

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection  
Rusk HHHHH: Part 1 of 3  
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk and Thomas J. Schoenbaum  
1985 November 5

The complete interview also includes Rusk IIIII: Part 2; Rusk JJJJJ: Part 3.

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally, my dad has spoken at great length about many issues of the Vietnam War on other tapes, providing the context and background, a lot of the overall policy questions, the history of the Vietnam decision-making. And I'm going to leave space--this oral history my dad has spoken about Vietnam on Tapes C, D, T [in an interview with the Wall Street Journal], and Tapes MM through QQ with William [Putnam] Bundy as an interviewer. That's a five-tape series.

DEAN RUSK: I might say that there will be many details of this period that are simply not in my mind. It may be a combination of things. It may be that this was a rather distressing chapter that I deliberately flushed from my mind. But beyond that, in 1968 I was just plain bone tired. I was exhausted. And I think that might come out in my inability to provide a good many of the details. But you go ahead with your questions. We'll see where we get.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, you're talking about seventeen years after the fact, too. So that doesn't help matters.

DEAN RUSK: Right. Some of these questions you might find answers to in the oral histories I gave to the JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] and LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson] Libraries; but we'll see.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. Pop, according to the appointment books that the LBJ Library sent us from January 27-31, you had continual meetings with your Vietnam advisers. Do you remember that? For four days, prior to the outbreak of the Tet Offensive you met with, for example--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: You definitely knew something was in the works and that a serious offensive was being contemplated.

DEAN RUSK: Yes. I think it was truly (unintelligible). We did believe that the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong were getting ready for a major effort in early 1968. Many signs pointed in that direction. The actual Tet offensive was not, in a sense, a strategic surprise but it was a technical surprise, because I was among those who thought that it was rather unlikely that the North Vietnamese would launch such an offensive right in the middle of the Tet holidays. Just as the two sides in World War I would sometimes stand down for Christmas, it has been the cultural experience out there that they would pause during the Tet holidays while people joined their families and recognized Tet, celebrated Tet. So the launching of the offensive right in the

middle of the Tet holidays was itself somewhat of a surprise. Now it's true that at that time, because of Tet, a considerable number of the South Vietnamese forces had been given brief leaves to be home with their families. But that was not true of the American forces. We were in a reasonable state of alert, as far as the American forces were concerned.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you get involved in that decision: whether or not to keep the Americans on alert or persuade the South Vietnamese to stay on alert?

DEAN RUSK: No, that would have been a military matter. I doubt that Washington was much involved in that. That was more or less [William Childs] Westmoreland's responsibility.

RICHARD RUSK: Did any of your Vietnamese specialists refer to the several instances in Vietnam history where the Tet offensive was actually the occasion for epic surprise attacks--Oh, this is something that occurred back in 1789, when a former Vietnamese commander--

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: Nothing like that?

DEAN RUSK: No, I don't recall that.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, that's the kind of thing--

DEAN RUSK: But these cultural factors seemed to be of some importance in that area. For example, the King of Laos decided that he would bury his father. And for that occasion he was planning to gather together all the notables of the country up in Luang Prabang, the royal capital. But the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese were just thirty or forty miles away. And we expressed to the King some concern that if he pulled all the notables together up there for that occasion, that these North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces would just come over there and seize them all. He said, "They won't do that. I'm burying my father!" And he was right. I mean, the other side left them alone. So, you know, sometimes it seems a little spooky, but these cultural factors had been an important factor. We'd learned, for example, in Laos, Cambodia that if you tried to do business on an unpropitious day you might as well stay at home. You've got to find a propitious day in which you are trying to do business with them.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. In the view of the fact that you guys knew that an attack was coming and it was likely to be major in the view of the buildup that you had observed, was it a mistake not to alert the American people that some hard fighting was immediately in the works?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I don't know what was said or reported from out there at the time.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that an issue that was discussed?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall the actual discussion of it. I don't think normally you would make a big public to-do about something which has not yet occurred, because it might not occur. The same question could be asked about the Battle of the Bulge. There we were pretty uninformed. I

don't recall that we took any special steps to alert the public that something big was coming. But one would have to check the reporting from out there to see. That normally would have come out of Westmoreland's headquarters.

SCHOENBAUM: Do you remember, was it a bombshell type of thing or did you start getting these reports of the Tet offensive? And then did you have a crisis meeting? Or did you communicate with LBJ? It must have been a surprise. What was your reaction? Did LBJ call you? Do you remember any details of the first action there?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we did not think that the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong could overwhelm American and South Vietnamese forces in any such offensive. We thought that it would be repulsed. At what cost, we could not be sure, because we didn't know just where the Tet offensive would be launched and what places. But in some respects one can compare this to the Battle of the Bulge. And it appeared at the time that this was almost a last major military effort by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong, because they shot the works in committing such manpower as they had.

RICHARD RUSK: That alone was a very lively debate within the administration I take it: the actual effects of Tet and what the Tet offensive signified. Clark [McAdams] Clifford said, in my interview with him, that he heard the talk that the Tet offensive was, in fact, an American victory. And he said he just didn't believe it at all.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. Well, I disagree with Clark on that.

