

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection  
Rusk EEE: Part 2 of 2  
U. Alexis Johnson interviewed by Richard Rusk  
1985 March

The complete interview also includes Rusk FFF: Part 1.

RICHARD RUSK: But then there are bits and pieces here and it's a matter of putting together those pieces. You've told me some things I haven't run into before, but go ahead.

JOHNSON: Luke [Lucius] Battle and I worked up the idea. I don't remember exactly at what stage we broached it with your dad, but when we did he was very skeptical. What he, in effect, said to us was that he wasn't sure that we needed all this or anything like it. He didn't grasp the idea and say, "Boy, let's do it here." His words were, "You know, if you and Luke want to try it, why go ahead and see what you can do." He wasn't giving it the--he wasn't embracing it. We ran into great resistance from the bureau chiefs, the assistant secretaries in the bureaus, because they saw this as some way of impinging upon their turf, their territory. We finally got it underway in a very, very small way and your dad was not to my recollection as enthusiastic about it. He was accustomed to the old way of doing things; why mess around with it? Of course the concept was not only to have somebody answer the phone in the State Department but somebody to correspond with the National (NMCC)--they set up their command center over there--and with the CIA.

RICHARD RUSK: He later claimed it was one of the achievements that took place under his tenure. I don't think he takes personal credit for it but he raves about that Operation Center.

JOHNSON: No, he took to it when it got going. He saw what it could do for him. I was somewhat skeptical about it. If it hadn't been for George [Sheridan] Newman pushing on me, I wouldn't necessarily have pushed so hard. Nevertheless, we took hold of the thing and, of course, inside of a few months I wondered how in the world we ever got along without it. And of course it's grown. All it was was one or two fellows sitting at the phone twenty-four hours a day. But then we had to set up the secure communications and this led to the situation room over at the White House.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, I see. That came after this?

JOHNSON: Yes. All of them interrelate, you see. We wondered how we ever got along without them. I forget what started me on this--well, your father's reticence about this. I'm talking about taking leadership around town is where we got on to this. Of course, communications is the heart of being able to lead and it gave the State Department a position it should have in the ability to draw the town together on the issues that we should take the lead.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you ever approach him directly, as his alter ego, and say, "Look, this is a problem, this reticence is affecting the performance in the Department"?

JOHNSON: No, never as a principle. It was on bits and pieces. It came up as you mentioned with setting up task forces, whether they should be chaired by State. I was always in the position of trying to get us to grab leadership and this is where he often would say, "You know, I have great responsibilities to my colleagues at the cabinet and I don't want to step on their toes or interfere with their responsibilities." He had a very strong sense of that. He would often repeat this. He didn't want to appear to be too far out in front of them.

RICHARD RUSK: What about other aspects of his performance and his style of operation as Secretary of State, as an administrator, as a handler of personnel, policy planning, dealing with the undersecretaries and yourself? What else could you comment generally about my dad with any revealing anecdotes or illustrations of his manner of operation?

JOHNSON: Well, I was casting back in my mind for staff meetings. He held staff meetings and he didn't like the large staff meetings. He wasn't comfortable with the large staff meetings. Again going back to this tendency to talk, in the concept of his that you've discussed and talked with the people that count and need to know, don't go beyond that. His staff meetings should be fairly general and he preferred to deal face to face with the Assistant Secretary or whoever else was involved. Chet [Chester Bliss] Bowles was under the Under Secretary. Yeah, that's right. There was very little communication between him and Chet.

RICHARD RUSK: There have been a lot of letters here written about that. As a matter of fact you've written about it in your book: their relationship and the problems they had.

