

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk AAAAA
Dean Rusk interviewed by Peter Oliver
1985 October

OLIVER: Sir, I have about five questions here. To start off with, I was wondering if you might give a quick definition of the military-industrial complex as you perceive it.

DEAN RUSK: The Defense Department is the major customer for major industries in this country, whether it's steel, or weapons, or vehicles, or ammunition, or whatever it might be. Now the arena in which one feels the pressure of the so-called military-industrial complex is to be found in two areas: one, in the Congress. Senators and congressmen are very anxious to get contracts for companies in their states and districts which provide jobs, and a tax base, and their own personal popularity if they can help get those contracts. So, you'll find elements of the industrial world working very hard in Congress. This is true on such a thing as a military construction appropriation. Just yesterday I heard the proceedings of the House of Representatives in passing a several billion dollar military construction bill. And it was clear that congressmen have the liveliest interest in getting funds for their own district for such military bases, or housing projects, or whatever it might be that might be in their own district. So they put together almost a patchwork of appropriations for different districts around the country. Now this is almost independent of the general attitude of a congressman toward the overall military establishment. Even the so-called pacifist-minded congressmen are concerned about their own districts. And when the Pentagon moves, as they do from time to time, to eliminate bases or effect a savings here or there, you'll find every congressman is very sensitive to what is happening in his district. So that is the first arena in which the battle is fought. And then the next stage has to do with the actual awarding of contracts by the Defense Department to particular industries. Some companies like General Dynamics will find that 80 or 90 percent of their total activity is concerned with Defense contracts. And there are many of the large companies, whether it's General Motors, Ford, or whatever, see and often get very valuable Defense contracts. And then there's a heavy pressure on contracts for research and development to explore new ideas. The President's space Strategic Defense Initiative, or so-called Star Wars initiative, is involving research contracts with many companies and a good many universities. And, of course, where there is money, there are going to be people who want to get some of it. And so there's very keen competition within the walls of the Pentagon to have these contracts awarded to individual companies and states and districts. Now when those contracts are pending in the Defense Department, senators and congressmen take a very active part in promoting those contracts and they become a kind of lobbying force in the Pentagon in behalf of one contractor rather than another. One sees this from time to time in rather dramatic fashion. When aircraft manufacturing companies lock horns, whether it's Lockheed against Boeing or whatever it might be. So this is a very lively part of the political process. Now one of the results of all this is that it gives the Defense Department very considerable political power in dealing with the Congress because each senator and congressman knows that if he makes too much trouble for the Defense Department in the Congress that this could bounce back and hurt his state or his district when the time comes for awarding contracts, or maintaining bases, or whatever it might be. So this whole

process is an important part of politics. Back in the early '30s a group of political scientists at the University of Chicago described the democratic process as a struggle over who gets what, when, where, and how. In other words a political process has to do with the dividing up of the resources of the nation. And there's no question in my mind that this process and the use of Defense Department funds is a major part of our political system. Now I must say that my experience has been in the State Department. The State Department almost never gets involved in this process. We don't have the appropriations. The State Department doesn't have the contracts to give. And so this is something that happens, more or less, outside of my own direct and personal experience as Secretary of State.

OLIVER: Would you agree that this process is a serious threat to frugal policymaking?

DEAN RUSK: To some extent it is difficult to have lean Defense Department budgets in the midst of all this process. But there are times when abuses of the process become so obvious and apparent that the military-industrial complex loses some of its clout. For example, in recent months we have heard a good deal about outrageous costs presented by Defense contractors to the government for payment--thousand dollar wrenches, two thousand dollar toilet seats, and things like that. Well when that occurs, people do begin to get indignant. And that indignation serves as a counterbalance to the otherwise greedy demands of the Defense Department. There's another factor too; and that is that any one of us who has dealt with large budgets will know that in any large budget there will be elements of waste, overlap, redundancy where you can save money. Now I find that even in the relatively small budget of the Department of State. And I am sure that there's a lot of that kind of thing in the many times larger budget for the Department of Defense. I personally believe that what is called zero-budgeting is a good idea. That is that each year one looks very carefully at every dollar in the budget--and I mean literally every dollar. I used to hold hearings within the State Department on budgets before I would go down to if the Congress and ask for the appropriations for the Department of State. And if you follow every dollar, you can come across these elements of waste and foolishness that can then be corrected. For example--and I'm sure this is multiplied many times over in the Defense Department--but I found that there was a great struggle in the Department of State for these metal vacuum water bottles to have on one's desk. It became a sign of prestige to have one of those on your desk. Well I found that the General Services Administration was paying about \$80 a piece for these water bottles. And when I inquired I found that if you go down to Sears and Roebuck and buy one for \$16. Well that's the kind of thing that comes to light if you follow every dollar, every nickel, every dime. And I'm sure that there are substantial elements of waste in so large a budget as the Defense Department. I would like to see economy become a responsibility of the chain of command in our military, starting with the four-star generals and admirals and running right on down to the one-stripe enlisted men. So that outside of active theatres of operation economy becomes a responsibility of command to try to do our best to see that the taxpayer gets a dollar's worth of defense for the dollar. And if that were done and were announced publicly, I think it would help the citizen to understand better what these Defense costs are.

