

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection  
Rusk IIIII: Part 2 of 3  
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk and Thomas J. Schoenbaum  
1985 November 5

The complete interview also includes Rusk HHHHH: Part 1; Rusk JJJJJ: Part 3.

RICHARD RUSK: All the major networks chimed in with their own editorial positions of the Vietnam policy. Many of them took a negative point of view. Walter Cronkite came out against it, and George Christian made the comment that "shock waves rolled through the government," when Cronkite made his remarks. LBJ's [Lyndon Baines Johnson] comment was at the time--and I think we asked this earlier--"If we've lost Walter, we've lost the war." Do you recall?

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember much flap in my own mind about Walter Cronkite. I do remember one remark that he made on the newscast, not a commentary or editorial. He referred to the "tired platitudes of the Secretary of State." What he overlooked was that the platitudes came from the reporters. If you keep getting the same tired old questions, you give them the same answers. (laughter) So I thought his comment was a little lopsided. No, when John [Bertram] Oakes became head of the editorial board of the *New York Times*, and when [James] Russell Wiggins left the Washington Post and then [Benjamin C.] Bradlee came in, such personnel changes and attitudes made a considerable difference. I remember sending up to the *New York Times*, when Johnny Oakes was there, a copy of the editorial written by the *New York Times* at the time of the signing of the Southeast Asia Treaty. This editorial started out "The signing of the Manila Pact was a great diplomatic triumph for President [Dwight David] Eisenhower and Secretary John Foster Dulles." It went on and on in that direction. Well, I took this up to have them compare their attitude at the beginning of the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] Treaty with what their attitude had come to be on Vietnam and I got back a tortured thirty-page memorandum from Johnny Oakes on this subject. It's somewhere in the files if you want to look at it.

SCHOENBAUM: Do you think he personally wrote that?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think so. I think so.

RICHARD RUSK: He did? Let me ask you a real general question. As you yourself acknowledge, the grass roots turned against the war. And to a large extent all these people are weighing in with editorials opposed to the war. Can you blame these people for having had a change of heart?

DEAN RUSK: Well, in the first place I don't believe that it was the news media who changed the attitude of people at the grass roots. I think it was the duration of the war and the continuing casualties that we--A kind of war weariness set in. I don't believe that the American people in general derive their opinions from the news media to the extent that some people think. After all, most of the newspapers in the country were strongly opposed to Franklin [Delano] Roosevelt.

And he was overwhelmingly elected four times. Now, when you say "blame." I don't challenge the constitutional right of those who came to be dissenters on Vietnam. I do think that they should accept responsibility for the effects of what they said and did, just as I accept responsibility for what I did. I think they ought to do the same. And they should accept the fact they encouraged Hanoi to persist and to continue the fight in order to win politically what Hanoi could not win militarily.

RICHARD RUSK: Now the American people had this change of heart. And it occurred over about three years' time, really, from when we first introduced our own ground forces there in '65. And here it is '68, about three years later. And we had this reversal of public opinion. World War II lasted longer than that with a great many more casualties. Why the difference? People could stay united--

DEAN RUSK: Don't exaggerate the unity in World War II. After all, World War II started, as far as we were concerned, with the attack on Pearl Harbor. And there was this son-of-a-bitch [Adolf] Hitler proclaiming that the Germans were the master race. Well, we had our own ideas about who was the master race. (laughter) But the last time I looked at the figures I was surprised to learn that the desertions in World War II were higher than were the desertions in Vietnam. Of course, in World War II they had more places to run to. It was somewhat easier to desert in World War II than it was in Vietnam. But nevertheless, one of General [George Catlett] Marshall's principal preoccupations in World War II was somehow to get across to the ordinary soldier what the war was all about, the great issues that were involved in the war.

RICHARD RUSK: You told us about that memo that you got from the government. Do you think in any way the American people, in a very general way, just didn't have quite the same amount of fiber that this group--

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think that the American people are--

RICHARD RUSK: Just got soft in some way?

DEAN RUSK: Not so much that as war weary. I think the American people are very impatient about war. And here was a war that was being fought on television in their living rooms every day. Now this raises some very important questions. Does this mean that we'll have to do quickly and with overwhelming force whatever we decide to do in a situation of this sort in the future?

RICHARD RUSK: We've got some good comment from you on these particular points. Let me get back to the Tet Offensive and what it meant to me, and to a lot of us. And that is, regardless of the question whether or not it was really a tactical victory or defeat for the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese, the very fact that they could do it after three years of a real pounding from American forces, and the very fact that they could put their lives on the line in such a massive way all over South Vietnam, suggested to us that those were the kind of people that we just weren't going to be able to beat short of obliterating them and obliterating North Vietnam. And if that was true, somehow we just misjudged that conflict. We came in on the wrong end of a civil war.

DEAN RUSK: Now this was not a civil war, Richard. There were civil war elements in it. There were Vietcong in the South who were part of the effort to overthrow the South Vietnamese government. But the people who came in from North Vietnam could not be called participants in a civil war. In this postwar period we've had several divided countries: Germany, Korea, China, Vietnam. Now each part of those divided countries had sufficient standing as a political entity to be entitled to the protections and the obligations of international law. If you want to test it, just suppose that the West Germans threw sixty regiments of West German forces into East Germany.

