

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

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Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk and Thomas J. Schoenbaum

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RICHARD RUSK: The only thing Tom and I didn't do was get together on our list of questions, so I think I'll--

DEAN RUSK: Do you want to turn this off until you're ready to go, or are you ready to go now?

RICHARD RUSK: Why don't you go ahead with your questions. I've got a lot more access--

SCHOENBAUM: I just wanted to start off with a couple of general questions. First of all, you were Secretary of State at the time of the Vietnam War, which people have referred to as a tragedy, or the only war that America ever lost, and this kind of thing. You have expressed no regret but disappointment in some of the events. My question is, was it worth the effort we made and did we accomplish something, and whether in hindsight there was any strategy that we could have used which would have insured a better outcome?

DEAN RUSK: I have commented on part of that to Congressman [Stephen J.] Solarz, there in that letter which you will have a copy of. But, let me say that I have been offered a number of opportunities to come up with a mea culpa on Vietnam and I have not taken advantage of such invitations. There is nothing that I can say now which can reduce in any way my share of responsibility for the events of those years. President Kennedy and President Johnson are not here to speak for themselves, and I will just live with it. Now, I would hope that the events of the next twenty years will be so positive and constructive in the direction of a durable peace in the world that future historians will be tempted to say that, well maybe President Kennedy and President Johnson and those fellows Rusk and [Robert] McNamara overdid it. That what they did was not necessary after all. No one could possibly want the kind of justification that would come from a few miserable, shivering survivors someday looking at each other and saying, "Gee, those fellows were right." So basically I am not looking for justification.

But to understand our thinking on Vietnam, one has to go back quite a way. As I pointed out in my letter, I belong to that generation of young people who were led down the path of the catastrophe of a World War II which could have been prevented. We did our duty, but many of us were teed-off because earlier steps had not been taken to prevent that war. When the Japanese moved into Manchuria, Mussolini moved into Ethiopia, and then Hitler started on his course of aggression. In any event, we came out of that war thinking that collective security was the key to the prevention of World War III. It was written very simply and strongly into Article 1 of the United Nations Charter, reinforced by treaties like the Rio Pact in this hemisphere, and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] across the Atlantic, and certain treaties across the Pacific. Well now, during the Truman administration when we were constructing NATO, there were a number of people who seemed to be interested in a NATO for the Pacific. After all, the United States is a two-ocean power. We are not simply concentrated on the North Atlantic. And there

was a fair amount of interest in the Congress in the ideas which later came to be the Southeast Asia Treaty [SEATO]. So we studied that at the staff level in the Truman administration and rejected the idea, because we thought it would be a mistake for the United States to go into Southeast Asia and form an alliance with some of the countries in Southeast Asia, and not all. And then have the involvement or presence of the United States become a divisive element within Southeast Asia. It would be much more sensible for us to wait until the nations of Southeast Asia as a group developed their own concerns about security, and that we could stand in strong second line support of the region as a whole. Anyhow, we rejected the idea of a Southeast Asia treaty during the Truman administration.

Well then, during the Eisenhower administration things seemed to change. There was the Geneva settlement, with regard to Vietnam. And the Eisenhower administration went forward with the Southeast Asia Treaty. During the Truman years, we had stayed offshore with our treaties in the Pacific: Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. During the Eisenhower years they proceeded to include security treaties with South Korea, with Taiwan, and with these countries in Southeast Asia who joined the Southeast Asia Treaty. Well now, the Southeast Asia Treaty became the law of the land and it inevitably was linked, therefore, to the central issue of collective security. We were concerned about how our conduct under the Southeast Asia Treaty might affect the judgments which other governments might make about how we would respond under NATO or the Rio Treaty in the Western Hemisphere. For example, President [Charles Andre Joseph Mario] de Gaulle opposed us on Southeast Asia. But if we had done nothing under that treaty, my guess is that President de Gaulle would have been the first to shrug his shoulders in Europe and say, "See, you cannot rely upon the Americans."

Bear in mind another thing which was very important to us--two other things. President Kennedy was very much involved with the question as to what would have happened if [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev had not believed Kennedy during the Berlin crisis and during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The fidelity of the United States to its pledged word is not just a piece of face-saving or prestige. It has to do with the ability to maintain some peace in the world. So that consideration was very much on Kennedy's mind. Now, we had tried--the other important thing was our experience under the Laos Accords in 1962. On the day before Kennedy's inauguration, President Eisenhower met with him, and I was present at that meeting. And the only piece of specific foreign policy advice that Eisenhower gave him at that meeting was to put troops into Laos. As Eisenhower put it, "With others if possible, alone if necessary." Eisenhower told Kennedy that he had not decided to do that, because the matter would run well into Kennedy's administration and he thought it would be better for Kennedy to have to make that decision.

