

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk JJJJ: Part 3 of 3
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk
1985 November 5

The complete interview also includes Rusk HHHHH: Part 1; Rusk IIIII: Part 2.

RICHARD RUSK: --declaring for the Presidency of 1968.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I thought the time would come when Bobby Kennedy would make a bid for the presidency. He, in the Kennedy tradition, was an heir apparent to John F. Kennedy. It was his turn next, just as John F. Kennedy had sort of stepped in when his older Joseph was killed in the war. So, I thought that time would come I didn't know just when it would happen, but I wasn't really surprised when he decided to make a run for it in '68. Maybe he got wind of the fact that Lyndon Johnson was not going to run. I don't know. Hubert Humphrey went into the Democratic Convention of 1968 with about eleven or twelve hundred votes, which were LBJ votes in the convention. So had Bobby continued to run, and LBJ had decided to run, my guess is LBJ would have gotten the nomination because he had an enormous lead going into the convention.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, did you have any contacts with Senator Eugene [Joseph] McCarthy during this Vietnam evaluation period? Or, in general, with respect to the war in Vietnam?

DEAN RUSK: Well, to me Eugene McCarthy was certain [sic] of a mystery man. To begin with he very rarely came to meetings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And when I inquired about whether he was simply spending his time with the Finance Committee, of which he was also a member, I was told that he didn't go to those meetings either. When he announced that he was running for the presidency on an anti-Vietnam platform, I went through our own files to see whether he had ever said anything to me about his views on Vietnam and I couldn't find anything. He had never called me and asked me to come by to see him. He didn't come to Senate Foreign Relations Committee meetings and put searching questions to me. He didn't drop by to see me on his way home from the Senate in the afternoon, or anything like that. So I could not find that he had really taken an active interest in Vietnam until he started running for the Presidency. So he has always been a kind of mystery man to me. I still have not been able to decide whether I think he's really a serious person.

RICHARD RUSK: Interesting.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking about the leaked story that was published in the *New York Times* about the large troop increase. I asked my dad if the public reaction to that leak story was a significant factor.

DEAN RUSK: I think if you just left out public opinion or political reaction, you would have had the same result. Just in terms of the professional policies of the government, we weren't going to put another two hundred thousand troops out there.

RICHARD RUSK: March 13: We're talking about [Joseph] Arthur Goldberg's bombing halt proposal that was presented to Lyndon Johnson in mid-March approximately, where he advocated a bombing halt of North Vietnam without any conditions.

DEAN RUSK: Well, let's go back a little bit about Arthur Goldberg. I myself am convinced that Lyndon Johnson thought that Arthur Goldberg was bored on the Supreme Court, and he asked him to take the position at the United Nations. I think one of the reasons why Arthur Goldberg took that position was he hoped to be able to work out an end to the war in Vietnam through his post at the United Nations. And so this was very much on Arthur Goldberg's mind. Now, he didn't have much to work with up there with Secretary General U Thant because U Thant's role at times was just plain tricky. But Arthur Goldberg did follow the Vietnam problem quite closely, and on occasion would make various suggestions or recommendations about it. And his recommendation for a bombing halt in March was not all that unusual, because he felt a strong desire to bring this war to a conclusion, as did the rest of us, on Vietnam. [tape interruption] He was the Commander-in-Chief. He was the one who had to decide the questions directly affecting the war. I just don't think that Arthur Goldberg was in LBJ's mainstream of thinking about how he, LBJ, wanted to handle this situation.

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: --to stop the bombing in the far North. But it was never intended merely as a gesture.

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking about Dean Rusk's partial bombing pause and the reaction of people like Clark [McAdams] Clifford and others in the Defense Department who were suspicious of it, who thought it might have been just a watered down version of a more permanent halt, for tactical reasons.

DEAN RUSK: I felt that we owed it to our men in uniform in Vietnam not to give these fellows a free ride down the Ho Chi Minh trail, and open up the demarcation line for additional penetrations into South Vietnam. So stopping the bombing up in the Hanoi-Haiphong area, or beyond, say, the Twentieth Parallel was one thing, but to take air support away from our own men in combat is a very different proposition.

RICHARD RUSK: March 20 you had the first meeting at the White House on the upcoming Presidential speech and its contents. The meeting was off the record even in your appointment books. You were there for three hours. Draft materials arrived from the State Department. Your bombing pause request was included; no one felt the pause would lead to negotiations. You wanted it, nevertheless, because: "Unless we are prepared to do something on bombing there is no proposal for us to make." That was lifted from one of your statements.

