

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk FFF: Part 1 of 2
U. Alexis Johnson interviewed by Richard Rusk
1985 March

The complete interview also includes Rusk EEE: Part 2.

JOHNSON: And those long nights between coups in Saigon, all alone there, I started dictating a tape I addressed to my oldest grandson about my early life. I wished I had known much more about my grandfather. I didn't know him or know much about him. I just addressed this to my grandson and started talking about my early life. Then while I was in the process of doing that another coup would come along and I had to interrupt what I was doing.

RICHARD RUSK: Weren't there over 12 coups in 20 months?

JOHNSON: Yes. But when I picked up again, why, I would explain what had happened. And then the embassy got blown up, and I'd pick up and explain what had happened. And this sort of grew into an oral diary.

RICHARD RUSK: Good for you.

JOHNSON: Not a regular one. I would go for weeks. But down there I did it fairly regularly.

RICHARD RUSK: You would talk into a tape?

JOHNSON: I would talk into a tape.

RICHARD RUSK: I wish more people would do that.

JOHNSON: And then I came back here and continued this. Every week or two weeks or so I would talk into the tape and fell what had happened, what had been happening, just talk into it.

[break in recording]

JOHNSON: And then these libraries were harassing me for my old papers on--

RICHARD RUSK: The Presidential libraries?

JOHNSON: Yes, the Presidential libraries and other libraries too. I didn't keep any papers except my working papers, but they wanted them. They wanted everything. So finally I said to the LBJ Library--I had a soft spot for LBJ. I said, "If you would transcribe these tapes for me, I will lend these papers to you." And neither one of us knew what we were getting into. It turned out to be about a two-year job, about two or three thousand pages of transcript.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Talking about arms control:

JOHNSON: I, frankly, have lost interest in it [SALT- Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty] to a large degree because the arsenals on both sides have now got into where whittling away at a thousand here and a thousand there really has no meaning.

RICHARD RUSK: It's irrelevant.

JOHNSON: It's irrelevant. In fact, the problem is not the weapons. I used to say to my Soviet colleague, "You know, why are you and I sitting across this table talking about these beasts of weapons? They are not the cause of the problems between us, they are simply a symptom of the problem."

RICHARD RUSK: We tend to forget that.

JOHNSON: "And we have got to get at the symptoms. The symptoms are that you are at an early stage of development. You are just like the Christians were in the Middle Ages. You still think that everybody still has to believe the same way you do and that if they don't then you're entitled to cut their throat or do whatever is necessary. It took the Christians some long years and millions of casualties before they finally decided to let others live and let live."

[break in recording]

JOHNSON: We do not have coexistence or detente with Canada or Japan or anybody else. We live and let live and tolerate. We have a lot of problems with each other but we tolerate our differences." I said, "Someday you are going to have to get around to the point of being willing to live in a world of diversity and accommodate your doctrine to it. Your doctrine is part of your problem; your doctrine requires you to try to have central direction and control. And when you get around to the point of being willing to live and let live the questions of these weapons will fall into place. Until that point, we are dealing only with symptoms."

RICHARD RUSK: How did they respond to you on that?

JOHNSON: I could never get a real response except when he said, "You know, it takes us--we need time. It's going to take time for us to get to that point." That's what I said. Well that is my own view.

RICHARD RUSK: I'm interested in that issue. We are today talking with Mr. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary with Dean Rusk in 1961, Deputy Ambassador to Saigon 1964-1965, Ambassador to Japan 1966-1968, Under Secretary of Political Affairs the latter part of 1969, And he also worked with my dad back in the Truman administration at one point as his Deputy. And even then they were calling you "Dean Rusk's alter ego." I wonder if we could start back then, not with the details of policy, but with your first contacts and general impressions of my father back during the Truman years? Whatever stands out as being significant.

JOHNSON: I came back to Washington in 1949, from Japan where I was Consul General, to be Deputy Director of the office of Northeast Asian Affairs. My predecessor commiserated with me over getting a dead-end job because--

[break in recording]

JOHNSON: --Japan and Korea. And as he said, [Douglas] MacArthur was handling Japan and Korea and the State Department is out of it and there is nothing to do.

