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Dean Rusk lecture to Professor Loch Johnson's political science class

1985

DEAN RUSK: --look for prospects for survival. We could give an entire course on that subject. So today I shall be talking in shorthand and leaving it to you to fill out the paragraphs in whatever way you wish. In August 1945 I was a Colonel in the Army serving in the Operations Division of the War Department General Staff. And we were all busy preparing for an invasion of the main islands of Japan. When the flash came in on the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, a Colonel of the regular Army at the desk next to mine said, "War has turned upon itself and is devouring its own tail. From this time forward it will make no sense for nations to try to settle their differences by means of war." An instinctive insight of a professional soldier. Years later, shortly after President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy was inaugurated, he sat down in the Cabinet Room with four or five of his senior colleagues and a staff of experts, and we spent much of a day going through an examination of the total effects of nuclear war, both direct and indirect. It was an awesome experience. At the end of it President Kennedy asked me to come back with him to the Oval Office to discuss something, and as we walked through the door he, with a strange little look on his face, said, "And we call ourselves the 'human race.'" As a small boy growing up in the Presbyterian church I memorized and recited the Westminster Shorter catechism. The first question in that catechism is "What is the chief end of man?" In the catechism it had a theological answer. But many years later during the Cuban Missile Crisis, as I drove through the streets of Washington and saw people walking along the sidewalks and driving past in their cars, I was sobered by the thought that this first of all questions "What is the chief end of man?", "What is life all about?", had become an operational question before the governments of the world. I mention these things simply to say that my remarks today will be based upon a deep and informed respect for the destructive power of nuclear weapons: not in the kind of fear which can lead to panic and irrational judgments and conduct, but a total respect for the capabilities of these weapons to destroy the human race. And I am glad that you have had the chance to have some insights into what that means. The most important single thing to me about this post-World War II period is the simple fact that in this year of 1985 we have put behind us more than forty years since a nuclear weapon has been fired in anger, despite many serious and sometimes dangerous crises we have had since 1945.

That is a very important, simple, incontrovertible statement of fact. I mention it to you as a partial antidote to much of the doomsday talk which we are hearing these days. Doomsday! Some of it comes from those who are trying to support dramatic increases in our defense budget. Much of it comes from those who are trying to organize various peace movements on the other side of the political spectrum. Some of it comes from news media trying to create shock effect in listeners and viewers. And some comes from occasional professors who find it the fad and the fashion to cry, "Oh, my God!" This doomsday talk has to be watched. Dr. Helen Caldecott, the Australian physician who has spent a good deal of time in this country working with various anti-nuclear groups, said on television not long ago that it was a mathematical certainty that we would have nuclear war within a very few years. Back in 1959 the well-known British writer

[Charles Percy] C.P. Snow wrote an article in which he assured us with scientific accuracy that we would have nuclear war within ten years. In that same year of 1959 Mr. Herman Kahn, the well-known head of the famous think tank called the "Hudson Institute", wrote a massive volume on thermonuclear war. And in that book he seemed to say that the human race would be lucky to get to the year 1975. Doomsday! There seems to be some allergy among the news media about talking about these forty years without nuclear weapons. A little over two years ago I was asked by Time magazine to do a little five-hundred word comment on relations with the Soviet Union, along with a half-a-dozen other people. And in my own little piece I remarked that we had put behind us thirty-eight years since a nuclear weapon has been fired. For reasons that I still do not understand the editors of Time wanted to take out that sentence. And I finally told them that they could throw the whole thing in the wastebasket, but if they used my little piece they would have to use it as I wrote it. And they finally did. When ABC [American Broadcasting Company] was coming up on its program, "The Day After," about a nuclear holocaust in our Midwest, I tried without success to get a message through to their top brass urging them to have one of their top correspondents, like a Ted Koppel, come on at the very beginning of that program to say three very simple things: One, this program was a dramatization and not a prophecy. Second, that we had put behind us then thirty- eight years since a nuclear weapon has been fired in anger. And third, that neither ABC nor anyone else could put a finger on a real problem in the real world today which is pointing toward nuclear war. But they didn't do it. Were they interested in shock effect and ratings? Or what? So it comes as a surprise to a good many young people to have this very simple fact about these forty years pointed out to them. Some of our thinking is complicated by a good deal of nonsense.

