

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

Rusk FFF FFF: Part 3 of 3

Richard [Dick] Holbrooke interviewed by Richard Rusk and Thomas J. Schoenbaum

1986 February

The complete interview also includes Rusk YYYYYY: Part 1; Rusk ZZZZZZ: Part 2.

HOLBROOKE: The question is the effect of all the deaths on the policymakers. Well, we know that [Robert Strange] McNamara was traumatized by the sight of one man burning himself to death on the Pentagon steps and throwing his baby to safety just before he died. It was an awful scene, but why McNamara chose to be so traumatized by that when several hundred people were dying a week in Vietnam is a legitimate question. That just shows that McNamara's will had been broken. I think it was horrible, a man burning himself to death, but McNamara's policies were putting people at risk and many of those people were dying. Your father says that [Lyndon Baines] Johnson felt those casualties so deeply. The correct answer to the question is very, very difficult to access. A person who assumes one of the highest three or four offices in the land must be prepared to use American power in defense of American interests as he sees fit. He must also be prepared, therefore, to countenance the result that American lives may be lost in defense of national objectives. He must, at the same time, be extremely careful not to send Americans out willy-nilly to their deaths. Jimmy Carter was very proud of the fact that nobody died in combat in his Presidency; but in the end, eight people did die in Iran during the rescue mission through an airplane accident which could have happened anywhere, but happened to happen at that particular moment. In regard to your specific question, it seems to me that the endless mounting of deaths without clear definable progress toward the political goal of a solution to the Vietnam problem was the central dilemma. After all, what was the issue? The issue was Americans were dying. It was this, by the way, that led [Richard Milhous] Nixon and Melvin Laird, when Laird became Secretary of Defense, to adopt the so-called Vietnamization Strategy in which they would deliberately reduce American casualties by removing Americans from combat even if the military said this wasn't the most effective use of American fire power. Because it was the Nixon-Laird perception that it was the casualties that were the greatest political vulnerability, particularly those of young draftees who were, in their view, much more expensive in political terms to lose than professional Air Force pilots. And they were right. But it would be wrong of any policy maker to be so callous and brutal as not to care about the casualties. And if it weighed heavily on the policymakers, that was all right. There is nothing wrong with that.

RICHARD RUSK: How did it affect my father in terms of any influence upon his decision-making? Did that loss of life and that escalation of loss of life help to lock him in, to try and push ahead and make something out of this. Because if he didn't, all those lives were lost in vain.

HOLBROOKE: Well, you've got to ask him that question. I've never asked him that question, but I think you're probably on the right track.

RICHARD RUSK: You think it didn't lock him in?

HOLBROOKE: I think it probably locked him in, but I'm just guessing, Rich. Next question: Was Vietnam an obsession in the government by 1968? Clark [McAdams] Clifford contends Vietnam had become an obsession by '68. Rusk contends that other policies went forward and the government was not hamstrung by impassable debate over war. What are my views? My view is that Clifford is probably right that in '68 there was an obsession, but that Mr. Rusk is right that other things went forward, like U.S. [United States]-Soviet relations, which reached the edge of a summit. But that does not mean that the Administration was not paralyzed, and I think that this is a semantic disagreement here. I'm sure that your father would agree completely that Vietnam had become an obsession, but he would demonstrate that other things happened in '68 and that is correct. I don't think this is a real issue. I think this is just words. The next one: What about the effect of [inaudible] loss of life? We just discussed that. The next one is, did he have a fatal flaw as Secretary of State? To what extent was he as a role model for me as an FSO [Foreign Service Officer] and FSE I]?

RICHARD RUSK: Answer the first one first; that's two separate questions.

