

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk GG: Part 3 of 3
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk and James Ralph Beard
circa 1985

The complete interview also includes Rusk EE: Part 1; Rusk FF: Part 2.

DEAN RUSK: The international echoes from Peggy's [Margaret Elizabeth Rusk [Mrs. Guy Smith]] marriage were quite extensive. We had reactions from many parts of the world that we learned about. I think our own embassies abroad were somehow a little reluctant to report much on these things, but these reactions trickled in. They were all positive.

RICHARD RUSK: They were?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: There was quite an international reaction. Do you recall specifically what happened?

DEAN RUSK: No I don't.

RICHARD RUSK: Would the Department have compiled that stuff?

DEAN RUSK: I doubt they would have set up a special classification for pulling all that together.

RICHARD RUSK: What ever happened to all that hate mail we got? I understand you got some in the Department and I remember some at the house.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I would think the so-called hate mail was limited to not more than a dozen letters.

RICHARD RUSK: To the home?

DEAN RUSK: Or to the Department. Oh, two or three of them might have come to the Department but there was very, very little of that.

RICHARD RUSK: It was certainly regarded as a significant step for its time.

DEAN RUSK: Well this was big news. *Time* magazine ran a cover story on Peggy and Guy--on the whole, a pretty good well-balanced story.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall what the advice was that you gave Peg and Guy on that?

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: Peggy and Guy [Smith] were married in the chapel of Stanford University. We all agreed that this marriage would not be announced in advance, and in effect made public, because I did not want the Vietnam protesters to come in there and interfere with or break up Peggy's marriage. That was the sole reason why we kept it quiet ahead of time. Then the moment the marriage was over reporters, cameramen, and everybody else were all there and got their pictures and got their stories. I just didn't want to have these protesters take it out on Peggy when their real object was me. So that was the sole reason for handling it that way.

RICHARD RUSK: James [Howard] Meredith called that the "perhaps the most significant thing to date in government to affect in a favorable way the racial situation in the United States." That's out of the Time magazine article of September 29, 1967. That was the cover story of Peggy's marriage. Did you feel, in your own mind, that it was really that significant a thing in 1967?

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: Since Peggy and Guy, themselves, did not look upon this marriage as in any way symbolic of anything--they weren't doing this to promote some cause or something, they were simply two young people who wanted to get married--I, myself, approached it in this same way. I did not attach or attempt to attach a lot of outside significance to it. So I never tried to interpret it in those terms because I am sure that that was not in the minds of Peggy and Guy.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall what the reaction was among your colleagues in government, or perhaps President Johnson?

DEAN RUSK: Very few of them spoke to me about it. Peggy and Guy got wedding presents from a good many of my colleagues and former colleagues. At one point I did tell Lyndon Johnson that if he thought that this wedding would make it more difficult for me to maintain my relations with the Senator the Congress, if that was his judgment, I would take that into account. He just dropped the remark one day that he had spoken to Senator [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.] of Georgia about it and Senator Russell had said, "Forget it. It won't make any difference at all." So that was the end of that.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you offer to resign? Was that part of it?

DEAN RUSK: Not in so many specific words. If, indeed, some of these southern senators had taken out after me like baying hounds and made it more difficult for me to carry on my responsibilities, I would have had to think about that--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: [Warren I.] Cohen described you as the principal influence in the Graham mission that led to Indonesian independence, the "only anti-colonialist venture of the early post-war years." Was race a factor in this effort with Indonesia and with respect to our foreign policy

in general as a "unilateralist"? Did your battles with the Europeanists within the Department have racial overtones?

DEAN RUSK: It's a little hard to measure, to extract out the racial issues from overriding political issues. You see, the United States looked with favor on the granting of independence to those large colonial areas at the end of World War II: India, Burma, Malaya, and so forth. But at the heart of the Indonesian independence issue was a very simple overriding fact. That is that the Dutch simply did not have the capability of maintaining their control over the Indonesians if the Indonesians were ready to resist, which they were. There was a very critical interview/discussion between Secretary of State George [Catlett] Marshall and the Dutch Prime Minister at the time in which Marshall simply pointed out as a military man that the Netherlands would bleed itself dry trying to assert its control over Indonesia and would fail, and that no one would come to help them, and that therefore they had no choice but to get out. I think that was the critical point, quite apart from the broad, sympathetic policy we had toward the independence of colonial areas. That was the clincher: that they simply couldn't do it and we wouldn't help them.