And one of the purposes of a university is to help students discover nonsense when they run across it. I'll nominate a few candidates for your possible interest. I do not believe it is worthwhile to talk about a limited nuclear war. It's just possible that if the forces opposing each other along that central line dividing Europe, that if they got involved in significant combat, and if there was an exchange of three or four nuclear weapons in each direction, that the two sides might immediately stop and reconsider the situation. But if that fighting is prolonged on a major scale, and nuclear weapons are used in Europe, then I am convinced myself, knowing something about what is called "crisis management," that their use would act like a rolling artillery barrage and move on to a full nuclear exchange. And the attempt to limit such nuclear war would be virtually impossible. I've heard it said, even by officials of the Defense Department, that there can be such a thing as a prolonged nuclear war from which one side might emerge with some kind of advantage. To me that is utter nonsense. After all, it was [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev who said that, "In the event of a nuclear war, the living would envy the dead." Nonsense. Another candidate is talk about counterforce strategy. And that has crept into some of our official speaking from time to time. Counterforce strategy: The idea behind that is that if you aim your own missiles at the other fellow's military targets, that that would send a message to him, and he would spare your own cities. Now the best way to send a message is to get on the hotline or pick up the telephone and talk to the other fellow on the other end of the line. Try to construct for yourself the kind of conversation that that would involve. "Hello, Mr. Chairman, this is the President. I just want to let you know that we have launched missiles at military targets in the Soviet Union, but only military targets, so we hope that you will spare our cities. How many? Well, we launched nine hundred. But you know there could be some misfires, so let's say eight-hundred-and-eighty, plus or minus. Which targets? Oh, your missile silos, your submarine bases

in Murmansk and Vladivostok. Oh, by the way, Mr. Chairman, this conversation ought to be short because as you know, Moscow is your central command and control center, and I want to give you a few minutes to get down into your shelter. Mr. Chairman? Hello? Are you there? Hello? Gee, Secretary [Caspar Willard] Weinberger, that fellow hung up on me. I knew you couldn't trust him." Now, the more you try to frame that message the more you are in the world of fantasy: a fantasy that goes beyond the imagination. And I think we do not help ourselves by exaggerating the accuracy of intercontinental missiles.

We call our missile accurate if it has a fifty percent chance of landing within X-hundred yards of its target. I heard a congressman on television last year say, "That means you have to launch two missiles at every target." Well, the congressman had never thrown dice. Because the second missile would have a fifty percent chance of hitting its target. And if you want to get to certainty, your mathematicians will tell you you would have to go to infinity. And that's a heck of a lot of missiles. A friend who is knowledgeable about these things said three years ago that if we had a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, we could hit Eniwetok with great accuracy because we have tested these missiles on a range running from California to targets near Eniwetok. And we have made all the adjustments over a period of time to manage to get the missiles pretty much where they were aimed. But neither we nor the Soviet Union have ever fired missiles into trajectories that would be involved in a nuclear exchange. We've had no experience in it. And such trajectories would have to take into account the wobbling of the earth on its axis as it rotates. We would have to take into account the geodetic problem of locating with pinpoint accuracy the very spot at which these missile silos might exist on the earth's surface several thousands of miles away, variations in the magnetic and gravitational fields of the earth, weather conditions at point of launch, and weather conditions at point of reentry. So I myself have the impression that we have given these intercontinental missiles far too much credit for pinpoint accuracy in the event of an exchange. I simply do not believe that even a Soviet force strike could virtually wipe out our minuteman force in our silos out in the west. And that exaggeration I think does not help very much. Now it seems to me that we have learned during these forty years that the fingers on the nuclear trigger are not itchy, just waiting for a pretext on which to fire these dreadful weapons. Since it is fashionable for us to be very self-critical on these things, if you have doubt about that as far as the United States is concerned let me remind you that we have taken almost six hundred thousand casualties in dead and wounded since the end of World War II in support of collective security: and without firing nuclear weapons. We have learned during that forty-year period that Soviet leaders have no more interest in destroying Mother Russia than our own leaders have in destroying our beloved America.