So when Kennedy took office, we looked at Laos pretty hard. And Laos at that time was where most of the action was. The North Vietnamese were coming into Laos. There was a Russian airlift supplying those forces. There was relatively minor activity in Vietnam, at that time. So we looked at Laos. The more we looked at it the less inviting was the prospect of putting American forces in there. It was a landlocked country, poor communications, and the Laotian people, if left alone, seemed to have no desire to kill each other. It was only when the North Vietnamese came in there that there was any real fighting. When only Laotians were on the battlefield--a few big explosions, shells, or something like that made a hell of a battle, but there were very few casualties.

SCHOENBAUM: I remember there were three factions--

DEAN RUSK: When only the Laotians were on the battlefield. I remember one report that, at one time two Laotian forces were on the battlefield, left the battlefield, went to a water festival together for ten days, and then went back to the battlefield. So we concluded that the better thing to do was to try to get all non-Laotians out of Laos and let the Laotians manage or mismanage their own affairs. We were confident that that would not result in any kind of blood bath. So we went to the Laos Conference at which Britain and Russia were the co-chairmen, and during that conference we made certain concessions, as contrasted with the Eisenhower administration, in order to get an agreement. For example, we accepted a neutralist as the Prime Minister for Laos. He was not our candidate, during the Eisenhower years, he was the Russian candidate. We accepted a coalition government made up of the right-wingers, the communists, and the neutralists. We accepted an International Control Commission made up of India, Poland, and Canada to supervise the agreement. Now that agreement provided that everybody would get out of Laos. We, the French, the North Vietnamese--everybody. It also provided that Laos would not be used as an infiltration route into South Vietnam. And it provided that the coalition government and the International Control Commission would have authority to carry out their functions throughout the country in Laos. Well, the trouble is, we got no performance on that agreement. The communists would not allow the coalition government to exercise any authority in the communist-held areas of Laos. They would not let the International Control Commission come into communist-held areas of Laos.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, are you reasonably certain that we lived up to our side of the agreement--

DEAN RUSK: In Laos? Of course. We were ready to, and did. We pulled back for a period there even on covert activity in Laos. You see, the idea was that if Laos could be a peaceful, neutral country, like Austria, that Laos would be at least a little island of peace out there, and it would make the other problems much easier to handle. As I say, Hanoi continued to use Laos as an infiltration route into South Vietnam.

SCHOENBAUM: That's interesting, that analogy. And later on we resisted negotiations at a certain point with Vietnam. Was this because of the fact that the Laotian Agreement It's funny that they entered into an agreement with us on Laos and then didn't keep it, but then they--I still don't know whether we wouldn't negotiate, or they wouldn't negotiate, or one or the other--or both. But there was a reluctance on both sides to enter into an agreement with respect to Vietnam.

DEAN RUSK: Well, we were in frequent touch with the North Vietnamese throughout the whole affair, through one channel or another. We were never out of touch with them. But the trouble is, it seemed to us, the North Vietnamese did not want an agreement. They wanted Vietnam, and Laos, and Cambodia. I remember one of the intermediaries between us and Hanoi, a Pole, seemed to think that his problem was to find a face-saving way for us to get out of Vietnam and turn it over to Hanoi. But that wasn't our view of the ballgame. Now President Kennedy was very bitter about the experience in Laos. We went to the two co-chairmen, the

British and the Russians, and pressed them to see to it that the Laos Accords were lived up to. But at that time there was some rivalry in Hanoi between Moscow and Peking for influence in Hanoi. And, it was our judgment that Moscow was unwilling to put the kind of pressures on Hanoi that would simply push Hanoi into the arms of Peking. So we got no help from the Russians in getting performance on the Laos Accords of 1962. They were good accords if we could have gotten performance on them. Well anyhow that experience--now when President Kennedy decided not to put troops into Laos, and to go for the agreement represented by the Laos Accords, he said at that time, "If we have to fight for Southeast Asia, we will have to fight in Vietnam." There the lines of communications were much more favorable, the access to the sea and by air. And the Vietnamese seemed ready to fight for what they presumably believed in. After all, at the time of the division of Vietnam and the Geneva Conferences of the mid-50s, a million people from North Vietnam moved south in order to escape the kind of regime--a lot of them were Catholics. They moved south, and so there were very strong feelings among many in South Vietnam, and they were not as pacifist as the Laotians were.

SCHOENBAUM: Another general question, when Clark [McAdams] Clifford became Secretary for Defense--

DEAN RUSK: You're jumping a long way ahead now, but go ahead.

SCHOENBAUM: Well this is another general question. He said that he was "shocked" to find that we had no plan for winning the war. And then McNamara also has said, now, that by 1966 or '67, had concluded privately that we could not win, but he didn't know really what to do. At some point, was there a paralysis of American policy in that we didn't know how to--really didn't know which way to go, and what to do?

DEAN RUSK: Well, that--I have learned since he was Secretary of Defense that Bob McNamara had some such personal conclusion, but he did not say that to me. And I used to meet with him almost every week in private conversation, just the two of us. He did not say it to me. But also, these things don't lend themselves to computers and operational analysis of that sort.

