by somebody who is willing to suffer those kinds of costs.

Goldberg: It's their basic strategy.

Pursley: That's right. They would outlast us, and politically they would make us pay the price.

Goldberg: They were clever enough to manipulate American public opinion.

Pursley: It's not entirely clear how much manipulation was required. The North Vietnamese didn't have to do very much except be bystanders and just watch as the U.S. formulated its opinions. In any event, Clifford was fairly convinced that the little piece that Paul and I did was not much more than perhaps underlining what his judgments already were, but that was a piece that I was involved with that he referred to over and over again. In his book he refers to it as being a fairly important piece to him. As the weeks went by, it became clearer that we were going to have some kind of formal negotiating activity. Clifford's attention turned to how we could get those Paris negotiations moving. The photographs on Clark Clifford's plane flying our delegation to Paris in late April would have been of Harriman, Goodpaster, and Habib–our negotiating team. Clifford accompanied them all the way there just to keep on talking, to be sure that his inputs were going to be understood. That's a long-winded introduction into the Clark Clifford tenure. Obviously the negotiations did not move smartly, there were all sorts of endless problems with the shape of the table, who would sit where, and on and on. It was excruciating. Woven into that were questions about whether we could encourage some more progress with bombing halts, or with other kinds of constrained or proscribed activity here and there. There was much internal debate, as you well know, throughout the entire Washington community on that.

Goldberg: At the secretary's level was there much thinking about the prisoners of war?

Pursley: Yes, there was some. But the thinking was that this issue probably should not be brought to the surface very strongly because it might inhibit any progress there was in getting the negotiations underway. It would be one more irritant or obstacle to get past the North Vietnamese delegation. The conclusion, particularly on the part of Averell Harriman, was that we should not surface the prisoner of war issue strongly.

Goldberg: He'd been sitting on it for a couple of years by then; he was just being consistent in that regard. Of course, Laird came in and reversed the whole thing.

Pursley: At least the emphasis was changed dramatically. It was a situation where a difference in degree became a difference in kind. That was an important part of the Laird tenure. He was very vehement about that; it was a Laird initiative. The White House probably would not have done that at all. That was almost entirely Mel Laird.

Goldberg: They just jumped on the bandwagon after a while. It was a good political thing to do.

Pursley: My hunch is that Laird pulled that off better than most secretaries of defense would have, because he was very skilled at working with a lot of very different groups. Admiral Stockdale's wife had been very vocal and involved and Laird could keep her placated a bit or at least "somewhere on the reservation." And Laird spent a lot of time working with others with different points of view.

Goldberg: For him it wasn't mainly political. If it was something he genuinely believed in, it was the right thing to do. With Nixon there was probably a stronger political motivation.

Pursley: If the right thing to do is a good political thing to do, too, that's great; that's what Laird firmly believed. That carried through to all sorts of things, like the Son Tay raid.

That was one of the most stellar moments, I thought, in Secretary Mel Laird's tenure. He had every plausible reason to call that raid off, and he could have done so very easily at the last moment, but he gave the go-ahead. He had every confidence that it was the right thing to do, that the people involved could pull it off, and that it would benefit our POWs whether we rescued people on that particular raid or not.

Getting back to Clark Clifford, it was a long summer of protracted activity in a negotiation mode and continuing pressure was pointed toward how we could get the negotiations moving and make some progress. In the back of Clark Clifford's mind was a strong propensity toward Vietnamization. He would have moved that way if he had had the chits with President Johnson or if he had had the political chits that Mel Laird had.

Goldberg: If it had been a Democratic administration he would have remained the secretary of defense. He tried to move it in that direction. If Hubert Humphrey had been elected, he probably would have been successful.

Pursley: He probably would have been secretary of state, if Hubert Humphrey had been elected, or so Humphrey had told him. Clark was very proud of that. He would have loved to have served that way. He told me so. He would have tried to take to the State Department a significant part of his Defense team. That is interesting in that he had inherited most of that team. Anyway, the summer wore on and a number of other incidents surfaced as the presidential campaign moved along. Clifford was distraught that President Johnson was not stepping up more to help Humphrey. With Vietnam so much in the forefront, there were a number of things that Johnson might have done. The incident that stands out was the activity in which Henry Kissinger's name was involved,

of trying to be an intermediary between the Democrats and the Vietnamese in terms of some kind of settlement, and then an intermediary likewise with the Republican candidate and the South Vietnamese. Some of this was known through NSA intercepts--who was doing what and who was saying what. It was fragmented information, so we never knew what the whole story was. Nonetheless, that was a pointed kind of issue with Clark Clifford. The question for the Democrats was whether President Johnson should go public with what then-candidate Nixon was allegedly doing in terms of talking with the Vietnamese and perhaps counseling them to wait until after the U.S. election for things to get better from a negotiating standpoint. The political question was whether it was better not to get involved in that kind of obvious swamp, not knowing how the press would play it or how people would accept that kind of thing. The alternative was not to acknowledge it at all and stay focused on trying to get some substantive progress in Paris. Clifford opted strongly for the latter and counseled the president not to get involved.

Goldberg: That's something like the October surprises of later campaigns.

Pursley: Laird was very disturbed when traveling with candidate Nixon that the subject kept coming up all the time, that they would have to campaign saying they had a strategy to solve the conflict in Vietnam. That was a key part of the Nixon platform. Laird later said he knew full well there was not even an inkling of a strategy. Laird in his inimitable style made an announcement somewhere in the Midwest that Lyndon Johnson had a secret strategy. It was a way to deflect attention from what he knew was wrong in Nixon's assertion. That's pure Mel Laird. So now we had two secret strategies floating around in 1968. Actually, Laird's assertion didn't create much of a ripple inside the

DoD; people thought it was a bunch of political baloney. It didn't bother Clifford much; he stayed very focused on trying to make real substantive progress.

Goldberg: Laird talked with us about the '68 campaign. It was clear that he felt that Humphrey could have won had he just spoken up even a few days before the election instead of holding back because of Johnson. I had the impression that he thought it might have been a good idea.

Pursley: Clifford was so dedicated and sincere about wanting to make good substantive negotiating progress, as opposed to playing politics, that he counseled the president not to get involved. Clifford was a strong Humphrey backer and was devastated when he didn't win. But he didn't think we should use the negotiations or the Vietnam situation as the stepping stone to a November victory.