JOHNSON: Yes. And of course the fact that Soapy [G. Mennen] Williams was appointed Assistant Secretary of African Affairs was the first announcement that JFK made with regard to the State Department. That was before your dad had been appointed and announced. As far as management of the Department was concerned, he had Chet Bowles and to a degree Soapy Williams. Soapy was not a problem in one sense but he was a driving ex-governor. He really took charge of African affairs. And your father had his views, of course, of how things should be handled. Oh, I remember such things as whether we should appoint an ambassador in each of these new countries or whether we should have dual accreditation in some cases because some of them were so small. But Soapy felt that they would feel insulted by not having an ambassador of their own. And I argued somewhat with your father about this with Soapy, but he was never willing to take Soapy on it, rightly so maybe. Maybe it wasn't worth the effort. He knew as well as I did that there was an absurd--some of the post-victory appointments which had established separate embassies and appointed separate ambassadors. If we got them used to having dual accreditation at that time--

RICHARD RUSK: There's an example where his reticence, or at least his hesitancy about confronting people in a showdown, did have a bearing on policy? Can you think of other specific examples where that same characteristic in him did have a bearing on policy? I suppose a lot of the Vietnam decision making is related to that to some extent. But in these other ways, other issues?

JOHNSON: Well, his role in the Cuban Missile Crisis--I'm never quite clear how much your

father was directing things or how he was doing so because it rarely--There's another case where he said, "You know, I'll tell you what I think you're doing wrong, but go ahead and do what you think you're comfortable with." We had the Ex-Com--

RICHARD RUSK: Were you part of the Ex-Com?

JOHNSON: Oh yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you in those meetings?

JOHNSON: There's my calendar. No, no I was called into that right from the first day. We met in George Ball's conference room and George took a strong hand in it. Your father would show up occasionally. I don't think George had much more communication with him than I did.

RICHARD RUSK: Of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

JOHNSON: Of the Cuban Missile Crisis. McNamara and Bob [Robert Francis] Kennedy and all them would be there, but your dad would not be there.

RICHARD RUSK: I know he was trying to maintain the premise of a normal situation.

JOHNSON: Well the normal schedule--He was trying to maintain that appearance too but he was not comfortable. There were twelve or fifteen of us in there and we did everything there. We didn't use a secretary or anything. It was kept very, very tight, lots of debate. And your father didn't like this idea of debate with people who had no responsibility. This is where he became very uncomfortable with Kennedy. Kennedy liked to have symposia on these issues, call in Dean Acheson and Arthur Schlesinger, and everybody would sit around the table. And the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense were just one of the symposiums. And he felt very strongly, I know, that this was not the way to run the railroad. The Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, they had responsibilities that these other people didn't have. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, Dean Acheson was a real hawk right down to the end, I think an irresponsible hawk.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, apparently after it was over Dean Acheson told my dad, "Well, you guys were lucky." And my dad said, "Well, to some extent we deserve the luck we got." They had an exchange on that point.

JOHNSON: Yes, I'm not surprised.

RICHARD RUSK: I remember in the accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis that before the President's speech and the implementation of his blockade decision, that among the advisers in the Ex-Com there was some wavering at the last minute about the blockade. And my dad stepped in at one point and very firmly and assertively presented the case again and helped achieve unanimity on that point. Do you recall that at all?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes I do. That was over in the meeting in the upstairs after the President came

back in. He came back from Chicago. And that was the meeting upstairs in the living quarters at the White House. And your dad did wait in there, I remember. That was the meeting that--let's see, we all met over at George Ball's room trying to keep things secret, of course, and we sent Averell Harriman over as a decoy over to the southwest gate. We all piled into George Ball's car which was in the basement.

RICHARD RUSK: Was my dad in with you?

JOHNSON: No, he didn't. I can't remember how your dad got there.

RICHARD RUSK: There were about eight or nine of you in that limousine.

JOHNSON: Well, Bobby Kennedy sat on my lap.

RICHARD RUSK: Gus Peleuses, my dad's security agent during those years, said that the security guys laughed about the way you guys were carrying on, because you were almost over playing the secrecy and they were afraid that someone was going to pick up on this. You know, they feared that you were going to blow your cover with some of these maneuvers. That was Gus' comment. He got a big bang out of a whole hell of a lot of this.

JOHNSON: It worked.

RICHARD RUSK: It took less than five days to get wind of the story.