SCHOENBAUM: He lost faith in his means of evaluating that war, I guess. He--

DEAN RUSK: You see, some of us remembered some other situations. For example, in March 1942, three months after Pearl Harbor, Hitler's armies were smashing at the gates of Leningrad, Moscow, and Stalingrad. [Erwin] Rommel was rushing through North Africa toward Cairo. Our intelligence people told Franklin Roosevelt in those days that Russia would be knocked out of the war in the course of the next six to eight weeks. The Japanese had just destroyed the heart of our fleet at Pearl Harbor, and they were rushing through Asia and no one saw any way to stop them. We could not mobilize our own armed forces except at a snail's pace because we simply didn't have the arms or equipment for them. Now, based on a certain kind of operational analysis, the jig was up! But it wasn't up. Roosevelt, and Churchill, and Stalin, and millions of people built upon faith, and confidence, and necessity and we defeated the Axis Powers.

Or in Korea. At one point there the South Koreans and the American and certain Allied forces were driven into a small perimeter around the Port of Pusan in the south. And it was only

MacArthur's famous Inchon landing that started the situation back again. But then when MacArthur moved his troops into North Korea and approached the Yalu River, the Chinese came in, and his troops got a pretty bloody nose there. And he reached a point where he thought that unless we were willing to open up general war against China, that we ought to get out of the Korean peninsula. Now, we had been through some pretty serious, dismal-looking situations before. And so I, myself, did not believe that we were doomed to failure in achieving our objective of preventing South Vietnam from being overrun by North Vietnam.

Now, I will jump to the very end. Although there are people who would scoff at this, I personally believe that from a purely military point of view, the objective was achieved out there. Up until 1966, I think the North Vietnamese thought that they could get what they wanted by military action. But by 1966, we and the South Vietnamese and the Koreans and others had established a position there which the North Vietnamese could not have overrun regardless of what they tried to do. But about that same time the North Vietnamese began to hear all sorts of things out of our own society back here. Statements by senators. If we had seen fifty thousand people demonstrating around the headquarters in Hanoi demanding peace, we would have thought the war was over and we probably would have been right. They could see fifty thousand people demonstrating around the Pentagon. So, out of our own society there came, for whatever motives and however well intentioned, there came a lot of messages into the ears of the people in Hanoi which in effect said to them, "Now just hang in there fellows, and you will get what you want politically, even though you can't get it militarily." And so the North Vietnamese persisted to an incredible extent. They suffered enormous casualties in that struggle, but they hung in there, and they made the judgment that if they just persisted that they would win it politically. And in that judgment they were right. It is pretty hard to negotiate with people who are quoting your own senators back at you.

RICHARD RUSK: Yes, but there are other factors there other than North Vietnamese reading of our domestic situation. Those fellows had been at it for twenty or thirty years. Our own intelligence, I believe, at least as shown in the Pentagon Papers and in analyses since, has indicated that it was fairly accurate in predicting the intensity of their effort, and their willingness to stick with it, the likely limited effect of our own bombing campaign, some weaknesses of the South Vietnam position and our position. There were other factors. And not only that, but my question is, were you satisfied with the accuracy of the intelligence information you were given, in view of what later happened, and the way you see things now? Looking back, were you surprised by any--

DEAN RUSK: Well, I had been in military intelligence at the beginning of World War II, and I was a customer of that kind of intelligence when I was working for General [Joseph Warren] Stilwell in China as Chief of War Plans and back in the Pentagon in the summer of 1945. So I was familiar with the fact that intelligence is at best an educated guess, particularly on enemy strength and enemy forces, and intelligence cannot surely tell you what the other fellows' intentions are going to be in a given situation. For example, intelligence did not tell us that in the Korean War that there would come a point where the North Koreans and the Chinese would be willing to sit down and bring that war to a conclusion on the basis of the status quo ante. You don't get that sort of thing out of intelligence.

RICHARD RUSK: But you knew in '64 and '65 how tough a road it was going to be.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, yes. We knew that it was not going to be easy. I think I made two mistakes about Vietnam. I think I underestimated the persistence of the North Vietnamese. I thought that there would come a time when they would be unwilling to make the terrible sacrifices, which in fact they made, and would come to the conference table and call the whole thing off, in some sort of fashion. I think also, the other mistake was that I overestimated the patience of the American people. The American people are very impatient about war. I am glad they are. But, they are not prepared for a long, drawn-out struggle over a period of time with the casualty list continuing to come in and things of that sort. And I think I overestimated the patience of the American people. By the way, that element of patience is illustrated by a little story that George Marshall told me. He and I--when he was Secretary of State--we were on a trip somewhere and we had an opportunity for sort of a bull session. And during that I asked him about the argument between the American and the British sides about whether to go into Europe through Normandy or through what Churchill called the "soft underbelly of Europe." And I asked him what was really in the minds of the American side in that argument. He said it was very simple. He said we knew that we had to get the war over with before the very institutions of our society melted out from under us and we could no longer sustain a war effort. He said the professions were drying up, education was drying up, our industry was having great problems being committed wholly to the war effort, that sort of thing. And we felt that going in through Normandy was the quickest way to end the war and we could not prolong the war for postwar political purposes, as Churchill wanted to do, by going in through the Balkans, through there.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that in the records?

