

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk DDD: Part 2 of 2
McGeorge Bundy interviewed by Richard Rusk
circa 1985 March

The complete interview also includes Rusk CCC: Part 1.

BUNDY: I don't know your father's position on this issue of what you're calling for, shorthand: the candid question in '65. I don't know either way. I don't know that it troubled him and I don't know that it didn't trouble him. And that may seem odd but it's part of the way we did business together. I don't know [Robert Strange] McNamara's view on the same subject. I know my own view because I broke a number of lances with the President on it. You know, I had such a difference with him on it that it was one of the really major reasons I concluded that it was getting on time for me to get out of the (unintelligible).

RICHARD RUSK: I suspected that.

BUNDY: But it would never have entered my head to go, as a White House staff person, and sort of hunt up additional believers, and go to the President's own cabinet to make war with him on a question of this kind. That would have been just, from my point of view, not something the White House staff does. I was working for him. If I had any complaints I ought to take them to him, and I ought not to let on outside that relationship what I was doing. We're not talking about-

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally, are you going to write a book about this?

BUNDY: Not right now. I'm busy writing a book about nuclear--

RICHARD RUSK: This kind of thing hasn't really been told.

BUNDY: Well, I understand that, Richard, and I just don't want to--I want to deal with it in my own way. I've talked to some people about it. There are a number of careful students of Vietnam, and it begins to come out in different views that different ones of us had. Now, we have to bear in mind here that this difference, important as it is to you, and as important as it is to me personally, and as important as it is in terms of eventually setting the record straight about persons, is within the context of basic feeling that this is not the time to quit in Vietnam and that therefore we have to do whatever it is that we have to do. You may argue about, "Don't open any open-ended doors. Don't say you're going to do whatever it takes," which Lyndon Johnson wanted to say, and did say repeatedly that summer, and do explain that it's really a major decision. Don't say, "We're doing just what policy requires and no difference between me and General Eisenhower." He stopped saying that when Eisenhower told him it made him curious, but only then. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: The events in Southeast Asia were more or less disclosing policy?

BUNDY: No. Let me tell you what I think may have been your father's way of thinking. What I did was to say, "Please don't say that. Please explain it. Let's tell them it's a big decision: I had my first differences with him on the Gulf of Tonkin. That was no time to go for a resolution because the resolution would be saying, "We're mad at your destroyer: your goddamn gunboat." But it wouldn't commit the Congress in any serious way to a large scale military operation. If you use it that way, you may not be smart. The difference there, the difference over what kind of speeches to make, what to say, difference in whether you should debate your opponents--and I did debate with Hans (Joachim) Morgenthau and he thought that was crazy--

RICHARD RUSK: Lyndon Johnson thought it was crazy?

BUNDY: Oh, terrible. Just for fun, he once--we were having an argument of just this sort. I'm not absolutely sure it was about Vietnam, it could have been about the Dominican Republic. But we had the same goddamn difficulty. He was overdoing it. He was explaining "Reds under the bed" and "Ambassadors hiding under the desk" and "The bullets are coming through," and "Am I supposed to tolerate this crazy anarchy," and "We had to move," none of which was the way it was. He said to me one day, "I think I understand your view. Now I know what you want me to do. Your position is that if your mother-in-law has only one eye and it's set in the middle of her forehead, you should keep her right up there in the living room where everybody can see."

RICHARD RUSK: That's the way he explained it?

BUNDY: Yes. (laughter) I was not able to give the immediate answer to just where I would keep that particular mother-in-law. Now I think what your father would say if he were sitting here--And you try it out on him.

RICHARD RUSK: I have.

BUNDY: Catch him on the second bourbon and say, "Look, you know perfectly well that you wouldn't have explained that war the way Lyndon Johnson did. And you know perfectly well that General Marshall wouldn't have explained it the way Lyndon Johnson did. Why the hell didn't you raise hell with him and tell him that we had to do it better?" And what I think he'll do is something like this, if he's going to answer you at all.

RICHARD RUSK: Which he probably won't.

BUNDY: Well you tell him you have a guy who guesses what he'd say. Don't identify your scoundrel until you've tried it. He might say something like this: "Look, I'm not here deciding what Lyndon Johnson would say in a speech any more than General Marshall tried to write Franklin [Delano] Roosevelt's speech. I'm trying to help him the best I can with the basic yes or no decision. Now are we trying to see this thing through or are we going to give up? And I'm for seeing it through, and he's for seeing it through. And we're not the same temperamentally. He's President and I'm Secretary of State. My job is to give him the best advice I can on the basic one-two question: Do we stay or do we quit? I tell him I think we better stay. I know it's gonna cost. After he's made that decision, the how and why of which kind of troops and how many, that's

Bob's business. It's not my business. My business is to get it just as straight as I can in the places where I can get it straight, which are what do we say on the international circuits? How do we make it clear that we're ready for an honest negotiation? What is our policy as to what kind of settlement we are looking for and how do we explain it straight forwardly and honorably to our opponents and to our friends and to the country? That's my department. You go back and look at what we said over my signature in that year, and you show me anything that is lacking in candor or that isn't fair or straight and we'll have another fight. But don't you tell me that I can give the President's speeches or that I can decide the Secretary of Defense's military importance."

RICHARD RUSK: Good answer. Well I'll try it on him.

BUNDY: You try it.

RICHARD RUSK: He's still--

END OF SIDE 1

[SIDE 2 BLANK]