RICHARD RUSK: Because of the nature of MacArthur, as much as any other reason? k

JOHNSON: Well, the nature of MacArthur and the fact that Japan was still under occupation and there wasn't much to be done. Except on June 20, 1950, when North Korea attacked South Korea, all of a sudden I found myself at the vortex. In the meanwhile, your father--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: The outbreak of the Korean War is when you first substantially came in contact with Dean Rusk?

JOHNSON: Your father--I forget the date that he became the Assistant Secretary. He was Deputy Under Secretary, and just about the time of the Korean War he became Assistant Secretary. I have the date here.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, I can find that out.

JOHNSON: But it's just about that time. The Director of Northeast Asian Affairs, John Allison--

RICHARD RUSK: Let me interrupt you with an anecdote. In [Dean Gooderham] Acheson's memoirs, my dad apparently volunteered for that job and Dean Acheson said he was so delighted that he said, "We kissed him on both cheeks and gave him the job."

JOHNSON: Yes, that's right. They were delighted. Even though I was three or so steps down the line, I was almost immediately involved directly with him because, of course, he became utterly involved.

RICHARD RUSK: You were not his Deputy at that point?

JOHNSON: Oh, by no means. It was way down the line. He immediately took hold of that and I was immediately I'd never met him before. I didn't know anything about him. And as the desk officer, why, he pulled on me. And I recall that I was going with him to meetings and we hit things off. I mean, we had to hit things off. And apparently I satisfied him with what I was doing. I found myself, in effect, being his Deputy as far as Korea. And then he made me the Deputy Assistant Secretary. I was Deputy to him, and then I stayed on when John Allison became Assistant Secretary when your father left for the [Rockefeller] Foundation.

RICHARD RUSK: You said in your memoirs that you had no secrets left to report as far as that earlier period of history is concerned. Perhaps you can give me some impressions of my dad as a colleague and as a boss back in that period, and later we can contrast his performance then and your relationship with him as your boss during his years as Secretary of State. Incidentally, my father will not be hearing these tapes--

JOHNSON: Oh no, no problem with your father hearing them. I will say what I use to say to him. I said, "You are an awfully hard man to work for."

RICHARD RUSK: I remember when you said that, even then.

JOHNSON: In the sense of, "I never know what you are doing and you never tell me what you are doing. And I have a hard time knowing what I'm supposed to be doing." He said then, and I've used it often for my staff since, "Do what you're comfortable with and I'll tell you if it's wrong." That's something he did throughout his whole career.

RICHARD RUSK: How did that work for you, as a style of operation, in general?

JOHNSON: In general, it worked all right.

RICHARD RUSK: You're the kind of fellow who liked to take authority.

JOHNSON: I was willing to grab authority. As he said, "Responsibility flows to those who are willing to exercise it." And your father was willing to exercise it and I by nature was also, so obviously, we got along very well together. But we never had any philosophical or discussions in depth, you might say. It was all that we were busy, terribly busy, and there were always just brief, very very brief, snatches. This was the way it was all the years I worked for him.

RICHARD RUSK: Not much long-range policy planning?

JOHNSON: Well, no: more of a tactical, pragmatic approach to things. Your father wrote very well. During the Korean War when he came to some of the difficult issues and difficult questions, your father would sit down at his yellow pad and draft. He wrote very clearly. He had a very clear hand. He would draft some points that he thought needed to be made, that he would send on to Secretary Acheson or through him to the President, or meetings of the Joint Chiefs. At that time, that threw us into direct contact with the Joint Chiefs and we--I went with him to meetings with the Joint Chiefs, which introduced me to, you might say, the military at that level. I had a lot of experience in Japan during the war but--He was very articulate and very succinct, never emotional, and handled himself in a very effective way, and only said what he wanted to say. In this regard, I think it is pertinent to the point--You recall during the Korean War we had the sixteen allies. We met with them regularly. Your father usually chaired the meetings. When it came to the difficult and ticklish part of MacArthur--MacArthur's march north and his statements regarding China and then his unannounced trip to Taiwan, and all these various things--our allies were taking very, very dim views.

