

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk JJJ JJJ: Part 1 of 2
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk and Thomas J. Schoenbaum
1986 April

The complete interview also includes Rusk KKK KKK: Part 2.

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking today with Dean Rusk about John Kennedy. This is Rich Rusk and Tom Schoenbaum interviewing. This is April 1986. Pop, John Kennedy came out of an entirely different background than you did. He came from a rich family, well established in politics and business, sort of aristocratic from the New England seaboard.

DEAN RUSK: Newly aristocratic, one of the Boston Irish.

RICHARD RUSK: All right. He came out of a select background, as we all do. To what extent did his background limit his understanding of the American politic, the American people? Just in general, how do you think John Kennedy's background may have served as a strength or perhaps a weakness in the way he operated as President? He never really worked for a living. He came from a well-to-do background.

SCHOENBAUM: And he also was limited in geographical focus, perhaps, to the northeast, what was called the northeastern establishment.

DEAN RUSK: Well, he had been exposed throughout his experience to world affairs. He lived in London while his father was ambassador over there. He moved in sophisticated circles. This was true of his education. He worked for a time as a reporter. He authored that book, *Profiles in Courage*, which caused him to think about a good many other people and the situations they face. Then he served in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. So I would say that he'd had a pretty broad background in world affairs and the principal national issues. I think it's true that he did not have an instinctive empathy with people at the grass roots because he himself was not a grass roots kind of person. And that meant that some of his programs which had to do with the common man and the poor and the people in need came out of his intellect rather than out of the very inner fibers of his being. He recognized intellectually that there are a good many things that ought to be done, but that did not carry with him a strong emotional force that one was to find later in Lyndon Johnson. But I think also that through that experience, he developed a kind of skepticism about sweeping generalities, about stuffed shirts, about the conventional wisdom. Now that had the benefit of his willingness to look at every question afresh because he was skeptical of the old pat answers. He was willing to look at any question, in effect, from the roots upward to see whether or not the standard answers were really relevant, were really the right answers. He had a very inquiring mind and this led him to an instinctive sort of an interest in innovation, if he felt that innovation was the right way to proceed. And in my judgment, that was an element of strength in his approach.

RICHARD RUSK: Was he well prepared for the Presidency?

DEAN RUSK: I think that one has to say that no one is really prepared to be President. And I think he was well prepared in terms of thinking about policy issues. But he'd had no significant administrative experience anywhere along the line. He had not been the governor of a state. So his administrative experience was rather limited, and there were times when his informality with administration tended to cause some confusion and tended to get in the way of the most efficient kind of administration he might have had.

RICHARD RUSK: Could you give us an example?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, I mentioned this before, that he would, from time to time, call the junior desk officer in the department working on a particular problem and talk with him. And when that happened, as I've indicated earlier, two things happened. First, it would scare the hell out of that desk officer to be talked to directly by the President. Secondly, whatever that issue was, had to come to my desk because anything that the President was interested in had to come to my desk so that I could be interested in it and advise him. And that, at times, got in the way of my own desire to delegate to my own colleagues in the Department of State.

RICHARD RUSK: We have you at considerable length on that. In terms of his preparation for the job, he also came through that Second World War, serving in the Southwest Pacific. He came close to losing his life over there. Obviously it was one of his formative experiences. Did he ever refer back to World War II?

DEAN RUSK: No, not really. He showed personal courage at the time that his PT [Patrol Torpedo] boat was knocked out from under him.

SCHOENBAUM: Did he talk about that specifically?

DEAN RUSK: No, no. He was once asked by some young person, "How do you get to be a war hero?" And he said, "By having your boat knocked out from under you."

RICHARD RUSK: It was easy; my boat was sunk!

DEAN RUSK: That's right. Something like that. I mean he took things like that rather lightly. It was the circumstance that caused him to do what he did, you see. And he did not blow himself up in those terms.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you ever exchange war stories with him? You were both in the same war.

DEAN RUSK: No, not really. We were both in the same war, but he was in the Navy in the Pacific and I was in the Army in China-Burma-India. And we just didn't, in effect, waste time by exchanging war stories. As a matter of fact, my conversations with Kennedy were always to the point at hand. We never just fanned the breeze.

RICHARD RUSK: You talked strictly policy with John Kennedy?

DEAN RUSK: We talked policy. And I learned that he was a very impatient fellow and he didn't want to waste a lot of words. So I learned to speak as precisely as possible to the point at hand and then shut up and go home. John Kennedy was easily bored. He was impatient with people who would come in and talk too much and there were a number of people around him who I'm sure he thought talked too much.

SCHOENBAUM: What did he do to show his boredom?

DEAN RUSK: Well, when he was receiving a distinguished foreign guest, a chief of government or chief of state in the Oval Office, this visitor would usually have quite a speech to make that he'd probably been rehearsing for some time before hand, and when Kennedy would get bored, he'd start rocking in that rocking chair and tap on his teeth with his fingernails. And that was a sign to any of us who were with him to find a way to cut this fellow short and get down to business, (laughter) But that was a sure sign that he was getting very impatient.

