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John Jay McCloy interviewed by Richard Rusk  
March 1985

RICHARD RUSK: We are interviewing Mr. John J. McCloy in New York City. This is Rich doing the interviewing. March, 1985. John J. McCloy was Assistant Secretary of War in 1941-45; 1961-63 coordinator of the U.S. [United States] disarmament activities; founder of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; also chairman of the Ford Foundation; and many positions in government; long-term colleague of Dean Rusk. We're talking about Mr. McCloy's first memories of Dean Rusk.

MCCLOY: --And he was working in the general staff. I remember he used to call himself one of the Indians, distinguishing himself from the chiefs. He says, "I'm just one of the Indians." And I got to know him there. And he was working down there, and I had interchanges with him all the time. And I got to know something of his personality then. But it was sort of intermittent contact that I had with him. He was just one of the workmen down in the general staff, with which I was more closely associated than I was with procurement. Mr. Bob [Robert Porter] Patterson, the Under Secretary, was charged by law with the main responsibilities for procurement. I was over on the tactical side, so to speak: the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Combined Chiefs of Staff. And at that time your father was working down, I guess, with the Joint Chiefs of Staff or at least in the General Staff offices. He was one of the workmen down there and one of the abler and more-- I had a good many contacts with him.

RICHARD RUSK: You did? This is when he worked for what they called Abe [George Arthur] Lincoln's Brigade?

MCCLOY: Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Occupations?

MCCLOY: Yes. That's right. Abe Lincoln. Abe Lincoln. His first name wasn't Abe, but they called him Abe. I don't know whether Abe Lincoln's still alive or not. He was up at West Point for quite a while. I got to know him very well.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you work with your father specifically on any of those policies?

MCCLOY: I can't remember back all that time just what it was, but he was in and out of the office. And he was one of the fellows that I recognized as being down in the General Staff and when we had tactical problems to deal with. I had a General Staff officer as my aide, or my chief assistant. I guess his name was [Harrison Alan] Gerhardt then. Was that Gerhardt?

RICHARD RUSK: I think so.

MCCLOY: And then another one I had was Tate, Ralph Tate. But they were professional officers. They were army officers doing General Staff work.

RICHARD RUSK: Did my father make enough of a splash back in those days that he had acquired a reputation? Do you recall how he was regarded back in those days?

MCCLOY: One had to consider--You see, I've known him a long period of time, so it's a little difficult to think back after all these years and not get mixed up as to what period you're talking about. But I remember when I was--

RICHARD RUSK: Well, that was forty years ago.

MCCLOY: Yes. When I was working in my office as Assistant Secretary of War, I frequently had to see your father. He'd come in with a paper now and then. And as I look back at him then, he wasn't making much of a splash except that he was known to be a thoughtful, intelligent, steady, useful, good worker. As he said, he was one of the Indians. And he used to frequently say, "I'm not one of the chiefs, I'm one of the Indians." And I had a very good impression of the type of work--I got to know him later on much better than I did. I knew him well enough then. So I'd known him--

RICHARD RUSK: You knew him when he became a chief?

MCCLOY: When he became a chief. That's right. That's right. When he was made Secretary of State in the Kennedy administration--I remember this very well--Kennedy said to me he wanted me to join his cabinet. And he said, "I can't offer you the two jobs that I think you're best qualified for: One is Secretary of State and the other is Secretary of War." But he said, "I've got those filled, and you're a Republican anyway."

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, is that what he said?

MCCLOY: And he said, "But I just want you in the cabinet." And I said I wanted to get back to practice. I didn't want to do anything at that time.

RICHARD RUSK: I suppose Treasury would have been the logical offer.

MCCLOY: (unintelligible) He said, "Well I want you to do something. And I've made such a to-do about disarmament in my campaign," he said, "I want you to give me some help there." I said, "I can help you with that."

RICHARD RUSK: And that's how you got involved in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency?

MCCLOY: That's right. Because I knew all the Generals and all the heroes of the war. I trotted them up on the Hill and had them testify: from Eisenhower down. All in favor of it. Mr. [Lyndon Baines] Johnson, then President, was advising Mr. Kennedy at that time not to tackle that thing because it was not a winning game and he couldn't afford a losing game that early in his

administration. But I said, "Well if you want me to try it." And he said, "Well I wish you would." So all I did--And he said, "You can't call it an administration measure. You have to do it on your own." And as I said, all I did was to go up and get all the heroes--

RICHARD RUSK: World War II people?