RICHARD RUSK: This is a critical point.

DEAN RUSK: There is no way that the Russians would have looked upon such an effort as a family quarrel among Germans. And we had a heck of a war in Korea over the same issue. And the Chinese and the North Koreans are the only people that the United Nations have ever specifically branded as aggressors. So although there were civil war elements in this Vietnam problem, the attack by North Vietnam on South Vietnam could not be described as civil war.

RICHARD RUSK: Because of that international conference of '54 and the fact that that line had been drawn, you are saying that that conferred legitimacy?

DEAN RUSK: Well, both parts of Vietnam had political standing. Each part had been recognized by a considerable number of states and they were entitled to the protections of international law. And, indeed, the Southeast Asia Treaty itself included South Vietnam as one of the protocol states that was entitled to the protections of the Southeast Asia Treaty.

RICHARD RUSK: I don't agree with a whole lot of this, but I can't see the point of arguing it out because we've done it on earlier occasions.

SCHOENBAUM: Could we maybe get back to the chronology?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, let's do go back.

SCHOENBAUM: I have a few questions. On March 17, LBJ, in reaction to [Arthur Joseph] Goldberg and Goldberg's advocacy of a bombing halt, is reported to have exploded in rage and said at a meeting, "I'm not going to stop the bombing and I've told you that. Doesn't everybody at this meeting realize that?" Kind of in reaction to Goldberg's pressuring him too hard. Do you remember this? And at this time, the record shows you were among those who were advocating a partial bombing halt, which LBJ ultimately accepted March 31, of course, in his speech. Do you remember? That must have been a critical week. Of course on March 25 the "wise men"--

DEAN RUSK: Such questions came up regularly at the Tuesday luncheon session with LBJ. And LBJ told us, and told people in Congress, that [Robert Strange] McNamara was his right arm to get on with the military side of it; I was his left arm to try to find a way to halt this thing by peaceful means. And so we discussed bombing halts quite frequently at these Tuesday luncheon sessions. LBJ came to be disenchanted with the productivity of bombing halts. He had had several and nothing happened in the way of political settlement. And he came to the view

that all a bombing halt did was to give the North Vietnamese a chance to step up their movement of men and supplies into South Vietnam, and that they took full advantage of it, and to hell with it. So he got to be very tough about bombing halts. But then in the first half of 1968, when he too, I think, recognized that people at the grass roots had decided we better call it off, he was more amenable to such possibilities. There was a time there when he was very resistant to bombing halts.

SCHOENBAUM: You, among others, helped convince him obviously on that partial bombing halt?

DEAN RUSK: If we had one, the answer is yes, because I was trying to give the political processes, the various contacts with Vietnam by other governments and other groups, every chance to see if there was any possibility that North Vietnam was interested in calling this whole thing off on some reasonable basis.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, it was early in March, Pop, that you presented that idea to LBJ; this was for a partial bombing halt. I think you also tied it in with an article by Barbara Ward that you thought was quite good and you passed that on to LBJ. Sir Patrick Dean also saw you frequently during this time. God, what was the point I was wanting to make here?

SCHOENBAUM: The partial bombing halt.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, right. There's some controversy going on that in these later accounts that Clark [McAdams] Clifford, and even William [Putnam] Bundy to some extent, and some others didn't really think this was a meaningful bombing halt that you were proposing, that it was something more to shore up American domestic opinion, that you didn't think the North Vietnamese would respond to it in terms of negotiations. And Clark Clifford in these later accounts was very leery of this proposal of yours. Do you recall any of this controversy?

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember the details. In retrospect I don't think the North Vietnamese ever had any incentive to negotiate.

RICHARD RUSK: You're probably right on that point.

DEAN RUSK: By that time they were hearing too many voices out of the homefront back here, which urged them to persist. I think I've indicated earlier on a tape that I think I myself underestimated the persistence of the North Vietnamese.

RICHARD RUSK: That's true.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: I must say that I thought there would come a time, as happened in Korea, with the Berlin Blockade, and other situations, when they would be prepared to find a way to call the whole thing off. And that did not occur.

SCHOENBAUM: But on April 4 the North Vietnamese did announce that they were going to enter into a peace negotiation. Were you surprised at that? Was that regarded as not meaningful in a deeper sense?

DEAN RUSK: Well, there was sparring back and forth, but we actually did organize discussions in the late spring and summer of 1968.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, those were the Paris Peace Talks. Why--

DEAN RUSK: Well, you see, the North Vietnamese probably thought, may well have thought as had the Poles, the Rumanians, and some others, that their problem was to find a way for us to save face while getting out. Well, we weren't trying to save face; we were trying to save South Vietnam. And so some of these efforts proved to be fruitless because the North Vietnamese were concentrating on getting what they wanted in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. And that's not what we had in mind.

SCHOENBAUM: Well, the April 4 event, whatever it was, was the first time, unlike the previous times which come from the Poles or the Indians; it had come directly from the North Vietnamese.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, I forget the details quite frankly.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, do you remember that on March 10 there was a meeting at the Gridiron Club? And it was from that group that this story came out that this massive troop request of 206,000 men was being considered. That created quite a hullabaloo. It was not put out officially by the government. It must have been leaked. Do you recall what the source of the leak was and what kind of uproar that obviously must have caused people like Lyndon Johnson?