RICHARD RUSK: In your briefings with Kennedy, did you ever notice him rocking in his chair and tapping his teeth?

DEAN RUSK: Not on a bilateral basis. I never gave him time for that. I always spoke as briefly as possible to the point. Now he did bring with him to the job two qualities.

RICHARD RUSK: Just a minute Pop, let me ask you one thing first. You literally did not discuss anything but policy with John Kennedy in the hundreds of times that you saw him?

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: You didn't ever just fan the breeze with Kennedy?

DEAN RUSK: Very, very rarely did we gossip about people for example. That was just not part of the job.

RICHARD RUSK: You're not trying to preserve that blue sky that you fear all the time? You virtually did not talk anything but policy with John Kennedy? Think back now.

DEAN RUSK: I think you'd find that any talk about anything but policy would be one tenth of one percent of the time we spent and I just can't remember at the moment.

SCHOENBAUM: What about on airplanes or trips when you're on a boring airplane ride or something? Do you remember an antics or incidents? Sometimes people have really nothing to do even though they're busy.

DEAN RUSK: No, if I were with him on Air Force I, he had his forward cabin, and we would come up and talk with him as though he were in the Oval office in Washington. And I don't remember any--I had more leisurely conversation, for example, with George [Catlett] Marshall when he was Secretary of State than I did with John F. Kennedy.

RICHARD RUSK: Is he the kind of man that just did not generate the atmosphere needed for leisurely conversation? He was obviously very intense.

DEAN RUSK: Bear in mind this arms-length relationship that I've mentioned. He always called me Mr. Secretary. I always called him Mr. President. Our relations were very close, but were official. They were not in any sense personal, sort of person-to-person, man-to-man. When I was with him, it was the Secretary of State with the President. It was not John F. Kennedy and Dean Rusk. And that was very marked in our relationship. I personally preferred it that way because, as you know, I'm deeply convinced that personal relationships should not intrude into the consideration of the merits of public policy issues. He did bring to the job the technical capabilities of a rapid reader. It was really quite astonishing to see how he could just turn the pages of a book and he'd have it. Then he also had an extraordinary memory. That meant that he took briefing very well, very fast. And he would hang on to it. I would add to that an insatiable curiosity about what was going on in the world. He was interested in a lot of details that most Presidents leave to other people. You put those three together and you had a lively mind constantly at work, constantly spinning over. Now apparently, he did like to chew the fat informally with some of his colleagues up at Hyannisport or in the Rose Garden or at West Palm Beach because he was interested in ideas. There were times when he would talk about possible ideas on which he had not made any kind of judgment as President, and sometimes that got to be misinterpreted.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, that we have at some length. You add those three things together, Pop, the force of his intellect and insatiable curiosity, his wanting to get into everything. Was he almost too dynamic a personality? Did he tend to overwhelm people? Did he tend to overwhelm you? Did he perhaps try to run the government a bit too excessively whereas other Presidents might make the mistake of not providing sufficient leadership?

DEAN RUSK: He was in no sense an overwhelming personality. That is, there was no such thing as the John F. Kennedy treatment comparable to the Lyndon Johnson treatment, I think perhaps because he was maybe skeptical about himself as well as skeptical about other people and ideas. He was also rather--remember that he was more cautious than many people remember him being because he had not felt he'd had a mandate in the election of 1960: He used to say, Cook County, Illinois. After the Bay of Pigs, he remarked, "I think I'll ask for a recount in Cook County." But he did not have the impression that somehow he had been given a blank check by the American people to do whatever he wanted to do. And so he gave pretty careful thought to the issues on which he was prepared to do battle and that made him more cautious than many people remember him to be.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think he overdid it in terms of Presidential leadership?

DEAN RUSK: No, I don't think so. You see, again the first sentence of Article II of the Constitution: The executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America. It is the President, and only the President, who is elected by the people to give direction to the executive branch within the laws of the Constitution. However, it takes a good deal of effort and thought on the part of a President to be able to impose his will upon the executive branch of the government. That doesn't come automatically. And he has to work at it to be sure that the

executive branch understands what it is that he wants them to do, and in the process, to listen carefully to all points of view on the issues which he has in mind.

SCHOENBAUM: There's one issue that really continues to puzzle me about John F. Kennedy, and that is he campaigned on the issue of a missile gap. We heard all about the missile gap. And then, shortly after he was elected, we read that the missile gap had been reevaluated and didn't exist, that this was a misinterpretation. What was the story on that? Was JFK guilty of some duplicitousness in that instance?

DEAN RUSK: Well, it is my impression--this would have to be checked out from other sources. It is my impression that about the time he was actually elected, we began to get superior methods of information, for example satellite photography, which gave us a much better readout and count of Soviet missiles. And in fact, our intelligence assessment changed about the time he became President, and the missile gap that he had talked about in the campaign proved not to be anything like as serious as he had charged that it was. But that was based, in my judgment, on new sources of information rather than upon deliberate duplicity on his part.