MCCLOY: From Eisenhower down.

RICHARD RUSK: And they all came out in favor of disarmament?

MCCLOY: All except one or two. And it was such an overwhelming thing that Mr. Kennedy thought that I was a great lobbyist. It was only because I got all the heroes and trotted them up there and they all came out in favor of whatever they called it: the ACDA [Arms Control and Disarmament Agency] then.

RICHARD RUSK: I'm not aware that you've written a book.

MCCLOY: No. I don't know about it. Whether I have any intention depends upon what I think I can write about which would be a useful guideline. I don't want to reminisce. I just would like to think through what I could put down that I believe would be a good guideline to the future and then see what comes out.

RICHARD RUSK: I'm very interested in that arms control and disarmament issue.

MCCLOY: I started that. I started that. And I put it through with these heroes that I'm telling you about. That's how it got passed. It wasn't due to anybody else. I don't want to blow myself up on it, but I'm just saying there were a number of people who were pressing disarmament. But the thought was that they weren't able to get anywhere.

RICHARD RUSK: This lobbying that you did with the World War II heroes and Congress, now was that associated with your efforts to form the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency?

MCCLOY: That's right. And that's exactly what happened.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall what my father's role as Secretary of State might have been with you on the creation of this agency?

MCCLOY: Well there was a good bit of dispute as to just where it should fit: whether it should have an independent authority or whether it should be under the State Department. And there was a good bit of discussion one way or another about that. I can't recall having discussions with your father about that, but it's very likely I did, as to how that was to be set up and where it would fit in the government and what authority it would have. It was a matter of very heavy discussion.

RICHARD RUSK: I wonder if I could back you up just briefly and ask if John Kennedy asked your opinion of Dean Rusk for Secretary of State. You had known him in the forties and I

presume you'd kept in touch with him during the fifties.

MCCLOY: I remember speaking out at that time. He told me, he said, "I can't offer you the two things that I think you're equipped for." But I was Republican and he was a Democrat. And I'd been a Republican all my life. And he said, "You've been in a bipartisan administration." Now he said--Well I guess there were several times I'd served. I served in Mr. [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt's administration. It was at the time of World War II, during one of his wartime administrations. You had a question you asked me and I'll try to answer it. You said, "Did you talk to Mr. Kennedy about your father?"

RICHARD RUSK: Yes. Prior to his appointment, did Jack Kennedy ask you for your opinion?

MCCLOY: He talked to me about it. He told me [Robert Strange] McNamara was going to be Secretary of Defense and your father was going to be Secretary of State. And I said, "Well, I know Rusk very well. You can be sure he'll be a very loyal and competent man." And then I demurred, however, about taking on the Treasury. I didn't think it was quite right for him to take on a burden of someone he'd be criticized for. At any rate, I was anxious to get back to practice law. But I remember he did talk to me and ask me about Dean Rusk. And I told him what I thought, that I was an admirer of his because I'd seen him work during the war and go through a good many vicissitudes, as an Indian rather than a chief.

RICHARD RUSK: That's a good ending. Were you aware at all of George Marshall's relationship with my father and perhaps George Marshall's opinions about my dad?

MCCLOY: I don't know. I just know that frequently Dean Rusk came up and talked to me about matters that I was interested in. I don't remember anything about Marshall. Marshall's office was just down the hall from mine and I used to see him frequently. We could have very well talked about it, but I don't recall anything about that. I did see a lot of General Marshall.

RICHARD RUSK: He's quite a man, I guess.

MCCLOY: I knew General Marshall in World War I, as a matter of fact.

RICHARD RUSK: You were a captain of artillery?

MCCLOY: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: I've read about you in my history books.

MCCLOY: Ota really?

RICHARD RUSK: You play a prominent role.

MCCLOY: My life goes back pretty far. I was serving before World War I and I remember being introduced to him in World War I.

RICHARD RUSK: George Marshall?

