

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection  
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Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk  
1986 February

RICHARD RUSK: Well, coming down the final stretch, Pop. Okay. We're interviewing [David] Dean Rusk about the Pueblo incident of 1968. This is Rich [Richard Geary Rusk] doing the interviewing, February 1986. Pop, you want to start with your own overview of what that event was all about?

DEAN RUSK: The U.S.S. Pueblo was an intelligence gathering ship; a small number of which we had in operation to patrol distant waters to pick up and analyze radio traffic in particular areas or to observe coastal shipping activities in particular areas. We were interested in North Korea because we have always been concerned about whether or not the North Koreans were gearing up for a fresh attack on South Korea. Our relations with North Korea had been very bad indeed since the end of World War II. I myself had not participated personally in the assignment of the Pueblo to waters off North Korea because these were fairly routine intelligence assignments, and those were handled by people junior to me. Pueblo was a relatively small ship, a few hundred tons. It was not armed with a capacity to defend itself if it were seriously attacked. It was limited to international waters and relied upon international waters for its own protection. The first word I got about the Pueblo came at the time when the Pueblo was already being pushed into Wonsan Harbor in North Korea. When these North Korean motor torpedo boats, whatever they were, came up and challenged the Pueblo and instructed it as to which way to go, Commander [Lloyd M.] Bucher, the Captain of the ship, made the decision not to fight his ship. Apparently he had a handful of fifty-caliber machine guns on deck, but they were in protective casings, and as I understand it, were heavily covered with grease, not even in firing condition. So he made the decision not to fight his ship, but to, in effect, surrender his vessel to the North Koreans. Later, some of the Navy types faulted his decision on that point. But in retrospect, I think he probably made the right decision. There had not been time to do a thorough job of destroying a good deal of very sophisticated and sensitive intelligence-gathering equipment on board, and that was an unfortunate part of it. In any event, when we knew that the Pueblo had been seized, we began boxing the compass of possible lines of action. We gave some thought to a retaliatory strike against North Korea, but that was not very promising. It would have taken us at least three or four weeks to mobilize in the area of Korea the kind of air power that could deliver such strikes without heavy losses because of four or five hundred Russian big aircraft that were known to be in North Korea. And also we were strongly of the view that if we did deliver such a strike, either one or both of two things might well happen: One, that the North Koreans would simply execute our officers and crew of the Pueblo. And secondly, they might even start land operations against South Korea, and we certainly didn't want another war of that sort on our hands. In any event, we had to give--

RICHARD RUSK: One of the aircraft carriers was somewhere in the neighborhood; I believe it was in the Sea of Japan. It might have been the Independence. One of the big carriers was within several hours' flight time.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think it was awfully--as I remember it, it was not within operational flight time of the Pueblo. That is, the idea of a rescue by air was not feasible from an operational point of view. And then, after the ship got into Wonsan Harbor, then we had the problem of a strike which would have required a lot of air power. And we had to give thought as to whether we could sacrifice additional men simply to strike at the North Koreans to give vent to our anger, and so forth, in that situation. We did look all over the world for some North Korean ships to pick up, but they didn't have any. So that was not a feasible retaliatory action. We also came to the important conclusion that our first priority must be the safety of these officers and men. We ourselves had ordered them into that mission on a vessel which did not have the capacity for defending itself. We were relying upon international waters for their protection, and that reliance proved to be nugatory, loosery [sic]. So we felt that we owed them a duty to do what we could to get them out of there. Well, that led to discussions at Panmunjom, the location on the thirty-eighth parallel, which had been used for many years as the site of contact between South Korea and North Korea, between ourselves and North Korea. And those talks opened in a spirit of intense hostility on the part of the North Koreans. They charged the Pueblo with being in North Korean territorial waters--we did not think that was true--and our planning or launching an attack upon North Korea; all sorts of wild and extravagant things. Now, it's true that at that time the United States technically accepted the doctrine of the three-mile territorial limit. But by that time, we had long since begun to recognize the claims of other governments to a twelve-mile limit, and indeed a large majority of the world's governments had already moved to twelve miles or more as the limit of territorial waters.

RICHARD RUSK: What did we take for an offshore limit in this country? Our limit here in this country is what?

DEAN RUSK: Technically it remains three, but I think we are moving toward a twelve-mile limit.

RICHARD RUSK: Yet we have a two-hundred mile limit with respect to Japan and its fisheries.