SCHOENBAUM: Did he ever kid about that and say, "Lucky for that missile gap," you know? (laughter)

DEAN RUSK: No, he was asked once by a reporter, "Have you had any surprises since you've become President?" He said, "Yes, I was surprised to find that things are as bad as I said they were in the campaign." (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: It turned out there wasn't a missile gap but he went ahead and built a hell of a lot of missiles. Bob [Robert Strange] McNamara picked a number of one thousand. That was a nice round number.

DEAN RUSK: Well you see, during the fifties, during the [Dwight David] Eisenhower period, we dropped off in our military forces largely for budgetary reasons. And it was clear that we needed to do something about that. There was another factor, too, that entered into it that was very important. About the beginning of Eisenhower's second term, the Soviets achieved a full strike capacity against the United States, and every President, beginning with Eisenhower in his second term, has had to think about something that other Presidents never had to think about, namely the virtual destruction of the United States. See, in the early part of the Eisenhower administration, with John Foster Dulles talking about massive retaliation, and a bigger bang for a buck, and that kind of thing, that was largely an attempt to explain what we could do on the cheek. Well now, when the Soviets achieved a full strike capability against the United States, then the nuclear deterrent began to evaporate as a deterrent because it became increasingly unbelievable because the use of massive retaliation became wholly irrational. Therefore, Kennedy and McNamara and I were faced with the fact that unless we built up our conventional forces, that the nuclear deterrent would become unreliable. And unbelievable and so we moved toward McNamara's notion of balanced forces primarily to give more validity to the nuclear deterrent.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, let me return to an earlier point. I want to quote you something out of one of your favorite authors: Arthur Schlesinger's, *A Thousand Days*--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, let's return to that earlier point. Do you think John Kennedy really did overdo it in terms of the Presidential leadership and involve himself too excessively in running the executive branch?

DEAN RUSK: Well, perhaps around the edges he showed some of that at times, just because of his enormous curiosity and interest in the details of what was going on. But on the other hand, large delegation is absolutely essential, just as a matter of time. I've indicated before that something like three thousand cables a day went out of that department with my name signed to them. Now of those, I myself personally might have seen six or seven or eight of them before they went out. The President might see one or two. But the rest of them have to go out on the basis of authority necessarily delegated to hundreds of offices in the Department of State in order to get the work done. Now, Kennedy did not really get in the way of that kind of thing. You see, the Assistant Secretary of State has to apply the art of government in deciding which questions are to go to the Secretary. The Secretary has to exercise the art of government in deciding which matters ought to go to the President. But my inclination was to go ahead and act except where I felt seriously that the matter deserves Presidential attention. What I did do with President Kennedy was to send over to him at the end of every day, a memorandum detailing, just in one or two lines per point, what we had done during the day and what matters are coming up the next day or two to give him a chance to see what was going on and also to give him a chance to pick up the phone and intrude himself into any issue that we had not referred to him. And that, on the whole, worked out pretty well. I was never criticized by President Kennedy for exceeding my authority. He never once took me to task for going ahead and acting without referring something to him.

RICHARD RUSK: He did take you to task for not exercising to its fullest extent your authority, I believe. If he was frustrated at all, it would have been in the other direction. Did he ever sit you down and chew you out about this?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall that he ever sat me down and gave me a lecture on going ahead and doing the job and not bothering him.

RICHARD RUSK: He never talked to you personally about the way you were handling yourself in that job or any of his reported displeasure with certain things happening over at State?

DEAN RUSK: No, no.

RICHARD RUSK: Never talked to you directly?

DEAN RUSK: No, one thing that--it sounds a little self-serving, but one thing that apparently impressed him very much was my relations with the Congress. I did have very good relations

with the Congress on both sides of the aisle and that apparently got back to him from Capitol Hill. And since he had been in the Congress himself, he seemed to be impressed with that.

RICHARD RUSK: Arthur Schlesinger, in his book, didn't make up all these alleged John Kennedy dissatisfactions with State and Dean Rusk. He didn't make all those up out of thin air. Obviously he spent some time talking with his friends in the White House, and obviously some of the stuff got back to you. Did it ever bother you that the President wasn't telling you directly about his reported displeasure with you?

DEAN RUSK: Well, some of that was just plain misunderstanding. John F. Kennedy had this sardonic wit that he used on everybody around him. We all took that in good grace because he used it most of all upon himself and members of his own family. But sometimes these things that he would simply say as a result of that kind of wit would be taken seriously by other people. Schlesinger would take that as gospel, you see. Now, what Schlesinger did not know was that when I agreed to serve as Kennedy's Secretary of State, I told him I could serve for only one term. Yeah, you've got that.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me ask you a related question.

DEAN RUSK: Whereas Schlesinger, see, got the idea that Kennedy was going to get himself another Secretary of State in his second term. And he translated that into some unhappiness by Kennedy toward me. Well, that was a part of our original understanding. Schlesinger later, when I reminded him of that, he said he was sorry he did not know that because that threw a different light on a number of things.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't really feel John Kennedy overdid it as a President? What about this business of excessive activism that historians have criticized the Kennedy years for? They were always trying to do things in response to crises. Perhaps they weren't sufficiently willing to sit back and let affairs elsewhere in the world run their natural course. Did you have a problem with John Kennedy over that? The term they use is "excessive activism" and that's the label that has stuck with the Kennedy years in retrospect.