JOHNSON: We went into the underground entrance to the White House. You know there is one?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Over at the Treasury Department. We drove in that way to get in and out. Well, Averell and Joe [Joseph John] Sisco were going in the southwest gate. No, no your dad, when it came to the crunch, went along with everything.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember him being assertive on the blockade option?

JOHNSON: No, I don't. I don't remember his being assertive. I remember debate on it. My own propensity for getting stuff down like the action document asserted itself at that time. We were to be split up into teams of three or four each to write pros and cons of various things. I wasn't comfortable with that. As consensus seemed to be developing Paul Nitze and I wrote the scenario for the blockade, which is in my book, which for the first time has been published.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, is that right?

JOHNSON: Yes. I'll show you what--And that became the action document over with the chiefs, with the speech. Let me show you that--

[break in recording]

JOHNSON: We took the initiative to do it. And this made people focus on precisely what was to be done and when it was to be done. And it was approved, you see.

RICHARD RUSK: Having to come up with a plan of action helped focus people on the decision.

JOHNSON: Decision. That's just the point.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll be darned, good point.

JOHNSON: That and the speech which followed from it. Writing the speech that Ted [Theodore Chaikin] Sorensen was doing, the questions kept coming up. When you write the speech, explain it. And you do this, you've got your policy. You can't fluff around the hard decisions.

RICHARD RUSK: And that's something that you and my dad both were on agreement on?

JOHNSON: We were entirely--

RICHARD RUSK: Forget the long prosaic types of analyses; stick to the action. Interesting.

JOHNSON: You see how this melded the political and the military at precise timing so that each complemented the other and we were--

RICHARD RUSK: This has been quoted in other texts: not the specifics of it but the fact that you came up with this. It is seen as an exceptionally good plan.

JOHNSON: I was very proud of that and I say it. And I learned, from your dad I think, to take this approach to things. And he sees something like this and he reacts very positively to it.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: This is as the Soviet ships were approaching the blockade and before they turned back?

JOHNSON: No, this is the night of the speech. That was the critical point. And the next critical point was when the ships were approaching. Those were the two critical points. Now, I slept that night on the couch in George Ball's office and I was awakened by the Op Center. That's when the Op Center--you know, that's when that type of thing really really paid off. The Pentagon was calling. There was a Bear Bomber or a transport plane, I couldn't tell which, that was coming down off the coast of Newfoundland, down off our northeast coast on its way to Cuba.

RICHARD RUSK: This hasn't been recorded, I don't think?

JOHNSON: It was a Bear aircraft. It's one of their four engine turbo props.

RICHARD RUSK: You wondered if there were nuclear warheads on that plane? Wasn't that part of it?

JOHNSON: Well, yes. Part of that but not--there were other planes from the night before, but that was the night of the speech that it was coming down. And the Pentagon called and asked what they should do. And I said, "Let it go." It wasn't a very hard decision but I had no question about the decision.

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally, I have a story here--

[break in recording]

JOHNSON: It called for--Make contacts with all these governments. Khrushchev woke up in the morning and we had everybody on our side. The night of the speech was the night of the U.N. concert at the State Department auditorium, and your dad--This called for your dad to meet with--Well, we had all these meetings set up, calling people out of the concert to meet with them. Your dad, I think, took on the OAS, which was the key.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you with him when he convened with the OAS?

JOHNSON: No, I didn't. I was up on the operating side. We had scores of people doing all kinds of things. The ability that he had to persuade people was exercised to its fullest, and he did it. It was a terrific performance. That type of thing is so exceedingly (unintelligible).

RICHARD RUSK: He met with the press and had his own briefing with the press just after the President's speech.

JOHNSON: Yes, that's right.

RICHARD RUSK: The press was about as tame and as cooperative as he ever remembers them. The crisis just scared them to death, and they were leaning on him for comfort and support in this crisis. That, in turn, helped strengthen him.

JOHNSON: Yes it did.

RICHARD RUSK: It just scared the hell out of them.