DEAN RUSK: I don't know. I doubt it. But, in any event--I don't think in retrospect that Hanoi ever had a motivation for a serious negotiation as we thought of negotiation. Up until 1966, I think they thought they could get what they wanted by military means. After that, I think they began to hear this encouragement from within the United States that if they just persisted they would win it politically.

SCHOENBAUM: They were right.

DEAN RUSK: Now we made some decisions about Vietnam that had a bearing on this, particularly the attitude of the homefront. We deliberately decided not to create a war atmosphere in the United States. We did not have military troops parading through cities. We did not have pretty movie stars selling war bonds in factories and things like that--all the things we did in World War II. We did that because in a nuclear world, it was just too dangerous for an entire people to become too angry, too whipped up. Now, that was difficult because we were trying to do, in effect, in cold blood in the United States what we were asking our fellows to do in hot blood on the battlefield, and that's tough on those who are carrying the battle. But it is also tough on those on the homefront. Now we deliberately made that decision. That is one of the questions which should be looked into for the future.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, Nixon moved away from that policy of gradualism, in a sense. Although he committed us to a policy of withdrawal of American ground forces, he went into

Laos and Cambodia, he used--he was a little more dramatic in his use of American air power, his own rhetoric in response to American anti-war effort here in this country pretty effectively negated that movement at several points. In light of his experience, does that experience suggest that perhaps gradualism is not the way to fight that war?

DEAN RUSK: One of these questions I raised in that letter to Congressman Solarz was this matter of a gradual response in a situation of this sort. Perhaps by--you see, this word escalation was reserved only for the American side. In general the reporters and the media did not talk about escalation by North Vietnam. In fact, our response--the buildup of our own effort out there was in direct response to, in effect, escalation by the North Vietnamese. It may be that this gradual response always left it open to the people in Hanoi that "Well, if we just do more maybe they won't." I posed in that letter the question that when President Kennedy first made the decision to put American troops into Vietnam, perhaps he should have put 100,000 there right straight--right smack on the barrel head, right to start with, to make it as clear as possible, as early as possible, that we would take this very seriously. And at that time maybe cause some second thoughts in Hanoi. Now if you do that--if, God forbid, we ever have that kind of situation again, and you think that because of our experience in Vietnam we have to start with a major level of force, it may well be that that lowers the nuclear threshold, that brings closer the time when a nuclear decision might have to be made by one side or the other. And so it is a pretty dangerous thing. In this post-war period.

RICHARD RUSK: It seems likely that if we were on the verge of succeeding with our war effort out there that China or the Soviet Union [would have intervened with their own forces??].

DEAN RUSK: Well, I am not sure about that unless we had tried to occupy all of North Vietnam. But a settlement on the basis of the status quo ante along the parallel, I think, would not have brought in the Chinese or the Russians.

RICHARD RUSK: Are you suggesting, in the light of everything that has happened, that there was potentially a way to win that war?

DEAN RUSK: Well, two preliminary comments on that. Vietnam was the first war ever fought on television in everybody's living room every day. That is--I mean war is the principal obscenity on the face of the human race. And if it is in everybody's living room every day, that produces pressures on people's morale, because war is hideous and ugly and terrible. Now, I raised with this congressional committee the point that if the Congress should ever have to deal with this kind of thing again, that I think that they would have to deal with issues of censorship at the very beginning. Because, you see, if in World War II, we had television cameras bringing to us every day Guadalcanal, the Anzio Beachhead, the Battle of the Bulge, things like that and the other side was not doing that--that could have had a major impact upon the result of that war, the outcome of that war. So that question of censorship, I think, is quite an important one. I don't know what the answer is. It is a difficult thing to do. You had all sorts of stories manufactured out there in Vietnam. A TV cameraman would go into a long-abandoned village which marines would use as a training base--

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BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

RICHARD RUSK: When did you change from Chesterfields to Larks?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, many years ago. Well, this cameraman handed a cigarette lighter to one of the marines there, in this marine training base and asked him to light the thatched roof of one of these huts. And the marine did that on the camera and then that went all over the country as an example of the marines burning down a native village. I remember one picture that went all around the country here, taken out of the door of a helicopter, of a poor old Vietnamese woman pleading with her hands forward in a attitude of prayer to get onto the helicopter. Well, that picture went all over the country with a slogan on it saying that "U.S. forces refuse to evacuate an old woman." Well, I had that--I looked into that one, had it looked into myself, and I discovered if that cameraman had turned his camera just ninety degrees, without moving another muscle, he would have had a picture of a helicopter filled with old women. And the caption didn't point out that if that photographer had gotten his fat ass off of that helicopter that poor old woman could have gotten on it. I mean, you just had so many of these phony things being perpetrated. By the way, Peter Braestrup's book on the reporting of the Tet Offensive is very enlightening on this. He is very critical of the way that was handled by the reporters out there. But anyhow.