DEAN RUSK: Well, that of course depends upon the point of view of the beholder. I think there were people around him in the White House staff who took an activist approach. They wanted their man to emerge as the great leader, not only of this country, but of the free world. They were inclined to want to do something when something came up. Vigor was the word of the day. Well, in terms of diplomacy in our national interest, there are many times when doing nothing is the right decision. But now, the important thing is that if you do nothing, you should do nothing on purpose and not through neglect or inadvertence or just spinning wheels. But I did not detect in President Kennedy, any sense that we were the world's policemen, that we had to go and try to do something about every situation that popped up in the world.

SCHOENBAUM: I just wanted to come back to a previous point.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me follow this up here. Warren [I.] Cohen has complimented you for doing what you could to tone down the excessive activism in the Kennedy administration. Do

you feel you warrant that label, Pop? And also, did you ever talk personally to John Kennedy about the need to just lay back and don't get so excited?

DEAN RUSK: No, I didn't philosophize with him about that. When individual problems arose, I would sometimes talk to him about the line of caution and not taking on every problem as our problem and that kind of thing. This more relaxed and, if you like, conservative view of the Department of State caused some of those around him in the White House to poke fun at the Department of State. You know Foggy Bottom and all that kind of thing.

RICHARD RUSK: Kennedy called it a bowl of jelly.

DEAN RUSK: A bowl of jelly and so forth. Kennedy once talked to Dean [Gooderham] Acheson and said to Dean Acheson, "What's the matter with the Department of State?" And Acheson said, "You are, Mr. President." So one had to watch that point a little bit.

SCHOENBAUM: Let me follow-up on one point that you made that I just want to reaffirm. Did I understand you, or did we understand you to say that after Schlesinger's articles or books were written about these stories about JFK looking for a new Secretary of State, that you told him the story and he said, "I didn't know that."

DEAN RUSK: That's right. You see, Arthur Schlesinger sat over there in the East Room of the White House, not in the West Wing. He was over in the east wing with the social secretaries and people like that. And he was a sort of an intellectual-in-residence. He did play a very useful role in reading articles and books and calling to JFK's attention to things that he thought might be of special interest to him. And then he would be given occasional special assignments, such as holding Adlai [Ewing] Stevenson's [III] hand up at the United Nations, and things of that sort. But very rarely was Arthur Schlesinger in the middle of serious policy discussion, although he was undoubtedly accumulating material all that time for a book about John F. Kennedy.

SCHOENBAUM: You knew that at the time?

DEAN RUSK: No I didn't. But I should have known.

RICHARD RUSK: Kennedy knew?

DEAN RUSK: I don't know to what extent Kennedy knew that Arthur was doing that, because if Kennedy had lived he would have wanted to write his own book.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you ever read *Profiles in Courage*? You must have read it.

DEAN RUSK: Yes I read it.

SCHOENBAUM: What are your thoughts on it?

DEAN RUSK: Well, JFK had some points of view that were rather different than [those of] some of the staff people around him. For example, that famous sentence in his inaugural address,

"Let every nation know whether they wish us good or ill," was, I think, characteristic of the man. There was some--After his death some of the Kennedy people tried to brush that sentence away as rhetoric. But after all, that sentence was engraved at his tombstone at his burial site in Arlington by the choice of his family. And when the British gave an acre of ground at Runnymede to the American people in memory of John F. Kennedy, that was the sentence that they engraved on the stone marker there at Runnymede. I found that that was Kennedy's approach to problems affecting the United States and its security and so forth, its vital interests. It was in no sense just campaign rhetoric or the kind of oratory that you sort of manufacture to put into an inaugural address.

RICHARD RUSK: Was John Kennedy, himself, a profile in courage? You have said that he showed great courage during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

DEAN RUSK: Well, and during the earlier Berlin Crisis.

RICHARD RUSK: He didn't show any courage with respect to China.

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DEAN RUSK: --I said about his innate caution: that feeling that he had no mandate in the election of 1960. So he was careful about picking on which he was prepared to do battle, particularly with the Congress. And a change in China policy by him would have led to a gouging public controversy between himself and many Republicans. Had he made that trip to China that [Richard Milhous] Nixon later made, he would have been cut to pieces by a lot of people in this country, including Richard Nixon. So he was cautious at the moment of decision. But there were times when he would, even so, when he would act boldly. For example, we faced the necessity of getting at least an extension of the trade legislation. And the idea in many minds was that we should ask for a one-year extension from Congress. And we felt that that would be a very difficult thing, that it would be a very controversial issue. And I, myself, took the view, along with Kennedy, that if we're going to have a real fight, then we should have a fight about something important. And so, Kennedy and I overruled some of our senior colleagues and decided to go for a five-year bill. That opened the way for the Kennedy round of trade negotiations.

SCHOENBAUM: And you won that one.