Goldberg: But there were other things that Johnson could have done that he didn't do.

Pursley: Very much so. There were perhaps a number of other Clifford activities that one could mention. He spent a fair amount of time thinking about our nuclear policy. He was quite satisfied, at least during his time in office, that we had a nuclear superiority. He thought that was substantial enough and that would be sustainable over a sufficient period of time so that we wouldn't have to worry about losing nuclear superiority, and that our nuclear policy and strategy were in fairly good shape. He also was attracted to the whole NATO situation. Politically it was an attractive thing. Obviously, going to the North Atlantic Council and hobnobbing with ministers of defense of other nations was appealing to Clifford. I think it has appealed to every secretary of defense. All of them have gotten wrapped up in various ways with the whole NATO operation.

Goldberg: Charlie Wilson didn't.

Pursley: I should say McNamara and later. That's an interesting observation and comment. It's an important point, because those were formative days for NATO in a lot of ways.

Goldberg: Fortunately Marshall and Lovett preceded Wilson and got things going on a proper keel.

Trask: Didn't Eisenhower as president pay a lot of attention to NATO?

Goldberg: Sure, he dominated.

Trask: But his secretaries of defense didn't.

Goldberg: And Foster Dulles did, too. Wilson was a homebody, when it came to that sort of thing.

Trask: This was a period of tenseness in race relations; Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. What measures did Clifford take, or what thought was there about using the military to assist with these problems?

Pursley: As important as all those events were, and this was highlighted by looking out Clark Clifford's office windows and seeing Washington burning, memory would not bring back any specific overtures by the secretary of defense. He offered assistance as requested, but Clifford did not become personally involved in that kind of activity. It had been the tradition that the deputy secretary was in charge of those activities. Bob McNamara used Cy Vance that way. A year earlier, in 1967, Vance had been dispatched to Detroit to supervise with General Throckmorton how we handled the volatile situation there. Paul Nitze continued in that kind of role. Clark Clifford didn't become much immersed in it, lamentable as the whole race and domestic situation was.

Trask: Two final questions about Clifford: What would you consider his major achievements, and how effective was he as secretary of defense?

Pursley: I believe his major achievement was to change the tenor, or at least the direction and process, of an attempted resolution to the Southeast Asia conflict. I think he did that fairly dramatically. A case in point is the president's decision not to run for office and the role of the secretary of defense's judgment about Southeast Asia in influencing the president's decision. We had been involved in Vietnam on a fairly sustained basis longer than in any other conflict in U.S. history. So in a few months to take a situation that complex and change the direction, at least of the thought and policy processes, was a substantial accomplishment.

Goldberg: He turned Johnson around.

Pursley: And a lot of other people. One of the things that we should say about Clifford, also, is that he was a counselor to the president on a lot of very sensitive matters other than defense. There were Supreme Court nominations and an array of political phenomena.

Goldberg: You mean as secretary of defense?

Pursley: As Clark Clifford, but while he was secretary of defense.

Goldberg: He had done that for years before.

Pursley: Exactly, but he continued in that role and Lyndon Johnson leaned on him for counsel in many ways. Given the number of years that they had participated in all sorts of issues together you would have thought that they would be very close personally. To a large degree they were. But they had also built up, particularly over the Vietnam issue, some antipathy. President Johnson periodically showed little patience with Clifford and

at times would not talk to him at all for a number of days. Other times, alternatively, he would keep Clifford in the White House or at the ranch for hours and days. For Inauguration Day 1969 Clark and Marny Clifford had invited President and Mrs. Johnson to their home for a brunch after the inauguration ceremony. The Johnsons went–that was the last event they attended in Washington. It was in honor of President Johnson. During the course of the brunch, Johnson called Clifford upstairs for a private exchange. Then Johnson presented to Clark the Medal of Freedom. President Johnson apparently couldn't bring himself to publicly give Clifford that kind of acclaim. It was illustrative of a love/hate relationship at that point. Johnson wouldn't conduct a ceremony in the White House; yet down deep he obviously felt that Clifford deserved the honor.

Goldberg: That sounds typical of Johnson. He was a man of tremendous mood swings.

Trask: Laird came in in January 1969 and you continued as military assistant. What were the circumstances of your reappointment?

Pursley: It came about for two reasons: One, Secretary Laird didn't fully appreciate what the role of military assistant was and asked Clifford what they should do about filling the position. Clark recommended that the current military assistants stay on. The other thing was that Laird came in with the disposition that he wanted an effective team. He was not going to involve politics in his appointments (a bit of irony) and wanted to find the most effective people he could. You probably recall from your interview with Secretary Laird–his stipulations to president/elect Richard Nixon for accepting the SecDef position were that 1) he would have access to the president without interference and whenever he wished; 2) he would have the power to name his own people, that

these would not be selected politically out of the White House or anywhere else; and 3) he would leave after one term in office.

Laird kept a number of people in very significant spots. For example, he kept John Foster as DDR&E. He kept Paul Warnke as ISA. He retained Harold Brown for a period as secretary of the Air Force.

Goldberg: That was just a short time.

Pursley: Yes, but it was an exceptionally important time, and he kept Warnke for a very specific reason. He wanted the continuity on Southeast Asia and specified that he wanted Paul to stay on as a guide through the time when Laird made his first trip to Southeast Asia. As I mentioned, he kept Harold Brown for a while. He wanted Bob Seamans as secretary of the Air Force, but Seamans could not be available until later in 1969. Secretary Laird felt comfortable in having Brown fill that spot as opposed to vacating it for any period of time. He kept Stan Resor as secretary of the Army, and that was not for a short time. Also concerning the transition, Laird dispatched Bill Baroody, one of his key assistants in Congress, to work on the changeover. Baroody and I had a number of talks and even wrote some notes together for Laird to sign. One was about the JCS liaison to the White House, a Bob Ginsburgh/Admiral Robinson kind of network. Laird wanted that network terminated. The network was not terminated; it caused substantial grief for both the White House and the chairman of the JCS. In addition, I had made out some transition notes and suggestions on management items--the daily schedule and the way the first week or two might function and how the secretary could get up to speed. I think it gave him some grasp of what was going on. He grasped the information quickly and followed it almost to the letter.

Goldberg: He did better than any other secretary in keeping people on.