SCHOENBAUM: Can we turn to a particular--

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, you go by your questions.

SCHOENBAUM: Okay. I just wanted to get in some questions, turning to some particular incidents now. Getting down to--can we talk about the coup in 1963--the coup and the assassination of [Ngo Dinh] Diem and [Ngo Dinh] Nhu? As I understand it, there were some interesting meetings there that still I don't think have been fully explained, and people have given their views on them. I know that, of course, the background of it was apparently that--well I remember that, the trouble with the Buddhist and Diem regime's crackdown, and the burnings and suicides of the Buddhist monks. And then [Henry] Cabot Lodge was about that time picked as ambassador. And did you personally pick him as our ambassador and recommend that he be appointed by the President? There was some hint in some of the accounts that you were the main--

DEAN RUSK: Cabot Lodge, during the Kennedy administration, came to visit me once. And although he had been standard bearer for his party as Vice President and things like that, he said, "I think I have one more piece of public service ahead of me and I just want you to know that I would be available. But I don't want anything routine. If I do something, I want it to be something real and important." So, I remembered that conversation with Cabot Lodge, and when the post out there became open I spoke to--who was it, Kennedy or Johnson at that time?



SCHOENBAUM: Kennedy.

DEAN RUSK: Kennedy. And he thought it was a great idea. So, we sent Cabot Lodge out there. It was a gallant thing for Cabot Lodge to do because he had a heart problem. But he went out there and gave it all he had. Now, we did develop growing misgivings about whether or not Diem could make a go of it, primarily because of the policies and activities of his brother Nhu and brother Nhu's wife, Madame [Tran le-Xuan] Nhu. So we were very concerned when Diem, under the influence of his brother, adopted policies toward the Buddhists, toward the universities, the students, and even toward some of the military that just pointed in the direction of the country's coming to pieces right under our eyes. Well now, in August 1963, President Kennedy, Bob McNamara, and I all three were out of town, on different things, and they prepared a cable in Washington to Lodge about the possible overthrow of Diem.

SCHOENBAUM: That was [Roger] Hilsman, wasn't it?

DEAN RUSK: [William Averell] Harriman, Hilsman, one or two others. By the way, I am just about to finish now a transcript of a congressional history of Vietnam that has a good deal of these details in it. Well, that cable was cleared with the three of us by telephone. But it was-- these were open telephones, and when I was called, I was given only in the vaguest terms any idea of what was in the cable. I was told in the call to me that President Kennedy had already approved it.

SCHOENBAUM: Who talked to you?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I'd have to--I don't know whether I can check back on that. Maybe it was-- I don't know whether it was George Ball or who it was. Maybe George Ball. But, I learned later that President Kennedy had said "Well, I will approve it if Rusk and McNamara approve it." Well, when they called me they told me that Kennedy had already approved it. Well, so what was I going to do, object if the President had already approved it? So I didn't remonstrate. Well then when the three of us got back to town and saw the actual cable, the three of us felt that it had gone further than we would want to go in the direction of an overthrow of Diem. So we pulled back on that in various ways. But the important thing that we did during the summer and early fall of '63 was to express publicly our disapproval of a number of Diem's policies by reductions in our aid program. And that was a sign to everybody out there that we were getting very restive about Diem's policies. The South Vietnamese military played around with the idea of a coup over a period of several months. They had plans laid on that they abandoned, and they did this and they did that. Now I do not know exactly what individual Americans down the line might have said to individual South Vietnamese generals, but I myself am convinced that the makings of the overthrow of Diem came out of South Vietnam itself--his attitudes toward the Buddhists, and, as I said, the students, and his handling of the military, and things like that.

You see at that time we did not have a presence in South Vietnam that could have any kind of decisive influence on that point. We only had a few thousands of people there. We could not have supported Diem if the others decided that they wanted to overthrow him. We could not have overthrown him if the rest of them had decided that they wanted to support him. So, the critical decision was not ours to make. Now we had told Lodge that if there were such a coup, we

wanted to be sure that Diem was personally safe. And Cabot Lodge, I think, called President Diem at the early stages of the coup to offer him assistance in having a safe exit from the country. But Diem apparently decided to go up into another part of the country where he thought he might get some troops that would support him. And on the way he was seized by the South Vietnamese military, and, contrary to our own hope and expectations in the matter, he was executed by the military.

SCHOENBAUM: There was a story that Kennedy was very upset about that.