DEAN RUSK: Well, an economic zone of two hundred miles we have accepted, yeah. But anyhow, we went through these very difficult, unyielding discussions at Panmunjom for a period of considerable months. And then finally--Well, the North Koreans wound up demanding that we make a statement accepting full responsibility for having violated their territorial waters, and so forth. It was, in effect, a confession. Well, then came a bizarre windup of the whole affair. We told our negotiator at Panmunjom to read to the North Korean delegation this statement which they themselves were demanding, and then to add at the end, "I'm instructed to inform you that there is not one word of truth in the above." The North Koreans accepted that and released our officers and men. Just almost spooky.

RICHARD RUSK: They did require us to sign their statement. They wanted a signature on a piece of paper.

DEAN RUSK: Whether we signed it or not, I don't know. But we did add the statement that there is not one word of truth in it. And they accepted that and gave us our officers and men

back. But this incident illustrates the point that arises in almost any of these situations: Where do your priorities lie? And we felt that our priority obligation was to the officers and men.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that decision and that priority contested seriously among your advisers?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: It was more or less unanimous?

DEAN RUSK: There was no great debate about that. But when you do that, when you make the safety of your own people, whether the crew of the Pueblo or your hostages in Iran or wherever, that tends to take away from you other possible lines of action. If you just strike out and bomb somebody, well that might make you feel a little better, but it doesn't get your people back. As a matter of fact, it almost guarantees their deaths. And so, in any event, at the end of the day the Pueblo affair was wound up. Now the ship, the Pueblo, is still in Wonsan Harbor. If it ever comes out, my own personal attitude would be that we should either seize it or sink it. But it's still there in Wonsan Harbor, and my guess is they will probably keep it there. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Well, that's interesting, Pop. Exactly what was the status of our relationship with North Korea both at the time the Pueblo was taken and in the years preceding? There had been increased contacts along the border and perhaps some indications that the North Koreans were becoming more aggressive in their part of the world.

DEAN RUSK: Well, we had had repeated incidents where saboteurs would cross from North Korea into South Korea to wreak havoc in South Korea. As a matter of fact, one group of them came within a few hundred yards of President [Chung Hee] Park's own residence. I think they called it the "Blue House" or "Blue Palace."

RICHARD RUSK: The "Blue House" incident? There were thirty-one Korean infiltrators?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: That was two days before the capture of the Pueblo.

DEAN RUSK: I've sometimes referred to the Koreans as the Irish of Asia. And the North Koreans have been pluperfect bastards throughout this postwar period as far as we were concerned. It's been very difficult for anybody to make any sense with the talks between North Korea and South Korea, which have occurred from time to time and have gotten nowhere. Japan's relations with the North Koreans have been very difficult.

RICHARD RUSK: Their own relationship with the communist world has been difficult.

DEAN RUSK: Well, they are pretty independent within the communist world. I think neither the People's Republic of China nor the Soviet Union has decisive influence on P'yongyang, the capitol of North Korea. I doubt that that will change until there has been a change of generation of leadership in North Korea, then something might work out. But they have never shown any

interest in the reunification of Korea, except on their own terms, on a basis of a communist reunified Korea. And the South Koreans are not willing to go down that trail.

RICHARD RUSK: To what do you contribute that obstinance on the part of their leadership?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I don't--I mean, they're just that way. (laughs) Whether for ideological or personal power reasons or whatever else, it's just the way that they present themselves to the rest of the world.

RICHARD RUSK: That Pueblo seizing came two days after the South Koreans had captured and repulsed that team of infiltrators that was trying to assassinate its President. With that kind of linkage did you think that that was? Indeed the first shots, opening shots, of a wider offensive? Did you see it in those terms? There had been a tenfold increase in border incidents between 1967, or 1966 and 1967. Did you think something was coming?

DEAN RUSK: We thought maybe the North Koreans might be playing with fire a little extra much, on the theory that we were heavily engaged in Vietnam and that we would not want to do very much about hostilities in Korea. The South Korean ground forces were very substantial over against the North Koreans. But the North Koreans had a clear superiority in the air. There were a lot of Soviet MiGs [Mikoyan and Gurevich] up there. So we weren't relishing an outbreak of another Korean War. It may be that Kim Il Sung, the North Korean leader, decided he would see how far he could go.

RICHARD RUSK: How did you first hear about the Pueblo, Pop?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think it came to the State Department through the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon. It might well have come also through the Commander-in-Chief Pacific's headquarters in Hawaii before it was relayed to Washington. But we heard about it within hours. But there simply was not time for anybody to respond to Bucher's call for help, in terms of protecting his ship. Now, what in fact would have happened had he just headed his ship due East away from Korea and steamed at full speed to get himself out of the area, what would have happened with regard to those North Korean motor torpedo boats, no one can know. But in any event he did not do that. He probably would have had his ship sunk out from under him with possibly heavy loss of his crew.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't fault Bucher for the decision he made to surrender--

DEAN RUSK: Not necessarily.

