

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk BBB: Part 2 of 2
Nicholas de Belleville Katzenbach interviewed by Richard Rusk
1985 March

The complete interview also includes Rusk AAA: Part 1.

KATZENBACH: I think that was true of President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy. Maybe it was true of President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson, all of us.

RICHARD RUSK: You had the feeling that that commitment was almost automatic. It really wasn't analyzed at any given point.

KATZENBACH: It was, if you had aggression, you'd better do something about it if you could because if you didn't things were going to get worse. I think it probably was far too automatic, not very well thought out. If you had a bunch of leaders out there who can't get the support of people--

RICHARD RUSK: Dick [Richard Charles Albert] Holbrooke's role up on my dad's floor that final year, or the last two years: What was he in relation to Vietnam? I know that he was sort of my dad's special assistant, or resident expert.

KATZENBACH: He worked for me. And I didn't know that Dick had a special relationship with your father when I hired him.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad didn't bring him in?

KATZENBACH: Oh, no, not at all. No.

RICHARD RUSK: He was the logical guy for that post, based on the people available, I guess?

KATZENBACH: Well, I had a whole bunch of really good assistants. But he was brought in as the junior foreign service officer. He was preceded by Tony [Anthony] Lake. Then Dick came in and replaced him. I had [Arthur] Hartman there; I had Larry [Lawrence S.] Eagleburger. I had a good group of people. Three of them. Arthur, most of the time--it was Arthur, Larry and one of the junior people.

RICHARD RUSK: I can remember Dick Holbrooke telling me one thing. I went down there right after the Tet Offensive. I called my dad from Cornell and begged him, "Don't put those 206,000 men in there." I went to see Dick as well. And he said, "Rich, I just don't get asked into your dad's office. I never have the opportunity to consult with him." Do you remember that being the case? And if so, why?

KATZENBACH: He never got into the Secretary's office, your father's office, to talk with him.

He talked with me all the time. And if I agreed with him, I carried it in. And if I didn't agree with him, he kept pushing me, pushing me, pushing me, which is all right. Dick was very helpful, as Tony was. I guess Tony succeeded Dick in that job, rather than Dick succeeding Tony.

RICHARD RUSK: Possibly, because Lake stayed on through the Nixon years. Oh, no, he later went on to the White House staff.

KATZENBACH: He went over to the White House staff, and I recommended him for that. He was unhappy with a lot of things. And I got him a leave up at Princeton, where he got his Ph.D.

RICHARD RUSK: You mentioned earlier about the morale of the foreign service. What did all this do to the morale of the service and the workings of the Department? We've got Vietnam going completely to hell on one hand: the circle of advisers narrowing throughout the Johnson years, lots of people simply not involved with something they really should have been involved in. What did that do to the Department? Any for instances?

KATZENBACH: I don't really know. I think the people who should have been consulted were all consulted in most of this. Certainly Bill Bundy was involved in everything that happened there. And Bill, himself, had his ambivalences about it. Bill had a lot of reservations about what was going on in Vietnam. I think everybody got discouraged by it, except Walt Rostow, who was the perennial optimist. Walt is one of the nicest people, although, God! I have to struggle to find anything I ever agreed with him on. But he was terribly nice. Gene [Eugene Victor Rostow] was a strange person. I knew Gene from Yale Law School, both as a student and teacher there. Gene was a very strange person, very hawkish about the Middle East. I got back from a trip where I'd been through Africa. I got back at the time of the Gulf of Aqaba, which happened just toward the end. I don't know whether you remember that or not, where suddenly the Arabs closed off the Gulf of Aqaba and the Israeli shipping. There was a fair amount of a crisis situation there. And I got back here and found Gene Rostow was calling in all the ambassadors, one after another. He was setting up a task force of destroyers and cruisers and so forth from the Dutch, from the British and so forth to cruise in on the Gulf of Aqaba and I said, "Is this what the President wants?" He said, "I don't know. I haven't talked with the President." I said, "Well, how about the Secretary?" He said, "Well, I haven't talked with him about it either." I said, "Gene, 'God! What are you doing?" Well, of course the ambassadors assumed that he was speaking for the President. He was speaking for Gene Rostow.

