

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk 71
Dean Rusk speech
circa 1985 July 23

DEAN RUSK: But perhaps I might begin with two or three points of background which might affect everything we talk about for the rest of the time we have available. In the first place, foreign policy is that part of our public business which we ourselves cannot fully control. Subject to certain self-imposed constitutional limitations, we can pretty much decide what we do here at home within our own national borders, but when we go beyond our national borders, we find about a hundred and sixty nations out there, each with its own geographical situation, its own cultural, religious, historical background, living indifferent parts of the world, to whom the very globe itself looks different if you put a pinpoint on Rangoon or on Montevideo or on Beirut. And no one of those nations simply snaps its heels and salutes when we speak. There's no command out there. There's a world of discussion, hopefully common points of view, but many disagreements, adjustment, compromise, confrontation, and, at tragic moments, violence.

So there is a degree of disappointment and frustration that is built into the very nature of our relations with the rest of the world. The State Department and the secretary of state will never be popular with the American people or the American presidents. Very often he's having to say, "Sorry, Mr. President, you can't have it that way because these funny foreigners just won't do it that way." And presidents don't like to hear that, and some of them don't like to hear it more than others. I'm thinking of LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson], for example. So there are limits to what we can reasonably expect in shaping a world that we would like to see.

Second point, every four years our constitution requires us to go through a great inquest of the nation as we decide who shall be president and at the same time we elect a third of the Senate [and] all of the House of Representatives. It's the most solemn and most important political process in which we as citizens participate, but it's also our quadrennial silly season, a period during which we say a great many foolish things to each other, to the confusion of our friends and our adversaries abroad. I have certain sympathy with the complaint once made by Mr. [Nikita] Khrushchev. He said, "It's very difficult to deal with you people in the West because someone is always having one of those damned elections." (laughter) Now, so every four years we're a body politic with a fever. We're not normal, and we perhaps ought to be aware of that.

As a matter of fact, foreign policy, particularly in this postwar period, has been nonpartisan or bipartisan. It has been my privilege over the years to sit in on literally hundreds upon hundreds of meetings of committees and subcommittees of the Congress. On no single occasion have I ever seen differences of view turn on party lines, Democrats on one side, Republicans on the other. Now, there were many differences of opinion because a lot of these questions are extraordinarily complicated, requiring on-balance judgments, razor-edge conclusions, on which honest men and women can disagree. But I've never seen those differences turn on party lines.

Now every four years each political party goes through a certain amount of agony to write a party platform, and they always have a section in those platforms about foreign policy. And in those sections they try to say something that a) sounds good and b) sounds a little different from the other party. And once in a while there's even a little fight on the convention floor about what goes into the foreign affairs section of such a platform. I don't want to sound cynical, but I've, again, sat in on hundreds of meetings involving the executive and often the legislative branches of the Congress [sic], of the government, under mostly Democratic but sometimes Republican administrations, where decisions have to be made, and on no single occasion have I ever heard anyone say, "Well, gee, let's get out the party platform and see what it had to say about this matter." (laughter) Because these generalities, these generalities are so general that they cannot possibly encompass all of the elements of a problem on which a decision has to be made.

Now, in that connection, [let me] remind you of another point which might be helpful to the classroom teacher. When a pilot takes off a modern hot jet airplane, he goes over a rather extensive list of questions. Sometimes they have them on little roll cartridges, and they roll these things over in front of them in the cockpit. He must ask himself dozens upon dozens of questions before he takes off on that policy, on that plane. Similarly, the policy officer has dozens and dozens of questions on his checklist that he ought to ask himself before he takes off on a policy. Every significant foreign policy question breaks down into dozens upon dozens of secondary and tertiary questions. Now because of limitations of space and time in the way we talk about these things with each other, we almost never get a chance to run through that kind of checklist with respect to a major question of foreign policy. We simply don't have time for it, or we're not offered the material on which we can give it time ordinarily. I would give a great deal if, just to substitute the mood of a question. When we hear that something has been done by a president or by the Congress, instead of saying, "Why did the so-and so's do that?" if we could only ask, "I wonder what they had in mind when they did that?" it might help us a great deal toward understanding somewhat more why certain things were done.

Now, a third point before I turn to your particular questions is to remind us of the sheer complexity of our constitution and political system, the most complicated political system in the world, at least since the Dalai Lama was chased out of Tibet by the Chinese--I think his was somewhat more complicated--deliberately made complicated by our founding fathers for reasons which all of you understand, an attempt to put some limitations on the exercise of raw power in the interest of freedom.