We have had time to reflect upon the fact that we and the Soviet Union share a massive common interest in the prevention of nuclear war. No one in his right mind in Moscow or in Washington could doubt that proposition. We and they also share a fundamental obligation to the entire human race, because we and they are the only two nations who have locked in mortal conflict to raise a serious question about whether this planet could any longer sustain the human race. And we and they have a specific and serious obligation under Section 6 of the Nonproliferation Treaty to make a serious effort to reduce the stockpile of nuclear weapons, and put serious limits upon the nuclear arms race. Now we should not suppose--And this relates to you because we are talking about the next forty years that are yours. We should not suppose this previous forty years is a sure guarantee for the future. We still have to be careful. For example, we and the Soviet

Union must learn not to play games of chicken with each other, to see how far one side can go in a particular adventure without crossing that lethal line. Because down that path lies the possibility of miscalculation and misjudgment, which might bring on catastrophes which neither side could possibly want. Those of us who served with Chinese forces in Burma during World War II were sometimes frustrated and a bit amused when we found it at times very difficult to get a Chinese force completely to surround a Japanese force. And they cited to us an ancient Chinese military doctrine to the effect that you must never completely surround an enemy, because if you do he will fight too hard. You must always leave him a route of escape. That doctrine is set forth, by the way, in a treatise on the arts of war, attributed to Sun Tzu several hundred years before Christ. Now whatever the problems we've had with that doctrine in a conventional war, it is a doctrine which takes on rather special meaning in a nuclear world. I do not believe that we shall have a nuclear war because the leaders of a nuclear government sit down and make a calm, deliberate decision to launch such a war.

They all know that that is mutual suicide. But it is just possible that we can have a nuclear war if a man or a group of men and women find themselves driven into a corner from which they see no escape, where they lose all sense of stake in the future and elect to play the role of Samson and pull the temple down around themselves and everyone else at the same time. It was for that reason that President Kennedy went to great pains during the Cuban Missile Crisis to try not to drive Mr. Khrushchev into that kind of corner. And that crisis was successfully overcome. Then we have to watch, in my judgment, the level of rhetoric between the two sides. During the first two-and-a-half years of the [Ronald Wilson] Reagan administration the level of rhetoric between Moscow and Washington rose to very high levels. Well, if that rhetoric becomes too vitriolic over too sustained a period of time, there is always the possibility that one side or the other will begin to believe its own rhetoric. And then we could have some problems. I've been glad to notice that these rhetorical exchanges have moderated considerably in the last year or two. But we have to be careful. Now these problems are very much on the minds of world leaders. I've been asked a number of times about the problem of a Mr. [Moammar] Khadafy getting and even using nuclear weapons. To me that raises no problem about a general nuclear holocaust unless you assume that the leaders in Moscow and Washington are idiots. And whatever you might think about them, they are not idiots.

We have talked about this Third World problem with the Soviet Union, particularly in the negotiation of the Treaty of Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, on which we and they agreed and have worked jointly very hard, to try to reduce the spread of these weapons into more and more hands. It is inconceivable to me that Moscow and Washington would allow the actions of someone like a Mr. Khadafy to cause us to destroy each other and virtually the human race. It just won't happen. Nuclear war in my judgment is simply that war which must not be fought. That war would not only eliminate the answers it would eliminate the questions. Therefore, the question "Why this nuclear weapon and this nuclear arms race?" The only rational purpose of nuclear weapons, in my mind, is to see to it that no one else will use nuclear weapons against us. But that purpose could be achieved with ten percent of present stockpiles, in my judgment. There is one possible exception to that, and that has to do with the situation in Europe. We have a substantial number of tactical nuclear weapons in NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Europe. If there were an all-out attack by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries against western Europe, they might very shortly find themselves in the areas where these tactical