DEAN RUSK: I don't know where the leak came from on that. There were so many people in the government that knew about this 200,000 figure that it would have been a miracle if it had not leaked out somehow, somewhere.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, the thing was reported by Neil Sheehan and Hedrick [L.] Smith. The story was carried in the *New York Times*. It was released during the Gridiron Club [sic]. And the speculation was that the story started with Townsend [Walter] Hoopes.

DEAN RUSK: I just don't know. (laughter) If somebody were to swear to me that Townsend Hoopes had leaked it, I wouldn't be surprised. But I don't have any information.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't have any particular recollections or anecdotes or LBJ's response to that?

DEAN RUSK: And it could have come out of Saigon.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that one reason that you and LBJ were so cagey about keeping this bombing halt possibility out of the task group, out of some of the task group meetings? It was certainly out the drafts of these Presidential speeches.

DEAN RUSK: The bombing halt problems came up in the Tuesday luncheon sessions. There was the forum for that kind of discussion. And that wouldn't have been turned over to any task group. After all, the Tuesday luncheon sessions were, in effect, statutory meetings of the National Security Council.

RICHARD RUSK: Because the bombing halt itself was not inserted into the draft of the President's speech until the very end. And my question was, did you keep it out of these earlier drafts for fear of leaks, because of these earlier leaks that had occurred?

DEAN RUSK: No, you begin with the state of the mind of the President. At what point was he willing to entertain such ideas? Now, he had tried these things on several times over a period of two or three years and got nothing for them except intensified efforts by the North Vietnamese. And so he wasn't easy to persuade until later in '68 when he too recognized that the people at the grass roots had decided we better chuck it.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you have a hard time persuading him in early March that, in fact, we needed this bombing halt?

DEAN RUSK: I forget.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall what his reaction was?

DEAN RUSK: No. I remember there was one bombing halt. Rather, we did some bombing in North Vietnam while I think Mr. [Aleksandr Nikolayevich] Kosygin was visiting Hanoi. Various people raised their eyebrows at that. But I was visiting Saigon during that same period, and the Vietcong tried to do some major bombing around Saigon. They attacked one of the major bridges, for example. I wasn't particularly impressed with the fact that we were bombing in the North while Kosygin was on his visit. Hell, they were bombing while I was on a visit to Saigon. Another element in my own mind that affected these questions: I myself had doubts about the utility of some of that bombing in the far North: Hanoi and Haiphong areas.

RICHARD RUSK: That we've got.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: We've got you very extensively on that.

DEAN RUSK: Because I'm not sure that the impact upon the war itself was worth the cost of men and planes that that bombing cost us. So to me a bombing halt was not all that much of a big deal.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. At what point did the President sign in with his decision that a bombing halt should be part of this effort? Would this have occurred right before his Presidential speech? Would it have been earlier in March?

DEAN RUSK: It was sometime in March, but I forget now just the date. And you have my recollection on the work we put in on the President's speech at the end of March--

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: --at which he announced he would not run again.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall when he signed in with that decision?

DEAN RUSK: No I don't. When you say signed in with a decision, there was not a decision until he made it.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. And in his own book he points out that, really, until he made that Presidential speech March 31, that he had the option of making that decision in any fashion preferred, and he wouldn't really definitively have made that decision in his own mind until the time before the speech.

DEAN RUSK: Now another thing about LBJ that may have a bearing on several of these things. He would postpone a decision until he was ready to act. When he made a decision he wanted to act straightaway. So he did not make advanced decisions to be leaked to the newspapers and things of that sort before he was ready to act. I'm sure there were times when he deliberately did not make a decision so that there was nothing to leak. But when he did make a decision he wanted to act straightaway.

RICHARD RUSK: Walt [Whitman] Rostow called you "first among equals of all the people advising LBJ." And in his book *The Vantage Point* LBJ says that you of all his advisors "best understood the way I wished to move." Other people who knew both of you said that LBJ wanted to hear Dean Rusk's views last; that you were the one that he turned to in the final analysis of all the people that advised him. We've got your view on why this may have been so, due to your common heritage and the close relationship you formed. But looking back at this Tet offensive and that post-Tet policy review, and the influence you personally might have had on LBJ, in what way, and specifically with regard to policy, how do you think you might have influenced him? There were a number of issues.

DEAN RUSK: That would require a detailed examination of particular issues that I don't, quite frankly, have in mind. But I was very close to LBJ. He apparently did rely heavily upon me during his Presidency. I'd suggested to him in 1967 that he get somebody else in my place, and he said, "No," that he wanted me to be Secretary of State as long as he was President. But I just don't know whom else he talked to, what other sources of advice he might have gotten, some of it outside of the government. I'm sure that he talked frequently with Senator Dick [Richard Brevard] Russell, [Jr.] on a lot of these things, and oddly other leaders of Congress.