The late Chief Justice Earl Warren was here in our law school shortly before his death, and on that occasion he said that if each branch of the federal government were to pursue its own constitutional powers to the end of the trail, our system simply could not function. It would freeze up like an engine without oil. Those who hold positions of responsibility in that constitutional system have to spend an enormous amount of time just to make the system work, and sometimes we as citizens don't understand that necessity, and sometimes we become a little disdainful about those who have to make some adjustments from time to time just to see that the United States government at the end of the day can do or not do what is called for.

We think of a secretary of state as somebody usually who is flying off somewhere in an airplane or flying home from somewhere in an airplane. All right, let's use that metaphor. He flies on four

engines: first, his relations with the president; second, his relations with the Congress; third, his relations with the Department of State and other departments of government; fourth, his relations with the press and public opinion. Now, notice that all four of those are domestic engines. This is before he talks to the foreigner at all. A secretary of state will have to spend at least half of his time on the domestic arrangements that are required to have a policy before he knows what to say to the foreigner. And I don't know of any other foreign minister in the world of whom that is true.

We think of the president as a chief executive sitting there at that desk in the Oval Office striking off decisions all day long. Well, if we do, we must also think of him as a sheep dog, as a man who's trying to round up enough people to go in the same direction for a long enough period to have something called a policy. If you make a list of the things that a president can do all by himself, it's a very short list, even though we develop a good many illusions about it.

For example, every few weeks, a question comes out, a poll comes out, asking the question, "How do you rate the president in managing the economy?" He doesn't manage the economy, doesn't have the constitutional power to manage the economy. Asking the question is a fraud upon the American public, but it's one of those frauds happily protected by the First Amendment. In a very real sense, the presidency is a license to persuade because he's got to persuade an awful lot of people, not just in the Congress, but certainly in the Congress, if we're to move forward or to move on an agreed national basis.

Now, I think we have to admit that the White House is a pretty good place from which to begin to persuade people. Senator [William] Fulbright used to complain about the habit of presidents who invite groups of senators down to the White House in order to talk various policy questions over with them because Fulbright said that the very awe in the atmosphere and the historical background of the White House itself makes that an uneven conversation. The cards are stacked against the senators. Well, there's something to that. Prime Minister Gladstone, once writing in the nineteenth century about his relations with Queen Victoria, said it's very difficult to argue on your knees. (laughter) So there is something about that. Teddy Roosevelt called the White House, you'll remember, "a bully pulpit." But nevertheless that element of persuasion is a very important part of any presidency, president's job.

Now, these are just three preliminary remarks. I might begin with one question which I understand that your group is interested in. I was tipped off on it. It begins with the current situation in Afghanistan. There have been two main elements in our relations with the Soviet Union since World War II, both always present. But in our public thinking and public discussion of our relations with the Soviet Union, we tend to swing like pendulum back and forth between something called cold war and something called detente.

Let me take just a moment to put this somewhat into perspective. We and the Soviet Union share a massive common interest--the prevention of all-out nuclear war. They know it; we know it. If all those thousands of megatons were to go off in the same half hour someday, there would be a real question as to whether this earth could any longer sustain homo sapiens. Now, if we and the Soviet Union can find points of agreement on large matters or small, which will help to broaden

that base of common interest and reduce the range of issues on which violence might occur, many of us think the effort has to be made.

Now, that effort didn't just begin when Mr. [Richard] Nixon became president and started talking a lot about something called detente in the early 1970s. It began immediately after, well, during or just after World War II. For example, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada went into the United Nations in 1946 with something called the Baruch Plan under which all fissionable materials would be turned over to the United Nations to be used solely for peaceful purposes, a plan under which there would be no nuclear weapons in the hands of any country, including the United States. The Soviet Union turned it down. But no sanctimony on that point because if the Soviet Union had been the first to develop the atom bomb and had made exactly the same proposals in the United Nations as we did before the United States obtained the so-called know-how, we could not honestly say that the executive and legislative branches of our government would have accepted those proposals of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the effort was made, and there was a fleeting opportunity that escaped us. President Truman and Secretary Marshall in good faith invited the Soviet Union to participate in the Marshall Plan. It was the Soviet Union that walked out of the Paris meeting of European countries to work out their response to this information, and when they walked out, they took Czechoslovakia and Poland along with them. But, again, no sanctimony because I think we'd have to say that if the Soviet Union had been a major participant in the Marshall Plan, we would have had great difficulty in getting the necessary appropriations from Congress. But nevertheless the effort was made. During the Eisenhower years, after hundreds of negotiating sessions, they achieved the Austrian State Treaty which got all occupying forces out of Austria and allowed that fine little country to proceed into the future on the basis of independence and neutrality. And again in that period a brilliant piece of preventive diplomacy--the Antarctic Treaty--which has excluded that vast part of the world from great power military competition, reserving it for scientific research under arrangements which give each signatory a chance to visit each other's activities and installations down there to be sure that the treaty is being complied with.