DEAN RUSK: He was very upset when he learned that Diem had been killed.

SCHOENBAUM: How did he react?

DEAN RUSK: You see we had gone to President Diem more than once urging him to do something about brother Nhu and Madame Nhu. At one point we urged him to send his brother Nhu to Washington as the South Vietnamese ambassador, do anything to get him out of the country. But he wouldn't have it.

RICHARD RUSK: Was the threat of American--withdrawal of our advisers over there part of the tactics which Kennedy may have used to influence Diem to bring--govern in a better way or to create more reforms in the Diem administration?

DEAN RUSK: I think the public threat, the public cutback on aid--

RICHARD RUSK: Financial?

DEAN RUSK: Financial, military, other kinds of aid--But, you see, we were still concerned about Hanoi overrunning South Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia. We didn't want that very large policy, and what we thought necessary, to be determined by the accidents of personality in South Vietnam. But, it was very difficult to get cohesion in the South Vietnamese government.

RICHARD RUSK: Were Kennedy's threats to reduce aid--was that primarily tactics which he was trying to use to pressure Diem, or was that an indication that he himself was having second thoughts about the American commitment to Vietnam?

DEAN RUSK: No, that was pressure on Diem, trying to get Diem to turn his policies toward the Buddhists, particularly the Buddhists, turn those around.

RICHARD RUSK: It has been portrayed by some that that period in our Vietnam experience was a period of great debate within the Kennedy administration. That by late 1963 the whole commitment was being questioned at that time.

SCHOENBAUM: There were apparently, right after the cable--the so-called Hilsman cable was sent--there were apparently four or five days of very acrimonious debate in which you participated. The accounts say that you didn't participate actively in the debates.

DEAN RUSK: Well I didn't--

RICHARD RUSK: That was Hilsman--

DEAN RUSK: I thought that as--I thought that my--my general approach to my office was that there should be no blue sky showing between a president and his secretary of state. I did not get involved personally in a lot of the staff debates that were going on. I wanted to wait until those debates were exhausted, and then I personally would discuss the matter with President Kennedy and give him my own personal advice. Then he would make the decision. In his book, *A Thousand Days*, Arthur [Meier] Schlesinger used to say that I would sit at those meetings of the Cabinet and the National Security Council like an old Buddha, without saying anything. Well that was true when there were thirty people around the wall listening in, including Arthur Schlesinger. Because I knew that these things would be read in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* the next day. So, very often at those meetings I would pass the President a little note saying, "Don't make your decision at this moment, let me talk to you in the office about it afterwards." Or I would see the President beforehand and talk over the issues with him. So that--and there were times when the Department of State did not know of the content of my discussions with the President, because my view was that when the President made his decision, it was the duty of the Department of State to try to give it maximum effect.

SCHOENBAUM: Were there--did you have meetings with President Kennedy at that time when people--people were apparently discussing the latitude that Cabot Lodge had given with regard to a possible change in government in South Vietnam?

DEAN RUSK: There was a lot of blowing around during that period. There were some of the people who were very keen about getting rid of Diem, but some of the rest of us were not as sure as they were that this was the right course. Because after all, coups come a dime a dozen all over the world. During my eight years in office there were eighty-two coups d'etat somewhere in the world, quite apart from legitimate changes of government--constitutional changes of government. And generally speaking, a coup does not change the problem very much, and you don't know that the fellow who succeeds is going to be any better than the fellow who was overthrown.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you tell President Kennedy that?

DEAN RUSK: Oh I think--I'm sure I did. I am sure I did. In any event, I think Diem, brother Nhu, and Madame Nhu, in effect, dug their own grave out there in that situation.

RICHARD RUSK: McGeorge Bundy made the comment about that Saturday letter to Lodge--the lesson he drew from that experience was never to do business on a Saturday. What lesson did you draw from that experience, in the wake of--

DEAN RUSK: I think this telegram illustrates the point that in diplomacy and in policy, precision is of the utmost importance, and that an important telegram of that sort should not go out until the principals--the President, the Secretaries of State and Defense--had actually seen the telegram. That is one important lesson drawn from it.

SCHOENBAUM: And after the fact there was nothing you could do when you did see the telegram?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we drew Henry Cabot Lodge back from that telegram, later, and made it clear to him that we were not to be the prime movers in any coup d'etat out there. Now, who knows in terms of what might have happened--what might have been is very hard always to guess about. But I think Diem's days were numbered, however the end of his days came about.

SCHOENBAUM: In fact, didn't--some of the accounts say Kennedy delegated--they use the word "delegated"--Cabot Lodge pretty much of a free hand as to how to manage the generals and what they did, as far as a coup or not.

DEAN RUSK: Well, in a situation like that there is no way that Washington can call all the shots on all the questions that come up. You have to delegate a lot to your ambassador and to the American commander out there, because you can't deal with that kind of situation in detail from Washington. So, there was a considerable delegation.