SCHOENBAUM: They were close personal friends?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, but Lyndon Johnson and Dick Russell had some differences on the civil rights business, for example: major differences. But Lyndon Johnson talked to Dick Russell at least three or four times a week when he was President, on all sorts of things. Among other things, because Dick Russell could deliver twenty-five votes in the Senate on any subject whatever. And LBJ respected that. I think I put on tape already how Dick Russell came to be a member of the [Earl] Warren Commission.

RICHARD RUSK: No.

DEAN RUSK: Well, apparently LBJ called Senator Russell and said he wanted him to serve on a commission to investigate the assassination of John F. [Fitzgerald] Kennedy. And Senator Russell apparently said, "No, under no circumstances. I simply will not do that, Mr. President. You will have to find someone else." About ten days later LBJ called Senator Russell back and said, "Senator, I just thought I would let you know that I'm announcing the formation of the commission to investigate the assassination of John F. Kennedy and your name is on it." And Russell said, "But, Mr. President, I told you that under no circumstances would I do that." And LBJ apparently said, "Well, I remember you said that, Senator, but your name is on the list." And he hung up. And so Senator Russell found himself on the Warren Commission.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll be darned. Who told you that story? LBJ or Russell?

DEAN RUSK: LBJ. (laughter) But Russell did have, at the end of the day, great respect for the office of the Presidency. And he refused to make a scene out of it when he found himself on the Warren Commission. (laughter) But he really got the LBJ treatment on that one.

RICHARD RUSK: Speaking of the LBJ treatment let me ask you about him and this loyalty thing. When confronting LBJ on the war, Clark Clifford, who was a [sic] long friend of his, said that this--the way he said it, "This Judas appeared." Earlier he had been in support, now he was confronting LBJ on the war and "this Judas appeared."

DEAN RUSK: Who was the Judas?

RICHARD RUSK: This new LBJ, or this new thing that came between them in their relationship.

DEAN RUSK: I see. Okay.

RICHARD RUSK: And he said his personal relationship with LBJ deteriorated as he, Clark Clifford, became critical of the war. And other people have said that LBJ's insistence on personal loyalty and the need to win in Vietnam sort of poisoned the well.

DEAN RUSK: That doesn't surprise me that Clark Clifford might have said that.

RICHARD RUSK: He didn't say that last statement, but he did say the earlier.



DEAN RUSK: But this is not just a question of personal loyalty, it's a question of constitutional loyalty. I think that makes a critical difference.

RICHARD RUSK: My question is, how did you handle this aspect of LBJ where he seemed to have, what many people thought, obsessive concern with loyalty? Robert McNamara, for example. They were very close officially and worked well together. And then Bob McNamara apparently changed his mind on Vietnam and that relationship just deteriorated.

DEAN RUSK: Well, LBJ told me that somewhere along the way, 1966 or something like that, somewhere in there, Bob McNamara told him in a personal conversation that he, McNamara, would like someday to be President of the World Bank.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. This story we have.

DEAN RUSK: All right. I personally think that McNamara's service came to a conclusion because the Presidency of the World Bank became open at that point, and LBJ had remembered that conversation and nominated McNamara to be President of the World Bank.

RICHARD RUSK: Right, but their relationship soured. It was no longer close; it was no longer officially good.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, there might have been--I don't know. There might have been other factors. For example, Bob McNamara was very much of a Kennedy man. He was close socially and personally with Bobby [Robert Francis] Kennedy as he had been with John F. [Fitzgerald] Kennedy. And as you know LBJ and Bobby Kennedy had some problems with each other. And that might have some bearing. But when Bob McNamara left the government he spoke in a very moving way and broke into tears, in terms of what he said about his service with LBJ and so forth.

RICHARD RUSK: You didn't find it a problem? You didn't find LBJ's concern with loyalty as being obsessive, something that you had to work around?

DEAN RUSK: No, because to me it was wholly in accord with the Constitution.

RICHARD RUSK: Could you speak critically and openly to LBJ on those aspects?

DEAN RUSK: Sure. At those Tuesday luncheon sessions we debated each other sometimes fiercely, and also debated the President. Because we knew that those who were at those Tuesday luncheons wouldn't rush out and talk to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* about it. So we knew--I mean if you're in a cabinet meeting or NSC [National Security Council] meeting with thirty or forty people sitting around the room, you could not have such frank conversations because somebody would leak it. No, I never had any problem in expressing my views frankly and candidly to the President, partly because he knew that at the end of the day I knew where the constitutional responsibility lay, and respected it.

RICHARD RUSK: On March 15 Dean [Gooderham] Acheson met with LBJ at the White House, I believe over lunch, and had a long talk with him. He told LBJ that the Joint Chiefs didn't know what they were talking about, that the U.S. was not winning the war, nobody believed LBJ anymore, that the American people were no longer in support of the policy. It sounds like a pretty blunt briefing on behalf of Dean Acheson.

DEAN RUSK: Where did you get that?

RICHARD RUSK: Harry--

DEAN RUSK: Harry [C.] McPherson, [Jr.]?

RICHARD RUSK: Not McPherson. [Herbert] Schandler? I've seen it elsewhere. It's in several of these accounts. Anyway, that was the essence of their conversation. That same night LBJ called you over to the White House and you guys met for two hours. Do you recall it? This was March 15.