JOHNSON: People were scared. It was a sober moment.

RICHARD RUSK: I'm told that the fellows in that Ex-Com group took odds at one time at the likely chances of the U.S. going into a nuclear war with the Russians, and the consensus was one chance in three. Do you recall that?

JOHNSON: Not one chance in three?

RICHARD RUSK: One chance in three that we would go--do you recall that?

JOHNSON: No I don't.

RICHARD RUSK: I think this is one of my dad's stories.

JOHNSON: I don't. Well you see, our emotional reactions waited until the morning. We weren't sure whether there might be a nuclear war.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you part of the evacuation plan? You and your family, were you part of that group to be evacuated in case of a nuclear strike?

JOHNSON: Oh yeah. That was always nonsense. Nobody's gonna ever leave during a crisis. The President's never gonna leave the White House when things get tough. That's the worst thing you could do.

RICHARD RUSK: You had no intentions of leaving if the security people came for evacuation?

JOHNSON: No, I had no intention of leaving. If the Secretary left and the President left, yes. I didn't see any point in my going off in the hills.

RICHARD RUSK: Security people wanted to know where Peggy [Margaret Elizabeth Rusk Smith] and I were at all times during that period. The idea was that they would never get my dad to evacuate if the family wasn't taken care of too. My dad remembers me telling him that this was for the birds. I told him, "Forget me, I'll stick it out with my high school football buddies." He realized it was a foolhardy process. You just couldn't get people to do this.

JOHNSON: No you couldn't. I had my card with me and all this, and I was supposed to get a helicopter over at the Pentagon and not say anything to my family--

RICHARD RUSK: Not say anything to your family?

JOHNSON: Oh no, you weren't supposed to say a thing to your family.

RICHARD RUSK: Were they going to be provided for?

JOHNSON: No, they were not. I arrived from Bangkok to Washington on the Sunday morning that the news of the Bay of Pigs broke. I decided that that was not a good time to report to your dad. I could wait until Monday.

RICHARD RUSK: What a beating!

JOHNSON: I went over to see Chet Bowles. Chet was at home relaxing and letting everybody that would listen to him at all, telling them in "great confidence" that he'd been against it from the start. Oh, back to this airplane, whether we shoot it down or things of that kind. Again here this goes back to your dad's advice always that, "You do what you do with what you're

comfortable with. If you're not comfortable with it then buck it up, but don't bother me with the details."

RICHARD RUSK: Don't shoot down the Soviet bomber?

JOHNSON: No, no don't.

RICHARD RUSK: If you had shot it down, would he have backed you up?

JOHNSON: He knew perfectly well I wasn't going to.

RICHARD RUSK: He had confidence in your judgment.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: That's why he gave you those instructions. Do you recall a case where those instructions did not work out, where you went ahead on the basis of your confidence on an issue or your knowledge of an issue, and either made a decision or did not make a decision, and later got called on it by my dad, in a way where this decision did affect policy and was harmful? Did that ever come up?

JOHNSON: I can't remember that-- I just can't remember any occasion in which he had called me up and said, "You really goofed." I don't say I didn't goof, but I can't remember an occasion in particular in which--

RICHARD RUSK: On a decision you made? I assume you were involved in tactical operational decisions that did not work, or at least were of a controversial nature and the press got hold of it and my dad backed you up. Do you recall any of those?

JOHNSON: No. He certainly never blamed me in any way.

RICHARD RUSK: Cut ground out from underneath you?

JOHNSON: Never cut ground out from underneath me.

RICHARD RUSK: He had that reputation in the Department.

JOHNSON: No, no. He never did that to me. He always felt that the fact that (unintelligible).

RICHARD RUSK: Well, you see a number of Secretaries of State come and go and you worked for more than my dad. Just in general, how did the foreign service like having a man like my father as Secretary of State?