RICHARD RUSK: That was a point of contention within the administration at that time?

DEAN RUSK: I think from the point of view--Well, on something like that, I suppose it's natural, but one tends to interpret such events from one's own point of view. And to me it appeared to be a last gas effort, from a military point of view, by the opposing forces. Now Clark Clifford's orientation was by that time somewhat different. And he might have looked upon it in another way.

SCHOENBAUM: What did LBJ think at that time?

DEAN RUSK: Well, he was concerned about the military impact of the operation. He wanted to be sure that it was repelled. We were concerned that one or two major cities had been infested by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. And I think it took two or three weeks to winkle them out of way.

SCHOENBAUM: He was of the "Battle of the Bulge" school rather than the "Clark Clifford" school.

DEAN RUSK: I think so. As a matter of fact, I'm convinced--and perhaps this is my own slant on the matter: I thought that had it not been for the strong voices of dissent here in this country that the North Vietnamese and Vietcong might well have decided to call it off after the Tet offensive had failed, because they took terrible losses in that offensive. It shot the works and had

not achieved what they had hoped for. Apparently they were looking for a general uprising among the South Vietnamese people, which simply did not occur.

RICHARD RUSK: Did the strength of that attack and the fact that they attacked cities and towns all over South Vietnam in very widespread fashion, did that surprise you as well, in addition to the fact that they struck during the Tet holidays?

DEAN RUSK: In many places their attacks were not a high level of force, they could be overwhelming in character. But in some places they concentrated forces that could occupy Wei, for example, [and] I think perhaps, part of Da Nang. And they penetrated to the American embassy in Saigon. But this illustrates the disparity which we were working with during that whole business. If you have guerrilla forces that are geared to hit and run, and they can select their targets at times of their own choosing, this imposes an enormous burden upon the defense forces which are trying to defend these various areas. Usually one heard in those days about the point that defense needs at least ten- to-one strength over against a guerrilla-type enemy, just to protect the provincial capitals and the other areas that you are trying to hold safe because the guerrillas can pick and choose. And that imposes a great disparity. We could never bring the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong to a decisive pitched battle, for example, which we would, I think, readily have won, because they would simply fade away and bide their time and strike again. I think [we] gave the wrong signal to Hanoi.

RICHARD RUSK: On February 4 you appeared with Bob [Robert Strange] McNamara on "Meet the Press" and both of you called the Tet offensive a defeat for the VC. February 7 you went to the medical unit at--Where was that? Walter Reed?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we had a medical unit in our own Department.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you having physical problems during that time that you remember?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I had dropped by occasionally, but still my aching gut, which still aches to this day. But I don't recall any important physical problem at that time.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. February 9th you gave a press backgrounder over questions about the failure of American intelligence in Vietnam. At least those were the questions you were getting from the press. And that was the scene of your famous, in some people's eyes, blow up, where you said, "There gets to be a point when the question is 'Whose side are you on?'" Do you recall anything about that incident?

DEAN RUSK: In one of those Friday backgrounders John [Alfred] Scali, then with ABC [American Broadcasting Company], asked me a question which was, to me, a very loaded question: no win kind of question. And I turned to him and said, "Whose side are you on?" Now my thought was at the time that if the United States goes down, there are not going to be any television networks, not going to be any newspapers that whatever they thought their roles were as reporters, they also were Americans. But yet that question to John Scali was picked up later by the press and used as though I was engaged in the rape of the vestal virgins. It was amusing later

when John Scali became our ambassador to the United Nations. I reminded him that he was going to be asking a good many people up there "Whose side are you on?" (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Did he become ambassador while you were there?

DEAN RUSK: No, no. That was during the Nixon years. He's back with ABC now.

SCHOENBAUM: I think what surprised people was that it was so uncharacteristic. You never lose your temper. You never showed your emotions.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I don't think I blew my top. I just put that question to him very directly and it rather startled him and startled some of the others there. I still think that it's an appropriate question when we talk about major issues. And there are times--I never looked upon myself as a man from Mars, looking at opposing camps as being more or less on an equal footing and that kind of thing. I felt that I had a client: the United States. That I was there to represent the interest and the policies of the United States. And I felt that I was on our side. And so I wasn't a referee in any sense; I was an advocate.

SCHOENBAUM: You felt that he was going beyond gathering news and he was being an advocate for the other side, in effect, an unwitting advocate?

DEAN RUSK: Unwitting. I would put it that way.

SCHOENBAUM: I don't mean to imply his disloyalty or anything like that.

DEAN RUSK: I forget now his exact question. I'm sorry we didn't keep transcripts of those meetings. But it was a very loaded question.

RICHARD RUSK: Well the press is good at doing that, as you referred to elsewhere. Pop, at this same time the siege of Khe Sanh was going on. And to what extent were you involved with those decisions? Let me finish my question. Were you uneasy about the military assurances that Khe Sanh could be held? What about the threat of continuous bad weather and the lack of air support that bad weather would entail? We've already talked a little bit about Khe Sanh, but go ahead, have a whack at it.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Khe Sanh came to be a kind of symbol related to the memories of Dienbienphu. And Lyndon Johnson came to attach great importance to the defense of Khe Sanh as a symbolic matter. And so he told our military to do everything they could to hold Khe Sanh.