RICHARD RUSK: He made another unannounced trip to Taiwan?

JOHNSON: Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: I wasn't aware of that.

JOHNSON: Well, he announced it after it was over. We didn't know that he was going and we didn't know what he was going to do even, or what he said down there. In any event, this presented great difficulty with our allies. And the sixteen ambassadors would come in to these meetings--We would have one or two a week--with fire in their eyes. And your father would sit down at the table and start talking, and you could see them visibly relax as he talked. And he would talk and talk and talk, then there would be the opportunity for a couple of questions, and then he would get up and walk out. They would go back to their embassies. Within about an hour or so, my phone would start to ring by ambassador assistants who were trying to draft their messages, and would say, "Exactly what did he say?" He didn't concede a thing; he didn't say a thing, deliberately. He was in a position--

RICHARD RUSK: Were there notes taken of these conversations? Probably not.

JOHNSON: Oh yes, there were notes taken and there would be a telegram there. Oh yes, they would be in the records, but I don't know that they would reflect the flavor of the meetings. His ability to deliberately stall people, which he had to do because we were not able to really defend MacArthur. On the other hand, he was our man--

RICHARD RUSK: And you had to back him up?

JOHNSON: --had to back him up. And so I always remembered those meetings in which they'd walk out and my phone would start ringing, "You know, now what did--"

RICHARD RUSK: That is the kind of thing that I am interested in: stories about my father. I am aware of his general qualities and attributes, the general things people say about him, but those little insights that tie that description of him to an incident, that's the kind of thing that makes a book go. So anytime you run into something like that, let me know.

JOHNSON: That's very outstanding.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We were discussing my dad back in the Truman administration. He gave me a delightful anecdote about his meeting with the various ambassadors. Do you recall any other types of stories that might illustrate some of his qualities or some of his problems back then as Assistant Secretary?

JOHNSON: Well, another characteristic of your dad that was consistent throughout the time he was Secretary, more so than in many ways, is that he had a profound sense of respect for responsibilities of others in the government. He was not a rough bureaucratic infighter. In fact,

he was a little laid back even for my taste as far as fighting for turf or fighting for policy. He kept his own counsel. He did not like to discuss really fundamental policies or fundamental issues with others present. He'd like to do it face to face and he liked to do it in writing if he could. He'd be very succinct; he'd write down the points he thought ought to be made to the President, and in a larger meeting with other people around he would not articulate his views.

RICHARD RUSK: Even then?

JOHNSON: Even then.

RICHARD RUSK: Why this capacity for reticence back during the Truman years when he was not having to worry at all about protecting a privileged, confidential relationship with the President? Of course he acted that way--that was his style in the sixties and everyone attributed it to that relationship as the President's primary foreign policy advisor. But he wasn't that back in the Truman era. Now why would he have been that reticent then?

JOHNSON: Well, I think his relationship with--he did have a relationship with Dean Acheson and with Truman, even then. His relationship was through Dean Acheson to Truman.

RICHARD RUSK: They knew each other?

JOHNSON: They knew each other very well, and they went to many meetings--he normally went to meetings with Dean Acheson: meetings with the President. No, I wouldn't describe that reticence just to be protecting his relationship with the President, with JFK or with LBJ.

RICHARD RUSK: There's something else there?

JOHNSON: It was built in him, part of his nature: reticence.

RICHARD RUSK: Was it seen as a problem back in the Truman years?

JOHNSON: No, not particularly. I don't think so. I wouldn't say it was that big of a problem. I would say that as far as his relationships with Acheson, with Truman, and of course later on with JFK and LBJ, it contributed to his relationships with them. It inhibited his relationships to a degree with others, and that's how he is rounded. Going back again, as I say even with me, having the close relationship that we established with one each other, he was always reticent to say what he thought. As I said, I use to tell him that "You know, you're awfully hard to work for. I don't know what you're doing or what you think." I had to sort of get it by osmosis.

RICHARD RUSK: I see. By osmosis. Did you become an expert at that? I heard there was someone within the Department who could read Dean Rusk's mind through studying his facial expressions and the little nervous tick that he might have.

JOHNSON: Well, I know none of that. I just know that to a degree I was successful in doing so. It was simply having a sense of it all.