JOHNSON: The general critique is that they did. They liked him. They felt he was a pro. He wasn't playing politics and they respected him. The only criticism I ever heard of your dad is the same criticism I was making, which is that he needed to assert himself a little more. He was too

considerate of his cabinet colleagues, particularly on issues of defense and so on. He was very respectful of Bob McNamara and I was--Some of my (unintelligible). And I often was inhibited by the knowledge that your dad wouldn't want to take this on as an issue; sometimes I thought he should. I don't say that--oh, I would try things out on him and his instinct always was, you know, "That's Bob McNamara's department."

RICHARD RUSK: It really was State Department stuff?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, I have run into a little talk about that. His concern about getting along with his fellow cabinet officers came at the price of deferring to them on matters of policy, on occasion.

JOHNSON: I'm not sure that it was just getting along: Well, it was getting along, yes, but also his genuine instinct that the cabinet--

END OF SIDE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2



RICHARD RUSK: --The need for unity at the top of the government was also a factor?

JOHNSON: Well, he felt the President was the boss and that the cabinet members had their responsibilities. And he looked upon them very, very much as being equals. The Secretary of State is not any more equal than the others as far as responsibility; he had his responsibilities. The Secretary of Agriculture also had his, and he shouldn't be intervening in the Secretary of Agriculture's responsibilities. That permeated the initial relationship. And as far as the State Department respected his concern, I'd say more people would have preferred to see him a little more assertive, not just from a bureaucratic point of view, but from the same point of view of substance.

[interruption in interview]

RICHARD RUSK: We were discussing Alexis Johnson's involvement with Vietnam decision making and his role in 1964 and '65.

JOHNSON: I never really had any real face-to-face, one-on-one discussion with your father about Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: You had some doubts right from the beginning as I recall.

JOHNSON: Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Whereas--You go ahead and do the talking.

JOHNSON: I had very great doubts about sending in American troops and they continued. Max [Maxwell Davenport] Taylor did too. First, my going there. This is the way things happened with your dad. I knew through the grapevine--I can't remember what grapevine, never from your dad--there was some discussion as to whether they should send me out there or whether they should send Max Taylor, or somebody else, another politician. I heard nothing about it at all until one evening your dad called me into the office. And we had our little scotch and soda--

RICHARD RUSK: You're part of the bottle club?

JOHNSON: Part of the bottle club, yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Let's see: you, George Ball, anyone else a regular in that after- hours session?

JOHNSON: Maybe Luke sometimes. I don't know. It was the relaxed time of the evening. He called me in and said, "Alex, the President would like to have you and Max Taylor to go to Vietnam." This was news to me. He said, "He'd like to have both of you go." Max was Chairman of the Chiefs. "Would you be willing to go?" Just recently I had been appointed career ambassador. "Would you be willing to go with Max?"

RICHARD RUSK: Career ambassador to what country?

JOHNSON: To Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: You had just been appointed ambassador to Vietnam?

JOHNSON: No, I was appointed the rank of Career Ambassador in the service. That was your dad looking out for me. He said, "Do you want to be in charge or choose to be Max's number two man? You're full equals." I said, "If it were anybody except Max Taylor I would automatically say no." But Max and I had gone to Japan together. He was the Captain and I was a language officer. We had grown up together, in effect. We had been very close personal friends. And when JFK had called him back, Max and I worked together on lots of things. We found each other very compatible. I said, "With Max, yes." I can see the advantage from the President's standpoint of having a soldier and a diplomat, you might say. It looks good. And Max and I could work together because we had done so much work together. He said, "Well, what would you like to be called? Assistant Ambassador? Deputy?" I said, "No, that sounds too much like Deputy Chief Minister." Well, we tossed around a couple things and I said, "You know, I think the closest thing would probably be Deputy Ambassador." He said, "That sounds all right to me." He picks up the phone and calls LBJ: "You know, Alexis is willing to go and he'd like to be called the Deputy Ambassador." LBJ said, "Fine, great. Can he leave in the morning?" I said, "You know I have a wife, a house, children, and a car."

RICHARD RUSK: It's women that have to pick up all the pieces of these immediate decisions.