SCHOENBAUM: So it was his idea to basically hold Khe Sanh?

DEAN RUSK: Well, basically yes.

RICHARD RUSK: I think Westmoreland was for it too.

DEAN RUSK: Westmoreland. But we devastated the area around Khe Sanh with bombing. I don't think any area has ever had as intensive bombing as the area around Khe Sanh, and including pinpoint bombing by B-52s. We just turned the area around Khe Sanh into a moonscape. But this came to be a kind of symbolic thing for Lyndon Johnson and for a good many others.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you get involved?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I was not heavily involved. But I hoped we would be able to hold Khe Sanh because, again, this symbolic aspect of it would have a bearing on attitudes on policy because it would have readily been compared to Dienbienphu had we lost it.

RICHARD RUSK: That's for sure.

DEAN RUSK: And Johnson was determined not to lose it if we could avoid it.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you get pretty worried about losing Khe Sanh? You know, bad weather can set in over there and that really reduces the air supply, air strikes.

DEAN RUSK: Well, we were concerned about it because the North Vietnamese were making a major effort to take Khe Sanh. They flew in heavy forces to try to take Khe Sanh. And they took terrific losses with all that bombing.

RICHARD RUSK: I think at one point LBJ made all his generals sign a piece of paper saying they would definitely promise to hold Khe Sanh.

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember that. (laughter)

SCHOENBAUM: But it was LBJ who had in his mind a comparison to Dienbienphu.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think you'll find there was press speculation kind of associating these two situations.

SCHOENBAUM: Yes, chicken and egg situation. Did he put it in his mind, the comparison, as a result of the press speculation? Sometimes it was told to the press that this was like--I had the impression at the time that the press was told that this was like Dienbienphu and we were going to win, that kind of thing. And we did. We did hold it.

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember the sequence of events there. But, anyhow, you got caught up with the special symbolic value. And we did hold it.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Were tactical nuclear weapons ever discussed as a hole card, with respect to Khe Sanh?

DEAN RUSK: No.



RICHARD RUSK: Never?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, from February 3rd on, according to these various accounts that have been written, the immediate reaction to the Tet offensive, in terms of you, in terms of Lyndon Johnson, Joint Chiefs and others, was to put the pressure on, that this was, in fact, an enemy defeat. And LBJ himself was reported to be a bit more warlike, a bit more hawkish than he later became in late February and March. Now if the decisions had been made then, if the decision had not been to delay and "Let's sort things out and see what we are going to do," was it at all possible or likely that we would have pushed ahead with a tougher approach?

DEAN RUSK: In retrospect, the question would arise as to whether we should have followed up by very intensive offensive operations following the Tet offensive to try to mop up. But against guerrilla forces that's not easy. And so we didn't have the chance to really drive home the severe losses that the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese had sustained. Whether we could have done more during that period, I don't know. But it didn't take long for us to realize that what we thought was a major military setback for the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong was becoming a brilliant political victory for those people here on the home front in the United States.

SCHOENBAUM: Just to follow up, those were--Of course, that was the time of New Hampshire, and [Eugene Joseph] McCarthy, and then later Bobby [Robert Francis] Kennedy jumped in. LBJ was acutely aware of that. To what extent was that on his mind? Was it constantly on his mind that that was part--

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I don't think that was very much on his mind because he had already decided that he was not going to run again. I've told you on another tape that he had talked to me about that a year before.

SCHOENBAUM: But he still wouldn't have wanted to be embarrassed, which he was when Eugene McCarthy rolled up that vote in New Hampshire. That must have been a personal embarrassment, even though he figured, "I'm not going to run. It doesn't make any difference." But it still must have--

DEAN RUSK: But that became a part of the understanding that we were getting in those weeks and months following the Tet Offensive, that here on the home front people at the grass roots were beginning to say, "Well, if you can't tell us when this thing is going to be over, we might as well chuck it."

SCHOENBAUM: And that's what really turned it around for Nixon.

DEAN RUSK: And I think that the Tet Offensive, particularly the reporting on the Tet Offensive as described by Peter Braestrup in his book *The Big Story*, had a good deal to do with that swing of opinion at the grass roots. But then some of the so-called wisemen also turned around.

RICHARD RUSK: We're going way ahead in terms of chronology, and we've already spoken to a good deal of this. Let's back up. This Harry [Herbert Y.] Schandler I talked with, Pop, who wrote this book [The Unmaking of a President] on this period, has this theory that General [Earle Gilmore] Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs perhaps took advantage of the Tet Offensive to force Lyndon Johnson's hand and achieve the mobilization of reserved forces that they had asked for. Do you think that was one reason behind the 206,000-man troop request? Here was an opportunity--

DEAN RUSK: I don't have the details, but my recollection was that Lyndon Johnson himself stimulated Westmoreland to put in his bid for the forces he would need in certain contingencies, and that the initiative for opening up this question of the 206,000 additional men came from LBJ. But then when the figures came in, we all looked at it and decided that, among other things, that an additional 200,000 men would not make the difference between success and non-success out there from a military point of view. You see, we had an enormous tail out there behind our own combat forces.