SCHOENBAUM: In retrospect was that like the Bay of Pigs in the sense that we didn't take the bull by the horns and yet we didn't--but we kind of let things happen and weren't strong, and saying "Well, look, we want to wait until the next election" or something, and yet we didn't manage the coup. If we had wanted the coup we could have managed it--

DEAN RUSK: I am not sure we could have managed it because, again, we didn't have the muscle out there. We didn't have the presence. When people take their own lives into their hands in a coup d'etat situation, the United States is a hell of a long way away. And they have got to make their judgments based upon the situation in which they find themselves. So there were limits on what we could have done if we had just said, "We're going to do this," or "We're going to do that," because we had no convincing ability to carry it out. See if three or four of those top generals had remained loyal to Diem, they could have driven the American forces out onto the beachhead. But anyhow.

By the way--talking about these reporters--there was one instance out there when one of the Buddhists had burned himself. The TV cameraman got there late, and he called out, "Throw on some more gasoline, I didn't get my picture." (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, Jesus. Where did you hear about that? Oh, come on!

DEAN RUSK: No, no, no, no.

SCHOENBAUM: Madame Nhu said "barbecue," didn't she?

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, man. Atrocities on both sides.

DEAN RUSK: Diem--don't put this in your writing, but--

RICHARD RUSK: You probably shouldn't be telling this.

DEAN RUSK: --amusing little story. Madame Nhu was kind of the first lady of Vietnam when Diem was there. His sister-in-law. At one point he tried to remonstrate a little bit with her and said, "Now if you don't behave yourself, I'm going to get married." (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right?

DEAN RUSK: But that's--

SCHOENBAUM: Was Kennedy--were you present at any meetings where Kennedy discussed the aftermath of the coup? Was he--how did he--did he emotionally react, or--

DEAN RUSK: Didn't get much--he was very much upset about Diem's death, but there was not too much time between that and his own death to get into it in any--Lyndon Johnson, I think, thought that the overthrow of Diem was a mistake.

RICHARD RUSK: He opposed (unintelligible)--

DEAN RUSK: By the way, there's one little point I might just put on the tape, if you still have some tape here--[P. Kenneth] Kenny O'Donnell, who was Kennedy's appointment secretary, and [Michael Joseph] Mike Mansfield have both said since then that Kennedy had told them, in '63, that he was going to take our troops out of Vietnam in 1965, following our elections of 1964. Well now, I don't know what Kennedy might have said. He liked to bat the breeze and toss ideas around, and what he might have said to Kenny O'Donnell playing touch football at Hyannisport, or that sort of thing--But, I, myself, am convinced that President Kennedy, wearing his hat as President, did not decide in '63 to take the troops out in '65, for two reasons--one unimportant reason and one very important reason. The unimportant reason is that I talked to him about Vietnam hundreds of times and on no occasion did he ever mention such a thing to his own Secretary of State. That's the un-important reason. The important reason is that had he decided in '63 to take the troops out in '65 following our election in '64, that in effect would have been keeping Americans in uniform in a combat situation for domestic political purposes. No president could live with that. No president could live with that. He couldn't look his own senior colleagues in the eye. The verdict of history would have been terrible. And Jack Kennedy was not the kind of--if he had said to Bob McNamara or me just that, that "I am going to take them out in '65 after the election,"--we would have had to say to him, "Now, Mr. President, if that is your decision you have got to take them out now. You can't leave them in there until after the election." So, I just don't believe that Kennedy had made any such decision. Now, he might have talked about it. He loved to toss ideas around.

SCHOENBAUM: Some of the accounts say that Robert [Francis] Kennedy, during this period just before the coup, after the telegram, advocated some kind of withdrawal, and that some other group of people--

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember that. He was much more gung ho about counter-insurgency operations and things of that sort. As a matter of fact, he volunteered to Lyndon Johnson to go to

Saigon as our ambassador. And I vetoed it. Ironically, on the grounds that this country could not take another Kennedy tragedy, and that Saigon was a too dangerous assignment for Bobby Kennedy. And look what happened later to Bobby.

RICHARD RUSK: Are you sure in your own memory that Kennedy's offers or threats to reduce the scope of our aid over there, including military advisers, was not also a part of his reconsideration of our Vietnam policy as a whole? Not simply an opportune course (unintelligible)--

DEAN RUSK: When you are in a spot like that you are always thinking of the alternatives, including the alternative of getting out. You box the entire compass of possibilities. To say that--you see, this word "consider" is a tricky word. In some contexts it simply means to think about it. Sure, in boxing the compass of possibilities you always think about that sort of thing. But the use of the word "consider" meaning thinking about it with favorable inclination toward it and an intention to do something about it, is a very different thing. This was a critical element, by the way, in the mean debate about whether the State Department was considering the recognition of the People's Republic of China during the Truman administration. Well, of course, we thought about it. We would have been village idiots had we not thought about it. But in terms of moving to recognize the People's Republic of China, we didn't come to any such conclusion.