nuclear weapons are to be found. I personally do not believe that any American president, whatever his political persuasions, would allow Soviet forces to capture those nuclear weapons. And I think the Soviet leaders know that. But that is the only exception to the general rule. So I've become, as far as the future is concerned, very much concerned about finding a way to limit this arms race. It just is reaching the edges of insanity in its present status. Let us at least acknowledge that negotiations between us and the Soviet Union on arms limitation are extraordinarily difficult. To begin with, when we talk to them about a balance between the two sides, each side tends to look upon this word "balance" like a bank balance. Each side wants a little something positive in his favor. And so there is inevitably a certain amount of jockeying going on just on that situation. But the nuclear forces on the two sides are not the same. And one has to measure different types of nuclear weapons alongside of each other. And that creates some real problems. And then there are some ghosts at the table. When you talk bilaterally with the Soviet Union about these matters you sometimes have the impression that they are looking over their shoulders at the People's Republic of China, a nation of a billion people armed with nuclear weapons, with which they share a several-thousand-mile common frontier. And what might appear to us to be a reasonable balance between us and the Soviet Union requires, on their side, something extra because of China.

And then there is the problem of the French and British nuclear forces which have been growing steadily in recent years. It isn't irrational for the Soviet Union to say that these French and British nuclear weapons must somehow be taken into account. And I believe at some point we will have to find a way to do just that, if we are to achieve any lasting arms limitation agreements with the Soviet Union. And we have had problems over the years on the issue of verification, partly because I think the Soviets look upon verification as a unilateral concession which we are asking from them. When they look at us they see an open society. They see a lot of what they want to know by reading Congressional testimony and technical journals. They see a government that does not know how to keep its mouth shut. They add a little dash of espionage and they can know fairly readily what they need to know about us on these matters. But when we look at them we see a country in which large areas are closed to foreigners, where there is a government that does know how to keep its mouth shut, and where espionage in the usual sense is very difficult to maintain. And so they may not feel the need for the kind of verification as far as we are concerned that we feel in connection with their situation. But both occasions are important not just from the point of view of the possibility of military cheating. Without verification, it would be very difficult to control, particularly in democratic societies, the political storms of fear and suspicion and hate that arrives over a lack of knowledge about what the other fellow is in fact doing. For example, on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty you do not have to sit around growing ulcers about whether or not the Soviets are complying with that treaty, because your government can tell you accurately that if the Soviets were to explode a nuclear weapon in the atmosphere, under water, or in outer space, we would know about it almost instantly to tell you about it, and then the government could decide what, if anything, we ought to do under the circumstances. So verification is difficult with the Soviets.

I must confess that for one who has lived with these matters for a good many years that as far as I am concerned I would go just as far in the elimination of nuclear weapons as the capabilities of verification would permit. If someone could show me how you would verify against hiding warheads away in salt mines in Utah and Siberia, and the U.N. [United Nations] Province of

China, I would go for zero nuclear weapons tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. Because in terms of the safety of American people, which must be a primary object of policy, it seems to me that the American people are less safe today than we were before these weapons were invented. But at the moment I cannot conceive of a method of verification against the hiding away of warheads. For example, if you think of warheads and not delivery vehicles, you could put most of the American stockpile of nuclear warheads into this one room. And the opportunities for hiding or evasion would be almost unlimited. But we need to continue the effort, as difficult as these discussions are, because we are wasting, as a minimum, billions upon billions of resources which both societies desperately need for a lot of other purposes. You have had some discussion from Dorinda [G.] Dallmeyer of a special problem which has arisen recently. Former Secretary of State Alexander [Meigs] Haig[, Jr.] said not long ago that he regretted that President Reagan had made that speech in March of 1983 launching the Strategic Defense Initiative. I agree with him on that, because by making that speech President Reagan introduced prematurely a hypothetical obstacle to arms control negotiations. I call it premature and hypothetical because it may well be at least ten years before we will know whether such space defense weapons are scientifically and technically possible. But yet they are a political problem now which perhaps would not have been the case had we simply gone ahead quietly with research on these matters, which had been going on for some time before that speech was made. So that's a real difficulty. I support research on these potential space weapons, partly as a hedge against a breakthrough of the state-of-the-art by someone else, partly because I see no way to verify a ban on research, and also because without that research we won't know whether there is anything to quarrel about. We won't know whether this is something in the real world, or simply a fantasy.