RICHARD RUSK: --to surrender that ship without literally firing a shot? The Navy report inquiry later reprimanded him severely and ruled against him, as a matter of fact, for having surrendered his ship.

DEAN RUSK: Well, if members of the court of inquiry had been in his shoes in that situation, I just wonder what they would have done. No, I don't particularly fault Commander Bucher. But I wouldn't have faulted him had he made the other decision and headed it out toward the open sea

and challenged the North Koreans to do what they might do. But you can't second guess a man who's in that spot without an opportunity to get any guidance from his superiors and things of that sort.

RICHARD RUSK: Following the Pueblo affair.

DEAN RUSK: Following the Pueblo affair we assigned such missions more often to destroyers, which did have a capability of self-defense, rather than to the Pueblo type ship.

RICHARD RUSK: That was one of the results, the so-called lessons of the Pueblo?

DEAN RUSK: One of the lessons of the Pueblo affair, yes.

RICHARD RUSK: That these voyages by these particular ships would discontinue.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: Was there any confusion as to exactly what had happened in those first few hours of the Pueblo's message, Pop? I'm thinking of the firing on the ship Liberty in which we had first thought, I think, that the Soviets or the Egyptians had been involved. And we finally came to realize that the Israelis were up to it.

DEAN RUSK: No, there was no confusion of that sort.

RICHARD RUSK: It was very clear then?

DEAN RUSK: And it was the Israelis, by the way, who informed us that they were the ones who had attacked the Liberty.

RICHARD RUSK: After some period of time.

DEAN RUSK: After some period of time, right. But we were sitting with President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson at the Operations Room of the White House considering the contingency that if it might have been a Soviet or Egyptian attack, when the message came in that it was Israel who attacked it, the U.S.S. Liberty.

RICHARD RUSK: What was LBJ's reaction to that? It must have been some relief.

DEAN RUSK: We were somewhat relieved because it was a lesser problem than it would have been had it been a Soviet or Egyptian attack. But I never accepted the Israeli explanation of their attack on the Liberty. I think that was an outrageous affair, and I just didn't believe their attempted explanation of it. I still don't.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you make any efforts to get North Korea's allies, such as they were--the Soviet Union and perhaps China--to try to influence them to release these people and play a more responsible role?

DEAN RUSK: I forget in detail as to whether we did or not. It's possible that we might have had a word with the Soviets on that. But I think it's unlikely that the Soviets would have stirred themselves very much over that particular point.

RICHARD RUSK: What about the reaction of our allies? What exactly was our policy beyond trying to ensure the safety and the return of these men? How did we go about that?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we reached the conclusion very quickly that our first priority must be the attempt to rescue our officers and men. I think our allies concurred with that. I don't remember any allies coming in and saying, "You've got to strike North Korea," and things of that sort. We weren't under any pressure. And, indeed, I don't remember any real pressure from anybody in Congress for us to strike North Korea because we had a bigger war already going on than we wanted in Vietnam, and we certainly didn't want to add a Korean War to that.

RICHARD RUSK: You took it very quickly to the United Nations. And you also tried to mobilize world opinion behind the American operation.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, but that was largely for general consumption. We didn't have any real idea that the North Koreans would be influenced by world public opinion. They just weren't that kind of people. One little incident that we found amusing: The North Koreans had forced Commander Bucher to send us a message giving the alleged log of his various locations. And they insisted that he include locations within Korean territorial waters. What he included in that list of positions, I think, were two positions which were forty or fifty miles inland where he could not possibly have been with his ship. And somehow the North Koreans didn't pick that up. And that was a clear sign to us that the entire message was phony.

RICHARD RUSK: They also plotted those positions and gave times for the dates of these positions in such a fashion that Bucher's ship would have had to travel at something like twenty-five hundred miles per hour to have made them.

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, I'll be darned. Yet, there was some serious question as to exactly whether or not the Pueblo was within the twelve-mile limit. As a matter of fact, do you recall, I believe the "Meet the Press" program with Robert [Strange] McNamara, who conceded perhaps mistakenly that the administration did not know for sure that the Pueblo did not go within that limit and would not know until the crew had returned and they had a chance to see the logs. Do you recall any of that controversy?