SCHOENBAUM: On this matter of the Secretary of State not showing any--there not being any blue sky, as you put it, between the Secretary of State and the President, and advice tendered rather privately being the best kind of advice. That's an interesting thing. First of all, were there any times when you had some conversations and could not convince either President Johnson or President Kennedy and went away kind of shaking your head, saying--I know that you would not allow any public blue sky to be showing, but in your own mind, did you walk away saying, that's not your--

DEAN RUSK: I had deep misgivings about the operation of the Bay of Pigs.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, yeah.

DEAN RUSK: Did you see that little memorandum I did for Ken Thompson?

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, I did see that. But in connection with Vietnam, with the bombing for instance--

DEAN RUSK: Well, no two men would do everything the same way in detail. There were a number of points in which I might have done differently. For example, I was skeptical about the impact of the bombing in the far north on the actual battle in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese in South Vietnam only required one to two hundred tons a day of supplies to keep themselves going. They lived off the countryside, and so forth. And getting one or two hundred tons a day down the trail through those jungle forests, and at night, and bad weather, and things like that, was no big shakes. So I was very skeptical about whether the bombing in the north was worth the cost in men and planes that we invested in it. But this goes to another little point about Vietnam. We never had unity of command with regard to Vietnam, although the military always

talks about unity of command. Not even on the American side, let alone the allies and the South Vietnamese forces. The fighting in South Vietnam was under the command of [William Childs] Westmoreland, but the bombing of the north was under the command of CINCPAC, Commander-in-Chief Pacific in Hawaii, and the B-52s remained under the operational control of the joint chiefs of staff in Washington. So the tendency in that situation was for the fellows as CINCPAC in Hawaii to think that they could win the war all by themselves with their part of the mission, that is, the bombing of the north. And that was not clearly coordinated with Westmoreland's needs in South Vietnam. I personally thought that we should have bombed very heavily all along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in the supply and support areas north of the parallel. But bombing a few so-called military targets up around Hanoi and Haiphong had very little impact upon the war.

But this goes back to another very important point. Since World War II, we, and at times some of our friends, have had to use force in certain key situations. But we tried to use it only to the level required to accomplish the immediate mission. We did not want these situations to slide down the slippery slope into the catastrophe of a World War III. When the Soviet forces tried to stay in Azerbaijan and Iran at the end of World War II, we didn't think about using force there. We took it into the Security Council, and we pressed, and we complained, and we demanded, and so forth, and we finally wiggled them out of Azerbaijan. When the guerrillas went after Greece, using bases in Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, we did not open up hostilities against those three countries. We gave as much help as we could to the Greeks, and the Greeks were able to work it out themselves in Greece, with an assist Yugoslavia's defection from the Warsaw Pact bloc. At the time of the blockade of Berlin, we used an airlift to keep the people of West Berlin alive for several months while we worked on a diplomatic solution to the thing, and we finally achieved a diplomatic solution to the Blockade of Berlin. When MacArthur was demanding general war against China, Truman's own military advisers told him that the only targets in China which could affect the situation in Korea would be the mass destruction of Chinese cities with nuclear weapons, and Truman was not prepared to go down that trail. Now, the limited use of force is difficult, difficult on the men in uniform who are doing the job--it's difficult on the home front. But nevertheless, it is very important not to let these situations build up and build up and build up, as happened just before World War I, into a total catastrophe. And so, this limited use of force does need examination because it is not easy. But yet the alternative--

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, talk more about this blue sky business--although there never was at the time of these administrations any blue sky between you and Kennedy or LBJ with respect to Vietnam--

DEAN RUSK: Well, I had some differences with them, but I tried to show public solidarity.

RICHARD RUSK: Great, now, you did mention that your attitude toward bombing up north was a little different from (unintelligible) policy. Were there other areas in which you pushed for some particular point of policy and it was not in fact accepted?

DEAN RUSK: President Johnson used to say that McNamara was his right arm, to deal with the problem on the scene out there, from a military point of view. That I was his left arm, and I was concentrated on trying to find some peaceful settlement to it. Well now, we had, on my

recommendation, a number of so-called bombing halts in an effort to facilitate negotiation. But we had been through several of those, and President Johnson became very skeptical about these bombing halts--very resistant to them--because the only thing he could see that happened during a bombing halt was that the other side would simply step up their infiltration of men and supplies down the trail. So there were times when I would recommend a bombing halt to him, which he did not like. But then in the first half of '68 when it became apparent that the people at the grass roots in this country had decided that if we couldn't tell them when the war was going to end, that we might as well chuck it, he was prepared to take more steps in the direction of engaging the North Vietnamese in some negotiations.

RICHARD RUSK: What about LBJ's policy of being less than fully candid with the American--

END OF SIDE 2