But I have a very different view about the prospects of moving the arms race into outer space. These defense weapons would cost hundreds of billions of dollars. And if we succeed in developing such weapons, then we come right up against the central rationale of the existing Antiballistic Missile Treaty. We and the Russians agreed, at the end of the Johnson and the beginnings of the Nixon administrations, that if each side began to deploy defense weapons against missiles, the inevitable result would simply be a multiplication of offensive weapons on both sides in order to saturate or penetrate any such defenses. In my judgment, the same thing will happen with these space weapons. Officers of the Pentagon have already testified before a subcommittee of Congress that if the Soviets were to develop their own SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] that we would have the offensive weapons which could penetrate or evade such defenses. And just a few days ago Mr. [Mikhail] Gorbachev said that if we went ahead with this program, that they would multiply their offensive weapons. So we face the prospect of not only hundreds of billions for the defensive weapons themselves, but hundreds of billions of new generations of offensive missiles which would be immune to such defenses. We're talking about a trillion dollar roundtrip at least. And we need to weigh that over against all the other pressing needs of our society. Now another President and another Congress will have to make a judgment someday about whether we go down that trail, or whether we seek to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union, and possibly others, to prevent the movement of the arms race into outer space. I myself have concluded some remarks on this subject just a few days ago by saying that the movements of the arms race into outer space seems to me to be politically inflammable, militarily futile, economically absurd, and aesthetically repulsive. Other than that, it seems to me to be a good idea. But these are things which you will have to decide, because you will be the prime actors when the basic decisions are being made about what we do in this field. I regret that

this issue promises to lead to postponement of serious further agreements in the limitations of arms because I feel we should get at it, not because I think these increased levels of arms will automatically result in nuclear war--these weapons won't fire themselves, or be fired by somebody--but because in order to support the effort made to continue the arms race, calls will be made upon fear and hate and suspicion on both sides in order to sustain the effort. And we could do without that. I want to get to some of your questions. But let me say that I am a veteran of a good many crises, some of them of desperate seriousness. And based upon that experience I would say to you that you are going to make it. I have no doubt about it. It won't come automatically, because you face the problem of adding another forty years to the forty years which my generation is presenting to you. It will take some thought, some restraint, some sacrifice, some caution. But you can do it. And I have no doubt that it can be done. In any event, what are your choices? Your choice is between advancing into the future with a measure of hope and confidence, working out your own lives in your way, or digging yourself a foxhole and laying in a supply of drugs, and squatting there shivering, hoping for an early death. Which choice is more congenial to a member of the human race? Or in this chapel, more appropriate for children of God? I myself have no doubt about it at all. Now Professor [Loch K.] Johnson will be discussing with you at your next session, I understand, some of the things which you yourselves in your own lives can do about these matters. Let me just mention two or three things that are very much on my mind in this regard.