DEAN RUSK: I think one has to say--is the tape rolling?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Tape's rolling.

DEAN RUSK: One has to say that our experience with bombing halts was not very encouraging. We tried several kinds of bombing halts under different circumstances over a period of four or five years and they hadn't produced a darn thing. And so, as I indicated earlier, LBJ got to be pretty resistant to bombing halts.

RICHARD RUSK: And you might have been less than hopeful about this bombing pause at the time that you proposed it, from that very point of view that they had not worked out in the past. Apparently, you and Clark Clifford had a very sharp exchange at this meeting over that bombing pause. And he was suggesting apparently that you were proposing it more for domestic reasons.

DEAN RUSK: Well, it was one thing to open up the possibility of negotiations. It was another thing simply to go into a bombing halt as a step toward getting out of Vietnam. There may be those who supported a bombing halt for the second reason, whereas my chief preoccupation was to see where the bombing halts could contribute in any way towards any prospects of negotiations either directly or through third parties.

RICHARD RUSK: LBJ was there for this exchange between you and Clifford. LBJ suggested this peace initiative, your bombing pause, being removed from the speech and stated separately. This was March 20. Subsequent drafts contained neither this nor any other peace proposal.

DEAN RUSK: Well, when LBJ would be coming up toward a speech he would call in people like Harry [C.] McPherson [Jr.], and maybe one or two others, and tell them in essence what he wanted to say. Then he would leave them to work out a possible draft. And then that draft would be worked on by people in the State Department, Defense Department, to get, in effect, their professional advice on it. But I have no doubt that the early drafts reflected what LBJ had told his own speech writers that he had in mind to say. And that brought about some modification before the speech was actually delivered by advisers in State and Defense Departments.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Around March 22, in view of the way things seemed to be going at the White House, Clark Clifford got discouraged about the trend of policy. And he wanted to call together the "wise men" again to meet with LBJ. Did you think that was an appropriate thing to do at that time, Pop? Did you have any role in the calling of that meeting?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think such a meeting occurred, did it?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, that was March 25, the "wise men" got together on this.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I see. Okay.

RICHARD RUSK: But it was Clifford who proposed to do it.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Clifford had been one of them before he became Secretary of Defense. Well, it's possible that Clifford had had some contacts with at least some of the "wise men:" for example, Dean [Gooderham] Acheson.

RICHARD RUSK: Probably.

DEAN RUSK: And probably had some idea that there would be some change of opinion in that group if he got them together again. And it would have been natural for him to make that suggestion under the circumstances.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you involved in the decision to call back in those "wise men?"

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I never had any problem about calling those fellows together. They were men of great experience. That wouldn't have bothered me, however the chips might fall. They were fellows that any President would be glad to have a chance to talk with.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking about LBJ's reaction to the report of the second meeting of the "wise men," the fact that he was shocked by it, and demanded to see the briefings.

DEAN RUSK: I don't think that it was the briefers who briefed the group as a whole that made the difference. I think it was the fact that people like Dean Acheson took some time ahead of time to browse around in government and talk to people in third, fourth, fifth echelons, and ran across a profound discouragement about any successful outcome of the war. And he drew his own conclusions from that. I don't think LBJ would have taken very much exception to the actual briefing that was given to the group as a whole.

RICHARD RUSK: Had he been there for the briefings? Apparently those guys rebriefed LBJ exactly as they briefed the others.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: Although apparently at that time you thought the briefers might have given an unbalanced appraisal of the overall situation, given their efforts to explain the real problems facing the nation. That was apparently your reaction at that time: perhaps they might have overdone it, having been influenced by all other factors and not strictly the situation in Vietnam.

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember being unhappy with the briefing these "wise men" got at that general meeting.

RICHARD RUSK: Apparently the "wise men" were focusing not on Vietnam, but on the political situation in the U.S.

DEAN RUSK: Well, some of them undoubtedly were.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you there when they reported back to LBJ on the 26th at the tail end of their session and actually made their report to Lyndon Johnson?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think I was physically present.

RICHARD RUSK: I don't think you were either. That was when LBJ said, "Someone had poisoned the well." I'll be darned.

DEAN RUSK: Well, these were people who had minds of their own. And it wasn't a case of their being taken in by somebody.