DEAN RUSK: Well, that question always comes up in situations of this sort. But I think it's possible that navigating on a dark night such as that, if you were going just outside the twelve-mile limit, you might have slipped inside of it at some point. But I don't think that made any significant difference.

RICHARD RUSK: Now, had the Pueblo been operating within that twelve-mile limit, and that was clearly proven, had--

DEAN RUSK: Had it clearly proven! It was not clearly proven. But go ahead.

RICHARD RUSK: Had it been, what influence would that have had on the crisis?

DEAN RUSK: Not very much because, again, our priority was to get the officers and the men out of there. Under international law, if a foreign warship comes within your territorial waters, you can require it to leave. And if they persist in staying within territorial waters, then you can take actions and force it to leave. But we had no such--this procedure was not followed by the North Koreans. You are not permitted to board a foreign warship within your territorial waters. You can require it to leave, but you can't board it. Warships carry sort of the immunities that an embassy carries in that regard.

RICHARD RUSK: What about incidents with the Soviet Union, Pop, on this issue?

DEAN RUSK: Well, the Soviets were usually pretty careful at staying well outside of our three-mile limit. And there have been, I think, a handful of cases over the years when one or another of their vessels, maybe a fishing vessel or something, would come inside our territorial waters for safety reasons, a matter of refuge. And civilian vessels are entitled to seek refuge within territorial waters. We ourselves have gone offshore to extend many courtesies to Soviet vessels off our coast, particularly in the Atlantic, to take out the appendix of one of their sailors, or to deliver a baby for a woman member of the crew, or to help them fix a rudder, or something of that sort. Most of those Soviet boats off our coast are fishing vessels. But occasionally there will be a vessel which was a Pueblo-type vessel, listening in on our radio communications. But with their other facilities, such as on the roof of the Soviet embassy in Washington, they probably don't need too much of that.

RICHARD RUSK: Let's see, the Pueblo mission and similar missions came before the 303 Committee, of which you were a member, for your approval.

DEAN RUSK: Well, my representative was a member. Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall that mission?

DEAN RUSK: No, I didn't get into those, that type assignment, because they were fairly routine and they were not brought to my personal attention. Once in a while if they had in mind a mission that was quite unusual, they might bring it to me. I once vetoed, for example, the desire of some to send a submarine into Soviet territorial waters to pick up some fragments of a Soviet missile that had been fired. But I vetoed that. I said I would rather not have the information than to use those means to get it.

RICHARD RUSK: Got any more stories like that?

DEAN RUSK: Well, for a time there during the fifties, and a few times in the early sixties, we would--we and the Soviets--would try to light up each other's radar stations. For example, our planes would go charging in toward the Soviet coast full speed and then at the last minute turn off, but in the process hoping to light up their radar stations so we could plot the location of their radar stations. And the Soviets would do that to us from time to time. Well, I thought that kind of gamesmanship was not worth the gamble and I tried to get people to cut back on that a good deal. And we, in fact, did cut back on that a lot. We lost some fliers to the Soviets up around the Murmansk area for that kind of monkey business.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right? Would that have been in the fifties?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, in the fifties.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think the Pueblo mission and similar missions were worthwhile missions? Were they worth the degree of risk and the degree of bother that were involved in sending those ships? Did they pick up good intelligence?

DEAN RUSK: On the whole I think they served a useful purpose. They pick up a lot of radio traffic, most of which is not encoded. And you can plot radio traffic between different military headquarters and things like that. And you'd get a pretty good indication that they were moving their forces to the south in preparation for an attack on South Korea. And it helps to plot activity and the level of activity going on in particular areas. But now that we have such excellent satellite photography, the purpose of such missions has been attenuated a good deal and they are not as important now as they used to be.

RICHARD RUSK: I understand the Soviet Union inspected the Pueblo within twenty- four or forty-eight hours of its landing in that harbor. Do you think the North Koreans and the communists in general found that to be an intelligence windfall?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we had an investigation of what might be called the "intelligence damage" as a result of the Pueblo affair. There was some damage, no question, because they were able to get hold of some of our sophisticated equipment and at least find out and examine and study the kind of equipment we were using. But that kind of equipment depends so much on very long odds to be able to make any use of it, unless you had the proper code words and all the rest that goes into it. So--

RICHARD RUSK: We changed our codes right after this incident.

DEAN RUSK: Some of them, yeah. But there was some damage. But the United States still lives; it was not vital. By the way, the South Koreans were not all that itchy to go to war over the Pueblo. They didn't like it, of course, but we didn't find them itchy to go to war at that time. So we didn't have really any major problems in terms of pounding the desk and demanding that we take more forceful action.