RICHARD RUSK: A sense that you shared the same philosophy and way of thinking about policy?

JOHNSON: Yes I think so, very much so. As far as I was concerned, he didn't need to spell things out in great detail. I was not one for writing memoranda. I guess I probably inherited that from him to a large degree. Being action oriented at these meetings and within the Department itself, you had officers in the state who were very articulate in writing all the memos, which nobody had time to read, (laughter) They looked very good in their memoirs and your father had an antipathy toward that.

RICHARD RUSK: Communication by memoir?

JOHNSON: Well, trying to do a stream of consciousness, if you will, or one of these big analyses, and all that. The thing to do, as I often say in lecturing to classes about the foreign affairs--I guess I took a lot of this from your father--is if you think you've got an idea, don't talk about it or try to write a big book on it, sit down and write the telegram to the ambassador, of what you want him to do; put down what is he supposed to say to whom. And then look at it and see whether or not it makes sense. That's a test of whether your idea had any validity. You don't have to go through any other process.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad would say that.

JOHNSON: He would not say that, but he would do that. He would always be ready, at least, with some action paper. And he didn't read the long studies that some of the staff tried to put up to him. He would look at some of that, but he was not enamored of them, nor was he enamored of writing them himself.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me follow up on that. You're suggesting then that long-range policy planning was not an interest of Dean Rusk?

JOHNSON: No, I would not say that. I wouldn't say that. He was thinking in long-range terms, but he didn't feel under compulsion to write it all out or to--he was thinking in long-range terms, but that was in his mind. He wouldn't necessarily write it out. But now, on the Korean War for example, it didn't mean that he wasn't thinking in long-range terms. For example, when it came to these issues as to whether we should withdraw when we were getting [beaten], or whether we should do this that or the other big policy decision in the War--whether we should cross the 38th parallel, things of that kind--he would--obviously he gave it a great deal of thought but he put those thoughts down as a page or two of points. He didn't feel that you had to spell everything out to people who knew what they were doing or knew the situation. He did not do long, long, analytical pieces; he would do short analytical pieces. You will find those in the files. I think I quote some of them in my book a few places there, his typical way of handling these things.

RICHARD RUSK: Getting back to some of his characteristics in the earlier years. He was called the "instrument of bipartisanship" by Warren [L.] Cohen. Incidentally, have you read Warren Cohen's book about my dad?

JOHNSON: No.

RICHARD RUSK: I haven't found anyone here in Washington who has.

JOHNSON: Never heard of it.

RICHARD RUSK: And you find a lot of people who never realized the book is out: published in 1980.

JOHNSON: I'll be darned. I guess I did hear something once. I don't know who he is and I don't know anything about the book.

RICHARD RUSK: Cohen said he was good at this bipartisan effort to keep support for foreign affairs. Do you recall any stories or illustrations of that that you recall of those years, and his success of building bipartisan support for policy?

JOHNSON: Well, the Korean War handling, itself, is a monument to bipartisanship. It was not a partisan political issue, and it did not become a partisan political issue in those days. He spoke very, very well. He could take a meeting--I've talked about how he could take a group of ambassadors with fire in their eyes in a room and have them all going out cooing. And he could do the same with group of congressmen. He had a very strong sense of the importance of keeping the congress informed, of keeping them onboard. He did not give a sense of partisanship--well, in those days, there was a strong feeling in the Congress and the country that partisan politics stopped at the shore. So these things were not dealt with in terms of partisan political issues, and he contributed greatly to that. He had a very strong sense of the importance of maintaining that. Back--well, he had many meetings with congressmen, with the Congress, and he took the initiative in a lot of it. And he was much better at that than--

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BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

JOHNSON: --although [George Frost] Kennan was a brilliant officer--

RICHARD RUSK: He was out as far as Dean Acheson was concerned?

JOHNSON: In that regard Dean Acheson is the greatest intellect that I ever worked around. Your dad and he, you know, they complemented each other exceedingly well.

RICHARD RUSK: Good point.

JOHNSON: They were a good team--strong team.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you privy to Dean Acheson's feelings about my dad back then, or perhaps Harry Truman's feelings about my father?