RICHARD RUSK: Interesting! So there's a case where it doesn't work: not being privy to what's in the Secretary's mind. Was my dad involved very heavily with that '68 war or did he pretty much delegate responsibility?

KATZENBACH: No, he was involved quite heavily in that, although he wasn't the guy who called it off. We went over the situation, he and I. He had to go down south for some speech or award or something he was getting. It was a Saturday morning, I think. And the Israelis were going hell-bent for the Syrian capital. And they were about sixty miles from Damascus: the road to Damascus. The Russians were getting pretty nervous then.

RICHARD RUSK: And my dad was off making a speech?

KATZENBACH: No, he was down there for a while. Then the President said, "We have to call this off." And your father said, "Look, I've got to go down south and do this." He turned to me and said, "You call him and you do it," which is what I did. And they were very good about it. That is to say, I was fairly blunt. The Israeli ambassador wasn't there. The charge was there: the number two man. He came in. Ebron, I think was his name. I said, "This is what the President wants. He means it. This is it." I said, "Do you want me to convey that message to your government, or do you want me to convey it through Ambassador [Walworth] Barbour?" He said, "Well, your communications may be faster. We'd both better do it." We did it that way. It wasn't because your father wanted to get the award. He just didn't want to build up a crisis situation. Because by not showing up where he should be showing up--it wasn't that he wasn't paying attention to his job, he simply thought that it didn't make much difference who conveyed the message. It was the President who wanted it. They weren't going to fight it.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad locked himself into a pretty tight position on the war. I am wondering if this decision of combat decision-making had anything to do with it. And what I mean there are fellows like my dad, very humane instincts, very decent, well-intentioned men, getting involved in decisions that entail loss of life, suffering, everything that war entails: one dead American after another dead American. You know, [David] Halberstam referred to it in his book as one dead American begetting another dead American, begetting another. Not for reasons of vanity, but because you are a humane person, and you get the feeling that you've got to make this policy work because of all these dead people. And the thing is progressive. We're talking about fifty-sixty thousand American deaths. Do you think that was a factor? To what extent does that kind of thing influence a guy like my father or the decision making process?

KATZENBACH: Oh, I think it clearly influences the decision making process. And if I say that, it means it has to influence the people who are in it. That may not be because they are humane. It could be simply because you say, "Look, after umpteen thousand people have died here, who gets to say, 'Gee whiz, let's quit'." That's a very tough thing politically to do. You saw how it was eventually done by [Henry Alfred] Kissinger, by saying we had peace when they didn't have peace. Henry Kissinger was a smart enough fellow to know damn well that he didn't have it.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. You could have had it on the same terms?

KATZENBACH: He said you could have had it on those phony terms.

RICHARD RUSK: And a matter of fact, we came reasonably close in the fall of '68, I think, on those terms.

KATZENBACH: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think it is a factor?

KATZENBACH: It could be, sure. As I say, I think World War II influenced everybody's thinking. And in part, influencing that thinking was the military experience that the people had.

RICHARD RUSK: Although, my dad came through CBI [China-Burma-India theatre], which if anything would have taught him the limitations on American power in Asia.

KATZENBACH: Well yeah. It also taught him--he really was irritated at the stupid way-- "Didn't they have any perimeter people out there?" he would say. "That man ought to be sheared out of the service!" not talking about the [William Childs] Westmoreland thing, talking about the people down at the command level.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, he was deputy chief of war plans for [Joseph Warren] Stilwell. And he was involved in the tactical military insurgency.

KATZENBACH: And he didn't get over that. As I said, he would never say that to McNamara or anyone else. But it used to drive him wild.

RICHARD RUSK: What was my dad's health and state of mind at that time of year in the office?

KATZENBACH: I thought it was pretty good.

RICHARD RUSK: He was hanging in there pretty well?

KATZENBACH: I thought he was hanging in there pretty well. He was obviously tired. But I thought he was hanging in pretty well. He always had a sense of humor.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall what any of the big laughs were?

KATZENBACH: No. It's so hard after all this time. It's an interesting period.

RICHARD RUSK: Are you going to write about it?

KATZENBACH: No, I don't think so. I'll let you write about it. (laughter) There are a lot of tragic things. Everybody had problems. Bob McNamara: terribly hard on him.