RICHARD RUSK: Did we not have to exert a restraining influence on the South Koreans?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: Especially in the aftermath of this attempted assassination of the President?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, on something like that, yes, they were furious with that. But after all, they could remember that terrible war they went through in the early 1950s. They weren't itchy to repeat that story.

RICHARD RUSK: What about the performance of the crew itself? At least some of the members of the crew did participate in some of these press releases and so-called confessions by which they admitted to being within Korean waters. They claimed they were on spy missions, and things of this sort. Were you disappointed in the performance of that American crew over there, Pop, under those conditions of captivity?

DEAN RUSK: Not particularly. We knew they were acting under coercion. We might have preferred that they not do it. But then we weren't facing the kind of penalties they were facing if they refused to do it. So I didn't get much upset about that.

RICHARD RUSK: What about LBJ?

DEAN RUSK: No, because I suspect that even members of the crew realized that anything they said would be greatly discounted by us. That we wouldn't merely accept--

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RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember the wire service picture of American crewmen, half of them seated around the table, the other half standing? And all those folks around the table were sitting there with their hands on the table with their middle finger exposed. Do you remember that?

DEAN RUSK: Some of them had their fingers crossed.

RICHARD RUSK: They did? (laughter)

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: I guess--incidentally, those crew members received one whale of a beating back there in North Korea when the North Koreans found out the meaning of that gesture. They had told their captors that it was a peace symbol.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, well. No, I wasn't upset by Bucher and his crew and their part in this situation.

RICHARD RUSK: Now, the Court of Inquiry did reprimand Bucher, particularly his decision to surrender the ship without firing a shot. Later, Secretary of the Navy, John [Hubbard] Chafee, countermanded that finding with a claim that that crew had suffered enough, and all charges were dropped. Do you recall being a part of that decision? Did you influence the President?

DEAN RUSK: No, no. I wasn't involved in that part of it. It's very easy for people who were sitting at their desks in Washington to be very gung ho about something like that. I don't know that they are able to know how they themselves would have acted had they been in Bucher's shoes. See, we didn't have naval vessels close enough to try to pick these fellows out of the water if the Pueblo had made a run for it and then sunk. I had the impression that after the Pueblo affair we tried to arrange that any ship of that sort would have some covering protection not far away, so at least if something like that happened we could give some assistance. Well, you've got more than you are going to want to say in your book about this.

RICHARD RUSK: How do you explain the fact that the American people really did not get too worked up over the Pueblo incident during that eight or nine months of captivity, nearly a year, in light of later crises, particularly the hostage situation in Iran where people really got worked up?

DEAN RUSK: That's because the news media were being swamped with Vietnam material.

RICHARD RUSK: There was so much going on at the time.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. And it was not made a big affair by the news media in a major way, and it was fairly incidental in relation to the total problem in Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't remember domestic pressure, congressional pressure, serious pressure to take a more active role with respect to the Pueblo?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think the fact that negotiations were going on caused a good many people to wait and see how and what happened as a result of those negotiations. I think a lot of people were impatient, of course, as were we about the prolongation of these talks at Panmunjom. But I don't recall very much bitterness about this as far as we were concerned.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: About these public confessions that the American crewmen were making. Did you get any other signals that they were under coercion?

DEAN RUSK: They were contradicted by our own intelligence material on just where the ship had been and what was going on. So we simply didn't take them on face value. You don't in a situation where our people are under that kind of coercion. We had a few such instances during the Iranian hostage crisis.

RICHARD RUSK: Of course, the North Koreans had established the ability to brainwash prisoners in the Korean War.

DEAN RUSK: Right. We would have been glad to have had this incident investigated by any outside body.

RICHARD RUSK: Such as?

DEAN RUSK: Such as an investigating committee of the U.N. Security Council, or indeed have the matter referred to the world court, or whatever. But the North Koreans weren't interested in that and just turned down any such suggestions.

RICHARD RUSK: John Chafee, Secretary of the Navy, overturned a very critical judgment by the Court of Inquiry against Bucher and some members of his crew and some of his officers. And Chafee's argument was that the responsibility for the consequences of the Pueblo should be borne by all.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: That they were not solely responsible for what happened. Would you care to elaborate on that?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, well, I agreed with his conclusion on that although I was not personally involved in that particular procedure. That was being handled as a matter of Navy discipline. It would be up to the Secretary of the Navy to make a final judgment on that unless the President himself intervened. But I think the Secretary of the Navy made the right decision on that.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you personally have any fault with the procedures that made it impossible to provide cover for a ship of that nature, on a mission of that nature?

