

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk CCCC: Part 3 of 3
William Tapley Bennett interviewed by Rich Rusk and Thomas Schoenbaum
1985 June

The complete interview also includes Rusk AAAA: Part 1; Rusk BBBB: Part 2.

BENNETT: We had that very close relationship, the three principal Americans on the island. I was the Ambassador in residence, [Ellsworth] Bunker was the Ambassador from the OAS [Organization of American States] and in charge of stitching together a provisional government, and General [Bruce] Palmer was commander of the troops. We had either lunch or dinner together every single day. Palmer stayed with me the first few days and then got his own quarters. I offered Bunker a stay in the residence, but he thought that as an international figure he should stay over at the hotel, which was the correct decision. But I had the best cook, and every day we'd have at least one meal together. I remember that very clearly because my cook could make eggs Florentine: you know, the spinach base under the eggs. Ellsworth liked that, so we had that every day, it seemed to me, months on months. The result of this close cooperation was that we were all kept immediately informed of anything that was an incipient problem and we never had any big problems among us. We had a wonderful relationship, and all three of us got together for dinner just last winter--well, a year ago, a few months before Ellsworth's death. I still see Palmer. Bunker was a wonderful man, and he had just the kind of cool to handle that kind of situation.

RICHARD RUSK: How about Thomas [C.] Mann? Was he a good person for that particular slot? That particular time?

BENNETT: Well, Tom had already moved upstairs to being Under Secretary, so he was--

RICHARD RUSK: For Latin American affairs?

BENNETT: Yes, he was out of the day-to-day operation by that time. [Jack Hood] Vaughn was Assistant Secretary for Latin America. And he had come, if I remember, from the Peace Corps, by way of being--from there to Ambassador to Panama and then back to the Assistant Secretaryship. He was the liberal man on the scene. And Tom, as your father said, tended to be a hard-line realist on Latin America, although he knew the Latins extremely well having grown up in a Tex-Mex community. Later he was a notably successful Ambassador to Mexico, one of our most sensitive diplomatic posts. He understood the Latins, and the Latins understood and liked and respected him.

SCHOENBAUM: Now, how did Bunker go about his job? Who was in charge of the country when he arrived and how did he go about--

BENNETT: Well, this military junta under [Pedro Bartolome] Benoit, and then that moved around and [Francisco Rivero] Jimenez of the Navy played a big role. After we sorted out the first problems of relief and the evacuations, the three ambassadors began interviewing all the different

sectors of Dominican opinion. They used the penthouse at the Ambassador Hotel which had a big sitting room, and they had a stream of people going in there. I don't recollect exactly, but it seems to me they traveled to other towns and talked to people there as well. I believe that's accurate.

SCHOENBAUM: And it took him a better part of a year to put things together?

BENNETT: No, no, no. They came down in June, at the very beginning, then went back to Washington, and then came back, I'd say in July, and started working in earnest on a provisional government which was sworn in the first week of September. Once you had the provisional government, we reverted to more or less normal operations. I presented credentials again, and you had a bilateral embassy in its proper relationship. They had a foreign minister and all that. Bunker then would come back and forth from time to time. The man chosen as Provisional President, [Hector] Garcia-Godoy, who has since died, was a splendid individual, a man without any personal flaws. He had been a friend of mine when I was in the Embassy twenty years before. We were all young together; used to go to dances that sort of thing. So, it was a very easy relationship.

RICHARD RUSK: He'd also been Foreign Minister for Juan Bosch. So, he was very sympathetic, and in close touch with Bosch.

BENNETT: That's right. I'm glad you recalled that. Yes, he was very sympathetic.

RICHARD RUSK: So in a way, LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson] did go back to Bosch, at least with the negotiations, a year or so after this thing blew up.

BENNETT: But Garcia-Godoy was never considered a Bosch man. I mean, he was not of that party. He had served as Foreign Minister, that's true, and he had also been, I believe, Ambassador to London. He was essentially non-partisan.

RICHARD RUSK: He was just his own man.

BENNETT: He was an eminent citizen who was non-political basically. He came from a prominent family; I guess he'd had presidents in his family background, and all that. As Provisional President he was under terrible pressure because he knew what the military could do to him. He was always calling on Bunker or me, mainly Bunker as the OAS representative, for help in standing up to the military. I remember some pretty ominous nights there when it looked as though they were about to throw him out. That would have been a defeat for all of us to have the provisional government thrown out. Yes, I remember one night we were at Garcia-Godoy's house. He lived in a simple villa, he wasn't in the Presidential Palace or anything like that. He had the Dominican military in one room, Bunker and I were in another room, and Hector, the Provisional President, was sort of in the middle. The military had given him some kind of an ultimatum, and he knew it was the wrong thing to do. And yet he was afraid that if he didn't make some concessions, then they'd just shove him out of office. And Bunker and I in the other room were saying, "Stand up to them. Go back and tell them you won't do this." Somehow we got through that night. Well, that was just one of the continual crises there and the uncertain moments you had in that situation. The point I wanted to make is that we were often charged, and Mr. [James William] Fulbright charged the Administration at the time, "Well, these people are all in your pocket. Why don't you

make them behave?" Well, it's simply not that simple, and Ellsworth Bunker and I often reflected together on that fact that we could put in twenty-six hours every day, and we could threaten and we could cajole and could plead and we could argue, and we could lay out a line of what seemed to us the right thing to do, but the final decision was made by those people. Those Dominican military minds had signals going back and forth in those brains, and you couldn't get in there. So, they make the final decision.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. My dad makes that point. He makes it consistently.