DEAN RUSK: No, not really.

RICHARD RUSK: And Dean Acheson had just unloaded on LBJ.

DEAN RUSK: I think there's another element that runs through some of this. Clark Clifford and Dean Acheson were, among other things, partisan Democrats. And I think they were giving much more weight to domestic politics and the upcoming election than some of the rest of us were. I think I've told you the little story about Harry Truman, saying to the State Department, "I don't want to get advice from you fellows based upon domestic politics. In the first place, good policy is good politics." Well, I think Clark Clifford, particularly, has always been strongly moved by domestic party considerations, more than most people who turn up in the job of Secretary of Defense.

RICHARD RUSK: More so than his legitimate feeling that the war was just wrong and had to end?

END OF SIDE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

RICHARD RUSK: You were saying that it was not hard for LBJ to accept contrary advice on Vietnam.

DEAN RUSK: He would accept other points of view if he had confidence in the motives of those who were offering the advice. Also bear in mind that a President gets a good deal of information on who is saying what to the press behind the scenes around town. And one thing

that used to make him very angry was to discover that people in his own administration were trying to undercut him by what they were saying to the newsmen around town. That he looked upon as poison. On that point I don't blame him.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. I couldn't follow the chronology. The New Hampshire primary, and then Robert Kennedy's announced candidacy for the Presidency obviously contributed to this feeling of the President that there had been erosion of political support for him. Jane Mosselle says that Bobby Kennedy used to come in on Saturdays and talk with you.

DEAN RUSK: Occasionally.

RICHARD RUSK: Just the two of you?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, occasionally.

RICHARD RUSK: It happened frequently, at least as she remembers it. She said it happened quite a bit.

DEAN RUSK: That was chiefly during the Kennedy administration. It happened less frequently during the Johnson administration. And I don't think he did when he became a Senator.

RICHARD RUSK: What were those talks all about? Just various things?

DEAN RUSK: Just chewing the fat.

RICHARD RUSK: Chewing the fat?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. Bobby Kennedy was interested in foreign policy matters. And he just wanted to talk over some of these matters and I was glad to talk with him. My understanding with President Kennedy was that we would let Bobby Kennedy show his interest in foreign policy matters, but that if Bobby ever got in my way that I would take it up with President Kennedy and he would straighten it out. So I don't feel that Bobby Kennedy directly interfered adversely in the conduct of our foreign relations. But he was interested.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he talk to you about the war? Did he weigh in with any significant opposition to it?

DEAN RUSK: The intriguing thing to me is that Bobby Kennedy volunteered to President Johnson to go to Saigon as our ambassador. And I vetoed that on the grounds that this country could not take another Kennedy tragedy, and Saigon was just too dangerously opposed to Bobby Kennedy. Ironically, in terms of what might have happened--

RICHARD RUSK: That might have been the safest place to send him.

DEAN RUSK: It's possible. But Bobby was prepared to go to Saigon as ambassador at one point. But then when he got into politics, I suspect his views changed considerably.

RICHARD RUSK: Apparently Bobby Kennedy, in some of these accounts, made an offer to LBJ not to run for the Presidency if LBJ would choose a new Secretary of State. (laughter)

DEAN RUSK: Well, LBJ told me, with some chuckles, that Senator Bobby Kennedy had come to him and said that if LBJ would take my resignation and make Bill [William Don] Moyers Secretary of State that he, Bobby, would not run for the Presidency. Now, I only got that from LBJ. What the truth of it is, I just can't be certain. But--

RICHARD RUSK: Did you do anything response to that?

DEAN RUSK: Not at all. Not at all. But there was no way--whatever LBJ might have done with me, he would not have asked Bill Moyers to be Secretary of State.

RICHARD RUSK: The other half of that proposition by Bobby was if LBJ would appoint a commission to review Viet policy, with RFK chairing that committee--

DEAN RUSK: I've never heard that one.

RICHARD RUSK: Never heard that one?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: Just as a minor tidbit. Were you ever told that after the New Hampshire primary, some people found out that the reason the voters were dissatisfied with LBJ was mainly for not pursuing a tougher policy. And that those people outnumbered the ones who wanted a withdrawal somehow: three or four to one.

DEAN RUSK: Well, that doesn't surprise me, because we had pretty strong support at the grass roots throughout most of that experience, at least through the mid-sixties. And I suppose on balance at any given time along there, there would have been support for more, rather than less, use of force. LBJ never gave it a moment's thought. But my guess is that there would have been popular support if we had dropped an atomic bomb or two on North Vietnam, however irrational such an act would have been, because there was strong support at the grass roots. By the way, the thing about the grass roots: As late as 1966, I myself came down here to the Atlanta stadium to attend an affirmation of Vietnam rally organized by the students of the colleges and universities of this area.

RICHARD RUSK: Right.

DEAN RUSK: On that day it rained cats and dogs! The heaviest rain I ever saw! So that the stadium was not heavily--

RICHARD RUSK: I saw that in the news. Got any particular memories of that incident?