Then in the sixties, despite the very grievous crisis over Berlin and the even more dangerous crisis over the Cuban missiles, President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson and their senior colleagues felt that it was just too late in history for two superpowers to pursue a policy of total hostility across the board. Because we understood that at the end of the day we and the Soviet Union must still find a way to inhabit this speck of dust in the universe at the same time. So we had the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of '63. We had a consular agreement with the Soviet Union, a Civil Air Agreement, providing flights between Moscow and New York, a nonproliferation treaty with regard to nuclear weapons, two important space treaties which have gone a long way toward keeping outer space insulated from great power military competition. And in the '70s Mr. Nixon and his colleagues extended those, that matter, that approach into more trade and were able to conclude a pretty good new agreement over Berlin and so forth.

Now, as far as I'm concerned, this word "detente" means no more than a continuing search for possible agreement. Now, agreements with the Soviet Union don't require trust, if performance can be readily ascertained. It'll be a long time before the Soviet Union trusts us or we trust the Soviet Union, but their credit on Wall Street is good because they pay their commercial bills. If

they stop paying their commercial bills, their credit would disappear. You don't have to worry about whether they're complying with that Test Ban Treaty of 1963 because your government can tell you accurately, honestly, that if they exploded a nuclear weapon in outer space or in the atmosphere or underwater, that we would know about it immediately and could tell you so. So, there are those who seem to think that there's no point in making any agreement with the Soviet Union because you can't trust them. Well, when you go into a bank to make a deposit, you don't ask yourself every time, "Can I trust this teller behind the cage here?" because we've got Federal Deposit Insurance; we've got bank examiners, so you don't even have to worry about that particular question. Now, that's one line of policy.

Many people are familiar with the lugubrious story of the period between World Wars I and II and the events of the 1930s that led us into the catastrophe of World War II, but most people have forgotten what happened just after V-J Day. We demobilized almost completely and almost overnight. By 1946 we did not have a single division in our army nor a single group in our air force that could be considered ready for combat. The ships of our navy were being put into mothballs as fast as we could find berths for them, and those that remained afloat were being manned by skeleton crews. It's a matter of public record that for three fiscal years, and you'll find this hard to believe, the defense budget of the United States came down to just a little over \$11 billion, groping for a target of 10 billion.

Now, during one of the wartime conferences, Mr. Churchill made a remark to Mr. Stalin about the views that the Pope had expressed on certain points. And Stalin said, "The Pope! How many divisions does he have?" (laughter) And Mr. Stalin looked there and looked out across the West and he saw all the divisions melting away, so what did he do? He tried to keep the northwest province of Iran, Azerbaijan, the first case before the UN Security Council. He demanded the two eastern provinces of Turkey, Aras and Khardahan[?]. He supported the guerrillas going after Greece using bases and sanctuaries in places like Albania and Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. He arranged a coup d'état in Czechoslovakia with the Red Army just across the border. He blockaded Berlin. He gave the green light to the North Koreans to go after South Korea.

Now, we have profound differences with the Soviet Union, despite what I would call the necessity for trying to find points of (unintelligible). We have profound disagreements with them, not just over the shape of our own societies--we've had those differences since 1917--we haven't started shooting at each other because of that--but differences about the very shape of the world community of nations. If you want to get a succinct statement of the kind of community of nations that the United States supports and can live with, read over the first two articles of the United Nations Charter. It's no accident that should be so because we played a major part in drafting those, that charter.

The Soviet Union talks about something called the World Revolution, which as a matter of ideology they consider to be historically inevitable. If we use the word "detente," they use the word [sic] "peaceful coexistence," which to them means a continuation of the struggle by all means short of general war, which is not exactly a synonym for what we think of when we use the word "detente." So we've had periods, moments of confrontation with them. I mentioned several of them just a moment ago, but we've had confrontations over Cuba. We've had problems

over what they've been doing in Africa. It seems tragic to me that after all this happened since World War II, that they still would send their troops into Afghanistan.