MCCLOY: George Marshall.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad was a young boy in Atlanta watching the troops march off to war. That's how he knew--

MCCLOY: George Marshall had a reserved authority that was very, very--It wasn't every stuffy, but whenever he said, "Just a minute, General," why, you stopped and listened because he had a penetrating mind and an air of authority about him which I refer to as being very effective, very impressive. I don't care who was present; whether Mr. [Winston Leonard Spencer] Churchill was there or both Mr. Churchill and Mr. Roosevelt. Whenever Mr. Marshall had something to say, people stopped and listened.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad said whenever he walked into a room; you knew right away that a major figure was there. He just had a commanding presence.

MCCLOY: Well he had a rare reserve of authority, as I say, without being at all stuffy. And I used to know him very well. I used to go fishing with him.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you?

MCCLOY: Yeah. I used to see him regularly. I made the statement one time that I think he came closer to touching the mantle of greatness than any of the people that I had talked to. And I barred none.

RICHARD RUSK: Interesting. Harry Truman once called him the greatest living American in his time: George Marshall. After my dad left the War Department and left the State Department in the early fifties, he became President of the Rockefeller Foundation. You later became Chairman of the Board of the Ford Foundation, I believe.

MCCLOY: That's right. I'd been on the Rockefeller Foundation before too.

RICHARD RUSK: You were a trustee of the Rockefeller Foundation?

MCCLOY: Rockefeller Foundation. Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Perhaps you can give me some impressions of my father's performance and what you recall of him as president of the Foundation during the 1950s.

MCCLOY: Oh, I have a general impression of him, very distinct, of capability, of graciousness, of--He was articulate, thoughtful, quiet, loyal. Those are the things that I associate with your father.

RICHARD RUSK: On the Foundation?

MCCLOY: With the Foundation: Wherever I had contact with him, that was my impression of him. I admire him.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he leave any particular stamp on the Rockefeller Foundation? Did anything change as a result of his actions?

MCCLOY: I don't know that I can think back on that. I hesitate to speak off the cuff without stopping and thinking. I find that after I think back and try to keep thinking, suddenly things open up to me that I'd forgotten all about. But I'm apt not to have them flush. It takes time to remember accurately. Your memory plays tricks if you don't watch out. You'll get into a perfectly innocent anachronism just because you've been a little too--

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. I was about seven years old when my dad was appointed and we moved to Scarsdale, New York. And he immediately plunged into the testimony in Congress for the Reece and Cox Subcommittees.

MCCLOY: Yes. I was called down at that time too.

RICHARD RUSK: You testified too. I remember seeing your testimony, I think. And that was on the tax-exempt status of the foundations. And I guess my dad must have done a pretty good job on that.

MCCLOY: Oh, he would do a good job, always. You could be sure that Dean Rusk would put in a workmanlike job? And he was loyal; always loyal. Well, I guess the Vietnam experience would show you the depth of his loyalty. He was a good workman and a loyal workman. But I can remember when he was working on my staff; I guess you'd call it. I was in the Operations area, the tactical areas of the Department, as I say, rather than procurement. And I just have a good impression of the fact that he was one of the people down there who was doing good, loyal type of work that I described.

RICHARD RUSK: One of the things he told me that he tried to do at the Rockefeller Foundation was to treat the trustees as if in fact they were the trustees, with decision-making responsibilities.

MCCLOY: I went through a good bit of that.

RICHARD RUSK: He tried to bring more of the planning and decision-making of the Foundation to the trustees individually and as a group.

MCCLOY: There's always been a little difficulty between--not always, but maybe to some degree in the Rockefeller and maybe to a greater degree in Ford--of the jurisdiction of the trustees and distinction of the staff. I mean, how do you treat it? Who runs it? Is it the staff that runs it or is it the trustees who run it? And there's always a little--not always, but frequently it arises.

RICHARD RUSK: I think my dad took the position that it was the trustees that ran the

Foundation.

MCCLOY: Well the trustees can overrun a job and so can staff. It's a nice balance there and I'm sure your father would be very sensitive to just how it ought to be done. It's the same way in a university sometimes. Is the president's office running it or is the faculty running it? And which one is the dominant party? But those things have to be worked out and they were worked out.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you have any stories about my father: Dean Rusk stories or some type of an anecdote?