RICHARD RUSK: I was over there. He gave me an interview on this stuff. And he doesn't talk about it with very many people. He told me that one time there was a protester outside his window at the Pentagon, who set himself on fire, and he had a baby in his arms. And before he was engulfed by the flames, I guess he changed his mind and threw the baby out. And he was sitting there watching all that!

KATZENBACH: It affected him, I think, very greatly emotionally. He was a very good friend of mine. Still is. He's a smart, funny man. If Bob McNamara's ever been wrong, it's hard to find out what it was.

RICHARD RUSK: He was wrong on that, and I'm sure that he knows it.

KATZENBACH: Of course, his view is different. His view is that he never was for it. And that's

strange.

RICHARD RUSK: That's interesting. Then why did he go along with it?

KATZENBACH: When he gave options, they were really always that they shouldn't get that heavily involved with that many troops. But the President wanted it, and he was just very loyal to the President. I think there is some truth to that. I also tend to think that it tends to get tilted a little bit with recollections.

RICHARD RUSK: I think so. George [Wildman] Ball has commented that McNamara may have been a dove to other people, but he was hell on wheels at those Tuesday luncheons.

KATZENBACH: Well, I was always unwilling to play the George Ball role.

RICHARD RUSK: Was your opposition that substantial, say by '67 or '68?

KATZENBACH: I don't believe in taking a lot of positions that are just going to be turned down. If I felt that way very, very strongly, then I would not be involved at all. What I was trying to do, what I thought people wanted me to do, was to try to find ways that made sure we explored all the avenues of trying to get to the peace table. That's what I concentrated on trying to do. I felt a lot of things were just--I didn't think mining Haiphong harbor or dropping bombs on Hanoi was going to have very much effect on the outcome of the war. But I thought they had a lot of impact back here, in terms of building up opposition. I didn't think they were worth doing.

RICHARD RUSK: One of the tragedies of that conflict was that no single senior adviser who turned against the war took his descent public, resigned publicly in public protest.

KATZENBACH: You'd have to resign to do it.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. Those anti-war people never had a figure like that to rally around. They were always prayerful types making their speeches.

KATZENBACH: That would make me feel very uncomfortable, to do something like that. It is, in effect, using the position that the President gives you and has placed trust and confidence in you, in order to turn against him. That's an uncomfortable position to be in.

RICHARD RUSK: Good point. I never thought of it in quite that way.

KATZENBACH: If I didn't have a position like that, it wouldn't make any difference what I said.

RICHARD RUSK: Of course, in England that public resumption protest is very much part of their protocol. In this country it is not.

KATZENBACH: Well, that may in part be because the people in those positions had their own

political base. They are not in those positions because the Prime Minister alone thinks they are hell on wheels. He's within his own party. And they have their own constituencies. And they go back to their party. That was true in a greater extent in this country than it has been the last thirty years. You know Adlai Stevenson, when he didn't get Secretary of State; they made him the Ambassador to the U.N. And that gave him cabinet status, which is as silly a proposition as anything I can think of. You don't have two spokesmen on foreign affairs.

RICHARD RUSK: Walt Rostow has called my dad "first among equals" in that triumvirate of people who advised Lyndon Johnson. Is that the way you saw him?

KATZENBACH: Well, that's what his job was meant to be. Yes. I felt that. It's increasingly difficult for it to be that way.

RICHARD RUSK: He was talking to McGeorge Bundy, McNamara, and my dad at the time that he made that statement. My dad had that much influence on Lyndon Johnson?

KATZENBACH: Oh, I think Lyndon Johnson respected him very greatly. I think probably with both Kennedy and Johnson for a long period of time, that McNamara had more influence than anybody. I don't think that kept up with Lyndon Johnson through all the time. With Kennedy, it appeared that McNamara was a doer. All military do that, always say they can do things they can't do.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, we've been through a lot of stuff here.

KATZENBACH: Why don't we just call it quits on that? If you have other stuff, we can get either together again or you can call me up. If I think of anything I've omitted that's important, I'll call.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. I appreciate the chance to get in here and talk with you about this.

KATZENBACH: It was an interesting period.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Well, I'll do my best on this book.

END OF SIDE 1

[SIDE 2 BLANK]