RICHARD RUSK: This clash between the Europeanists and unilateralists: you know, between such people as George [Frost] Kennan and perhaps Dean [Gooderham] Acheson and others-- Looking at them and from what you knew about those people personally, individually, did you think racial attitude was part of the makeup of the Europeanists? Did you ever suspect that?

DEAN RUSK: It's hard to sort that one out. The problems we had with these independence movements, with the Bureau of European Affairs in the State Department, derived I think fundamentally from the fact that the Bureau of European Affairs was responsible for trying to build good relations between ourselves and Europe and this was a potential major point of friction. This was at the time when we were trying to work with our friends in Europe to rebuild Europe and making the first steps toward the Marshall Plan and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and things of that sort. So it's inevitable that my office, the United Nations Office or later the Far Eastern Office, would have some differences with the Bureau of European Affairs because our responsibilities were different.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't remember race being discussed, per se?

DEAN RUSK: No. I don't think that this was on a racial basis.

RICHARD RUSK: Moving ahead twenty years: Some of the critics of Vietnam have cast their objections to that war in racial terms, stating that the massive use of American fire power against Asians never would have occurred against Caucasian peoples had we been fighting Caucasians instead. How do you respond to a charge like that?

DEAN RUSK: I would simply begin by saying it simply was not true. We helped South Korea defend itself against the North Koreans where Asians had elected to put themselves in the position of the aggressor. We helped South Vietnam defend itself against North Vietnam. After all, it was Asians who were moving in on South Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia. And we made a major effort during the Vietnam War to keep the impact upon civilians limited. There's one story about Vietnam that has never been told and I have suggested it to a number of reporters

who simply were not interested. That is the additional casualties we took because of the rules of engagement which were designed to protect civilians.

RICHARD RUSK: If someone was interested in developing a story along those lines--I'm not saying that I'm the one to do it--where would they look for that material?

DEAN RUSK: They would have to comb over a good deal of material. They would have to start with the Rules of Engagement, which are publicly available. Then they would have to comb over a good many materials in the Pentagon: the operational reports and things of that sort. I remember one full year after the bombing started in 1965: After one full year of that, the North Vietnamese put out a story reporting that there had been five hundred civilian casualties as a result of the bombing. Well now, in terms of bombing, five hundred for a full year is just nothing. I still have on my conscience the fact that we asked our own men sometimes to do things the hard way rather than the easy way in order to save civilian casualties. At those Tuesday luncheon sessions with President Johnson, when we were looking at a particular bombing target, if you approached the bombing target from one direction there would be less defensive resistance in terms of anti-aircraft and things of that sort, but there would be a greater risk of civilian casualties through overages or shorts. Whereas, if you went in in another way, there would be far less risk of civilian casualties but more defense. And there were times when we would send our flyers through the more difficult way in order to protect civilians. That's a very tough decision to make.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, either as a private citizen or a public official, have you ever been called a racist or accused of discriminatory attitudes or practices?

DEAN RUSK: I think only on one occasion. Somewhere in a press conference or something, somebody asked me about the People's Republic of China and I made three very factual statements about China: One, there would be a billion of them. Second, that they would be armed with nuclear weapons. And third, that we didn't know what their policies and attitudes would be twenty years down the road. Well, [James Barrett] Scotty Reston and, I think, [Eugene J.] Gene McCarthy picked that up and charged me with raising the "yellow peril" notion in racial terms. I don't know anybody who didn't know that there were going to be a billion Chinese and they'd be armed with nuclear weapons. And I didn't know anybody who knew what their policies would be twenty years later. These were just very simple, factual points. Well, about two or three weeks later, Scotty Reston halfway apologized for this in one of his later columns, but it was buried so deep in there it never caught up with his original column.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you call that to his attention?

DEAN RUSK: I sure did.

RICHARD RUSK: What did you do? Phone him?

DEAN RUSK: I don't know whether I saw him or phoned him. I don't know. But he knew perfectly well that I wasn't raising the yellow peril in racial terms. That wasn't in my mind at all. And I think he would be the first today to confirm that that is so. I think that's about the only

time I was ever accused of personal racism. Let me think a little bit more about that.