RICHARD RUSK: This part we have. We've talked about the fact that we could have better utilized our forces.

DEAN RUSK: And the South Vietnamese forces. Well, I remember one report that indicated that a combat soldier in Vietnam would be in actual combat maybe two or three days a month. You see, this was a period when we were placing the professional soldiers with new draftees on a promise that we would send them home after one year's service out there. And when a fellow had gotten in a few months out there, he didn't want to become a casualty with a trip home in mind. And so this raises serious questions about whether that's the way that we can ever fight a war.

RICHARD RUSK: With one year rotation?

DEAN RUSK: Right. I remember visiting, going through North Africa on the way to India with General [Joseph Warren] Stilwell. And we stopped off where the great First Division was, in North Africa. And their morale was temporarily shot, in this fine, elite division, because the word had circulated among them that after the North African operation they were going home. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: That's a tough rumor to have to put out.

DEAN RUSK: That's a sure way to destroy the morale of a military unit, particularly if the rumor wasn't reality. The same thing happened to [Frank Dow] Merrill's Marauders. They were told after a certain operation they would go home. This was a key question in terms of the morale of troops.

RICHARD RUSK: Was Stilwell deliberately misleading the Marauders on that point? Circumstances changed.

DEAN RUSK: No, it was one of those rumors that get started among the men themselves.



RICHARD RUSK: February 13th you fellows discussed the reserve call up at the White House. February 17th LBJ made that trip to Fort Bragg to say good-bye to the 82nd Airborne.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, I remember that.

RICHARD RUSK: He was going back there for another trip. Included in that group were some veterans who had been there before. And some of those people were real unhappy about going back. They didn't show any enthusiasm for returning. And accordingly it was one of the most painful experiences of the Vietnam War for LBJ. This trip to Fort Bragg being one of the most painful things of the war: do you remember him talking about it? And my second question would be: What were those particularly painful personal experiences for you in that whole period? Start with LBJ.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I said before that except for the men and women who carried the battle and their families, no one agonized over Vietnam more than Lyndon Johnson. He would get up at 4:30 or 5:00 every morning to go down to the Operations Center to check on the casualty list in Vietnam. And everyone one of them just took a little piece out of him.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember him talking about that experience?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, I remember his commenting about how difficult it was for him to go to Fort Bragg and send these fellows back for another tour of duty. It was a painful experience for him. I remember on occasion driving with LBJ through a small town, and people would be lining the sidewalk. And he would turn to me and say, "These are the mothers and fathers of our men in Vietnam. Take a good look at them." Well, he suffered the agony of a Commander-in-Chief when he was having to commit men to combat, and I think he felt it very deeply.

RICHARD RUSK: How about your own experiences? Granted LBJ was making the decisions. But you and others were advising him. I'm talking about those personal human experiences that you might recall.

DEAN RUSK: You see, I have deeply, deeply regretted every casualty of every war fought in my lifetime. That begins with World War I. To me, war is the principal obscenity on the face of the human race. It just makes no sense at all for us to kill each other off. And so I felt these things very strongly. But I had a duty to perform.

RICHARD RUSK: What about that Army nurse? That type of thing.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, I still remember visiting a hospital in Saigon where the severely wounded men were. And while I was going through these wards I remember an Army nurse--I think she was a captain; maybe she was a major--who looked at me with what I thought was undisguised hatred. She didn't say a word. But it was clear that she was holding me personally responsible for what had happened to these men. I've often thought I would like to have a chance to meet her again and talk things over with her. That I understand, and I never forgot the look on that nurse's face. No, you feel those things.

RICHARD RUSK: Any other experiences like that that you would want to put on tape?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I have written a good many letters to the families of people who were lost in Vietnam, particularly people I knew personally and things of that sort. I never made any of those public because I don't want that kind of letter, about which I feel very deeply, to be the subject of scorn and cynicism on the part of other people. So I have kept all that private.

SCHOENBAUM: Is this while you were Secretary?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. But those are not easy letters to write.

RICHARD RUSK: [C.] Jane Mossellem and Gus [P.] Peleuses told me that during that one trip to Vietnam you made that you would go in there where these troops were. Wherever you went you would get right with these American forces, and one at a time want to know where they lived and what their names were, and the addresses of their parents. And they say you came back from that trip and your pockets were just stuffed with these notes.

DEAN RUSK: I would write notes to their parents.

RICHARD RUSK: You would write notes to their families.

DEAN RUSK: You know, I stopped making those visits to Vietnam for a very specific reason.

RICHARD RUSK: That we have. We got that on an earlier tape.

DEAN RUSK: Okay.

RICHARD RUSK: Anything else along this general line? You know, the war comes home to all of you in very human terms.