JOHNSON: Not privy to them.

RICHARD RUSK: Just aware of their general relationship?

JOHNSON: Aware of the fact that when there was anything going on your dad would get the call.

RICHARD RUSK: Warren Cohen also said that my dad's finest moment back there during the Truman years was his ability to rally American confidence in our Korean effort after the Chinese came in. And there was such confusion in Washington as well as confusion from MacArthur's headquarters. And my dad was very strong in rallying people and maintaining support for the policy. Do you recall that?

JOHNSON: Oh, very much so.

RICHARD RUSK: Specifically, are there ways you can illustrate that for me?

JOHNSON: Oh, I think I get more specific in my book on this. When the Chinese came in, MacArthur panicked. The atmosphere was very, very unhealthy. And we had a feeling that MacArthur was just losing control of himself in this. You know, it wasn't MacArthur, the grand eloquent MacArthur, who we'd been dealing with previously. And there was serious talk of evacuating all of Korea and abandoning all of Korea from MacArthur's headquarters. That was very frightening. And your dad at that time did a great deal, I think, to rally opinion and to get people to take a calm view of the situation and not just to panic and run. We had a strong feeling that that was the situation over in Korea. Now, another individual that turned that around was Matt [Matthew B.] Ridgway, General Ridgway. When General Ridgway went over and [Walton H.] Walker was killed that was the time of the big retreat and panic--Ridgway single-handedly took charge of that Eighth Army and, as I say in my book, it was the greatest trait of generalship that I've ever seen in being able to turn around a panic, a rout, and organize it into a strategic withdrawal.

RICHARD RUSK: Strategic withdrawal?

JOHNSON: Withdrawal. And then march back up again. Ridgway provided that element on the ground in Korea and your dad did a great deal getting Dean Acheson--

RICHARD RUSK: It's been forty years and it's an unfair question, but do you recall any more anecdotes that I'd be interested in?

JOHNSON: My recollection is he did not do much public-speaking but he did a great deal of meeting with groups. I mentioned some groups, of course. But, oh, various groups that came to the Department or various meetings. I suppose, I recall. I don't remember specifics because I was never really directly involved. Look at his schedule, his calendar, and you can run down a lot of

that. Do you have his calendars, incidentally?

RICHARD RUSK: My dad gave those to the LBJ Library, but I think we can work out an arrangement where we can use them.

JOHNSON: Yeah. No, no, they're very cooperative in that sense.

RICHARD RUSK: Would someone have a copy of his schedule back in the early fifties at that level of office?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, by all means. Oh, yes. His secretary would keep his appointments calendar. The normal thing was a calendar. Oh, yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, very good. Leaving that period of history, did you have any significant contacts with my dad during the fifties while he was president of the Rockefeller Foundation?

JOHNSON: No I didn't except that, very typical of him and very typical of your mother, when I was appointed Ambassador to Prague in '53 in the Eisenhower administration--I stayed on through the period--we were going to go over by ship to Europe. I was taking my car. I had my three younger children with me. But anyway the five of us were going over by ship. And I think he called me, I can't recall, or he wrote me. He said he would like to see me and to let him know if we were going to come through New York. I did let him know and he invited all of us to stay out at the house out in Scarsdale.

RICHARD RUSK: Scarsdale. I'll be darned. I don't recall your visit, but I don't recall much from back then.

JOHNSON: No. And he, which was very generous to take in a family of five, which was very, very much appreciated.

RICHARD RUSK: Well you're part of the inner circle then because we didn't have a lot of house guests back in those days.

JOHNSON: No. And he drove me down to deliver my car. I was having that shipped. He drove me down to the docks, went with me down to the docks, and I shipped my car. And I guess we took the train back to Scarsdale.

RICHARD RUSK: You must have had a good personal friendship at that time.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Very much so. I felt that--yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me ask you this. You had said that my dad was "one of the most uncommunicative men you've ever known." Now I'm sure that he was that as your boss. What about as a personal friend?

JOHNSON: Oh, no, that was entirely different.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you feel that you know the man?