MCCLOY: Well, maybe if I thought about it a lot, I could think about things. Oh, I'm sure there was. I remember he had a good sly sense of humor.

RICHARD RUSK: Yes he does. Still does.

MCCLOY: But I don't know that I have any particularly dramatic incidents or stories that I think of at the moment. I don't want to repeat. I tried to summarize briefly there what my general impression of your father was.

RICHARD RUSK: You had known him in the 1940s and the fifties and you had formed a definite impression about my dad then. And then you came to know him as one of the chiefs, as Secretary of State in the 1960s. Were you surprised by any aspect of his performance as Secretary that perhaps you did not anticipate?

MCCLOY: No, I don't think so. I thought it was sort of the--I used to know Bob [Robert Abercrombie] Lovett very well when we were on Mr. [Henry Lewis] Stimson's staff. He was the Assistant Secretary for Air and I was the Assistant Secretary General there. And I remember his speaking of your father and sharing the same opinion that I did. I don't think that I can say much more at the moment. Maybe something will come to me. I find I'm speaking more and remembering more now about what my relations were with George Marshall than anybody else because I've been concentrating on it. Suddenly I wake up and think, "Oh, I remember the time he came in there rubbing his hands and saying to me, 'John McCloy, don't let them ask me whether or not we should throw a bomb on Japan. That's not a military question.'"

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, really? He did say that?

MCCLOY: He said, "That's an imponderable." He said, "I talked a great deal with the scientists about it." He said, "And I think the scientists--I'm not a great scientist and I'm not so sure that they know what they're talking about." And he said, "I'm just as convinced as I can be that this is not a military question. It has imponderables in connection that would transcend any military question." And I can remember--I can see him standing in the door, opening my door and coming in talking about it because he was rather disturbed about the thought that he should be asked whether or not we should drop a bomb. That was an imponderable. That was a matter of the finest type of decision making process. They shouldn't treat it solely as a military question. It transcended. That's an example of the penetration of his thinking and the quality of his thinking.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, I hope that no one ever had serious second doubts about the decision to drop that bomb.

MCCLOY: I don't know.

RICHARD RUSK: I'm sure the use of that bomb saved many lives.

MCCLOY: I was all in favor of dropping the bomb because I'd been working on the thing and had been very much involved in it. I don't associate any thoughts of your father with that. My point was that we did have--the President was a new President: it was President Truman. At that time he'd been very shortly in office. At that time, the President, Mr. Roosevelt, had not taken him completely into confidence in regard to the progress of the bomb. Mr. Stimson had to fill him in. There's no question that the dropping of the bombs--and they did. They dropped two of them before they were through. But I think that every ounce of credit goes to Mr. Truman that he went as far as he did to try to bring about a situation where he didn't have to drop any atomic bomb. He would have been happier, in my judgment, if he had not dropped the bombs, and yet at the same time achieved the surrender he was seeking. He was very anxious and he was intrigued with the idea of being able to bring about a surrender of the Japanese without the necessity of dropping any atomic bomb. He ended up by dropping two. And he was the type of man who didn't want to shirk any responsibility: admitted he had responsibility for dropping them before he got through. But he would have much preferred to have been able to achieve the surrender without the necessity of dropping the bombs.

RICHARD RUSK: My question doesn't relate to my father. But when you had your discussion with George Marshall about the use of that bomb, was he also confused or alarmed about, perhaps, some reports from his scientific advisers that they themselves were unsure how big this explosion might be prior to the test of the atomic bomb?

MCCLOY: Oh yes. This is before Alamogordo.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. Was that a major issue?

MCCLOY: I was in Potsdam at the time of Alamogordo. But I remember he used to come in to me and say, "McCloy don't let them ask me whether we should drop an"--I'm repeating myself--"Don't let them ask me whether we should drop a bomb on Japan. This is a tremendous question because I've talked to these scientists and I'm not convinced that they knew that this bomb might not set the world ablaze."

RICHARD RUSK: Is that what he said?

MCCLOY: Sure. He said, "I don't think they know. And who are they asking: me? I'm not a scientist at all. And I get the impression that they don't know as much as they think they know. Something cosmic might--"

RICHARD RUSK: It might keep right on chain reacting, in other words?