DEAN RUSK: You see, I had been on both ends of this syndrome. I had served in World War II, convinced that World War II could have been prevented. And I was fed to the teeth with that thought. Yet, we who thought that way nevertheless did our duty during World War II. So these things do stir up the deepest possible feelings. But when I found myself on the other end of it, supporting policies which committed our own men to combat, you feel that side of it. I think it's somewhat easier to be on the receiving end than on the giving.

END OF SIDE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

SCHOENBAUM: --from people in Vietnam, that people would write him directly, troops would write him directly. And he would personally set aside some time to read those letters. Do you know about that?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I know that that happened. But I myself did not read those letters or decide to which ones of them he would reply to or anything like that. I was simply not involved in that. He did get quite a number of letters from people out there. And on the whole these letters were letters of support.

SCHOENBAUM: They were sustaining letters?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, right. I think once in a blue moon or so he would quote one of these letters. And I know he shared some of those letters with people in Congress.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, getting back to the chronology. On February 27th you had your first meeting to consider the Wheeler Report, which asked for the additional 206,000 men. The situation in South Vietnam was still a little precarious. [Walt Whitman] Rostow recommended the formation of a task force, to be chaired by Clifford, to consider Wheeler's recommendations. On February 28th you attended your only meeting that you attended of the task force on Vietnam.

DEAN RUSK: I think that was in Clifford's office wasn't it?

RICHARD RUSK: Yes, that's right. What were the instructions from LBJ on what that task force was supposed to do?

DEAN RUSK: Well, it was supposed to look at this so-called request from Westmoreland and advise the President on how we should handle it. But it soon became apparent that this group was not going to recommend the dispatch of another 200,000 men out there.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember getting a memo from LBJ on what that task force was supposed to do?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall it.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall the memo?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. But, you see, one thing that was very much in the minds of the top command--the President, the Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff - - was the state of our strategic reserve, because we had begun to call down on our strategic reserve for Vietnam, and we were even drawing key personnel out of our forces in Europe and NATO for service in Vietnam. I was somewhat more relaxed than some of the others were on that point because I felt that our forces in Vietnam were a part of our strategic reserve where they were and that if we needed them somewhere else we would move them to another locality, say in Europe. So I was not quite as disturbed as Senator [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.] and some others were about it

because I did not look upon our forces in Vietnam as somehow removed from our strategic reserves.

RICHARD RUSK: If you had gotten a memo, if you personally had gotten a memo from LBJ on what that task force was supposed to do, would you have remembered the fact that you had gotten it?

DEAN RUSK: Not necessarily.

RICHARD RUSK: Not necessarily. That's part of the controversy of this period.

DEAN RUSK: Memos were flying all over town all through this period.

RICHARD RUSK: In LBJ's book, *The Vantage Point*, he takes the point of view that he more or less assigned this task group the responsibility of taking a look at the whole context of the war. And there's been some controversy on that point. He claims that he sent the memo, and it went to you and other people. Clifford said he never got a copy of that memo.

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall it. No.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall it?

SCHOENBAUM: And that's interesting, isn't it?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, but there were so many memos. You might look to see if in the documentation of the documents of the Pentagon Papers any such memo appeared.

RICHARD RUSK: Moving ahead to February 29th. These meetings continued. Did you have any feeling when that task group was formed, and perhaps after that first meeting, that that group itself would be engaged in really the most fundamental soul-searching questions about the Vietnam War? Did you have a feeling that that was the way that group was going to move?

DEAN RUSK: Not particularly. As soon as I could tell that the consensus clearly was that we would not add another 200,000 men out there, I more or less turned participation of those meetings over to other people in the Department and did not follow through by attending the rest of the meetings personally.

RICHARD RUSK: Did that task force move, and particularly under Clifford's guidance, move in directions and conduct itself in ways that you did not approve? Do you think that group was faithful to LBJ's instructions?

DEAN RUSK: As far as I was concerned, the primary mission of that particular task force at that time was to consider the request for 200,000 men. Now, I'm not sure that the sane task force was the one which developed in terms of a general critique of the war. I think that was more or less an additional activity on the part of Clifford and some of those around him.

RICHARD RUSK: There was another group as well meeting under Paul [Culliton] Warnke's guidance in the Defense Department.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, and then there was that non-committee that met from time to time in Nick [Nicholas de Belleville] Katzenbach's office.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. So there were at least three groups going over these questions. Do you think they adhered faithfully to LBJ's instructions? Or did they move beyond the scope of what was proper for them to do?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think they felt that their job was limited by LBJ's instructions. As advisers to the President, if they thought that there ought to be a change in policy they would be free to recommend a change in policy. Now there were times when I felt that LBJ was a bit impatient about this kind of thing because he wanted to bring the war to a conclusion on reasonable terms. And sometimes a defeatist kind of an approach becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and leads to the very conclusion that LBJ was trying to avoid.

RICHARD RUSK: Who did you rely on for information on Vietnam for your own personal briefings? Who do you recall was really good? Who were those close associates that you really turned to?