Pursley: The Laird group functioned effectively from the first day on. Things kept right on moving. Laird made it clear that he was in charge, and no one had any doubt. The first time I met Mel Laird was in the vestibule of Clark Clifford's house. Clifford had a little get-together around the holidays, between the time Laird was nominated and January 20, 1969. His first comment to me was "It's too bad you are leaving." I was surprised, and waited for the rest of the sentence. It turned out he had mistaken me for somebody else. It was a memorable first meeting.

Trask: Laird even went to lower level positions, as he did with Charles Bowsher, an assistant secretary of the Navy, who was a Democrat, in order to keep the good people.

Pursley: That's absolutely illustrative. He had a people network that was impossible to comprehend. He knew Bowsher, he wasn't just casting about.

Trask: The fact is that Laird and Bowsher are still very close to this day.

Pursley: The number of people who are protégés of Mel Laird would make a long list; obviously, Hillary Clinton would be on the list. She was an intern in Mel Laird's congressional office, back when she was still a Republican. That was, I believe, her first introduction to government. She wrote a paper on Vietnam, which Laird still has. There were some attempts, particularly by Haldeman and Erlichman, to influence DoD appointments, but Laird would not stand for it. He maintained his control in making key appointments for all four years, and as time went by the decibel level went up and it got harder to maintain. But Nixon never recanted on that. Laird kept that ability to name his own people. For example, there was great pressure to replace Resor with Bo Callaway,

and Laird would have no part of Bo Callaway. That came up perhaps more frequently than others, at least across the screen that I was looking at.

Goldberg: I guess he knew him well.

Pursley: I think he had in the back of his mind that ultimately he would put Bob Froehlke in the secretary of Army position. He wanted Stan Resor around through the tough parts of trying to get Vietnamization going.

Goldberg: It's interesting that Laird measured up as well as he did in the job, considering his reputation as a strong partisan, politically. He rose above a lot of that.

Pursley: He could be partisan, but he was respected on both sides of the aisle, by both parties.

Goldberg: He was a supreme pragmatist, for one thing.

Pursley: You are correct. He and Fulbright got along exceptionally well. He and Proxmire, oddly enough, got along very well.

Goldberg: He was a people person, wasn't he?

Pursley: Yes, he was, and he was, as we have agreed, a pragmatist. I think Mel Laird was very dedicated to wanting government to function effectively. He would work hard to make sure that happened. I think his record on the Hill and inside Congress showed that. It certainly did inside the Executive Branch, and throughout all I've seen with Mel Laird, he was dedicated to getting the two branches to work together well.

Trask: When Laird came in, were you given any instructions or guidance? Did your duties change at all?

Pursley: Not by his direction, but they changed. I had been there long enough to begin to be a bit dangerous. I knew reasonably well how the department worked. It was

possible to assume more responsibility and to take on more duties. Duties expand with experience, and Laird allowed and seemed to welcome that. For example, Laird was attracted to the idea of meeting with ten to fifteen people face-to-face and frequently–including the service secretaries, DDR&E, and the assistant secretaries–certainly every two weeks and sometimes every week, and with the chairman even more often. I would make out an agenda and a talking paper on why issues were important. The paper might include some background. There could therefore be an ongoing log on the progress we were making on key issues. It systematized many activities and provided a mechanism for accountability. It was a management by objectives kind of thing, on a regular basis, and it carried on ultimately to an annual submission to show how we stood vis-a-vis the objectives that were laid out at the beginning of the year. Laird was very attracted to that. If I could go back and feel good about any one thing, it occurred to me that even though the Vietnam War was an important part of what the Department was doing, the secretary of defense had never systematized his approach and control of department activities. It was all delegated and disseminated to a lot of places. A lot of it went to the chairman, but major pieces went to secretaries of the services, a lot to the assistant secretaries, etc. The suggestion to Mel Laird was that we needed a more centralized control to be sure that his objectives and those laid out by the administration were really being pursued. To the degree that he wanted to avail himself of opportunities to lay out new alternatives, he needed to be much more involved. For example, he started a Vietnam task force, which essentially met daily. It caused the secretary to become directly and consistently involved. Equally importantly, it got the rest of the Department attuned to the fact that the secretary of defense was involved.

Goldberg: Don't you think the Department had that sense with McNamara?

Pursley: Not to that degree. McNamara was so involved in everything; it was hard to think of a principal issue in which he wasn't involved.

Goldberg: He didn't systematize it, did he?

Pursley: That's right. He delegated so much. That's the irony of the military charge that McNamara was too involved. In fact, take the mission statement for MACV. I'll bet McNamara never saw it and didn't even know what it said. He just assumed that with CINCPAC in charge of that theater, this would be all laid out and the military had it in very clear focus. Just the opposite was true. I think that the military never did get roles and missions sorted out very clearly, certainly not with the secretary of defense's guidance, anyway. McNamara, by delegating to the military, allowed these various fissures to continue. The Navy would have certain pieces of the mission, the Seventh Air Force would have certain pieces. Everybody had a chunk, which was normal, but it was not getting us moved along very smartly. I mentioned the role of MACV because this was a key change that came out of the Vietnam Task Force. Laird changed MACV's specific objective in August 1969, essentially on his own, and in a very Laird-like move. Knowing that the president was going to be out on the West Coast most of that month and that people would be going through the mail more slowly, he wrote a note telling the president that the secretary of defense was going to have Secretary of the Army Stan Resor have a press conference while in Southeast Asia in mid-August 1969 changing the MACV major mission from that of prosecuting the war to that of training the South Vietnamese so that they would prosecute the war. It was a major change. Laird's tactics were correct. Nobody paid attention to the memo until headlines appeared that

Resor and Abrams had had a press conference in Saigon and announced the mission change. The screams came from California, "What in the hell are you doing?" Nobody had paid attention to what was happening, which was exactly what Laird had predicted.

Goldberg: Let's get back to your role as military assistant. You just stayed on, by virtue of default. You were in the job, satisfying Laird, he had come to rely on you more and more. It was just a matter of continuity.

Pursley: I think that's true.

Goldberg: What was the Air Force reaction?