DEAN RUSK: No, except that one year later you could not have imagined that the students of the colleges and universities of this area would have organized such a demonstration of support.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, let's talk about this March 28 meeting to polish the draft of the Presidential speech to be given on March 31.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me just review some of the history of it. The initial draft had recommended no bombing halt, 28,000 men for reinforcements, made only a pro forma plea for negotiations, and according to this account, was a little bit aggressive in tone. Again, there was confusion about this meeting, and your role and Clifford's role. Townsend Hoopes quotes Clifford as saying, "Dean Rusk was troubled and sincerely anxious to find some way to the negotiating table." Clark Clifford kind of dominated the talk for a while, changed the tone of the speech. You ended up advising the second draft. You decided to include a bombing halt proposition in there. Walt Rostow went along with all of this; you went along with all this. Were you somewhat persuaded by Clark Clifford at this meeting?

DEAN RUSK: Well, what I was more persuaded by was increasing evidence that people at the grass roots were coming to the conclusion that we better chuck it if we couldn't wind it up promptly and that the more moderate tone of that March 31 speech seemed to me to point in the direction of starting some talks, rather than simply the belligerency of all out determination to fight it through to a conclusion. And I think it's possible that the tone of that speech helped stimulate Hanoi themselves to become a little more active in indicating a readiness to talk. After all, that happened in April didn't it? Their announcement?

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. April 4.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, well, that might have been a direct response to LBJ's final speech on the subject.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you comfortable with the way that speech actually read?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, I was.

RICHARD RUSK: You were?

DEAN RUSK: Except that when we prepared the draft we did not have the final paragraph in it about LBJ not running again. But, no, I worked on what I thought was the final draft of that speech, and then took off to New Zealand for an ANZUS [Asia-New Zealand-United States] meeting.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right.

DEAN RUSK: Then I was notified on the plane halfway across the Pacific that there would be another additional final paragraph. And I knew that LBJ would announce that he was not running

again, because he had told me the year before that he would have to announce that he was not running again no later than March to give other candidates a chance to get in position.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. At the time that you guys met on March 28 to review that first draft, had LBJ made up his own mind about that bombing halt proposal of yours discussed earlier? Do you have any recollections about that?

DEAN RUSK: Probably he didn't really make up his mind until he saw and approved the final draft of the speech. He, as I said earlier, usually made his decisions after full reflection, and then when he was prepared to execute. But I doubt that he had made up his mind too much in advance of that speech.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think Clark Clifford was influential, if not in your overall thinking on Vietnam during that entire period, was he influential on that point in the draft of that speech?

DEAN RUSK: He and I, for a change, more or less agreed on the tone of that speech. And he expressed apparently some surprise to find that that was my view.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. At the end of that meeting you had Bill Bundy draft a cable to Saigon notifying that LBJ had accepted the proposal to stop the bombing of North Vietnam, north of the Twentieth Parallel. Then Rostow called LBJ and informed him of the work that was going on the second draft, asked to see him later in the day. You went over to the White House that evening. And you met extensively with LBJ. Any recollection of the particular session?

DEAN RUSK: No. I don't.

RICHARD RUSK: You were working on a seven-page alternative draft. LBJ called you into his office alone. And you discussed these things I guess. He authorized sending this cable to Saigon, informing [Ellsworth] Bunker in South Vietnam of his plans, and that included the bombing halt.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall the substance of your remarks to LBJ?

DEAN RUSK: I think my remarks were reflected in the outcome of what was actually done. I would not have sent such a cable to Saigon without LBJ's full approval; I mean, that's for sure. It would not have been within my authority to do so because I did not have the authority to decide on a bombing halt. The President was the Commander-in-Chief.

RICHARD RUSK: I have this feeling that LBJ kind of made up his mind that night at the White House on the 28th of March. He had his speech coming up and he had to decide what he was going to say. And it seemed like that was the point of decision.

DEAN RUSK: I think that's probable.

RICHARD RUSK: You think that's probable?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. By the way, on the personal relations between Johnson and Clifford. On [Richard Milhous] Nixon's inauguration day, following the inauguration, we top members of the Johnson Administration went out to Clark Clifford's house for a little luncheon session, with LBJ and Lady Bird [Claudia Alta Taylor Johnson]. And then some of us raced to the airport; Johnson was moving out to the airport by helicopter. Some of us, including your Mom [Virginia Foisie Rusk] and me, raced to the airport to be there when he took off. I remember we went around that circumferential highway eighty miles an hour to try to get there before Lyndon Johnson left. But that was a rather warm affair, that luncheon session Clark Clifford gave for LBJ.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that right?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. So I don't know how bitter the tension between them came to be.

RICHARD RUSK: Things might be developed by other people more so than--

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, lots of relationships are coming full circle years after the fact. Harry McPherson signed in with his own feelings about the March 28th meeting; he was there apparently.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, he was one of the principal speech writers for LBJ.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. He was working on the draft of the speech. And it was his feeling that something more than Clark Clifford's persuasiveness and his convictions caused Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow to acquiesce and change their minds, and change in particular the tone of the speech. And I'll tell you what he said about it. What he says, in talking about the fact that you and Rostow went along, he said, "Why should that have been? Clark Clifford was one of the most persuasive men in Washington, etc. But something more than Clifford's style and contacts must have caused men like Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow, staunch believers in the justice and necessity of the war, to acquiesce. Something like conversations with President Johnson, who had in turn been talking with Congress." And he goes on to describe LBJ's contacts with the Congress. And he concludes, "This I believe he must have communicated to his most trusted advisors, Rusk and Rostow. And this, more than Clifford's logic and the impressive sources of his information, must have caused them to talk of 'how' instead of 'whether' after he spoke at this particular meeting."