DEAN RUSK: And we did, and we won it, and won it rather handsomely. Now that was an instance of a bold decision that he made despite his innate caution.

RICHARD RUSK: Any further illustrations of John Kennedy's courage?

DEAN RUSK: Well, when Chairman [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev, in brutal fashion, threw that ultimatum at Kennedy in Vienna in June '61 about Berlin, Kennedy looked him straight in the eye when Khrushchev said, "And if the west tries to interfere there will be war." Kennedy looked him straight in the eye and said, "Then there will be war, Mr. Chairman. It's going to be a very cold winter."

RICHARD RUSK: Were you there for that exchange?

DEAN RUSK: I was present at that time. And then I think Kennedy's insistence that these missiles be taken out of Cuba was a part of an extraordinarily dangerous crisis. But throughout that crisis Kennedy personally was cool as a cucumber. He never became emotional or excited. No, he had a capacity for courage that I think was impressive.

SCHOENBAUM: What about his language? I personally, along with a lot of other people, was shocked when the so-called White House transcripts came out of the Nixon administration and we heard all those expletives deleted. I mean, sure, none of us are naive and we know that four-letter words are used and we use them ourselves. But the quantity and quality of the four-letter words used in the Nixon administration, I think, shocked a lot of people. How would you characterize his language in that regard?

DEAN RUSK: You know I simply do not recall Kennedy using vulgar four-letter words, or even "damn" and "hell" in top-level conferences where decisions had to be made. He just didn't go down that trail. As a matter of fact, neither did Harry Truman. Although in some of these hour or hour-and-a-half programs about Harry Truman they pulled together almost all of the four-letter words that Truman used in his whole lifetime. When Harry Truman was acting as President, I didn't hear these four-letter words from him. Now when he was playing poker with his cronies, it might have been a different story. But I just do not recall that Kennedy used such language when he was acting as President, partly because he had such a command of the language that he did not have to use such words to make a point. He would make his point in elegant English.

SCHOENBAUM: Would you describe him as elegant? Is that a word you would use about him?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. He had a respect for words. And he, somewhat like George Marshall, had a respect for words. He himself was very good with words, but he had at his elbow the enormous help of Ted [Theodore Chaikin] Sorensen, who was a very good master of English and master of spoken English. And he undoubtedly helped John F. Kennedy considerably on many of the phrases that we associate with John F. Kennedy.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, you must have had some doubts about John Kennedy, some aspects of his personality. You did vote for Adlai Stevenson back in 1960. Do you care to elaborate on the reasons why you preferred Stevenson over Kennedy in that election?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I had supported Adlai Stevenson in my small way in '52 and '56, and thought very highly of him. I thought Adlai Stevenson made a lot of sense in what he said to the nation. Although in '56 he almost lost my support by some unilateral steps that he proposed

about nuclear weapons. I forget now the details. But I was sort of in the frame of mind to support Adlai Stevenson, and I did so even during the convention of 1960. It didn't make any difference, because I didn't have any votes. But--

RICHARD RUSK: As a matter of fact, Mom's [Virginia Foisie Rusk] vote counterbalanced your own.

DEAN RUSK: I think I've told you that during the convention of 1960--

RICHARD RUSK: Pop couldn't even deliver his own wife!

DEAN RUSK: --I sent a telegram to [William] Averell Harriman, who was head of the New York delegation, in effect saying, "Don't be a damn fool. Support Adlai Stevenson." Averell was then swinging toward John F. Kennedy.

RICHARD RUSK: You weren't even able to deliver Mom's vote in that election, were you?

DEAN RUSK: I'm not sure what she would have done, depending on who was the candidate. Mom and I every once in a while split on Presidential elections. I think she voted for Wendell [Lewis] Willkie once instead of Franklin [Delano] Roosevelt. But I've never had any votes to deliver to anybody. My political endorsement means, frankly, nothing.

RICHARD RUSK: You stated the positive reasons why you voted for Stevenson. Was there anything negative about John Kennedy or his campaign that cast some doubt about him?

DEAN RUSK: No, it was primarily because I just didn't know anything about him. I just didn't know him. I had no real impressions of him. I'd never met him. I'd never heard him speak, personally. I'd seen him on television.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you regard him as too young?

DEAN RUSK: No. I think age didn't have much to do with it. And it didn't bother me that he was Catholic. That didn't bother me at all. After all, Al [Alfred Emanuel] Smith, the Catholic, took the State of Georgia in that election in '28, despite his Catholicism.

RICHARD RUSK: What didn't you like about John Kennedy?

DEAN RUSK: Hmmm.

RICHARD RUSK: We're all mortal. We all have our strengths and weaknesses.

SCHOENBAUM: What are his greatest weaknesses, or a single weakness?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I'd have to think about that because I've never brooded on that subject.

SCHOENBAUM: He wasn't lazy in any way, was he?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, no.

SCHOENBAUM: He worked hard?