Pursley: Not pleased. The Air Force was never terribly pleased at the way I performed. This went back to a number of things, small issues, usually. To back up, I was not one of the Air Force nominees to fill the position of military assistant in the first place. The Air Force disposition was to send a number of names to the secretary of defense, and let SecDef choose from the Air Force short list of nominees. The Air Force would not have thought of me in a jillion years. Alain Enthoven was the one who recommended me to McNamara. McNamara didn't know me individually, but he did know of my work on the Supersonic Transport. As you will recall, President Johnson had asked McNamara to chair an advisory executive committee on this issue. Secretary McNamara had apparently been pleased with my work on that project. Back to the military assistant position, much to the Air Force's consternation, none of the Air Force nominees were seriously considered. I didn't go in as the most favored person, from an Air Force standpoint.

While serving as military assistant a number of additional matters arose. For example, Gen. McConnell had been keen about opening a new air base in Thailand to

house the EC-121s when we went over with our sensor system in 1967. McConnell had a different and unusual set of reasons for wanting to open that base, but as it turned out it didn't make any sense. It was something of a conflict between so-called military judgment and logic, and McNamara, as he was inclined to do, talked to me about it and then sent out a piece of paper asking me to analyze the situation and prepare a paper for him (McNamara). Phil Odeen of Systems Analysis helped me and we put together the paper arguing that opening another base was both high cost and militarily inefficient. That infuriated McConnell.

Goldberg: He knew you were involved?

Pursley: My name was signed to the sheet of paper that floated to Dodd [General] Starbird, who was then running the sensor task force setup. The memo denied McConnell's request. My memo was classified, but it made it around. The comptroller, Hitch's successor, Bob Anthony, thought enough of the memo to circulate it as a model of good analysis and succinct presentation. I think it's fair to say I was in some trouble with the Air Force. Periodically I would get calls, never from McConnell, but usually from John Meyer, to come up and be lectured to about not being loyal enough to the Air Force and not carrying the Air Force buckets of water, or coals, or whatever the appropriate metaphor is.

Goldberg: That was individual re-bluing.

Pursley: I was threatened that when they finally did get their hands on me I would go through a re-bluing exercise, and they were relishing the day when all that would happen.

Goldberg: You had a predecessor in this regard in that office–Cary Randall. Remember him?

Pursley: I never met him, but I've heard the name often.

Goldberg: From the Marine Corps--the same experience. As soon as he finished as military assistant he retired; he had no future at all.

Pursley: It's interesting that in the Air Force that all changed. Jack Ryan wasn't nearly as strong about rigidly adhering to and fostering Air Force positions as either John Meyer or J. P. McConnell had been. Ryan at least was willing to be agnostic. He wasn't sure whether I was worth a damn or not, but even though not keen about having me sent out to U.S. Forces Japan he told me later that my tenure in the Far East was one of the best management jobs he had ever seen. Jack Ryan and I became very good friends.

Goldberg: Out in Japan?

Pursley: Yes. He came out there three or four times while I was there. Both the U.S. Forces Japan and the 5th Air Force jobs were substantial. The issues were major and important; but at least early on the Air Force was not keen about the fact that I was there.

Separately, and prior to going to Japan, i.e., while still military assistant, Buz Wheeler [CJCS] had complained to the White House about me--or at lest so Al Haig told me. Wheeler felt he was constrained, according to Haig, from making as effective inputs as he wanted to make on a number of matters, and felt that I was the reason. Haig told me the complaint was made to the president that I was standing in the way of Wheeler having access to the secretary of defense, Mel Laird. I don't know if he also by inference went back to Clifford and McNamara. The kinds of activities that I was involved in were more pointed and numerous with Laird, so it could have just as well have been that. Haig showed me a black notebook and told me it went back to early 1969, the contents allegedly reflecting keeping a record on me. That is one of the

reasons the wiretaps on me evolved, I suppose, by inference. There were others in the military who were concerned about the role of the military assistant, what he was doing, and how much access and persuasion he might have with the secretary of defense and others.

Goldberg: Was Wheeler justified in his complaints?

Pursley: Not in my judgment. I do not recall ever interfering or even thinking of interfering between a chairman or any of his people and the secretary of defense on anything.

Goldberg: It would have been terribly presumptuous.

Pursley: I never would have dreamt of it. That's not to say that on a number of issues I didn't have inputs; those were always well known. I tried to be objective and open. I also tried to facilitate inputs to the secretary from all quarters. The idea was to help the secretary do the best job possible.

Goldberg: Did you have a formal appointment by Laird as military assistant?

Pursley: That came a good bit later. Near the end of my tenure I finally got a formal appointment as military assistant.

Goldberg: You were in the job.

Pursley: I was in the job, but I didn't even know there was such an animal as a formal appointment. I doubt if Secretary McNamara or Secretary Clifford knew either. Secretary Laird brought the appointment phenomenon to our attention.

Goldberg: When did you first become military assistant? You were the military assistant for Clifford.

Pursley: And I was for Bob McNamara prior to that.

Goldberg: How long for McNamara?

Pursley: From April 1966 until he departed in February 1968.

Goldberg: You were the top ranking assistant at that time?

Pursley: Not at first. Al Moody was the top ranking assistant when I joined the office in April 1966. I became top ranking assistant when Al left for Vietnam in November 1966.

Goldberg: Wasn't Moody a general?

Pursley: Yes. He got promoted to brigadier general just before he left for Vietnam.

Goldberg: Wasn't it usual for the secretary's military assistant to be either a brigadier general or a major general?

Pursley: The spot in the organization chart called for a major general, a two-star. The rank didn't make a bit of difference to me. I was interested in the responsibilities and the opportunity to serve the secretary of defense directly.

Goldberg: When did you get your promotion to brigadier general?

Pursley: 1969, as I recall.

Goldberg: Under Laird?

Pursley: Yes. The promotion had been processed before that. That had happened under Secretary Clifford. The first time I met Bob McNamara I was a lieutenant colonel, (although I was on the colonel's list).

Goldberg: It's unusual for somebody of that rank to be holding that position and exercising that much influence. It's understandable that it would probably have produced resentment on the part of a lot of people, particularly the Air Force.

Pursley: I don't know about "a lot of people"; the situation undoubtedly bothered some. By and large, though, among the people with whom I dealt in the job I believe there was

understanding and appreciation. I tried hard to keep all the relationships smooth and productive; but objectivity had to be a paramount criterion.

Goldberg: Did Haig actually show you something?