OLIVER: Have there been any successful attempts to control this complex since and during your time as Secretary of State?

DEAN RUSK: Well, during my period--I don't have the details in mind--Secretary of Defense Robert [Strange] McNamara put on an efficiency drive in the Pentagon. And this had to do with competitive contract bidding. It had to do with centralized checks on inventories to be sure that we weren't buying a lot of things over in one area when there was a surplus of those very same things in another area. He did a good many things to tighten up the Defense budget when he was Secretary of Defense. But it's something that has to be done all the time, every day without letup. And it has to be stimulated by the leadership of the Department. Fifteen or twenty leaders at the top of the Department can make a big difference in such things if they really put the heat on and require that waste be eliminated and that things be done as efficiently as possible.

OLIVER: Do you feel that under the present administration the military-industrial complex has gained momentum?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think there's no doubt that the Defense Department has developed a substantial momentum in getting funds from the public treasury. And Mr. [Ronald Wilson] Reagan has set the tone for that in his insistence that there be no cuts in the Defense budget. You see, one thing that occurs--now I don't want to sound too partisan here. Back in the '60s when our defense budget was running, say, 70 billion dollars or something like that, the asking figures of the three services at the beginning of the budget cycle would run to, say, 115 or 120 billion dollars. Then it was up to the Secretary of Defense, the Bureau of the Budget, and the President to bring their asking figures down to what was considered to be tolerable, such as 70 billion dollars. Well, it's my impression now that the leadership of the Pentagon works on the asking figures and tries to put them into effect rather than to take a hard look at them and bring them down to what might be called bearable limits. I'm quite sure that today there are majors and lieutenant commanders sitting around the Pentagon scraping out the bottom drawers of their desks looking for ways in which to spend all this money. Because they've never heard of so much money before. And in that process you can have a great deal of waste. A senator from Georgia, Senator Sam Nunn, is very much concerned about this. And he has publicly expressed reservations about the redundancy in our weapons systems, for example. Do we have too great a variety of weapons systems? Another thing that bears upon this military-industrial complex has to do with the rivalry among the three major services: the Army, the Air Force, and the Navy, for what they consider to be their share of the Defense pie. And they struggle with each other over who is going to be in control of which weapons systems. And it takes a very strong Secretary of Defense to cut through those inter-service rivalries and come up with a total budget that really is lean and makes sense. So that's another element in fueling the impact of this military-industrial complex.

OLIVER: You mentioned zero-budgeting. Could you give any practical solutions that would lead to the dissolution of this threat in this complex?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I don't know that you can dissolve it. I think you have to control it. But after all, there are many, many pressures on the federal budget from all directions: whether it's for social services, or education, or whatever it might be including defense. And in our system there's bound to be competition among those who are demanding shares of the federal budget: the states, the local governments, the whole business. And this is simply, to me, a normal and inevitable part of the political process. I see no way to get rid of it. But what ought to be done by

a President and a Secretary of Defense, and a Bureau of the Management and Budget is to bring all of these processes under severe control. And just as we ought to try to eliminate fraud from, say, our Social Security payments, we ought to try to eliminate waste and fraud in our Defense Budget. And it takes a lot of work to do that.

OLIVER: Are there any solutions you could give to regulating this process?

DEAN RUSK: To me there's only one way to get at it and that is for those who are in charge to take it seriously. In the case of the Defense Budget, the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Defense's own principal civilian assistants, and somehow to make it clear that the public is entitled to a dollar's worth of defense for a dollar taken from the taxpayer. I also agree with Senator Sam Nunn that the increases in the Defense Budget have been too large and too fast--that we ought to stretch these costs out over a longer period of years if indeed we do need more defense. Budgetary considerations ought to be a very central part of our approach to the space defense initiative--the so-called Star Wars program--because the actual development and deployment of these space defense weapons will cost hundreds of billions of dollars. And then if we or the Soviet Union begin to make any progress toward effective space defense weapons, then we'll be asked for additional hundreds of billions of dollars to get offensive weapons which can penetrate or evade such defenses. So we're looking at the possibility of an additional trillion dollars in connection with the movement of the arms race into outer space. Now that's a journey that we ought not to take if we can possibly avoid it. And so it's no accident that six former Secretaries of Defense, both Republican and Democratic, joined in a statement a few days ago urging that we continue to comply with the Antiballistic Missile Treaty which would go a long way toward preventing the arms race from moving into outer space. Here we are talking about the prospect of a trillion dollars at a time when we are already running a 200 billion dollar deficit in our federal budget. So we ought to be thinking about ways to prevent having to make that journey if we can possibly do it. Yet there are many who, including the President, seem to be caught up with slogans on this subject and so the budgetary prospects of the future to me are rather gloomy.

OLIVER: Thank you for your time.

DEAN RUSK: Okay. Good to see you.

END OF SIDE 1

[SIDE 2 BLANK]