

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

Rusk MM: Part 1 of 5

Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk, Thomas J. Schoenbaum, and William Bundy

1985 February

The complete interview also includes Rusk NN: Part 2; Rusk OO: Part 3; Rusk PP: Part 4; Rusk QQ: Part 5.

RICHARD RUSK: This is oral history is a taping of Dean Rusk. The subject is Vietnam. Tom Schoenbaum, Rich Rusk, and former Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William Bundy, will be doing the interviewing. This is February 1985. Do you need that machine on over there, Pop?

DEAN RUSK: No. I am delighted that my old friend and colleague, Bill Bundy, is with us today. And I am hoping that he will make his own contribution to these tapes other than just asking questions, because his experience and memory are very valuable to us.

I think we might start by going back to the [Harry S] Truman administration because every story has some beginnings. At the time of the discussions between the executive branch and the Senate on NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], there developed in the Congress a fair amount of interest in a NATO-type arrangement for the Pacific. After all, we were a two-ocean power, and it seemed natural to some members of the Congress that if we should do this in the Atlantic, we should do something like it in the Pacific.

So we looked at this pretty hard at the staff level in the administration. But for several reasons we did not go down the trail towards a Southeast Asia treaty. To begin with we were looking toward certain other treaty agreements that had to do with the peace treaty with Japan. President Truman had asked John Foster Dulles to achieve a peaceful reconciliation with Japan: a short and non-punitive kind of peace treaty. Well, that did not suit very well countries like the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, and certain others because they were very nervous about the possible revival of the Japanese military power in the Pacific. So during the thinking about the Japanese peace treaty, we felt that we should have a security treaty with Japan which would give us a continuing presence of American forces in Japan following the peace treaty, partly for the protection of Japan, partly as a reassurance against a building up of the kind of Japanese military power that would cause great nervousness in the Pacific. The security treaty with the Philippines was, in part, a quid pro quo for a peaceful reconciliation with Japan. And the same thing was true with the Anzus Treaty with Australia and New Zealand. And then during the Truman years, the French had not come clean about the independence of Indochina. After all, India, Pakistan, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia were all in the process of becoming independent. But the French were very sticky about Indochina. And we did not want to align ourselves with French colonialism in Indochina.

Then we thought, as I said on another tape, that it would be a mistake for the United States to go into Southeast Asia and ally itself with some in that area, but not all, and let the relationship with

the United States become a divisive element within Southeast Asia. It would be much better, we thought, to wait until the region developed a security concern of its own as a region. And then we could stand in strong, second-line support of the region as a whole. So we did not move toward a treaty that would involve Southeast Asia during the Truman years. Bill, do you have any further comment or question on this particular point?

BUNDY: No, I think that summarizes something I haven't ever focused on. It sounds solid to me.

SCHOENBAUM: Can I ask a follow-up question, and the logical question? This has to do with that period, that pre-1960, especially. Everything we did or virtually everything we undertook that came out of that post-World War II period and the Truman administration, followed up by Dulles as Secretary of State and the Eisenhower administration, everything pretty much turned out well. We were talking last night about that. And with the glaring exception of Vietnam--would you say in the light of what Mr. Rusk said--was the policy during Truman towards southeast Asia--would you point out some things that--did we take one step too many or two steps too many in southeast Asia at or prior to 1961 that locked us into a certain decision making frame of mind? I am thinking specifically of, for instance, the '54-'55 decisions to support the French, which seemed to be a reversal of the policy of Truman..

DEAN RUSK: Yes, let's come to that in just a moment.

SCHOENBAUM: And the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] pact.

DEAN RUSK: President Truman did not really have much of a personal interest in southeast Asia until the outbreak of the Korean War. [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt had pressed very hard for the independence of these great colonial areas of Asia. But by early 1945 he gave up that effort and that interest. I know that because in mid-'44 various Frenchmen turned up out in the China-Burma-India theatre where I was, asking to be parachuted into Indochina. So I sent a cable back to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asking for a statement of U.S. policy towards Indochina. And months passed with no reply. We sent follow-up cables. If a staff officer happened to be going back to Washington, we could get him to try and look into it. Finally, in early 1945, a Joint Chiefs of Staff paper came out headed "U.S. Policy Towards Indochina." The first sheet said the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked the President--it was FDR--for a statement of U.S. policy on Indochina. The President's reply was contained in Annex I. So I flipped over to Annex I and it said, when asked by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a statement of U.S. policy on Vietnam, the President replied, "I don't want to hear any more about Vietnam."