DEAN RUSK: Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William Bundy; also, Tom [Thomas Lowe] Hughes and his colleagues in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research; and then one or two people who were involved in the super top secret type of information on which I was briefed every morning. But I tried to look at a variety of sources. I would look at the daily reports of CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], from the Defense Intelligence Agency, from Westmoreland's headquarters. So I had a complex of sources of information.

RICHARD RUSK: And Katzenbach would probably be one?

DEAN RUSK: Well, not so much on the intelligence side because he and I were in the same position. We were consumers of intelligence.

RICHARD RUSK: Did [Richard Charles Albert] Holbrooke ever weigh in back there with any significant information for you?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall any particular role he played at that particular period.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember my phone call from Cornell in the middle of all of this?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: (laughter) I called you from up there and I said, "For God's sake, Pop, don't send all those men over."

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I see.

RICHARD RUSK: I asked you if it were true that these rumors in the newspaper, were these rumors true that suggested that LBJ and the administration were going to send an additional 206,000 men over there. And you immediately answered back with, "Where did you hear that?" as if we had somehow tapped your lines. I told you it was being publicly discussed in the newspapers. And you said you couldn't respond in an open conversation on the phone like that. The next few days you sent me a long letter. I don't know if you remember the letter or the phone call, but I just begged you not to send all those men over there.

DEAN RUSK: I hope I told you to go back to sleep.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, you probably told me to go back and hit the books. Clark Clifford makes a great to-do over the fact that all the China specialists and Asia specialists at that time were suggesting that had we taken another option and moved into North Vietnam with massive forces and tried to occupy North Vietnam, that that would have triggered North Vietnam's mutual assistance pact with the Chinese, and the Chinese would come in. Now, is that what you recall from the advice of these China experts? Was it unanimous in that regard?

DEAN RUSK: I think the judgment was that if we moved ground forces in to occupy North Vietnam, that the chances would be very high indeed that the Chinese would come in. As a matter of fact, I remember one military memorandum--I don't think it was an official memorandum from the Joint Chiefs--but one military memorandum, recommending that we occupy North Vietnam. In that memorandum it said, "We do not think that this will bring in the Chinese. But of course if they do come in that will mean nuclear war." Well, in this military memorandum that looked like a piece of fine print. But that sentence is the kind that just pops out of the page at a President.

RICHARD RUSK: In terms of the general advice you were getting from the Asian experts, whoever they might be, is that what you remember the advice being? Clifford definitely suggested that that was what he was hearing from everybody.

DEAN RUSK: I think that's probably right. There was a general feeling that if we moved in with land forces to occupy North Vietnam, that there would be a very high chance that the Chinese would come in. And we were watching the move on the Chinese forces very carefully to see if they were mobilizing towards the South in China.

SCHOENBAUM: Did they ever do that at any point?

DEAN RUSK: Not on a major scale. Not on a major scale because we didn't get close enough to their own borders to raise that issue with them as had been raised in Korea.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, March 1st you spent a couple of hours with Dean [Gooderham] Acheson. And this was after Clark Clifford's swearing in at the State Department as Secretary of Defense. Was Dean Acheson another person that weighed heavily in your own thinking about Vietnam, particularly at this point? You saw him several times, but March 1st was the first.



DEAN RUSK: Well, during most of the Vietnam experience Dean Acheson was what some people would have called a "hawk": very strong and supportive of military action out there and the need to bring it to a successful conclusion. But then in the spring of '68, after the Tet offensive, he changed his mind. In effect, he came to the conclusion that we ought to cut our losses and bring the thing to a conclusion. There were two or three others of the so-called "wise men" who had a similar change. And that somewhat surprised Lyndon Johnson, and I think had a pretty deep effect on him in his own attitude towards the war.

RICHARD RUSK: That occurs about March 25th, and maybe we can get to it at that time. Do you recall the first meeting of the "wise men" where they came out almost unanimously in support of what the President was doing? This would have been back in 1967, mid- or late 1967. Do you recall that?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, they were I think literally unanimous.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. That's right. One or two mild dissents. But the group itself was unanimous.

DEAN RUSK: Very strongly in support of the effort in Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Did that particular first meeting trigger in particular anecdotes at all?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think so. Well, one thing that Dean Acheson did that I think had some influence, before that meeting--When was it, late March '68?

SCHOENBAUM: March 25th.

DEAN RUSK: He himself talked to several people in the government at third and fourth levels down to get his own understanding of the facts of the situation. And in the course of that he ran across some who felt that the jig was up. And I think that kind of briefing had some bearing on his own change of mind on the matter.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he have an effect on you?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't think so? How about [William] Averell Harriman? You were seeing him a great deal back during those times. It could have been about other matters.

DEAN RUSK: Averell Harriman, as I recall was always in support of the official policy, whatever that was, out there. What his own personal views were, I'm not sure that I ever knew, because he never expressed to me any serious doubt about what we were trying to do. He served for a time, as you remember, as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and he was always what some people called a good soldier in terms of supporting the President's policy on these matters. But he was not one of those who tried to organize a change of policy within the administration.