MCCLOY: Yes. That's the idea. You must bear in mind there were not only chain reactions--I just remembered now. It was a coincidence, but the time they first found the chain reaction, which was the stadium at the University of Chicago, was the date of Pearl Harbor. Sheer coincidence. But they found the chain reaction there under the stands in the stadium at the University of Chicago. But that coincided with Pearl Harbor.

RICHARD RUSK: I read a report two months ago that you may have seen, and that is a report of the German nuclear program during World War II. Their top nuclear scientist became very disillusioned with the Nazi regime and with Hitler. Yet he was aware of the potential of that weapon. And rather than defect or escape, he stayed with the program and deliberately diverted the German research over into a direction that would not work. They went that heavy water route, remember? And that was a deliberate decision on his part to more or less sabotage the German nuclear program that tried to develop a bomb.

MCCLOY: Well, I don't know anything about that. I know a good bit about the genesis of the bomb, but I don't know what the Germans did. [Otto] Hahn was the man over there. The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. They had split the atom, you know? And Niels [Henrik David] Bohr came over. We got him because he was a great physicist. And he came over and was alarmed. We were alarmed by what the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute was doing. And they dusted off [Albert] Einstein to write a letter to the President.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. And it went from there.

MCCLOY: And it went on from there, yeah. And we rather outdistanced them.

RICHARD RUSK: My father, incidentally, shares your continuing concern with arms control and disarmament. He's very active.

MCCLOY: Well I hope they may can get somewhere now. I don't know whether this new man is receptive to the thing. I know everybody's goodwill is that it will result in constructive solutions. [Andrei Andreevich] Gromyko, whom I had a great deal to do with in those days,-- He's still around--has a certain consistency of personnel as well as policy. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Chiefs stay chiefs over there.

MCCLOY: And I do hope something constructive in the way of preservation of peace and better relations will develop as a result of this renewal of negotiation. I know an awful lot of folks go with it. I don't know anything about this new man. Well, I didn't know much about the old guy. I knew other earlier ones.

RICHARD RUSK: While my dad was Secretary of State, do you recall any specific contacts that you had with him on the issues of arms control or more specific questions of the Test ton Treaty?

MCCLOY: I must have had them, but I can't recall just off the cuff that way. That was part of the web and woof of the problems that we were considering at that time. I thought it would have

been very apt that we should chat about it. I don't remember specifically [inaudible] anything. And I think I'd rather leave it in the terms of the general impression that I have. That's probably better than any striking incidents that I can--

RICHARD RUSK: That's fine. With respect to the Vietnam decision-making, do you recall, did you ever talk one on one with my father or try to consult with him at any time?

MCCLOY: Oh, I'm sure I must have talked with him individually from time to time. I was subjected to great pressure in that time by Mr. Johnson who wanted me to go out to Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: He did?

MCCLOY: Oh, yes. He wanted me to succeed--I see Mr. [Henry] Cabot Lodge [Jr.] died the other day. Mr. Johnson wanted me to succeed Mr. Lodge. And I said, "This isn't my dish of tea. I don't know this area. I don't know anything about it. I have this strong feeling that we shouldn't get involved on the Asian continent. That was something that was sort of preached to me by Eisenhower so many times. I heard him say that so many times. And I said that I didn't want to take it. I wanted to get back to private life.

RICHARD RUSK: President Johnson was going to ask you to replace--

MCCLOY: Oh, he wanted me to take Cabot Lodge's position. And he put pressure on me that was very outrageous.

RICHARD RUSK: It's called the LBJ treatment?

MCCLOY: You know: great flattery. "You know why I'm asking you to do this, McCloy? Because you're the greatest proconsul the country's ever had." I could see myself in a Roman toga. And the next time he was saying, "I know why you're not taking it. You're afraid of it." It was heavy pressure. But I have very distinct feelings about that. I can see how Mr. Johnson, then he was leader of the Senate, he got things done. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: A great wheeler dealer.

MCCLOY: What are you going to do, write a book or something?

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. I'm writing a book about my father. And I'm writing it more from the point of view of his son. It's more of a personal story. And I'll let the scholars handle policy and that sort of thing. I'll write it as a family story. It won't be a very critical book. But he's given me his blessing and he's helping me all he can. We've done a great deal.

MCCLOY: How is he?

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