DEAN RUSK: He worked hard. Well let me just say again what I've said, maybe, on another tape. I saw him hundreds of times in a great diversity of situations. And on no single occasion did I ever hear anything or see anything to cause me to speculate about his personal life. On no single occasion did I ever hear him complain about his back or any other physical problem. And not once did I ever think that I was in the presence of a man who was under any form of sedation. Now whatever these stories are, and I don't know the truth of the--whatever these stories are, there was nothing in that line of country that interfered with his being President. I mean, I found him ready and able and capable of being President at all times. And so these stories pretty much leave me cold.

SCHOENBAUM: Was he perhaps too ambitious? Did he have an excess of ambition? Was his a cold and driving ambition?

DEAN RUSK: Well you can't be President without being ambitious. You can't be President without having extra supplies of adrenalin. To me it's a miracle of our constitutional system that anyone ever steps forward to want to be President. It's a man-killing job. It's one of the worst jobs in the world because the President is held responsible for a lot of things over which he has no control, he has no constitutional power. Now if you ask what the sources of John F. Kennedy's ambitions were, you'd have to look back at his father and his family and the zeal in that family for political life.

SCHOENBAUM: Do you think the death of his brother, Joe [Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Jr.], was important?

DEAN RUSK: John was the heir to his brother Joe's political ambitions, or political role. No, you have to be ambitious to get into that line of country.

RICHARD RUSK: McGeorge Bundy was asked by Kennedy whether or not you would be a suitable Secretary of State for John Kennedy. You might not recall this story, Pop. But Bundy raised the question as to whether or not you two men were different in style and also different in personality. You were surely different in your backgrounds. And he raised to John Kennedy some question about your appointment based on those differences. You, yourself, in one of these oral histories, commented upon some differences in personality that you had with John Kennedy. Care to elaborate on that? Did that type of thing interfere with your relationship with him?

DEAN RUSK: Well it's true that Kennedy and I came out of wholly different backgrounds. I think that I had developed in my previous service in government a bit of caution about the situations in which we should intrude ourselves, some sense of which things are really in our national interest and which things are simply at the rhetorical level. But I think, in fundamentals Kennedy and I were on the same wavelength as far as major policies were concerned. As a matter of fact, when I went down to West Palm Beach to talk over a lot of things with him before

he announced my appointment we talked about the main lines of American policy and the importance of bipartisanship and things of that sort. So I didn't feel that I was on a different wavelength from him. Now our two styles are different. After all, he had been active in politics. He had been out presenting a public image of himself. I was quite the opposite. I had never had any interest in elective political life. I had been in the State Department and president of the [John Davison] Rockefeller [Sr.] Foundation. In that job you sort of act quietly behind the scenes because all you are doing is putting out money for people who have the real ability. And so I was never in the situation where I had the slightest interest in putting myself forward as a public person. And I suppose that created some differences of approach. As a matter of fact, I once told a press conference in response to a question that my principal hope as Secretary of State was to get foreign policy news back on page 12. I wanted to get a situation that was so normal that it was not newsworthy. And that was more or less my approach to it. Now Kennedy and the people around him wanted to put him forward. For example,--

RICHARD RUSK: Did you assume that he would be happy if foreign affairs stayed on page 1?

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: With his name associated?

DEAN RUSK: That's right. Well, I remember we were told that if there was good news in the foreign policy field to report that that should be made at the White House; if there was bad news we should do it at the State Department. (laughter)

SCHOENBAUM: Who told you that?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, that was an instruction. I forget now just how it came, whether it was directly by Kennedy or through Pierre [Emil George] Salinger, his spokesman.

SCHOENBAUM: This was a memo or something serious?

DEAN RUSK: No, it was made clear to us that if there was anything that was likely to be considered good news that they would make it at the White House.

RICHARD RUSK: Did it come from John Kennedy?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I'm sure it did.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he say that to you?

DEAN RUSK: I forget the exact circumstances, whether he said it to us directly in a meeting of some sort or whether he relayed it through Pierre Salinger. But that's the difference between being a President and being a Secretary of State. I don't think Kennedy was in any sense jealous of any members of his cabinet, and that included Adlai Stevenson up at the U.N., even though Adlai Stevenson had been the standard bearer of the party in two national elections. He might have been jealous had Adlai Stevenson been Secretary of State. There might have been a sense

that maybe Stevenson might have overshadowed him in some respect. But that was not true of me. And I never had any impression that Kennedy was jealous of members of his cabinet. As a matter of fact, I think he understood that it's good for a President to have a good and strong cabinet working behind him and alongside of him.

SCHOENBAUM: Can we ask about your reaction to his assassination? We've talked about this before and you've told us where you were and the circumstances, and you related the events. But what we're both interested in is a more personal reaction. What was your personal, emotional interior reaction? We all had those reactions. And I remember that I cried. I cried tears over that event. And it's still a sad event. It was like a member of your family dying. And it was unbelievable, I think, to so many people. And I remember walking around the streets and people would have tears in their eyes. And I think people actually cried for two days. And, of course, we had never met the man. We were not closely associated with him. But he was a real presence to us. Did you shed any tears?