HOLBROOKE: Did Dean Rusk have a fatal flaw? Surely, I don't think I can answer that. He is today what he was in 1960 and his strengths are so strong. No person is perfect. Every person's strengths usually leave a corresponding weakness. His strength was his ability to hold clearly the principles in face of tremendous pressure: his total loyalty to the President, his lack of ego, his self-effacing qualities, and that led to corresponding weaknesses. Was he qualified to be Secretary of State? Absolutely. No question. And most people who argue that he shouldn't have been Secretary of State, that there were other people, just missed the point. Everybody who knows him and saw him in action then, or sees him in action now, knows that he was a man of great stature and, in my view, the best qualified man in 1961 to be Secretary of State.

RICHARD RUSK: He probably was one of the best qualified we've ever had.

HOLBROOKE: Absolutely. As for his role model for me as an FSO, there's no question that I would not have ever thought of the Foreign Service as a career if it were not for having met Dean Rusk at the most formative point in my life, when I was in high school, and when he was already talking about the Foreign Service, and then while I was in college, at the precise moment I was looking into what career, finding him in Washington as Secretary of State. He was the first person I'd ever known personally who became a person of national importance and he encouraged me in joining the Foreign Service. As for the East Asia job, the fact that I followed him in that job with a gap of twenty-seven years or twenty-five years was just a wonderful coincidence. That was a genuine accident, but one which gave me a certain personal pleasure.

RICHARD RUSK: He had used George [Catlett] Marshall as a model for himself in the performance of his office and the way he conducted himself. Was that also true in the case of Dick Holbrooke and my father, Dean Rusk?

HOLBROOKE: Well, I don't think he was my model by the time I became Assistant Secretary of State. I think he was one of a number of important influences in my life and I admired certain qualities in him immensely, as I still do. But I'd also come under the influence of two or three other people who had given me positive models, notably [William Averell] Harriman and

Clifford, both of whom I'd gotten to know very well and who were very, very different types of people, and there were some important negative models too. Bob [Robert William] Komer was a very strong negative model for me because I did not like what I saw in the way he conducted his business. I thought he showed an unprincipled style. And there were two other important positive models for me: Nick [Nicholas de Belleville] Katzenbach, who had been my direct boss and was one of the most brilliant people I'd ever dealt with or worked for, and Cy [Cyrus Roberts] Vance, who, after all, had given me the job and to whom I owed everything. So he was no longer the single model. He was not as clear a symbol to me as George Marshall was to him. But on the other hand, he was more important in the development of my career than Marshall was in his because I would never have joined the government if it weren't for Dean Rusk; whereas Dean Rusk was already in the government long before he'd ever met George Marshall.

Next question: Pentagon Papers. I think my letter will suffice for the time being. I haven't read the Pentagon Papers now in a long, long time. But my memory is that as we sat in the back office of Robert McNamara, using all the files available to us, the more we looked at the data, the worse McNamara himself looked, and the more inconsistent McNamara looked. While by contrast, Dean Rusk's role became steadier and steadier. On the other hand, there were very, very few documents with Dean Rusk's own footprint on them. He, because of his unique understanding of his relationship with the President, had left very little personal evidence behind of his views. Whereas he would transmit orally and not reduce them to writing, lower level officials had to put things in writing. And that's why the Pentagon Papers will always be an incomplete, although valuable, testimony. They'll tell you more about [John Theodore] McNaughton and [William Putnam] Bundy and [Paul Culliton] Warnke that they will about Rusk and Johnson and [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy. What's particularly missing from the Pentagon Papers, as I've pointed out repeatedly, is the Presidents themselves. Presidents do not send memos to people arguing for policy. They make decisions.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad was criticized for not giving adequate leadership to the Department of State in foreign affairs during the sixties. Some people saw him as being sort of a weak man, not very strong. And yet, in the way he conceptualized his office, all the advice that both of his Presidents got on foreign affairs, as far as the Secretary of State was concerned, come strictly through him. He didn't go in there with a team of people all advising the President: task forces and stuff like that. He bore the responsibility for advice himself. In that sense, is that weakness or is that strength? It seemed like he, personally, giving the way he conceptualized that office, was bearing that responsibility for advising the President totally upon his own shoulders. Is that a point worth speaking of and making?