Pursley: Nothing specific. My hunch is that a lot of what he was saying was fabricated by him. Plus, the idea of wiretapping probably came from him. Wheeler and all of his people and I worked very well together. That was not so much true with Admiral Moorer. He was very difficult. That was true both from my standpoint and the secretary's. We never knew where he was or what he was doing. He was a tough one to keep track of. The military assistant had to perform that role for the secretary, because the secretary couldn't be running up and down the corridors trying to find out what the Joint Staff or the chairman was up to involving people like Admiral Moorer.

Goldberg: We'll get to that in time, too.

Trask: Laird espoused something called participatory management, in terms of the management of the Pentagon. What did that mean in practical terms?

Pursley: It's hard to say. Those two words say a lot about Mel Laird's personality, I guess. He wanted people to feel that individually they were important to the areas they were working in and to the progress of the whole Defense Department generally. He wanted people to have a sense that they were important individually and that their views were important. I'm not sure that what participatory management meant from an actual management standpoint would be easy to define. He went out of his way to use the term and to get people to think of themselves as part of a broad team in which they had an input and were individually important. That by itself is an important--and productive--management technique.

Trask: A bit more of a morale building exercise.

Pursley: That would be included, yes.

Goldberg: Generally it is supposed that he used the term primarily with reference to the military services. That was an effort on his part to make them feel that he was going to pay attention to them and perhaps give them more opportunity to follow their own bent than McNamara had done; that they would be listened to more than they had been under McNamara and that he was interested in giving them status.

Pursley: What you say is undoubtedly true. The irony of it is that the reverse was true on some things, particularly on important issues like Vietnam. So it shows that being tuned to using the right words and causing people to feel that they are involved may be just as important, if not more important, than the actuality of whether they are or not.

Goldberg: Form is more important than substance.

Pursley: It can be in some cases. If you can have both form and substance, that's better, and a lot of that was true with the Laird team. Let me cite two items. Warren Nutter perhaps was not the strongest assistant secretary for international security affairs that we have had. Warren was very bright, but almost afraid of this building. He didn't function very effectively, so we had to design a lot of ways to bolster the areas that he should have been handling. It was delicate and difficult. So when you say participatory management, just the reverse was true in some important arenas. By the same token, I don't know of another secretary where the group of people who truly worked directly with him, let's say the top 40, felt more like a real team. That so-called Laird team still gets together on a periodic basis and they still hold periodic reunions. Whether because of the term participatory management or the constant drumbeat that they were important,

it's a bit unusual, at least in what little I've seen in the federal government, to find that kind of cohesiveness that carries on and persists meaningfully through the years. Until Dave Packard died, it was called the Laird-Packard team. I don't know if there will ever be any more of those get-togethers; the group is getting smaller and smaller. The last reunion two- and a half-years ago, while Dave Packard was still alive, was at the Army-Navy Club. We spent a full day in the Pentagon hearing briefings. It was still a very cohesive, strong group. So whatever it meant, it clearly had an impression on people that was carried forward and that they would point to with great pride. That's quite an accomplishment.

Trask: I know that was certainly true of Bowsher. He talked about that a lot. He and Laird are still very close.

Pursley: Laird presided at Bowsher's farewell ceremony at GAO in 1996. I had lunch with Mel that day, but I couldn't go to the ceremony.

Goldberg: What about PPBS, and systems analysis particularly? It's a well-known story what happened at systems analysis under Laird. What's the real story from Laird's standpoint?

Pursley: What you may be referring to as "the real story" may be different from my view. Laird felt very strongly that systems analysis was not just important, but a critically important part of his staff. He decided that to save systems analysis and to bolster its true effectiveness it would not be a good idea to go to the Hill and try to reinstall it as an assistant secretary position.

Goldberg: It was when he came in.

Pursley: I don't think so.

Goldberg: It was he who downgraded it.

Pursley: You may be correct on the appearance and the formality. I would submit it was Laird's purpose to preserve and sustain the function. If the issue had been left to Congress, the function might have been abolished. In any event, he didn't want to go through that and have Ivan Selin go to the Hill for confirmation hearings. He didn't want to do that, because he thought it might mean the destruction of the office if he put Ivan through that.

Goldberg: Because of very strong opposition?

Pursley: Absolutely. Mendel Rivers and others would have tried to destroy the whole thing and probably submit legislation, which might have passed, to abolish the function.

Goldberg: The position title was changed in 1973 to director of defense program analysis and evaluation. Selin was acting assistant secretary for a year, and then Gardiner Tucker came in as assistant secretary.

Pursley: In any event, Laird did not want to go through the business of sending Ivan up there even though he had great affection for him and wanted him serving in that position. He would have kept Ivan on the whole time he (Laird) was in the Pentagon if Ivan hadn't decided on his own that the situation was not optimal. Ivan had some pretty good ideas about other things he could do.

Goldberg: Might as well get rich.

Pursley: At least do things that were a little different, anyway. He got rich, big time. But the rich part was the result of creating and leading a very productive commercial organization--an organization that, if you will, performed systems analysis. Mel was a very strong advocate for and supporter of systems analysis. He may have been the only

secretary of defense who on more than one occasion went down to the systems analysis offices and talked to that entire staff about work that he was quite familiar with, and praised them for it. He had Phil Odeen, the deputy, on the Vietnam Task Force. That was a clear signal to everyone that systems analysis was an important mover and shaker as far as Mel Laird was concerned. I know he just didn't want to have Ivan go up to the Hill and go through the throes of this thing.

Goldberg: He didn't want to have a battle, I guess.

Pursley: Exactly. And he thought he might not stand a chance of winning. This was one of the reasons why Mel is proud of saying that while he was secretary of defense he never lost a single vote on an important issue. One of the reasons he could say that is that he picked his fights.

Goldberg: The attitude in Congress toward systems analysis was primarily because of McNamara and Enthoven. It was a matter of personalities as much as anything else, is that correct?

Pursley: I would guess that is probably right in some sense. It was also about personalities in uniform who spread uninformed and incorrect information about systems analysis to the Hill. There were people who didn't understand, and to a degree that was fostered by the military departments. Many uniformed people would go to the Hill and complain that systems analysis was playing roles that in many cases it wasn't playing at all. Systems analysis took a terrible beating about the TFX, the F-111, and they were never involved in that issue at all.

In any event, Mel Laird was a strong advocate and supporter of systems analysis and used it widely and effectively.

Trask: What about ISA, was their role changed at all?