RICHARD RUSK: Right, right. LBJ in his own memoirs said, "If they had been so deeply influenced by the reports of the Tet offensive, what must the average American citizen be thinking?"

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, sure. Right.

RICHARD RUSK: To begin the question of when did LBJ decide on the bombing pause, what was the moment of decision: [Michael Joseph] Mansfield, on March 27 in a private talk, was unsure of LBJ's commitment to the idea. And he thought as late as the evening of March 27, LBJ had not decided to include the bombing pause.

DEAN RUSK: My guess is LBJ made that decision within twenty-four hours before he announced it. That was just typically the way he operated.

RICHARD RUSK: On March 28th you had that meeting to review the draft of the speech. And you were the one who suggested that two drafts be prepared that--that another draft be prepared to give the President a choice. Did you kind of have that feeling going into that meeting?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think that simply reflected that I did not know what the President's final decision would be. Therefore, we ought not to hem him in by giving him only one draft, but give him an alternative to look at.

RICHARD RUSK: And you yourself at that time were not quite certain on the 28th exactly which way he was going to go.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: And you think the point of his decision was somewhere between the 28th and the 31st?

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't remember that evening at all at the White House when you went over there with William [Putnam] Bundy after that speech? Or after that drafting session on the 28th?

DEAN RUSK: I just don't recall the details of it now.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking about this meeting at the White House on the 28th. Dean Rusk was at the White House until eight p.m., returned to the Department of State at eight p.m. Harry McPherson worked all night on the new draft of this speech. And, Pop, do you recall anything at all about that evening?

DEAN RUSK: I think it's very probable that I talked to McPherson by phone during the evening.

RICHARD RUSK: It was possible?

DEAN RUSK: My appointment books might show whether or not I might have talked to him on the phone.

RICHARD RUSK: Nothing in there about that. Would you and Bill Bundy have worked together?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I'm sure that Bill and I would have spent some time after that in the office. I don't know what we did for dinner that evening. I just forget.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. LBJ said that the "work continued on the draft of my speech, but it was largely a matter of refinement of language." This is his quote. This is when McPherson--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: On March 30, another drafting session was held with Lyndon Johnson present. And Nick [Nicholas de Belleville] Katzenbach represented you, because you had left for Wellington, New Zealand that same day.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: When you left, did you think things had been fairly well resolved or was there still a great deal of flux in the air?

DEAN RUSK: No, I thought the main body of the speech had been pretty much put to bed by the time I left for New Zealand.

RICHARD RUSK: Really?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. And the only thing that was changed was the addition of that final paragraph, where LBJ announced that he was not going to run again.

RICHARD RUSK: When you left you had taken a last look at the draft. And then you heard it or saw it, read it later on--

DEAN RUSK: That's right. When I left I was pretty confident that, with only minor changes, that would be the final speech.

RICHARD RUSK: Was it, in fact, the final speech?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: With minor changes?

DEAN RUSK: And the addition of that final paragraph.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. You didn't feel at all bad about pulling out at that point and going on this trip?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, no. That thing didn't bother me because I was always content to let the Under Secretary act as Secretary in my absence. That was true of George [Wildman] Ball, and it was true of Nick Katzenbach.

RICHARD RUSK: Apparently LBJ and Clark Clifford and others really haggled word by word over the content of that speech on March 30 and gave it a lot of tugging and pulling. Clark Clifford was trying to remove any language suggesting that we would hang tough. [tape interruption] Johnson's speech of March 31 curtailed sharply the bombing of North Vietnam, proposed peace talks, and denied [William Childs] Westmoreland's massive troop request. It didn't deny it, but it was not on in terms of the speech.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: It also removed Lyndon Johnson from Presidential consideration. All four of those things fell in line with your recommendations too, with the exception of the last.

DEAN RUSK: Yes. I was content with the first three. But I had a strong idea that he was going to announce that he was not going to run again.

RICHARD RUSK: Was the right decision made on March 31 with respect to the Presidential speech, looking back over all this period of time?

DEAN RUSK: Well, what part of it? I mean in what respect?

RICHARD RUSK: In all three major thrusts of that speech. We're talking about the bombing halt--

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think so. I think that what he said about the bombing opened the way for various intermediaries, communications, to check out with North Vietnam whether they were

interested in some talks. Indeed, a few days later they indicated they would be willing to have some talks. So I think those were the right decisions under the circumstances.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think LBJ thought, in retrospect, that he had made the right decision on March 31?