JOHNSON: Yes, I think I do. I feel I do. I feel comfortable. I always feel comfortable with him, yes. He used to, when I then I came back. When was it I came back as--wait now. I guess it was after he--yes. You know, chronology is the thing that you always come up against.

RICHARD RUSK: That's how it goes.

JOHNSON: When I was writing my book. You've got to get your chronology straight. When I came back as Under Secretary, that's right, in the Nixon Administration--

RICHARD RUSK: Kennedy administration?

JOHNSON: No, Nixon administration. After he'd left. No, after he'd left. He would drop into the Department and he'd always poke his head in my door. We never had much time for much conversation, but he'd always poke his head in my door with some question, some comment of some kind. We would chat about this, that or the other--never at any length. He would be five minutes or six minutes, but he was clear in what he wanted to say or what question he wanted to ask. And he'd ask it and we'd exchange views. So I was never surprised to see him poke his head in my door and I felt comfortable in his doing so.

RICHARD RUSK: Is there any element of mystery about Dean Rusk, any aspect of his personality that, even as a close friend of his you don't understand. I'm a son who essentially is doing this project so I can get to know my dad. And I just wondered, those of you who'd worked with him so closely and knew him as a personal friend, I wonder if he had the same--what should I call it--if there was still a partial distance, an area of privacy there that--something he was holding back.

JOHNSON: Well, he--no. The time of our close association was a time of crisis. And then when I came back as Under Secretary in the JFK period we were busy, terribly busy. He was busy and I was busy. You did not engage in small chit-chat. There was usually no occasion for it at all. It was get the business done and get out. So as far as his--now, for example, as far as you kids, I don't remember his ever--I don't think we ever talked about kids or family or things of that kind. Now your mother, Virginia [Foisie Rusk]--my Pat [Tillman Johnson] was very close to her and they were very compatible with each other.

RICHARD RUSK: Your wife and my mother?

JOHNSON: Your mother, yes. A little incident on that that was very typical: the talk that these foreign service wives would complain about having to do this, that and the other--when I was in Vietnam and she was evacuated back here--

RICHARD RUSK: '65?

JOHNSON: In '65, yes. She was living alone in an apartment up on Connecticut Avenue and she slipped on the floor and broke her elbow. I don't know how it came about. I was in Saigon. But I know that your mother heard about it and she came right over to see her and stayed with her two nights--two days and two nights.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right?

JOHNSON: That's while your father was Secretary. Washed out her clothes for her and took care of her. It was the kind of a gesture that was within the character of both your mother and your father. Never any side or pretense about them. They were natural human beings. For the wife of the Secretary of State, even though I was over there, to do that was very impressive. I think it illustrated, though, the relationship between us.

RICHARD RUSK: It sure did. I'm glad you told me that.

JOHNSON: Yes. I have enormous regard for your mother. She--

RICHARD RUSK: Some people have suggested that I write this book about my mom instead of my dad.

JOHNSON: They went together.

RICHARD RUSK: Well I should put a chapter in there.

JOHNSON: She worked at her job like the wife of no Secretary I've known. She went to every party and National Day party. My wife was also very conscientious on that when I was Under Secretary. The two of them would always be at them. No matter how obscure the country or little the country they would be there. And people noted it and appreciated it. Your father--well, this incident when the embassy was blown up in Saigon--

RICHARD RUSK: '65?

JOHNSON: Yeah, in '65. Your father was at a White House dinner and he called. He got me through the military phone almost immediately.

RICHARD RUSK: You were hurt in that weren't you? Weren't you cut?

JOHNSON: Yeah, I was cut up, but five of my staff were killed. It was a big--some 200 people were wounded. It was the first big car bomb. In any event, he immediately, right from the White House--he knew my wife was in Hong Kong on her way back. I don't know how he knew it, but I guess he knew. Anyway, he immediately got a message to her saying, "I've just talked to Alex and he's all right. I want you to know that." His thought was--you know, he was so thoughtful about those things of that kind.

RICHARD RUSK: And he got hold of you too?

JOHNSON: Yes. Well, he got hold of me briefly. It would not be unnatural for him to get hold of me, of course, because he was Secretary and I was in charge of the embassy at the time.