Pursley: Yes, to a degree it was. I think Warren Nutter was a substantial disappointment to Laird.

Goldberg: Had Laird chosen him?

Pursley: Yes. He was an economics professor at the University of Virginia. Laird was very fond of Nutter. I think he was disappointed and surprised that Warren was not more effective than he was. Warren seemed to be almost afraid to move out, for whatever reason. It created big problems for me because the material coming from ISA, which in John McNaughton's day or Paul Warnke's day, for example, was some of the best written, most tightly reasoned material of any in the Department, would come from Nutter fragmented and loose.

Goldberg: He had some good people working for him.

Pursley: Yes, but the output never reflected the quality of those people. Laird ultimately brought in Roger Shields, who handled POW affairs. He brought in Armistead Selden, a former congressman from Alabama, as Nutter's deputy so that he could have the feeling that he was getting a bit more done. Mel then would meet more frequently with Selden than with Nutter. ISA's function diminished in influence.

Trask: It wasn't because Laird didn't want it, but because of the downgrading of the office.

Pursley: ISA had had a succession of very strong, capable people, going back at least to Paul Nitze, and was a well-staffed group. You could disagree with what they were doing or in some cases how they were doing it, but their well researched work was tightly reasoned. ISA had the tradition of being a good operation.

Goldberg: That's why it became known as the little State Department.

Pursley: That is true. ISA as a function changed, however, and it became a less productive function.

Trask: Could you comment on the importance of the Blue Ribbon Defense Panel, set up right after Laird came into office? What was its effect in the long run?

Pursley: It's hard to say. This was something that Laird thought was important for the DoD to undergo. I'm sure he had been thinking about that for some time. If he had not been secretary of defense he might have been pushing that from some other vantage point. He had great confidence in the man from the insurance company in New York, Fitzhugh, who headed it. The panel itself represented the politically proper kind of mix. Paul Thayer from Fort Worth, later deputy secretary of defense, was one of the members. So there were knowledgeable people on the panel, which did help. But that was a very serious effort at trying to look at a wide variety of issues. I don't know how much you could say it actually changed the department. Probably at the margins in a number of places, because Laird paid a lot of attention to it. He and Packard together worked quite a bit with Fitzhugh on it. It certainly had the effect of bringing Fred Buzhardt up higher on Laird's screen and ultimately was, I think, the proximate reason for Buzhardt becoming general counsel. Maybe that's a derivative kind of effect. It's interesting. If I were pressed to name the two or three most important specific things that changed as a result of the Blue Ribbon Panel, I would have a little trouble. That is probably more a reflection on me than on the Blue Ribbon Panel.

Goldberg: That's because not many things did change. They did make some very radical suggestions, but there were some that seemed fairly reasonable and sensible, and they didn't get adopted either.

Pursley: It gets back to the point, at least in my judgment, of what a good secretary of defense must do, and that is to pick four, five, or six major kinds of issues to focus on and stay very focused on those. For Secretary Laird, Vietnam was one. Arms control came to be a very important issue. We never would have gotten SALT I without a Mel Laird working first on the ABM and then on SALT I. Another was the all-volunteer force. My hunch is that that would not have moved without major SecDef attention. Of lesser importance, but important to get moving at least in relation to the Nixon doctrine and all the diminution in the defense department, was Total Force, the concept of integrating regular and reserve units in a very real way. Finally, there was the addressing of a range of social issues including blacks and women and introducing some of that mix into higher ranks. There were going to be some flag officers that were female. I think Laird knew that would take a lot of time and personal attention by the secretary. So there were five or six issues, and he stayed right on those. He made very decided, discernible, specific major steps in every one of those. I think he thought that the Blue Ribbon Panel was important, but he wasn't going to spend major parts of his time working on those kinds of things.

Goldberg: Not only that, but by that time he was able to observe that the organization was working reasonably well and that any kind of major changes would take time, effort, and persuasion, and might cause problems for him. He had enough problems.

Pursley: I agree with what you are saying. But why is it, for example, that we still have year after year the question of acquisition reform and nothing much ever changes? In my judgment, it's because the secretary of defense has never picked that as one of the major focus issues and dedicated himself to getting it done. There's nothing that can't be changed over time.

Goldberg: Perry made the effort.

Pursley: More than most.

Goldberg: He knew more than most.

Pursley: He brought in people like Colleen Preston and did a lot of other things. He made a bigger effort than almost anybody else.

Trask: Wasn't Nixon somewhat behind the Blue Ribbon Panel, or was that exclusively Laird?

Pursley: I think that was almost exclusively Laird. I would say it would have been very unlike Nixon to have done that. Of all the things that they would have tried to insert themselves into, that would not have been one. Certainly, given the fact that Laird had the chips, the license, to pick whomever he wanted and do it any way he wanted, I think Nixon would have probably opted the other way, not to let Laird get any publicity.

Goldberg: Laird went for the second deputy business. Why was that?

Pursley: I don't know.

Goldberg: He supported the proposed position but he didn't appoint anybody.

Pursley: The burden of the secretary is so enormous, it is logical that if you could have two Dave Packards it would be better than one. I think two Bill Clements would have horrified him.

Goldberg: It would be pretty hard to get two Dave Packards, also. He certainly came through as a man of very high caliber and rectitude and as independent-minded. Is that your impression of him?

Pursley: Absolutely. And Laird seemed to be able to find these people and get that kind of commitment.

Goldberg: He couldn't keep him, though, that was the trouble.

Pursley: He kept him a lot longer than I would have guessed he might.

Goldberg: I asked Packard why he left; he said that by that time it had cost him $20 million.

Pursley: I would have thought more than that.

Goldberg: $20 million back then was a lot more than it is now.

Pursley: I would imagine, though, that it was an understatement. Packard was quite modest and in many ways very unusual. I'm sure that Mel Laird told you the anecdote about Dave Packard's appointment. Laird announced that Packard was going to be the deputy, and Nixon called and asked who he was, and could he at least meet him. Such a situation is instructive about Laird's position and strength as secretary of defense. So Laird and Packard got on a plane and headed to Key Biscayne. When they got there Nixon wanted to meet with Packard alone. Mel visited with Mrs. Nixon during that time. After an hour or so Nixon and Packard came out. Nixon took Mel aside and said, "That's one hell of a man." Nixon was very impressed. That was illustrative of both Laird's ability to attract good talent and not being beholden to the White House very much.