DEAN RUSK: I think so. I think so.

RICHARD RUSK: Was it not true, or did he ever have reconsiderations about not continuing with the escalation, or continuing with more pressure? Because remember, [Richard Milhous] Nixon took over. And Nixon really did step up things in terms of massive bombings of North Vietnam, Hanoi, and Haiphong, mining the Haiphong harbor. Did Johnson later come to feel that perhaps he should have continued, and even increased his pressure?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I'm not sure about that, because the Johnson administration turned over to the Nixon administration a military position in South Vietnam which the North Vietnamese and Vietcong could not have overrun regardless of what they did. But we could not turn over to the Nixon administration a unified Congress or unified people. And I must confess that I was a little surprised that Nixon tried to stay in Vietnam as long as he did, because I felt that the people who had the power to make the decision, namely the American people at the grass roots, had made it. And I can understand why President Nixon wanted to leave behind something that was reasonably satisfactory from our point of view, and the South Vietnamese point of view. But he did take more military action at the beginning of his administration than I thought he was going to. And during the campaign he had campaigned on the basis that he knew how to wind up the war in Vietnam. He wouldn't tell anybody how.

RICHARD RUSK: He would sort of touch his breast pocket as if there were some secret plan in there. And he was allowed to do that.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: And he nearly lost the election because of that, probably. You tend to regard this decision on March 31 as sort of a major turning point? Was it the high point of the American involvement in your own thinking, as it has come to be?

DEAN RUSK: Not particularly. You see, it was during this period that I felt that war weariness had set in among the American people, and they had decided we better chuck it if we couldn't tell them when it was going to be over. And there was no way that we could give them any such assurances with integrity. And we didn't try to give them such assurances. And so I felt that somehow we had to work our way toward either a negotiated settlement or a simple de facto reduction on the American effort out there.

RICHARD RUSK: Could we have resumed the bombing if North Vietnam had not been somewhat receptive to the initiation of talks? Was it possible?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, sure. We could have resumed the bombing.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll tell you what my reaction to the speech was up in Cornell, Pop. I heard that speech and I said to myself, "My, God! This marks the high point of the involvement there, and we eventually are going to get out of Vietnam." That was my reaction.

DEAN RUSK: Well, that was the feeling among many of us in Washington. We realized that what appeared to be a majority of the American people had simply decided they were not going to continue to support it.

RICHARD RUSK: And apparently a lot of troops in the field got that same signal right then, too, as good as communications were over there--Armed Forces Radio. They heard the speech. Up to that point we had been more or less trying to win. We had been trying to do the job. And from that point on it was kind of a holding action.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. Well, when you're rotating new draftees into your forces out there on a one year basis, inevitably your new draftees are going to take with them their impressions from the home front. That undoubtedly had an effect on the attitude of the troops and their morale.

RICHARD RUSK: Now, were you aware of Clark Clifford's role in interpreting subsequent statements of official policy on Vietnam after the Tet offensive? And the speculation here is that Clark Clifford had launched a deliberate public campaign to interpret the President's decisions in the way he felt they ought to be interpreted. In other words, Clark Clifford wanted to make sure that the decision of March 31 was a definitive turning point for Lyndon Johnson and our policy over there.

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember any tensions and strains between me and Clark Clifford on that point.

RICHARD RUSK: On subsequent interpretations?

DEAN RUSK: On subsequent remarks there might have been--

RICHARD RUSK: For example, he, in a speech to the National Press Club in September, set a definite limit of 549,500 men in Vietnam. And there was quite a flap about that. And it was sort of a flap within the administration too.

DEAN RUSK: Well, whether the Secretary of Defense should be precise on something which was for the President to decide would be question without fully clearing it with the President ahead of time.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you and LBJ ever contemplate resuming the bombing after the 31st of March? Was that a serious option?

DEAN RUSK: I forget now whether in fact we did resume the bombing. I think maybe we did, didn't we? I don't think we waited until Nixon's inauguration to resume.

RICHARD RUSK: I'm not sure.

DEAN RUSK: Of course, we were soon getting into the Paris Peace Talks.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. That's a good time to quit, Pop. We'll just finish off this Paris Peace Talks when you get back and do this next week.

END OF SIDE 1

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