RICHARD RUSK: Both in Scarsdale, New York, and Spring Valley, Washington, D.C., you refused to sign residential sale agreements that would prevent the future sale of those homes to blacks. Do you care to comment on this and, if you would, on any other ways in which you may have lived your personal life in a racially tolerant manner.

DEAN RUSK: When we bought our little home in Washington, D.C. there on Quebec Street just below American University, we found that for many, many years, decades the deed had provided that the home could not be sold to Africans or Asians or "denizens of the Ottoman empire"--(laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: It was in the deed, huh?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, it was in the actual deed itself. So I asked my lawyers to figure out how we could knock that out.

RICHARD RUSK: Had you already signed the agreement?

DEAN RUSK: I had not closed it at that time.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you see it yourself or did someone--

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I saw the deed. I have always remembered that phrase "denizens of the Ottoman empire." This was a 19th century deed, probably. My lawyers, who were themselves very liberal, advised that the process of changing a deed is so complicated, time consuming, and difficult that the best way to handle it would be simply to file a statement with the deed that I considered those clauses unconstitutional and would not comply with them. And that's what I did. Of course, they maintain that kind of discrimination also by resale contracts, which I refused to sign. That is, the real estate agent from whom we bought that little house in Washington was pretty well-known around town as dealing only in properties for whites. They wanted me to sign a resale agreement that if I ever wanted to sell that house I would sell it through them. And that would help to preserve the discrimination pact. But I didn't sign their resale agreement. Although, in fact, I think we may have sold the house through that particular firm, as it happened.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you have an unpleasant exchange with that fellow over that point?

DEAN RUSK: No. Not particularly.

RICHARD RUSK: Was the Scarsdale house purchase set up the same way?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think it was in the deed. I think this has disappeared now, but in Scarsdale the real estate people tried to guide Jewish families into a particular section of town.

RICHARD RUSK: What section of Scarsdale was that? Fox Meadow?

DEAN RUSK: Fox Meadow section. They discouraged even Jews from coming into Greenacres, although we did in fact have a number of Jews there. We didn't have problems with black discrimination in Scarsdale because we didn't have any blacks. I don't know that there were any blacks at all living in Scarsdale except as live-in maids and servants for people.

RICHARD RUSK: That's what I remember.

DEAN RUSK: The discrimination in Scarsdale while we were there was on religious grounds rather than racial grounds. Now that has largely disappeared, I am happy to say.

RICHARD RUSK: You may need a little time to think, but do you recall any ways in which you may have ordered your personal life to try to live in a racially tolerant way?

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: When we lived in Scarsdale, you will remember that the Scarsdale Golf Club was just two or three blocks down the hill across a railroad track. I was invited more than once to join. Although it would have been wonderful for you kids to have been able to--

RICHARD RUSK: It sure would. That was a great place. As a matter of fact we used to sneak on the course.

DEAN RUSK: --to run down the hill for a swim or to play golf or tennis or whatever. I could not in conscience join a club to which, for example, I could not invite the trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation. And since this club would not admit Jews, much less blacks, I just refused membership.

RICHARD RUSK: You had Jewish trustees at the Foundation?

DEAN RUSK: Well, sure. And also, just as a general matter of principle I didn't feel it was up to me to join that particular kind of situation. Whether they have changed that now, I just don't know. It was typical around New York in those days to have Gentile country clubs and there were a few Jewish country clubs.

RICHARD RUSK: Why was it you were rather insistent on Peg and Dave [David Patrick Rusk] and myself going to a public high school, public school system rather than a private?

DEAN RUSK: Part of it was not principle at all, it was just money. (laughter) I don't think we could have afforded it. But also there was a pretty general sense that if people like we were didn't patronize the public schools, that we would turn the public schools more and more into a class element in our society. When I was in the cabinet in Washington you kids went to public schools. Some of the children of my good liberal friends were off in private schools.

RICHARD RUSK: I would say, most of the children of your liberal friends were in private schools.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. No, we've always felt and strongly supported the public school system. Mom and I were active in PTAs [Parent-Teacher Associations] here and there, particularly active in Scarsdale. It has just been our general orientation and attitude.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you ever get involved with Dave in his Urban League work in Washington while you were Secretary? Dave had entered the, joined the Urban League in the aftermath of Martin Luther King's march on Washington and his famous speech of "I Have a Dream." I believe he worked there for four or five years as one of the leading officers in the Urban League.