Goldberg: No, and less so as time went by.

Trask: Nixon set up the Defense Program Review Committee in October 1969. What were his objectives behind that?

Pursley: That committee was a creation of Mel Laird's. I'm not sure I can find all the papers, but I made some observations to Mel about the way the federal government went about deciding how large a budget was enough for DoD. There were different and better ways to approach that issue--certainly more analytical than having the Bureau of the Budget declare in late December what the Defense budget "bogey" would be for the following fiscal year. My reasoning, and ultimately Laird's, involved an economic and political calculus that looked at a variety of economic objectives. National security was one of our economic objectives because it uses disproportionate national resources. Economic growth was another objective. Certainly price stability, full employment, equitable income distribution, balance of payments equilibrium are all important economic objectives as well--and all are important to national security. The idea is, how can you optimize among those, because some of them are contradictory. If you want a very strong national security budget, you may very well upset the economic balance enough to generate some inflation. Lord knows, that was true. When you add up Vietnam and the Great Society it may be that you will also generate some balance of payments problems. The whole idea is to optimize among the objectives and to provide the president with sound analyses to allow him (the president) to choose among an array of alternative budgets. The person who would have a right to decide what set of policies to put together to optimize the balance among those should be the P

resident of the United States. What he needs is some analysis showing what the tradeoffs are. If you go for national security budget A, which might be fairly modest, that

would be one thing, with certain implications. To go for budget B, which might be a ramped-up one, would have certain other implications. So the president would choose among a set of national priorities. The idea would be to get to the president a set of analyses along those lines definitive enough that he could make some reasonable choices, and not just take a certain percentage of a bogey number on a political basis. The Defense Program Review Committee (DPRC) was established to conduct such analyses and to provide the president with an array of choices. The DPRC was established in the office of the national security adviser; otherwise there would have been a fight over where it should be. Laird wanted this arrangement. He never argued that the Defense Department should have the primary role, although DoD would play an important role. It was a way to get an idea about what sizes of defense budgets mean in terms of other objectives and give the issue a focus. So the DPRC was put in NSC, but in order to augment the group that would be looking at these kinds of analyses, it was necessary to bring in the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, at that time McCracken, somebody from Treasury, and maybe even somebody from the Fed. You would have an analytical group not permanently assigned to NSC but operating on specific objectives and timetables as brought about by the adviser to the president for national security affairs. That was the proposal and Nixon bought it. The idea unfortunately aborted. Two or three things happened. McCracken decided he didn't have a large enough economics analytical staff to dedicate to the task. The effort drifted. McCracken told me that was the worst mistake he made, because it was a chance to get a lot better analysis in designing a defense budget.

Goldberg: What was Kissinger's attitude toward it?

Pursley: I'll get to Kissinger in a minute. Secondly, Jim Schlesinger in the budget office decided it was a good opportunity to get into some areas he felt strongly about, such as the supersonic bomber. Interested parties saw the DPRC as an opportunity to redesign specific areas of procurement programs. That was not the purpose of the DPRC, but lo and behold, that was the tack they started taking. Then Kissinger, who at that time knew little about economics and cared less, decided it was a great vehicle for doing Packard's job of pulling together different pieces of the overall defense program. In other words, try to design the specifics and not the aggregates in terms of what the overall numbers should be. So between Kissinger and the BoB they scuttled the thing. McCracken stood on the sidelines too long. The process was in such disarray and so far from the mission for which it had been designed, that after a year and a half it was stopped. That was the Defense Program Review Committee. Nixon originally was so pleased with the concept he had a piece in his first annual report on foreign policy about how great the DPRC would be and what a revolution it would create in the way we went about designing national security programs. I'd say the biggest problem in all this was the national security adviser. I don't think he ever quite understood quite what the concept was. He saw it as an avenue to get into a lot of detailed work that otherwise Dave Packard and Mel Laird were doing. That, of course, was deadly for DoD. What is your view; you probably thought about that too. I always thought it lamentable that we never got it going. We could probably regenerate it today.

Goldberg: One of the problems of an organization like this is that it takes someone at a top level to see that it works by insisting. If Nixon had continued to pay attention to it, he might have gotten it. These people were so busy, had so many irons in the fire, and

were going in so many directions at once, that nobody really took it in tow. That is what usually happens.

Pursley: McCracken might have taken it in tow, but he would have had to pull in some people from other places.

Goldberg: Did he have enough clout to do it?

Pursley: He probably did. We had Systems Analysis do a dummy model of how we thought it might look and work, and the paper that came out looked good. We didn't dare quote it, because we would have had so much agitation it would have died that instant. But it was just the kind of thing that if you put yourself in the top position, it would be exactly what you wanted to give you insights into the implications for various sized national security budgets.

Trask: Can you comment on your working relationships with Laird? How often did you see him, how close were you, and what different kinds of things did you do?

Pursley: I had almost constant contact with Mel Laird and had a broad range of responsibilities. It was a mixture of being a de facto chief of staff and simultaneously an action officer. With McNamara the role was somewhat narrower--but included a lot of analysis and action officer or project activities. I did see McNamara frequently. McNamara was incredibly knowledgeable. It was a real challenge. With Clifford we worked a different way, with the 8:30 group, so we were in frequent contact there; with Laird it was constant in and out of office contact. Sometimes we would sit around and talk through a whole range of issues.

Goldberg: You and Cary Randall would have a lot to talk about. He served four secretaries. He could speak for the secretary, and people accepted it when he spoke.

Pursley: I would hope that some of your acquaintances might say that about my relationships with the secretaries. How many years was Randall there?

Goldberg: Eight years, 1951-59, and maybe into early '60.

Pursley: His job was probably harder than mine was, not only because of the number of years, but the kinds of information systems that were available.

Goldberg: He didn't have the staff resources.

Pursley: He didn't have a planning, programming, budgeting system, so it would be harder to find things that were really needed.

Goldberg: That's what Systems Analysis did.

Pursley: Exactly, so I'll bet it was a harder job for him than it was for me.

Trask: Was your office physically located close to Laird?

Pursley: Yes. Coming out his door, my office was next to his two private secretaries. They keep changing it around and it gets fancier all the time. We had just those two offices, and then we had what we used to call the bull pen, where we put people working on special projects. The infamous Pentagon Papers project comes to mind.