DEAN RUSK: Well when we got the first flash in that plane on our way to Tokyo that he had been shot in Dallas, we telephoned the White House to confirm that. And immediately, upon confirmation, we turned the plane around and headed back to Hawaii, which is about an hour away. Before we landed in Hawaii, we had learned that he had died. Well, we took about twenty minutes there on the plane, each person with his own thoughts.

RICHARD RUSK: What were your thoughts?

DEAN RUSK: And I have never tried to describe my thoughts. The anguish and the sense of tragedy and the sense of personal loss and things like that simply, as far as I'm concerned, are beyond words. It was really a painful experience. But then after about twenty minutes, the cabinet officers on board and I assembled in my cabin and we spent the rest of the time back to Washington talking about what needed to be done to keep the public life of the country going.

SCHOENBAUM: Then it's back to business?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, but the necessity to provide continuity and, in effect, to strengthen people around me, in effect--

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. You were the senior officer.

DEAN RUSK: --took care of my own, any problems that I might have had. I mean, life goes on. The nation lived. There were things to be done.

SCHOENBAUM: For that twenty minutes there was complete silence? Things kind of--

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, for twenty minutes there were--

SCHOENBAUM: Nobody talked? Were there people in tears?

DEAN RUSK: That's right, for about twenty minutes. There were people in tears. I did not shed tears because it's just not my nature to do so. I bleed inside rather than shedding tears.

RICHARD RUSK: Gus Peleuses [Dean Rusk's security agent], who was on the plane, said that folks were real concerned about Luther Hodges, that they didn't know if he was going to make it back to Hawaii there, that he was coming apart.

DEAN RUSK: Well, different people had different reactions. There were a good many tears on that plane. You see, when we got word that Kennedy had died, I went on the loud speaker and announced that.

SCHOENBAUM: Oh, you were the one that announced it?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. And--

SCHOENBAUM: Do you remember your exact words?

DEAN RUSK: No. I think--

SCHOENBAUM: How did you phrase it?

DEAN RUSK: It was very short. I simply said, "We have just learned that President Kennedy has died. God save our country," or something like that, and let it go at that. And each person then had his or her own thoughts.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you then call people together after that twenty minutes?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

SCHOENBAUM: You just quietly went around tapping people on the shoulder and--

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Realizing that words are not adequate to fully describe what you may have thought during those twenty minutes, nevertheless it's my job and Tom's job to try to describe such things. Do you care to take a stab at it?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I've already indicated the sense of anguish and pain and the sense of tragedy and loss. You know, it's kind of hard to go into further detail on something like that. I'm not going to slobber all over the place. But it was a very special moment. You see, I had felt very close to John F. Kennedy, although our relations were official. He tended to set all of us on fire around him. He just galvanized us with that extraordinary capacity to enlist the enthusiasm and interest of young people in public service and politics, something we haven't seen anything like since. He was, in so many ways, a most extraordinary man.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you realize then, right after his assassination, that you would in fact be Secretary of State for another five years?

DEAN RUSK: Well, all of us in the cabinet offered Lyndon Johnson our resignations. That's routine and traditional.

RICHARD RUSK: Didn't you know then that you would, in fact, be in that job for another five years?

DEAN RUSK: I had no idea. Because when President Johnson called me to his office over in the executive office building on the morning after the assassination, I told him that he ought to feel free to build his own administration and that he had my resignation. And it was he who said, "No, I want you to stay on your job. We've got to assure continuity here. We've got to keep the nation going. And you have a duty to stay at your post." And I did so, because you could not possibly say no to a President under those circumstances.

RICHARD RUSK: There was continuity and the business of the government went ahead. Nevertheless, people have called the assassination of John F. Kennedy a real turning point. What died with John Kennedy?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think a sort of a sense of effervescence, a desire to reopen, take a fresh look at all standing policies and questions, to search for any new approaches that would make sense. For example, Kennedy and I made a special effort at the beginning of his administration to improve our relations with the Third World countries, the nonaligned countries. During the Eisenhower-Dulles period, Dulles managed to get across the view that we think that mutualism is immoral. Well we didn't think so. We thought that wherever there was a country that was independent and secure, interested in the concerns of its own people and reasonably cooperative in international affairs, that there was a situation in the interest of the United States. And so we set out to improve our relations with some of the nonaligned countries. And I have in mind, [Ahmed] Ben Veil a of Algeria, [Gamal Abdel] Nasser of Egypt, [Kwame] Nkrumah of Ghana, [Achmed] Sukarno of Indonesia, [Josip Broz] Tito, people like that. Now we didn't always succeed because some of these fellows were just plain rascals. But we made the effort. And we sent people like [Robert] Sargent Shriver [Jr.] off on special missions to visit some of these people.

RICHARD RUSK: There was less concentration on that than during the Truman years.