DEAN RUSK: Well, in retrospect, I thought it had been unwise for us to rely so heavily upon international waters for the protection of a vessel that was incapable of defending itself. And so later, as I indicated, we tended to use destroyers and other types of vessels, frigates and so forth, for this kind of mission. And also, as I recall, we tried to arrange to have supporting units closer to the area where we could give some assistance to any American vessel that got in trouble on such a mission.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. Was there any attempt, Pop, to try to recover that gear?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we gave some thought to the possibility of trying to locate and pick up any of the intelligence gear that had been chucked overboard. But I recall that the decision was made not to do that because it would not have made that much difference from an intelligence point of view. Whether the North Koreans ever picked up any of that, I don't know. But they wouldn't have gotten much more that way than they would have gotten off the Pueblo itself.

RICHARD RUSK: We mobilized a considerable fleet in the Sea of Japan. And Lyndon Johnson also called to active service roughly fifteen thousand reserves.

DEAN RUSK: Well, that was to try to deter any idea that the North Koreans might have of launching an attack on South Korea. You never can know just what they have in mind with people like that who commit that kind of an act.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, one of the options was recommended by Walt [Whitman] Rostow. It was kind of a wild one. He wanted to lure a Soviet intelligence ship that was in the area into South Korean waters, and then have Republic of Korea naval vessels seize it as counter-hostage. He claimed that that approach offered good "symmetry" for what happened. And the historical record has you rebutting Rostow. And again, Rostow was a man with whom you had excellent relations with during all these years. It quotes you as saying, "The only 'symmetry' is its equal outrageousness." Do you recall that?

DEAN RUSK: I think I might well have said that because that would have been my view of the matter. You don't improve the situation simply by dragging in the Soviet Union and making them a part of it. These things, in situations of this sort, you try to keep the situation as limited as possible; you don't let it spread. After all, a lot of foolish men in European governments allowed the assassination of an archduke to lead step-by-step into the horrors of World War I. You just don't want to go down that trail if you can avoid it. I must say that I was somewhat amused to learn that when we looked for North Korean ships anywhere in the world that we could seize, we learned that they didn't have any. Their only shipping was along their own coastline: small vessels. They didn't have any oceangoing maritime vessels of their own. We had something over eighty officers and men involved in the Pueblo. Now, I personally did not think that we should spend good lives in stunts to try to demonstrate our anger at this incident because it's not fair to those men whose lives you would expend in expressing that anger, and that we ought to concentrate on getting the officers and men back from the North Koreans and not ask other poor devils to go in there and get killed just to make us feel a little more warm inside back here.

RICHARD RUSK: At one point the North Koreans, as the Iranians did later, threatened to put these men on trial and punish them. Do you recall that?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, they threatened to try them as war criminals or something. I forget now what it was. And it's possible that they might have been advised against that by the Soviets. But we strongly objected to that both publicly and privately.

RICHARD RUSK: And, of course, had they gone ahead with that, that might have changed the entire nature of our response.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, if they had started executing these men I think we would have made them pay the price for that.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Pop, the actual location of the Pueblo was somewhat contested. Did I read that? I don't think I did.

DEAN RUSK: Well, all right. Go ahead.

RICHARD RUSK: The location of the Pueblo was contested somewhat. And 1968 was a bad year for administrative credibility in general. But Robert McNamara himself in a "Meet the Press" interview said that the administration itself didn't know absolutely for sure about the location of the Pueblo, whether or not it went within the twelve-mile limit, until they had a chance to talk to Bucher and read the ship's logs. And his remark gave rise to some controversy about where the Pueblo was. [Joseph] Arthur Goldberg, when he took the case to the United Nations, wanted to use American radio intercepts of Korean transmissions that proved our case. And, for security reasons, some of our military objected to releasing those transcripts. Did you get involved in that controversy?

DEAN RUSK: I might well have since Arthur Goldberg was involved up at the U.N. But I think Bob McNamara, in the "Meet the Press" program, was simply telling the truth. You cannot be absolutely certain that some area--What we did know was that Bucher was ordered to stay in international waters on his mission. But some error of navigation could have been made. Something might have happened. You can't be absolutely sure. That's like proving a negative. Unless you have the commander at your disposal and his own genuine logs--Now whether those own genuine logs--I don't know whether we ever got those back off the Pueblo. But no, I think McNamara was simply telling the truth.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. The South Koreans surely must have been upset by this Pueblo incident, particularly that it came only several days after this "Blue House" infiltration and attempted assassination of their President. Do you recall what our policy was with respect to South Korea in all of this?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we certainly did not want them to start another Korean War by launching an attack against North Korea. After all, we were heavily involved in Vietnam. In any event, we would not have wanted to see one of these incidents expand into a war. But the South Koreans did have a genuine problem about these infiltrators crossing the thirty-eighth parallel to come down into South Korea. And they asked for and received a good deal of additional aid to deal with that problem of infiltration of saboteurs.