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Does that sound like a likely reconstruction?

DEAN RUSK: It's possible that was a part of it. But also we were beginning to hear from the people at this point. So that on issues like that at the end of the day the people are the boss. Okay, boy, I've got to break and sign off.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, we were discussing this earlier bombing proposal of yours in early March, around March 4, 5, and 6. There was the decision on the part of you and Lyndon Johnson not to cable Ellsworth Bunker about this proposed or possible bombing halt. Did you also keep this possible action from Clark Clifford?

DEAN RUSK: Probably not. I did not play games with people or colleagues in the government. After all, he was the Secretary of Defense. And the bombing halt would be of direct interest to him. So I think it's probable that he and I discussed it at some point during this period.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you or LBJ concerned about leaks coming out of the Defense Department, that group of civilians that was working with Clifford?

DEAN RUSK: Well, to some extent.

RICHARD RUSK: There had been that leak--

DEAN RUSK: In any event, again it was LBJ's practice not to want to leak forward decisions. If he was going to take a bombing halt, he would take it and do it.

RICHARD RUSK: Right away.

DEAN RUSK: But not have word spreading around town that he was about to do something. He didn't like that at all. That was not his method of operation. But I think it's very likely that I talked about that very privately with Clark Clifford.

RICHARD RUSK: And probably not in any larger group?

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: When that leak went out about the 206,000 man troop request that [William Childs] Westmoreland apparently wanted, that leak did come, looking back, in retrospect, it did come from the defense civilians: Townsend Hoopes specifically, I think.

DEAN RUSK: It's probable.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall a lot of anger, definite backlash, or reaction from either you or LBJ that "this is really a kind of leaky group over there and we are going to have to hold our cards a lot closer?"

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think there was some of that feeling. You see, LBJ was extremely sensitive to leaks that were clearly designed to undermine his policy. That was the thing that really set him off. He had some suspicions as did I about who some of the leakers were. I can't name them because I can't prove it. But you have a pretty good idea about who's talking around



town. That sort of thing gets back to you. The reporters themselves help you discover who such people are.

RICHARD RUSK: I've got a good chapter on that.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: You said earlier that you didn't totally understand Clark Clifford's conversion from being a very firm hawk on Vietnam to almost being a dove, and taking the position he ultimately took. Do you think that his having to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March, or was that February, may have been the catalyst that would have caused Clifford to--

DEAN RUSK: Did he testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee or the Armed Services Committee?

RICHARD RUSK: He was asked to.

DEAN RUSK: I see.

RICHARD RUSK: And he got with [James William] Fulbright and said that he would rather not. And the reason for that was that there was a policy evaluation going on right now, that he wasn't very sure where he stood; his own views were changing. He felt very uncomfortable going before that group. I suppose that really could have been a catalyst for him having to defend a position in congressional testimony before the TV cameras and everything else. Did he ever discuss that with you?

DEAN RUSK: Not particularly. I think, given his state of mind after the Tet offensive, I can see why he might be very uncomfortable about testifying before a congressional committee, particularly in public.

RICHARD RUSK: Remember it was after that Tet offensive that you gave that tremendous two days of testimony for the Fulbright hearings on nationwide TV.

DEAN RUSK: No, that was in '67.

RICHARD RUSK: That was '67?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. All right.

DEAN RUSK: I might just comment on that. Bill Fulbright wanted me to come to the Foreign Relations Committee in a public session before television in '67. And LBJ did not want me to do it, and told me not to go. Well, that gave me a real problem. I tried to work it with Fulbright that we would have an executive session on closed circuit. But LBJ did not want a public debate

because there were certain feelers going on, and he thought such a thing would get in the way of such feelers. So I filibustered that point for several weeks. But Bill Fulbright and I both knew that if we wanted a foreign aid bill, which we would have to have, that I'd have to come before the committee. And so the time came when I had to appear on behalf of foreign aid. And so they had me. I went down there and we spent two days talking about Vietnam and almost nothing about foreign aid.

RICHARD RUSK: Did I tell you what the reaction was at Cornell?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: A lot of these students who had been opposed to the war came around and said, "Rich, I'm afraid your Dad didn't change my views on Vietnam, but he sure did a hell of a job testifying." I had a number of people come up to me--

DEAN RUSK: I had a good deal of mail on that. And the principal theme of much of the mail was that I had managed somehow to keep my cool.