DEAN RUSK: And we tried to reduce the gap in our policy between nonaligned countries and allies. Sometimes this created a little friction with some of our allies. For example, we tried to improve our relations with India. And the Pakistanis did not like that very much. When we tried to improve our relations with Nkrumah of Ghana some of his African neighbors became a little nervous because Nkrumah was off on this Pan-African jag, with him as the leader. Nasser was off on a Pan-Arab jag with himself as leader. Sukarno was off on a Pan-Malaya jag with Sukarno as the leader. Well, these other countries didn't like that very much. So we had some problems there. And the Peace Corps was a major initiative by the Kennedy administration. At times in our relations with Nasser in the first period of the Kennedy administration we had a major Food for

Peace program with Egypt. At one point we were feeding about forty percent of the Egyptian people. But he got up in front of those big crowds in Cairo, and instead of being silent about it-- We didn't expect him to get up in public and bow and scrape and say, "Thank you, Uncle Sam," and all that sort of thing. But he would get up in front of those big crowds and yell such things as, "Throw your aid into the Red Sea!" Well, he did that so much that he persuaded the Congress to do just that. And the Food for Peace program came to an end.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, the reaction worldwide to Kennedy's assassination was really dramatic. Do you recall specifically any anecdotes or stories about how people responded?

DEAN RUSK: Well, it was extraordinary. The reaction to Kennedy and Jacqueline [Bouvier Kennedy], his wife, during their Presidency was really quite extraordinary. I remember I met President [Charles Andre Joseph Mario] de Gaulle out at Dulles Airport. And as we were coming in on one of those big elephant buses from the airport to the terminal to get into his cars, I thanked him for coming. He said, "Don't thank me. The little people of France demanded that I come." We had Africans walking through the bush fifty or seventy-five miles to our nearest consulate or embassy to say, "I did not know President Kennedy but he was my friend. I had to come and say I'm sorry." The extraordinary world reaction at the grass roots was just hard to describe. And that was--Well, we had something of the same reaction when Franklin Roosevelt died. I was walking through a crowded Indian city on the day that the news came by. And the upper-class Indians would give me their folded hand salute as I passed by; I was in an American uniform. But the beggars and urchins on the street would just touch me with their hand as I walked by, this time not with their palms up expecting anything. But just touched my hand in sympathy. Well that was, if anything, multiplied when Kennedy died. See, he and his wife had caught the imagination of so many people in so many parts of the world that his death was a shock to--

RICHARD RUSK: --Sheer physical attractiveness must have accounted for some of that. I hate to say it, but they were a beautiful couple.

SCHOENBAUM: Glamorous.

RICHARD RUSK: Very glamorous.

DEAN RUSK: I think that contributed to it. Because they were a very attractive couple. And Jacqueline would speak French and Spanish when the situation called for it. John F. Kennedy's French was very broken. I think I told you about that ambassador didn't I? We had an ambassador from one of the French speaking African countries come to Washington to represent his country. And he didn't have a word of English. So when he called on me before he went over to present his credentials to the President, we spoke French. And afterwards he went down to the lobby and some reporters got hold of him. And one of the questions was which language did you use? And he said, "We used French." One of them said, "Well, how is the Secretary's French?" And he paused for a moment and said, "About like President Kennedy's." (laughter) This was a tactful way to refer to my broken French. Oh, dear.

SCHOENBAUM: These are kind of short questions. When did you see JFK at his happiest? At his saddest? At his angriest? You know, different occasions. Do you remember the happiest moment you ever saw him? The saddest moment? The angriest moment?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think he was deeply pleased on the Sunday in which Khrushchev announced that he would withdraw the missiles from Cuba. He also was greatly pleased with the conclusion of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. But--

RICHARD RUSK: Didn't he regard that as his single greatest achievement?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think if you had asked him later, getting the missiles out of Cuba peacefully might have been looked upon as--but the Test Ban Treaty was a source of great satisfaction to him.

SCHOENBAUM: But do you remember any anecdotes? Did you see him on those occasions? Did he shake your hand warmly and say anything to you?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I was with him when Khrushchev announced he had taken missiles out. But you don't demonstrate, jump up and down, and shout and clap your hands and something like that.

RICHARD RUSK: Tom, my dad's not much for stream of consciousness.

DEAN RUSK: But to get that over with was an extraordinary relief because the thing, the situation, was just too damn dangerous for anybody to be comfortable with.

RICHARD RUSK: What about the other two parts? When perhaps he was happiest, most angry.

SCHOENBAUM: Saddest, angriest: maybe two different occasions.

RICHARD RUSK: The kinds of questions that Sarah [Rusk, daughter of Richard Rusk] would ask you, Pop, like, "What's your favorite color?"

SCHOENBAUM: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: But little questions like that can pop something out of you.

DEAN RUSK: I think probably one time when he was genuinely angry, although he kept himself under reasonable control, Sukarno was in Washington on a visit. And in their talk Sukarno kept trying to draw John F. Kennedy down the trail of talking about Gina Lollabrigida and women of that sort. And this just infuriated Kennedy that this internationally known leader would try to draw him, the President of the United States, down such a trail. That, he didn't like at all.

RICHARD RUSK: Particularly in the context that Sukarno invited Jackie Kennedy to.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Sukarno went home and invited Jacqueline Kennedy to visit Indonesia. And I immediately vetoed that myself. I didn't even have to refer that to President Kennedy, although I mentioned it to him. Because there was just no way we were going to let-

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