RICHARD RUSK: Briefly, very briefly, describe the moment of the explosion. What was that like? If it's in your book I can find it.

JOHNSON: It's in my book. It's in my book. I was on the top floor. It's in my book.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll get that.

JOHNSON: It was a shambles, and very scary.

RICHARD RUSK: I bet it was. Let's move ahead to my dad's appointment by John Kennedy in December 1960 and your impressions, your reaction to that appointment. What were they?

JOHNSON: Well, I was surprised and delighted. I was in Bangkok at that time, Ambassador there. And our principal problem at that time in Southeast Asia was Laos. The Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese were moving on Laos. We were worried about Thailand. It was a period of great tension and a lot of debate was in the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] Council.

RICHARD RUSK: Fascinating that you were in on the Geneva Accords in '54. That must have been quite enlightening to you.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Of course. I've gone through all that.

RICHARD RUSK: And you're someone I have to talk to again when I've been through your work in detail.

JOHNSON: I went through all of that with Foster Dulles, which is another story. But you know, I like Foster.

RICHARD RUSK: Two different men.

JOHNSON: They're two very different men. Dulles wasn't always as stern a figure as he's sometimes presented to the outside. I found him a very warm human being. But anyway, that's another side.

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally, let me interrupt you.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Farther back during the Truman years you were aware of at least one negative quality that he had: this business about reticence.

JOHNSON: Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: You were aware of his fine positive qualities. When he became Secretary of State--I'll ask you first your immediate reaction to that appointment and then, as a follow up, were you surprised by any aspects of his performance as Secretary of State that perhaps you did not anticipate based on what you knew of him back in the fifties? First your reaction.

JOHNSON: First, I was very surprised because the contact I had had with him over the years indicated that he had no ambitions, political ambitions or otherwise, for Washington. He seemed to be very happy up at Rockefeller and it never occurred to me anymore than it did to him, I know, that he was going to be back in Washington. You know, I don't know whether you've run into the fact that about--I guess it was before the JFK's election he'd been a member of the Army-Navy Country Club. He and I, we used to go out there and play golf now and then.

RICHARD RUSK: When both families lived in Washington? Back before he went to the Foundation?

JOHNSON: Yes. And you know that just about thirty days before the inauguration he resigned his membership in the Army-Navy Country Club because he figured there was no reason in paying his absentee fees because he was never coming back to Washington. I don't know whether you've run into this.

RICHARD RUSK: I hadn't heard that. No.

JOHNSON: It's an illustration of his attitude at the time.

RICHARD RUSK: You saw him as being a man genuinely without ambition in the political sense.

JOHNSON: Yes. That's right. I never thought of him as a political figure from politics. Yes. And so--well I learned this thing about his resigning the club afterwards, of course, when I came back here, because then they wouldn't take him back in.

RICHARD RUSK: You're kidding. As Secretary of State?

JOHNSON: Without his going through the mill again. In any event, his resignation--he'd paid his absentee dues all that time and then he decided, "Well, it's no use keeping paying these because I'm never going to go back to Washington again."

RICHARD RUSK: Going back to Washington?

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes. I was very surprised, needless to say, and naturally very pleased at it because here was a man I knew, trusted, and respected, and had a good personal relationship with having become Secretary of State was.

RICHARD RUSK: You realized it then that you would be part of his team?

JOHNSON: Well, one way or the other I would be part of his team. Again, there, I was hoping

to stay in Bangkok, but then he telegraphed me--sent the first telegram nominating me for Assistant Secretary of Far Eastern Affairs. Would I take it? And I said I would, of course. And they sent my name up to the hill and it was on the floor in the process of being voted on, with some others of course at that time, when it was withdrawn and then they changed it to Deputy Under Secretary. And I came back to that. But I was thrown in immediately with him. Because my first messages to him were that "This SEATO meeting is upcoming. Things are very tight here in Southeast Asia, and I think it would be a great morale booster in Thailand and I think it would be a good push for SEATO if you as Secretary of State could attend this meeting," which was to be in Bangkok that year. And he came out to the meeting. This was his first, I think probably his first official meeting of any kind.

RICHARD RUSK: Right.