RICHARD RUSK: (laughter) Under this probing from the Senators.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. Many people commented on that.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Bill Fulbright said in his opening comments to you when you showed up, he said, "I know that you understand that those in this room and the public at large will understand that the discussion between you and the committee, etc., is not inspired in any way by any personal animus towards you. Every member of this committee has a high regard for you personally. All of us, and I particularly, recognize that few officials in Washington today have performed their duty to their country with greater devotion and energy that you have. The fact that many of us disagree with your views in no way implies that we do not have a profound respect for your intelligence and integrity, and that we do not admire your devotion and sense of duty." So that was Bill Fulbright's opener. And it was quite a statement on his part. I heard you had said, "That was like a grace before you started carving me up." Okay: Then Clifford says he's reluctant to testify; Fulbright won't take his understudy. They tried to ask [Paul H.] Nitze to go up there and testify, and Nitze prefers to resign. And LBJ gets wind of this, banishes him from the White House.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, Nitze put himself in a rather awkward position on that, because he simply refused to go down to meet a committee of Congress and defend the administration's position on Vietnam. In that situation, since he was the Deputy Secretary of Defense, it might have been better for him to resign, because he was not able to perform his duty as the Deputy Secretary of Defense.

RICHARD RUSK: And apparently his threatened resignation really rocked Clifford to some extent. I think it was one of the things that helped persuade him.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: The cabinet meeting on March 13 went for two-and-a-half hours. Was Vietnam discussed? Did the cabinet play any significant role during this Tet policy review?

DEAN RUSK: Well, these cabinet meetings are very interesting, because at almost every cabinet meeting LBJ would ask me and the Secretary of Defense to make some comments on Vietnam. And then LBJ would go right around the table, asking each cabinet officer, "Do you have any comments? Do you have any questions?" They all sat there silent, even though some of them after they left the cabinet were pretty strong doves. I've written several letters to friends trying to get some explanation of how it was that people, including cabinet officers, would not really step up and say what was on their minds. The more I look into that question, the more complicated the question comes to be. But, for example, [William] Ramsey Clark was sitting at my right at the cabinet table. When he left office he could go all the way to Hanoi, but when he was Attorney General, a member of the cabinet, he couldn't lean eight inches to his left and say to the Secretary of State, "I don't agree with what you are doing in Vietnam." That to me is a great mystery.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall the cabinet's signing in in any significant way--

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: --on Vietnam during this period?

DEAN RUSK: No, the cabinet was not a place where such decisions are made.

RICHARD RUSK: Or even serious discussions?

DEAN RUSK: Well, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense usually made some comments on Vietnam. And those comments were serious. But there was no general debate.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking about Dean Acheson and the extent of his influence with both Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk.

DEAN RUSK: We always listened carefully to what Dean Acheson had to say. He was a man of great experience and a very intelligent man. We did not take his advice on the Cuban Missile Crisis because he wanted to open up the crisis with a strike against Cuba. He was very much opposed to the quarantine method because he thought that was too weak. But you see, Dean Acheson had never served as Secretary of State under the circumstances where a full nuclear exchange was possible, was operationally possible.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. That we've got.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. And he also was criticized very heavily while he was in office, by a good many Republicans, as being soft on communism. And my guess is that after he left office he

overreacted to some of that criticism by being extra hard-boiled on a lot of issues. But I must say that his change of view on Vietnam in '68 made an impact, and caused one to think.

RICHARD RUSK: I bet it did!

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Precisely because he had that very strong orientation.

DEAN RUSK: And at least it was a measure that the political tides were moving against the continuations of the war if a man like Dean Acheson would abandon ship.

RICHARD RUSK: Any comment on your relationship to Dean Acheson?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I was very close to Dean Acheson during the Truman Administration when he was Secretary of State. And I visited him at his home quite frequently. Virginia and I went out to his farm in Maryland on occasion. And the rumor has it that he was one of those who urged Kennedy to turn to me as a Secretary of State. But he was, I think, disappointed in my service as Secretary of State on certain points. For example, he was a Europeanist and did not like the strong support we gave to the decolonization process: the Portuguese colonies and Africa, for example, and certain attitudes toward South Africa itself. I was never sure whether his law firm had some of those people as clients, and that gave me pause at one or two occasions. But on the whole he was helpful. On the whole he was helpful.

RICHARD RUSK: He tended to make your life a little difficult for you, I guess. I asked Bill Bundy what Dean Acheson thought of your job as Secretary of State and Bill said that was a very unfair question, and then said Dean Acheson could be very critical about you, but he was very critical about everybody, and not excepting himself, Bill Bundy. I guess he was very caustic, very outspoken, very abrasive.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Dean Acheson enjoyed caustic remarks; he relished them. He liked to get a good wisecrack off at somebody else's expense. And he didn't suffer fools gladly. He didn't care, for example, for outside advisers; these committees of advisers that were brought into the government to speak their piece. He used to refer to them as just "another bunch of sons-of-bitches from out of town." And he had a disdain for the processes of the Congress. But, nevertheless, I think we remained friends until his death. But I was critical of him in certain points, and he was critical of me I'm quite sure. Although when we were sitting personally together he was always polite and considerate. He never hurled blasts at me in my presence. I felt he put a few darts in my back around Georgetown.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, we talked earlier about Robert Kennedy and his declaring for the Presidency, bolting the Democratic party to run against an incumbent Democratic President. Have you got any particular opinions of him or that action?

DEAN RUSK: Well, there was a very strong sense of political ambition in the Kennedy clan.

END OF SIDE 2

*Richard B. Powell*  
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