HOLBROOKE: Well, you see, the words strong and weak are very--by my standards, Dean Rusk was and remains an immensely strong man, the strongest of all the people in the Administration, by far. I don't have any question about that. The word weakness comes from people who do not understand what it required to carry out the kind of role and mission as Secretary of State which Dean Rusk thought was appropriate. Now, he had described the relationship in articles and public speeches for years. It was a relationship which John F. Kennedy had told him he wanted in a Secretary of State. So when Dean Rusk was appointed Secretary of State, John F. Kennedy got exactly what Rusk told him he was going to get. And in that context, it meant total loyalty, an absolute willingness to be a lightning rod and take public

pressure away from the President and observe it on yourself, never duck, never blame it on other people the way Kissinger and [Alexander Meigs] Haig [Jr.] always did, never turn the pressure back on the White House. You know, basically it seems to me there have been two types of Secretaries of State. You've had the loyal subordinates of the President, who conduct themselves impeccably and try to draw heat away from the President, of whom Dean Rusk, Cy Vance, and George [Pratt] Shultz are the epitome. Then there are the politically controversial Secretaries of State who draw attention to themselves, of whom John Foster Dulles, Henry Kissinger and Al Haig are the models. You have a third kind of Secretary of State who are really so passive as to be non-entities, and in that category I would put William [Pierce] Rogers, and maybe Christian [Archibald] Herter--although Herter didn't serve very long--and Ed [Edmund Sixtus] Muskie who, although he was hardly a passive person, served such a short time that he really played no active role. Dean [Gooderham] Acheson is hard to categorize because, while he was immensely loyal, he also became enormously controversial. But the Marshall, Rusk, Vance, Shultz model was the one that Kennedy chose, and he got the ultimate practitioner of that model. That took enormous strength, and anyone who thinks it didn't misunderstands what Dean Rusk stood for. He is an iron man. He never took a vacation. He worked seven days a week, fifty weeks a year or more. He never asked more of his subordinates than he asked of himself. And he distributed the pressures very sparingly on other people. He trusted his deputies, [Chester Bliss] Bowles and [George Wildman] Ball and Katzenbach fully and treated them as almost equals--less so with Chester Bowles, not because he didn't like Bowles, as I understand it, but because Bowles was simply not the right kind of man for that job. But, having done that, it was a very small circle and he was absolutely loyal to that principle.

You say that [Robert Francis] Kennedy considered Dean Rusk a weak man. That was clearly wrong, but it's also important to understand why Bobby Kennedy took that view. Bobby Kennedy was an activist who did not understand the Dean Rusk he thrust for the job. And as Kennedy got more aggressive and more interested in foreign policy, he probably wanted to be a kind of a shadow foreign minister himself. But, I speak now as a person who had the highest affection for Bobby Kennedy and the greatest respect for Dean Rusk. I think that that was another one of those dialogues which never took place. They couldn't straighten out their relationships. They were too conflicted. It was probably not the right thing to do to bring Bobby Kennedy into the Cabinet as Attorney General. It would have been better to keep him in the White House as a personal trouble shooter and close confidant of the President. But as it worked out, it came about that this took on a kind of a Grecian--Greek tragic quality. And now, we're talking here about mythological figures who would be analyzed and talked about for the rest of our lives. The important thing is for us to try to separate reality from myth. The reality is simple, to my mind: Dean Rusk was an iron man. And you can argue with his conception of how he would conduct himself, but you cannot argue that he was weak because, as you look back on the R whole saga now, he was the strongest of them all. But Bobby Kennedy couldn't see that in the days when his brother was President. How could he see that? That was a different world. You know, at that time McNamara looked stronger; Bundy looked stronger. You're talking about 1963 and 1964. Now we have the benefit of hindsight and the breaking up of so many other people. You can see what strength it took for Dean Rusk to stick to what he stood for all these years.

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