RICHARD RUSK: [Was there] virtually anyone else, either in or out of government, official or personal, family even, that you turned to for advice on Vietnam that really had an influence on you, particularly during this critical period when policy was more or less up for grabs?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think I looked to those carrying responsibility for advice. People like William Bundy, Bob McNamara, Joint Chiefs of Staff, LBJ himself, and his National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow. I didn't go out talking to columnists and commentators, professors, and people like that.

SCHOENBAUM: But this was the critical time in February when McNamara, in effect, had severe doubts about Vietnam: at least one, to what he called "illuminate the ambiguities of our policy." And I think McNamara's rationalization was that we had fulfilled our duty, and that we can't help a country that is unable to help itself. There are limits. Did he discuss this with you? And did this change your mind at this period?

DEAN RUSK: Well, he and I had some discussions in '64-'65 about the problem of Americanizing the war: that if we put in too much out there then the South Vietnamese would, in effect, turn it over to us and let us take the burden of the fighting, while they themselves, in effect, stood down. We tried to avoid that by assigning different kinds of responsibilities to American and South Vietnamese forces. But there was always the problem of what there was to support in South Vietnam. This was a point that I had brought to President Kennedy's attention while I was--I think in a telegram that I sent him from Tokyo--to be sure that he understood the gravity of a decision to increase American forces out there at all. And in this telegram I raised the question as to what there was to support. That was always a serious problem. In general, we thought there would be some, in effect, division of responsibility by having the South Vietnamese forces undertake the pacification programs in the countryside where they'd be dealing directly with the South Vietnamese people in all sorts of ways. Whereas we would take the brunt of engaging North Vietnamese main forces, where we could locate them and get at them. But I'd have to look that over in great detail to draw any real judgments out of it. As a matter of fact, a few days ago I was on a panel at Wake Forest University with Graham [Anderson] Martin, our final ambassador out there. And he described the operations of the South Vietnamese forces during the first year after the withdrawal of the American forces, in '73, and described them as being really very successful. It was not until the Congress cut off supplies and arms in both military and economic assistance to Vietnam that things began to unravel. But he had been quite impressed with the way the South Vietnamese armed forces had taken hold and had carried the battle out there, even after the U.S. forces had left.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, a lot of the planning that was going on, the policy review that was going on, seemed to occur over on the defense side. You have that group chaired by Clifford: the task force. You had a policy planning staff that was directed by Leslie [Howard] Gelb meeting with his people. They put out the first internal report within the U.S. government attacking the existing policy on Vietnam. Then there was Warnke's group over in the Defense Department. Why was the State Department not involved in taking on some of these big issues and some of these longer range policy questions? Why was all this going on over at the Defense Department?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we did spend a lot of time on these things in the State Department. William Bundy can give you the details. But we didn't do so with hullabaloo. We didn't organize official task forces and things of that sort. We let the normal operations of the Department take hold of these things.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you have people asking the strategic questions: Should we be there? Should we pursue any other options to our present course? What are the consequences of a negotiated settlement now? What are the consequences of an American withdrawal? Did you have groups asking these big questions on the State side? I get the impression that the policy was there; it's in place; we push on with it. And that there wasn't much of that kind of thinking going on in State. It had to be done elsewhere.

DEAN RUSK: Well, this raises some very difficult questions. The policy had been made by the constitutional authorities of the government: the President and the Congress. The duty of the executive branch of the government is to take their directions from those that the people put there to give them directions within the laws in the Constitution. Now it's one thing to look at such questions as you raised. But it's quite another thing to let those questions diminish in any way the support for the policy of the government. And I was rather sensitive on that particular point. It was not for the bureaucracy to decide that the President was wrong, and therefore, the bureaucracy ought to move to somehow undermine the President's policy. If anyone wanted to make a recommendation they shouldn't make it on top of the table; have it considered, have judgments made about it, including any recommendations that would go to the President. I did not, myself, stand in the way of such memoranda or such questions going from me to the President as the views of whoever it might be, because a President ought to have full access to different points of view when he's having to make decisions. But there's a delicate distinction between looking at the alternatives and failing to support the policy.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember this question coming up within the Department itself?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, it came up once or twice in the morning staff meetings, which I held everyday with fifteen or twenty of the top officers of the Department.

RICHARD RUSK: Were there people complaining who were not looking at the big policy questions?

DEAN RUSK: George [Wildman] Ball was the only person in the Department who ever came into my office and dug his heels in the rug and said, "I think what we are doing in Vietnam is wrong." Nobody else did. Nobody, literally! Now, there were two or three people who later resigned. And then after they resigned claimed that they resigned because of Vietnam. But they didn't walk into my office and tell me that they didn't like what we were doing in Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Who were these folks?

DEAN RUSK: Well, there was one fellow. He's died since. He was Assistant Secretary for Cultural Affairs. He used to complain to me about not getting enough money from the Congress for his cultural affairs. But he never came into my office and said, "I'm opposed to what you're

doing in Vietnam." But then after he left office he became a super "dove." Well, I personally expected people to act like men when they're on those jobs and when they think something, come in and say it.