RICHARD RUSK: I think that was a hundred million dollars of American aid.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, something like that.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that a form of agreement where in return for that aid they agreed not to invade North Korea?

DEAN RUSK: No, it wouldn't be put in those terms.

RICHARD RUSK: I see. Pop, at a press conference you were asked why the U.S. was so slow in dealing with this crisis, and whether or not we had forgotten the men on the Pueblo. And you responded, "If anyone wants to form a 'Remember the Pueblo Committee' I'll be a charter member of that committee." And later, or very soon thereafter, a Reverend Paul [D.] Lindstrom

took you up on your word. Your remark formed a national "Remember the Pueblo Committee," which ultimately had about eight hundred chapters in this country. And it turned out that he put your name at the very top of his letterhead stationery as an honorary trustee or member of this committee. And it turned out to later be a very right wing group, highly critical of the administration and the State Department for embarking on this policy of appeasement as they called it. Do you recall that?

DEAN RUSK: Quite frankly, I don't. But my guess is I might well have said that in a press conference, made that remark in a press conference, because we certainly in the administration had not forgotten the officers and the men of the Pueblo in any way. We were working hard to get them out. And this was simply a quip to remind people that we, too, were very much concerned about these officers and men. There was no problem of forgetting them.

RICHARD RUSK: That group did raise quite a bit of hell. And later on you met with this fellow for a half-hour or so in your office. Do you recall that meeting?

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember anything.

RICHARD RUSK: You insisted that he take your name off his letterhead stationery. Pop, when you guys signed this statement that the North Koreans were insisting upon, even adding your qualifier that none of it was truthful or factual, did you worry that this was too so-called soft a response? Did you have to worry about infuriating or angering the South Koreans or domestic political opinion back in this country?

DEAN RUSK: Despite this bizarre means by which we finally got our people out of there, I don't remember much public attention paid to this extraordinary way of getting them: that is, signing this statement while declaring it was not true. It was sort of passed over in the general interest that our officers and men were being released.

RICHARD RUSK: Why do you think the North Koreans were willing to accept something like that?

DEAN RUSK: I've never quite understood it because it is so bizarre. I mean this was roughly equivalent to--Suppose a man had kidnapped your kids and demanded a hundred thousand dollars ransom. And I sent the kidnappers a check for a hundred thousand dollars and said, "By the way, I am going to stop payment on this check at the bank." And the kidnappers had accepted that and returned my kids. That's roughly comparable to what this whole deal was about.

RICHARD RUSK: You made the comment after it was over that this was the most extraordinary situation you had run into.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. It's bizarre in terms of procedures of diplomacy. But maybe the North Koreans simply felt that they had milked this incident for all it was worth and they might as well themselves liquidate it. Or maybe they felt that they had scored a point by getting us to sign their statement, even though we said it was untrue.

RICHARD RUSK: I believe one of your advisers commented that the North Koreans had such total control of their own news that they could go ahead and produce this signed statement and forget everything else that the United States has said to refute it and enable that to fly for propaganda purposes in the communist world.

DEAN RUSK: Probably.

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally, that compromise agreement: There was an override and a prior refutation scheme whereby we would sign the statement but immediately refute it. That suggestion came from a Maryland housewife apparently. This was the wife of one of your Foreign Service officers, a guy named Leonard.

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall that? Let's see.

DEAN RUSK: No. But you know, when something like this happens, there are a lot of people who thought that it was their idea that produced the result. For example, I suppose that when [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy was coming into office there must have been a hundred Americans who somewhere had said to some Russian, "You ought to get things off to a good start with Kennedy by releasing these American flyers being held in the Soviet Union." Well, when the flyers were released there must have been at least a hundred people to meet their press and say, "You see what I did? I did that."

RICHARD RUSK: And they all took credit for it.

DEAN RUSK: When it was [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev who did it. You will find a good many people now taking credit for the departure of [Ferdinand Edralin] Marcos from the Philippines. There were a lot of people who told him that they thought he ought to leave.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you surprised that the Pueblo crisis ended as it did?