BENNETT: No matter how much influence we are supposed to have, we don't have the final decision.

RICHARD RUSK: You know, this whole thing, this negotiation process which Ellsworth Bunker was involved with and the OAS approach sounds like the type of thing my dad would have been real big on. I wonder if the fine hand of Dean Rusk was somehow involved, at least at the Washington end.

BENNETT: I'm sure it was, because Ellsworth came back and forth quite a lot and he always saw the Secretary and the President. He had great prestige in Washington. And he dealt at the top level. He was a splendid man, he was absolutely ramrod straight. He was a Vermonter, as you know. He wore a blue-white seersucker. He was always ramrod straight and cool, no matter how hot the day was. He had a very correct, formal bearing, and people just respected that. He established his presence, and the press--he wouldn't tell the press anything that he didn't want to tell them, and yet they never rode him for that. He'd just come out of a meeting, "No, I don't have anything for you today," and stride on to his car. And they took it because he just had that manner.

RICHARD RUSK: Juan Bosch refusing to come back at the time when it would have made a lot of sense for him to return: the critics--well, again, I'm taking a lot of this stuff from Theodore Draper's article in *Commentary*, December 1965, called "The Dominican Crisis."

BENNETT: Yeah, I remember that.

RICHARD RUSK: Case study of American policy. Makes the point that Bosch did want to come back right at the beginning of this blowout. Matter of fact, he made the calls initiating contact in requesting transportation back. Our government more or less froze him out at that point and later on tried to encourage him to come back. But at that point, Juan Bosch saw himself as being more of a figurehead in the process, and that he was not really legitimately under consideration as a major player. Is there any truth to that part of Draper's story?

BENNETT: Personally, I think that's a typical example of Bosch's self-pity and technique of weaving a spider web of intrigue directed against himself. Whereas the fact was he was a physical coward, and that was widely known. I'm not just casting aspersions; he was afraid to come back there. That was widely commented at the time.

RICHARD RUSK: You knew him personally well enough to know that?

BENNETT: I didn't know him personally. He had already gone out of office by the time I arrived there. No, I didn't know him personally. But everybody who knew him--

SCHOENBAUM: Never heard that.

BENNETT: You haven't? I would have thought that was rather widespread. I'm not clear how much of that is in [John Bartlow] Martin's book, the idea of cowardice. But certainly many Dominicans considered him a physical coward: that he was willing for other people to get shot at, but not willing to risk his own skin. But that's an example, I think, of the line peddled by Jaime Benitez, in favor of Bosch, to people who wanted to believe that sort of thing, who are always ready to believe their own government is--pushing people around.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll conclude with a question that critics pose in this situation, and that is the outcome of our intervention was good for American interests and probably for Dominican interests. Yet we did violate some principles along the way. The OAS charter for one, which states that a country cannot intervene in the internal affairs of another country. Now you've had twenty years to look back on it, how does it all wash out for you? Do you think of it now as you did at the time, that this was a legitimate action on our part? And you still see it that way, as what is worth the violation of that individual principle?

BENNETT: Yes, I think I would say that. I mean, in looking back, obviously there are some things we could have done better. There were some things we shouldn't have done, possibly. But I'm thinking of day-to-day details more than I am of the general thrust of the policy, which I think was right and which I think has paid off. It was a policy of necessity rather than of conviction that American intervention is good for everybody. Nobody said that and nobody felt that, and the charges that we were just thirsting to intervene and waiting for the chance, that's all balderdash.

RICHARD RUSK: The real issue was the chance of a second [Fidel Ruz] Castro, second Cuba --

BENNETT: Well, the first issue was the safety of our own citizens. When we'd been told by the local authorities they couldn't guarantee them, when you had instances such as that shooting at the hotel, people calling from downtown saying, "Please come get me, I'm in mortal danger," the fact that citizens of forty countries chose voluntarily to be evacuated.

RICHARD RUSK: What was the total number of citizens that came out?

BENNETT: Something around forty-two hundred, I believe; between four thousand and forty-two hundred, which is an enormous number in a country that size. I remember a few months later there had been some trouble out in Bangladesh. I think seven hundred and sixty or nine hundred and sixty people were evacuated by the U. S. Navy. That was front page in the *New York Times*, and so forth. Here were forty-five hundred people on a small island right next door. It's funny how Latin America is given a different treatment from other areas of the world, sometimes too exaggerated, sometimes too played down. I remember former Senator [Paul] Douglas saying that the American always tended to jump over Latin America in their view of the world, they looked at other places, that we took Latin America and the Caribbean area for granted. Then when something happened there, there was all hell to pay. And I found that to be true.

RICHARD RUSK: By golly, this has been a good interview.

END OF SIDE 1

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