SCHOENBAUM: Can you explain why your relationship with George Ball, as I understand it, remained warm whereas, perhaps, LBJ's relationship with George Ball deteriorated?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I'm not sure that they did, because I think both Kennedy and Johnson both appreciated the ability and courage with which George Ball put another point of view. And I myself greatly valued the fact that he would do that. Now he didn't do it publicly. He didn't go out and campaign against the President's policies. Now, also remember that within the government there were hundreds of issues where George Ball was in full support of what we were trying to do. And that I think was the key thing which caused him to remain in service despite his difference of views on Vietnam, because there were a lot of other things we were accomplishing that he was fully in support of. But I think he did it the honorable way. He made his points within the government to the appropriate people. He did it eloquently with courage, but then didn't go out and try to undermine the administration by gossiping with newsmen and holding his head in his hand and saying, "Oh, my God!" and that kind of thing. The way he did it earned our respect, as well as the content of what he was saying.

RICHARD RUSK: How about Clark Clifford?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I don't fully understand yet the change in view of Clark Clifford, because up until he became Secretary of State [sic] he was one of the principle "hawks" in town. He had been a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory board. He had, as a personal friend of LBJ's, been called in occasionally while he was a private citizen to sit in on policy discussions, and he was one of the principal "hawks." The same thing is true of Justice Abe Fortas, who was often brought in, I thought improperly, into these policy discussions. But when Clark became Secretary of Defense he went through quite a change of attitude, and you would have to get the reasons for that from Clark himself. I just don't fully understand it.

RICHARD RUSK: You know, he came to believe as did a number of people both in government and outside of government, that the policy was wrong; that we had to turn it around; we had to wind it up. Now, if they honestly came to those beliefs, was he acting improperly to have conducted himself in the way in which he did, by soliciting support within the administration from people who had sympathetic viewpoints?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think he should have made his views clearly known to the President. Now whether he should have--and I don't know the extent to which he did this--whether he should have organized an active resistance to the President within the executive branch of the government, that would be another question.

RICHARD RUSK: He and his colleagues would get together and discuss with each other, other people in government, and ask themselves the question: Is he with us? Is he hard or soft on Vietnam? If they thought that person could help they would talk with him and try to bring him into this group, you see. Clark Clifford very vividly described all this in my interview with him.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I'm not going to use adjectives about that sort of thing, because there was one situation where I regret that I did not myself organize resistance within the administration, and that was on the Bay of Pigs. I should have tried to organize a solid front on the Bay of Pigs matter, and I didn't do that. Maybe I badly served President Kennedy in not doing so.

RICHARD RUSK: Implicitly you're more or less agreeing that under certain circumstances, if these are really your convictions, that it's okay to do that?

DEAN RUSK: At least before the decisions are made. Before the decisions are made.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay.

DEAN RUSK: But I've always felt that after the decisions are made by the President that members of his administration have a duty to support him or get out.

RICHARD RUSK: Right.

DEAN RUSK: Resign.

SCHOENBAUM: But you said before it wasn't Clifford primarily that changed the President's mind on this. It was more of the grass roots.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think that we got increasing evidence in the weeks and months immediately following Tet that people at the grass roots, like my cousins here in Georgia,--

SCHOENBAUM: Did you talk to them?

DEAN RUSK: No--had finally come to the conclusion that if we couldn't tell them when the war was going to end we might as well chuck it. And the people have the power and the right to make such a judgment. I'm not complaining about that because the evidence was, up until well into 1967, that we had pretty strong support at the grass roots for this effort, quite apart from these demonstrations at Cornell and places like that. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Phone calls from your anti-war son?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: What about the congressional people? Do you remember any talks that you personally had with them that might have helped swing you around? Charles [Harting] Percy was someone who appears in your appointment books.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, I talked to a good many of them. One of my law students here did a paper once on what the executive branch had a right to believe was the attitude of the Congress on Vietnam at all stages. The powers given to the Congress under the Constitution are given to the Congress as a corporate body, not to individual senators and congressmen. It seems clear to me

that we had strong support in the Congress throughout most of this period. As late as 1967, I think--it might have been '66--Wayne [Lyman] Morse put in a resolution to rescind the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which they could do in the Congress with a so called "concurrent resolution:" a resolution that would not go to the President for signature or veto. Well, when he put that in there was a motion made to table it and only five senators voted against tabling his motion. Tabling was a way to kill the motion. But two or three of the "doves" in Congress, including that fellow from Minnesota--What's his name?

SCHOENBAUM: Eugene McCarthy?

DEAN RUSK: No, who ran for the Senate. He was a congressman from Minnesota. Oh, dear. I'll think of his name. He was one of the leading "doves". He told me privately that if we could give him some indication as to when this thing was going to be wound up that he would support us. But without that he said he just couldn't do it. I think I have mentioned this on an earlier tape. But throughout most of this period our principal problem in the Congress came from the "hawks."

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, this we have.

DEAN RUSK: Rather than from the "doves."

RICHARD RUSK: All the major networks--

DEAN RUSK: But some of the--

END OF SIDE 2