To begin with, you should be informed and try to separate sense from nonsense. But you should also give particular thought to the men and women that you elect to public office, particularly to the White House and to the Senate and House of Representatives in Washington. It is of greatest importance that the people we send there over the next half-century will be people of intelligence, conscience, and good practical judgment, thoughtful, moderate in their view of world affairs, because their responsibilities could become just too dangerous if we fill those places with the other kind of people. And so I would urge you to give a lot of thought, whatever your own occupation will be, however you make a living--to give a lot of thought to the candidates of your choice and what you might do to help elect better ones rather than worse ones, regardless of the political party to which you belong. Because these matters are bipartisan in character and have very little to do with the difference between political parties. And then to keep in mind the bottom line, which is that whatever we think of the Russians--I don't like them very much--whatever they think of us, somehow, at the end of the day, we and they must find some way to inhabit this speck of dust in the universe at the same time. Everything turns upon always keeping that in mind. And I must confess that I think that fundamental idea came through at the most recent summit between President Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev. Eventually you may be driven back to questions of faith. I myself do not believe that we are on this planet to reach out and grasp the power of the sun itself to burn ourselves off of it. But that article of faith needs to be translated into practical politics. There will be times when we shall have to bite our tongues, restrain our tempers, keep under control our glandular reactions. But perhaps we have no choice, and it may be that civilization itself is largely due to a process of restraining our desires to give voice to all of our passions, or to act upon our own passions in every situation. Let me end, before I take your questions, by saying that I am deeply confident that you will be able to add another forty years. And that by that time the very thought of using these dreadful weapons may have become unthinkable. That is what we all have to work for. Now let's take some of your questions.

QUESTION: What kind of results are coming out of the Summit?

DEAN RUSK: What results are coming out of the Summit? Well, my expectations ahead of time were rather modest. I thought that if they could meet, shake hands, exchange dinner, and talk over some things and get away without damage that that would be a good idea. But they did better than that. I think they seemed to recognize that very deeply involved are certain common interests on both sides; some of those I've already mentioned; and that they established a process of dialogue which I think is very important. We ought to be talking with the Russians at all levels, not just at the top, but at all levels up and down the line, so that we could try to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings about what each other has in mind. Let me give you an example. You may be surprised to hear me say that I myself have never seen any evidence of an intention on the part of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies to launch an all-out invasion of western Europe and attack North America. There are those who talk about such an intention based upon capabilities. And we should understand this distinction in our thinking. A troop commander in the field must give great attention to his enemy's capabilities because the troop command must be able to cope with the worst that the enemy can do. And so he's got to be ready for that, assuming that the enemy will want to do his worst. Deriving possible intentions from capabilities is one thing. Looking for evidence of a serious intention to move in a particular way is rather a different thing. Now there's another aspect of this that bothers me a bit. The Soviet Union similarly has no evidence of an intention on the part of the West to attack eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. They cannot have such evidence because there has never been any such attention. Dean [Gooderham] Acheson once said that the only thing that NATO cannot do is to commit aggression. And yet their leaders continue to feed their own people a barrage of fear of an attack from the West. Since they have no evidence of an intention by the West to attack the East, or wonders what else they have in mind with this constant barrage of propaganda. Is it to explain why they have so many forces among the other countries of eastern Europe? Is it to explain why they are paying so much of their gross national product for military purposes when the civilian population has so many unfilled demands? Is it to help them explain why six percent of their population in the Communist party rules the entire population with a relatively iron hand? I don't know. I don't try to answer that question. But I'm concerned that they continue to feed this line of thinking to their own people.

QUESTION: (unintelligible)

DEAN RUSK: Complete nuclear disarmament. One can't be sure in advance. And we do have this difficulty of verification that I mentioned. But the Soviet Union for many years came into the United Nations proposing resolutions calling for a general and complete disarmament. We at times went along with those resolutions with tongue in cheek because we couldn't quite see how we could possibly arrive at that situation unless the Soviets made some very large changes in their attitudes toward the rest of the world. But there are those who think that we should never propose to the Soviet Union something which we think they would have no chance of accepting. I take a rather different view. We ought to make these proposals to the Soviet Union, not do their negotiating for them in advance, and let them decide what their reaction would be. So if we could find--Again, we have to get back to the problem of verification. But I would be glad to see as low a level of nuclear weaponry as the processes of verification would permit. And if that

goes down to zero, in my judgment so much the better. Now if two or three of you want to slip down front here and put a few more questions, I'll be glad to wait a little bit. But we are coming to your adjournment, and I'll leave it up to Professor Johnson. (applause)

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