JOHNSON: And of course, I was delighted to see him, to have him come. I was delighted that he was going to come out there because I thought it was very, very important. It was a very critical period. And he did come out to the meeting. And, of course, it was easy for me because I didn't have to spell everything out to a new hand. I could communicate with him well. I pointed to the importance of--of course, I should say as he came the foreign ministers of the other SEATO countries came too, so that was an important aspect of it. And it gave him an opportunity to get acquainted with them. I forget all the names. To get acquainted with them and for them to consort with each other on what was a very critical national issue at the time. When it came to the communique, I was pushing as strong a communique as we could issue as deterrence to the other side on this. And between the two of us we drafted up a little language on that which he telephoned back to the White House and got approval to issue. Secondly, on Thailand: The Thais were complaining about SEATO not doing anything and their concern that nothing would happen from SEATO. And I had, without any real authority from Washington, I'd taken the position with foreign minister Thanat [Khoman] on this, that if others didn't do something it didn't necessarily forestall us. We didn't have to have unanimous agreement.

RICHARD RUSK: Which is written into the language of that treaty?

JOHNSON: No. It came out eventually. And I had been making this argument with Thanat Khoman without any authority, not checking it out. And I persuaded your father to make the same argument with the Prime Minister there, reinforce what I'd been saying. And subsequently that language became embodied in what's known as the Rusk-Thanat Communique, which is cited in my book, which puts it in formal language. So your father's presence and ability to see through these things, his willingness to act, was a very, very considerable factor and very comforting to me. You see, I stayed out there. I didn't immediately come back to the job back here. I stayed out there until that meeting and then I left Bangkok after that meeting and came back here to take my job as his Deputy Under Secretary. We started out his term on a very key issue at that time and very close collaboration with each other.

RICHARD RUSK: Any aspects of his performance as Secretary catch you by surprise based on what you knew of him earlier. It did Dean Acheson. And of course Dean Acheson and Robert [Abercrombie] Lovett recommended my father strongly to President Kennedy. I know, at least Dean Acheson, I'm not sure about Robert Lovett, became somewhat disappointed over my dad's

performance--you know, the same business about reticence and lack of leadership. Dean Acheson became critical of that after a while. He did not foresee that problem. Were you surprised by that? You know my dad had many fine qualities as Secretary of State. I'm aware of them as much as anyone. But I guess he really was criticized quite severely for this reticence. Did you foresee that being a problem?

JOHNSON: Yes, to a degree. I felt that--I wanted to see him push a little harder, be a little more assertive. And I worked various projects directed to that end.

RICHARD RUSK: (Laughs) Tell me about them. Go ahead.

JOHNSON: Well, one of the first ones was the operations center in the Department. I came back--George [Sheridan] Newman was my assistant. Well, at that time, up to that time, there was no central point of the Department--

RICHARD RUSK: For fast communications?

JOHNSON: For fast communications. Nobody would answer the phone at night even, or anything--

RICHARD RUSK: Let me ask you about the authorship of that idea. My dad told me once that he had visited a SAC [Strategic Air Command] headquarters and saw what types of instantaneous worldwide communications they had there and wondered, "Now if the War Department can have this, why can't we have the same communications for purposes of peace?" I read in your book--I think the authorship of that idea came from someone else and I recall you as saying that my dad was a bit lukewarm on the idea.

JOHNSON: He was. If I can say something, I think I planted the idea. But somebody else planted it with me.

RICHARD RUSK: I see. Alright. I do recall he visited a SAC headquarters and said, "Hey, this is something we need too."

JOHNSON: Well, he was--this whole idea of an operations center--One of my assistants was a fellow named George Newman that I'd inherited in the office. He felt very strongly about this business of communications and coordination and all of this. He was a very, very great man. And he sold me on the idea of the importance of an operations center in the Department, particularly for after hours. We should be able to operate twenty-four hours a day.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right.

JOHNSON: And said, if everybody went home and a telegram came in, telegraph people up in the telegraph bureau would take a look at it and decide whether or not they needed to call somebody and who they needed to call and all that. We were really in the horse and buggy days on this. And I discussed it with--

END OF SIDE 2

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