DEAN RUSK: I was a bit surprised quite frankly that the North Koreans accepted this bizarre ending. Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: What about the lessons of the Pueblo, Pop? Have you ever given much thought as to what they might have been, as you have done for the Bay of Pigs?

DEAN RUSK: Missions of this sort should be undertaken by vessels that are able to defend themselves, at least against lesser attack. Secondly, we ought to have supporting units close enough to give them support if they get into trouble. I think those are the two principal lessons we learned. The arrival of great capabilities now on the part of satellite photography and satellite intercept capabilities has greatly reduced the need for Pueblo-type vessels.

RICHARD RUSK: As a matter of fact, the Pueblo-type ships were decommissioned in the aftermath of this.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, we've used some destroyers occasionally for similar missions. I hope we pretty well disbanded the Pueblo-type vessel for such things.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, that kind of situation must have been very frustrating to a "can-do" President like Lyndon Johnson.

DEAN RUSK: Well, he was angry about it and frustrated. But he had a lot of other problems on his hands. And although he used some very strong words at times, he was fully aware of what we were trying to do to get these men out of there. And here he had agreed that getting these officers and men of the Pueblo out of North Korea was our number one priority. So I didn't have any private problems with President Johnson on this. I suppose there might have been a clearly different impression as to what he had said in relation to what I had said, because I was trying to fish him out. And he was in a different political situation. So he might have used stronger words than I might have used during this affair.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, you gave a speech to the Cathedral Club in Brooklyn, New York on January 25 right after the Pueblo was seized. And you said, "We said a good deal about the course of events today. And I recall in Ecclesiastes 3 it is said that "To keep to everything there is a season. A time to keep silence and a time to speak." I guess that was the approach you took throughout that crisis.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, generally speaking there are a good many situations where you are better off remaining silent than going out and making all sorts of speeches because you are trying to resolve the problem. And very often the speeches you might make to your own people or to the press get in the way of resolving the problem. So I wasn't looking for chances to make inflammatory speeches about the Pueblo, although I thought it was not only outrageous but it was just plain ridiculous. Now, I couldn't say publicly at that time that this whole affair was ridiculous because that would seem to show a lack of regard for the officers and men of the Pueblo and for the outrageousness of this offense by the North Koreans.

RICHARD RUSK: In terms of keeping silent on it, we did go along with the idea of private talks at Panmunjom. These weren't public talks.

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you have any more mixed feelings about not having taken a tougher stance in light of what later came to happen in the world? Did our lack of a firmer response in getting these men back perhaps encourage other countries, other groups of terrorists, to take the actions that they did later? Is there anything to that argument?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I doubt there is much connection between the Pueblo incident on the one side and these Middle Eastern terrorists on the other, people like [Muammar] Khaddafi and Ayatollah [Ruhollah] Khomeini and people like that.

RICHARD RUSK: Even if there is no direct linkage, is there a point to be made?

DEAN RUSK: There's a broader idea involved The United States, thank heaven, is generally looked upon as a civilized country. And we are not likely to react in total anger to anything that comes up. Now there are those who may gamble on that when they try to take some action against Americans here and there. But we, for example, cannot just grab a bunch of people and shoot them, because our laws won't permit it. If they seize our embassy in Tehran, we can't seize and imprison the people in an Iranian embassy in Washington We're just not that kind of country; we're not that kind of people. And the laws won't let us. So there are those who take advantage of that to some extent. And we just have to live with that. We can't, ourselves, become terrorists just because somebody else becomes a terrorist.

RICHARD RUSK: How do you relate that point of view to the Reagan Administration's seizing of that Egyptian airline?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, that was what international lawyers would call an act of retaliation. That is, that was self help in retaliation for an egregious violation of international law. So I had no problem with Reagan's action in forcing that airplane to land in Sicily.

RICHARD RUSK: In language that you use often, Pop, what about these claims of critics who ask for more forceful response, like the fact that we didn't respond more forcefully, that we limited our actions to returning those crewmen of the Pueblo? Doesn't this whet the appetite of the aggressor?

DEAN RUSK: Well, but when you think of action of this sort, you've got to think not only of the first step, the act you might take, but what the second, third, fourth, and fifth step might be. Because if we had taken action that would have led to a new Korean war, a lot of these same critics would have said, "Jesus! That's not we had in mind!" But people who make decisions have got to take into account the consequences and think ahead to what comes later. A lot of people can be critical but not want the results of what it is they themselves are yelling for. Well, people who carry responsibility have got to keep their wits about them and not go down that trail.

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