Goldberg: You had deputy military assistants?

Pursley: There were two military assistants. One was more senior than the other and one was the principal assistant that all the secretaries would lean on. The work that the other one did tended to be derivative.

Goldberg: So he was in effect an assistant to you or a deputy?

Pursley: That's the way it worked. There would be times when Laird, given his social proclivities, would go out of his way to acknowledge the other military assistant and spend time with him.

Goldberg: So while you were there the other military assistant played a secondary role?

Pursley: Well, maybe in a sense, but it was always a cooperative effort. We worked together.

Goldberg: Who were the people serving under you in the military assistant's office?

Pursley: Bob Gard and Bob Hixon, who were Army, and Dan Murphy, who was Navy.

Goldberg: Murphy moved up the ladder subsequently.

Pursley: Gard did, too. Bob had a piece in the New York Times on land mines a week or two ago. He's a very bright guy.

Trask: Were your relationships with the deputy secretary close, also?

Pursley: Yes, but less so than with the secretary. Cy Vance had two strong military assistants, Carl Trost and Abbot Greenleaf. They didn't think they needed a lot of help. I worked with Cy Vance on the TFX issue very closely while the so-called Icarus meetings were going on. Paul Nitze and I had a relationship that was very close. For whatever reason, we found ourselves in the 8:30 group under Clark Clifford and working together in a number of areas, mostly Southeast Asia. Dave Packard had some good military assistants, especially Jim Wilson and Ray Furlong. When the secretary was absent for whatever reason, Dave Packard would always include me in whatever was going on down in his office.

Goldberg: He was his own man.

Pursley: Laird and Packard were so good together, a fine team.

Trask: What about Laird's relationships with JCS, particularly with the chairman? Were there regular meetings? And what was the nature of the relationship?

Pursley: It was nothing unusual until Tom Moorer became chairman. To back up to Buz Wheeler, Laird had great respect for Wheeler and had a very positive relationship with him. He had good relationships with all the chiefs, though General Ryan asked me later what he could have done as chief of staff of the Air Force to make the Air Force more effective in its relationship with the secretary of defense. I told him he could have been more open and been a bigger presence there. He told me he had been apprehensive of asserting himself strongly and insisting that, for instance, when Secretary of the Air Force Bob Seamans came to see the secretary of defense, the chief of staff should have been there, too; Jack Ryan would not do that. Laird would have welcomed it. His relationships with all the chiefs were very positive, except for Admiral Moorer. That was a special case. Laird might say that maybe his largest regret as secretary of defense was not nominating Leonard Chapman to be the chairman instead of Admiral Moorer. He had gone far enough in thinking about Chapman to clear it with President Nixon. At that time the Marine Corps wasn't an official member of the Joint Chiefs, so to take a man who is not even a JCS official and put him in as chairman would create a big stir. Also there was no precedent for a Marine being considered or nominated. There would be a lot of political heat from the Navy, saying they wanted someone from the Navy in that spot. So Moorer took the spot, but he was hard to handle. We never knew where he was; for example the Admiral Robinson link and the yeoman who was over in the White House purloining papers that they were not supposed to have. This was so typical of Admiral Moorer.

Goldberg: Of course the services had been spying on each other all this time, so why not spy on the White House, too?

Pursley: You could say that, but it is so much different in degree as to be different in kind. It made it difficult, and not because Laird was naive. Allow me to provide some background. Laird had asked Bill Baroody and me to write a letter (this was before January 20, 1969) addressed to Henry Kissinger. The letter said that one of the things the secretary of defense would like Henry to consider was dropping the liaison function between the chairman's office and the White House. Laird could foresee difficulties down the road if that kind of liaison continued where communications became confused or people used it for less than stellar purposes. Laird couldn't have been more prescient than that. I think that the liaison had worked to some degree under other personalities. When Bob Ginsburgh was the liaison man and the chairman was Buz Wheeler, and Rostow or McGeorge Bundy were at the White House the arrangement probably was benign. But when you had different players, it made the secretary of defense's position very difficult. You just didn't know what in the world was going on, and it was very difficult to find out.

Goldberg: That whole business is still a bone of contention.

Pursley: Let me emphasize again that Laird had good relationships with all the chiefs, with the possible exception of Tom Moorer. Laird was very accommodating to Moorer in terms of giving him an audience at any time on anything, and Moorer was in and out of the SecDef's office a lot. Moorer raised lots of issues, many of which he had already negotiated in the White House, anyway. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs had an advantage in many ways in the national security organization. The Goldwater-Nichols act probably strengthened that role. If you analyzed the National Security Council structure, the way it was set up in terms of committees, meetings, the whole structure,

the only person who had a representative on every single one of those committees or groups was the chairman. He had the ability to have input into an agenda and into a policy that no one, including the secretary, had.

Goldberg: That's interesting, because the notion is that the Goldwater-Nichols act made this enormous change and gave the chairman his great powers to enable him to dominate the chiefs and others. In fact, the chairman has always had this, because he's had access to the secretary and the president. It all depends on who the chairman is; if he wants to use his power and influence he can, and some did. Radford, for example, was a very powerful chairman. Others didn't even approach him in that regard. The chairman always had that opportunity if he wanted to do it. It wasn't because of Goldwater-Nichols that Powell was a powerful chairman, it was in large part because he was Powell that he was a strong chairman.

Pursley: I think that is absolutely true. I made the point at the time of Goldwater-Nichols that much ado was being made about something that was important, but to a very great degree it was making de jure what was already de facto. All we are doing now is just legitimizing what we have been doing all along. Sure, we didn't have a vice chairman, but all that does is add one more set of eyes and ears, it doesn't change the authority of the chairman one iota. In terms of the operational chain and the way he is used, he has been used in the operational chain all along by every secretary of defense.

Goldberg: Shalikashvili is not exercising as much influence as Powell did, because he's a different kind of person.

Pursley: In my judgment what is still left to do is an analysis similar to that of Goldwater-Nichols but in this case for the secretary of defense's role. There are many areas where

the secretary needs to have his capability and authority bolstered. Some of it may have to do with the National Security Council structure; some of it may have to do with who runs the National Military Command Center, those types of areas. There are a variety of ways in which we need to look at and pay attention to making the secretary of defense as effective as possible. After all, in the national command authority chain the secretary of defense is number two–right after the president.