DEAN RUSK: Dave and I did not cross paths in connection with our respective jobs and responsibilities, but we saw each other frequently and talked about his work in the Urban League. I think he enjoyed it.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, do you recall meeting with any of the protest groups in the sixties while you were Secretary, related to perhaps any of the marches on Washington?

DEAN RUSK: There was a poor march on Washington?

RICHARD RUSK: Poor People's March?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, mostly black. They came up and pitched their tents in the mud and all that sort of thing. One of the black leaders--was it Ralph [David] Abernathy?

RICHARD RUSK: I think it was Ralph Abernathy, yeah.

DEAN RUSK: --insisted upon meeting with me as Secretary of State. So I received him and a group of twenty-five or thirty of his colleagues. At that meeting they handed me a list of questions and points on which they wanted replies. When I looked through there, none of these had to do with foreign policy. They all were about domestic matters. So I simply distributed those questions to other cabinet members and they put together some replies. Then we assembled that and sent it over to Ralph Abernathy. Then he wanted to have another meeting with me before the news reporters and TV cameras and things of that sort.

RICHARD RUSK: Was this first meeting before the press at all?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: Just privately? Was it up in your office?

DEAN RUSK: It was up in the Department somewhere. I don't think it was in my office. There were too many of them. It was somewhere else. He wanted a press conference with me on these answers. Well, they weren't my answers and I wasn't prepared to get into them. It wasn't my business to get into them and I refused that press conference. I didn't feel that he should use me, as Secretary of State, just to create a demonstration against my cabinet colleagues by being very

critical about the replies they had made to his questions. I simply refused to meet him the second time.

RICHARD RUSK: I think [William] Ramsey Clark had been through that experience and I think he had advised you that it probably wasn't an experience worth repeating.

DEAN RUSK: That's possible.

RICHARD RUSK: You asked me for my opinion about it, I remember that.

DEAN RUSK: Well I did meet with him the first time.

RICHARD RUSK: I've got one final question and that is: The South has historically, and still even today, has come under criticism from other sections of the country, particularly up North, for being backward in their racial views and being an intolerant section of the country. Yet, you've grown up in the South. You've had the chance to see these issues on a national level. Care to comment upon these sectional differences? Is it in fact true, as the critics claim that it is, that the South is more intolerant toward black people?

DEAN RUSK: I just don't think that is true, generally speaking. I think with a little luck the South will be able to show the way to the rest of the country in race relations. You see, back in the old days when the theory was wrong about the white-black relationship, nevertheless there was an infinity of personal relationships between whites and blacks in all sorts of ways. Now, when the theory came to be straightened out, those personal relationships continued. Whites and blacks would join with each other in all sorts of common enterprises. There has been something there to build on in a way that you don't have in a place like south Boston, or in Watts, or in the south side of Chicago, and things like that.

RICHARD RUSK: Well there simply just hasn't been any contact between the people there.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. So, I think that the South is in a position to make a major contribution on these race relations. You see, in the North, you have these problems where you have blacks. In a good many places in the North there are not any blacks so there is no problem, and they can take a very lofty attitude about these matters. Where you do have blacks in large numbers, there are problems in the North as well as in the South. They are withering away, but they are still there.

RICHARD RUSK: There was a great deal of progress in race relations during the sixties, especially the earlier part of the sixties, then greater tension in the late sixties, a lot of ghettos burning, a lot of public protest; some discouragement in the seventies, more or less in economic terms where blacks had obtained their rightful status under law, but were still suffering the effects of economic poverty and discrimination. Are you optimistic that this country will continue to make success in civil rights?

DEAN RUSK: We'll make progress, but the progress will depend in part on the general tone of the leadership we have in Washington, particularly in the White House. I don't think that has been particularly hopeful in recent years. I think it's very bad indeed that black unemployment is

double that of white unemployment typically. I think it's still true that the blacks do not come out of higher education as sharply trained as a good many whites. Therefore, I think it's still true that some of them find that they are not competitive where competitive jobs are involved. That will steadily improve, but I just don't buy this attitude that somehow the North is far ahead of the South in race relations these days. After all, you've got an elected black mayor of the city of Atlanta and a good many other southern cities. You've got lots of black elected officials around the South. The black business community is steadily developing and moving ahead. So I think these things are changing.

END OF SIDE 2

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