Now, sometimes these moments of confrontation get in the way of the search for agreement. For example, on a certain Wednesday morning in August 1968, we and the Soviet Union were all set to make a joint identical announcement that President Johnson would soon go to Leningrad to open what came to be known later as the SALT talks, negotiations on limiting strategic nuclear weapons. Trouble is, that the very night before, the Tuesday night before, Soviet troops marched into Czechoslovakia. And I had to, personally to call the Soviet ambassador in Washington and insist that he immediately call, telephone Moscow to tell them not to make that announcement the next morning about President Johnson's visit to Leningrad. It's a little ironic to think that some years later the SALT II Agreement had to be put into the refrigerator for a time because Soviet forces marched into Afghanistan.

I mention this background because our news media tend to ignore the background, partly because they haven't the space or time. They tend to leave the impression that history started yesterday morning at nine o'clock. There are those of us who are dealing with, I think, with young people, and I do as well as do you, might want to remind them that a lot of these things are not new, that they all have considerable background. At all times in our relations with the Soviet Union there are both the elements of detente, the search for agreement, and confrontations based upon these fundamental differences about the very shape of the world community and what kind of conduct is required if we're going to live together in peace.

All right. Those are some--Now, what questions would you like to put? Yes, sir.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: How do you view the invasion, or the motives of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan?

RUSK: Well, when you get into motivation, one has to be a little careful because motivations usually are very complicated, and in the case of the Soviet Union they do a much better job in keeping their mouths shut than our people do, so that you have to speculate about motivation a good deal. But my guess is that they saw in Afghanistan a self-proclaimed Marxist government that wasn't making a go of it, and that worried them under the rubric of what they used to call the Brezhnev doctrine, the right of the Soviet Union to intervene in any socialist, meaning Communist country, to insure that it remains Communist. I think they saw a major election in process in India with high prospect that their old friend Indira Gandhi would soon be coming back to power. They saw great political fragility in Pakistan. They saw an Iran which was in a state of complete disorder with separatist movements shooting at the authorities in places like Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Baluchistan and high tension between Iran and the United States. I think they found it predictable that Western Europe in general would take a more-or-less indifferent and business as usual attitude if they were to move into Afghanistan. They saw us in the middle of a presidential election, and it may well be that this question got caught up in the preliminary maneuverings with regard to the succession to Brezhnev and Kosygin. I don't know whether it was related to any long-term plan to move into the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. My guess is the Soviets don't make their decisions that far in advance. They'll wait and see. But I think they put together a combination of things and made the decision that they could move with

impunity as far as the rest of the world was concerned. They may have underestimated the Afghans. I suggested to my friends in the State Department some months ago that they send me to Moscow to give them some technical assistance on how to get bogged down in a small country. (laughter) All right. There's another question. Yes, m[a'am]. Right here.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Do you see any immediate, or within the next three to four months, resolution of the Iranian crisis, or do you have any suggestions that might be relevant to the situation?

RUSK: These hostage situations are unique situations, each one unique, and one finds that ordinary ways of thinking and acting simply may not be relevant. When something like that happens, the first thing you have to decide [is] where your priorities are. I think the, our own government made the right decision in giving top priority to the safety and the lives of the hostages themselves. Now that immediately puts a lot of limitations on what you can do. It requires a great deal of calm and patience and restraint, and also involves a great deal of suppressed anger and frustration and all the rest of it. We had the same kind of problem when the North Koreans seized the Pueblo. We had eighty-five officers and crew seized. And when we first heard about it in Washington, the ship and its crew were already entering Wonsan Harbor in North Korea. Now, we could have bombed North Korea and then maybe picked up eighty-three [sic] corpses someday, but we decided that since we had sent those men on that type of ship, which is unable to defend itself, into those waters, relying on international waters for its protection, and that proved unreliable, then our first duty was to the officers and men. It took us eleven months to get them out of there, even though at least in North Korea there was a government that was in charge. Now, I don't know how this will evolve. My--if I were Jimmy the Greek, and we'll bear in mind that Jimmy the Greek is a gambling man, I would bet that we would get our hostages back, but it may take, it will take some more time, and at the very end it may come through some kind of bizarre kind of involvement. We got our people back from Korea under literally one of the most bizarre diplomatic moves one has ever heard about. For weeks and weeks, the North Koreans had pounded the table requiring us to make a statement--

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