JOHNSON: I said, "Let's make it the next day." So I agreed to leave the day following. Then I did take off. Max had stayed behind for hearings and nominations and all that too. And I did take off. I telephoned Pat [Pat Tillman Johnson] and told her what it was all about.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me follow up on your comment that you had doubts about that conflict quite early. You don't recall ever having gone directly to my father, one to one, to either challenge his position or confront him with your doubts? Do you recall that ever being the case?

JOHNSON: No, I don't recall I knew what his position was. There was no disagreement or doubts among us about the importance of Vietnam, but his position of how we should handle it, what we should be doing, that was a given.

RICHARD RUSK: The given was the strategic importance of Vietnam and the need for defending it?

JOHNSON: Well, strategic importance, yes. That was a given. The only question is how to achieve it.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall the option of withdrawal ever being discussed?

JOHNSON: Oh no, no. That never crossed my mind.

RICHARD RUSK: That never came into the discussions?

JOHNSON: It came down to the question of--it came to the head when Max and I were there, when things were going downhill, and whether we should introduce American troops. I was strongly opposed to bringing in combat units and Max was too.

RICHARD RUSK: You didn't know what my dad's viewpoints were on that point, is that what you are saying?

JOHNSON: Yes. I was--Max came back for meetings. I don't remember your dad's position in that meeting. I don't remember ever hearing it.

RICHARD RUSK: You didn't discuss it with him before you left for Vietnam?

JOHNSON: Oh, no. No, because it hadn't arisen at that time. At that time--

RICHARD RUSK: You're talking about the spring of '65?

JOHNSON: Yeah. That issue had not come up. This is the summer of '64 we went out there. And we were still trying to do more of the same thing: that is advisers and supplying and all that. The question of our directly engaging in combat had not arisen at that time.

RICHARD RUSK: I've got to get you a copy, if you're interested in doing any reading, of my

dad's role in this stuff.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We're discussing Warren Cohen's *Dean Rusk* and his thesis on my dad's pattern of decision making throughout the sixties on Vietnam. I know what that is, so go ahead.

JOHNSON: I don't recall whether, as again by osmosis or not--but I--well, the issue up until '64, the time I went to Vietnam, the issue of a direct introduction of American troops had not arisen. The issue was simply doing better at what we were doing, as in training and supplying Vietnamese forces, giving them helicopter help, and all that. The introduction of the Marines was picked by accident against our views, really. I'll tell you quickly how that happened. When we did decide to do the bombing in the North, just as a gesture. The Air Force came to us and said that--

RICHARD RUSK: They needed security in Saigon?

JOHNSON: Yes, security in the airfields. They needed to have anti-aircraft. So Max and I agreed that bringing in a battalion of Hawks--and in bringing in and defending the Hawks, the Hawks had to go in the hills around the fields and they needed security. So we agreed to bring in some Marines to guard the Hawks who were guarding the airfield. That got parlayed in twenty-four hours into a Marine expeditionary force. And Max and I went back screaming at that and said that we had only agreed to a battalion for guarding the Hawks. And back in four or five hours they said that they had approved two brigades, I think it was.

RICHARD RUSK: They had approved a larger group initially and then you guys cut it down?

JOHNSON: And then they cut it back, but far beyond what we wanted. And then from then on--

RICHARD RUSK: That was the start of it?

JOHNSON: The decision was not to introduce combat at that point, the decision was--

RICHARD RUSK: Although Maxwell Taylor was enough of a military man, and you had enough familiarity with military matters--Didn't both of you know that when air operations were going to be conducted out of South Vietnam, bases would need ground security?

JOHNSON: We accepted that. We accepted ground security.

RICHARD RUSK: You thought there could be limits on that?

JOHNSON: Yes, we were trying to keep the limit of a battalion to guard the Hawks. That's where we wanted to stop.

RICHARD RUSK: (laughter) It kind of got away from that.

JOHNSON: And things got away, and I know how it gets away.

END OF SIDE 2

*Richard D. Arnold*  
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