SCHOENBAUM: Of Indochina you mean.

DEAN RUSK: About Indochina. "I don't want to hear any more about Indochina."

RICHARD RUSK: Even then it was a pain in the neck.

BUNDY: He had stopped pressing on the French.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, perhaps he had battered his head against Churchill as long as he thought he was going to, and he just abandoned that effort. But a very important consequence of the withdrawal of FDR from interest in this region was that policy control then shifted to the British. The British were the agents of the combined Chiefs of Staff of that particular area. And that, in effect, meant Churchill. And as we know, Churchill was the man who said, "I did not become His Majesty's first Minister to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire." So, at the end of World War II, the British returned to India, Burma, Malaya. The Dutch returned to Indonesia. The French returned to Indochina. Truman did not pick up this interest of FDR. He was completely preoccupied as a new President with the arrangements of the occupation of Germany and for the prosecution of the war against Japan. He simply didn't put his mind to it. It was not until the attack by the North Koreans in 1950 that he gave any thought to it. And at that time, during the first week or two, we did not know what this attack in North Korea might mean. We did not know whether it would be something limited to the Korean peninsula or whether it was a general, communist defensive in Asia. We were concerned that the People's Republic of China might move against Taiwan or against Southeast Asia. And so, as you will remember, in addition to putting some troops into Korea, President Truman intruded the 7th Fleet between Taiwan and the mainland to try to insure that there would be no hostilities in either direction in that situation. He also greatly stepped up our assistance to Southeast Asia. That meant, in effect, the French, trying to head off a possible communist adventure in other parts of the Pacific which might broaden the war from Korea into a general conflagration. That was really the first time that Truman himself paid much personal attention to Southeast Asia. Now, during the Eisenhower--

BUNDY: May I interject there?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, please.

BUNDY: There was one thing that people sometimes point to and that is, about March 1950, before the Korean invasion, Philip [C.] Jessup and others went out on a special mission, out to Indochina, and did come back and, I believe, recommend a limited program of economic aid. And that was put underway in some fashion before the attack.

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

BUNDY: That doesn't conflict with what you were saying, but it was a concern that the French were overextended and others have interpreted this, particularly on Mr. [Dean Gooderham] Acheson's part, as in very considerable measure a need to keep the French solid in the NATO framework and, therefore, not rock their Indochina boat.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. Dean Acheson was primarily a North Atlantic man. He knew that some of the [George Catlett] Marshall Plan aid going to France was being used in Indochina. And we had a rather painful relationship with the French during those years because, for NATO and North Atlantic reasons, we wanted to work closely with France in building the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the rest of it. But on the other hand, we did not believe that they could, in the long run, succeed in maintaining French colonialism in Indochina.

So we combined giving assistance to France with pressures on France to come to a political

conclusion of the situation in Indochina. We would press them at times pretty hard. But with a succession of weak French governments, there really wasn't a French government that had the political standing to make a clean break and give the Indochinese states their independence. Also, we did not want to press the French so hard that they would simply throw up their hands and say, "Okay, Indochina is your baby, Uncle Sam. You take it!" because we didn't want that on our hands if we could avoid it. So there was a rather ambiguous relationship with France on these issues, as well as some pretty strong arguments within the State Department between the Bureau of European Affairs and the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs on how to handle the Indochina problem.

But then the situation changed in the fifties, during the Eisenhower administration. And here Bill Bundy can be of great help to us. Because with the Geneva Conference, which was convened to take a look at Vietnam--John Foster Dulles did not achieve at that conference what he had hoped to achieve. And he was faced with the prospect of putting his stamp of approval on an arrangement which would in effect confirm the communist character of North Vietnam. So he walked out of the conference and sent [Walter] Bedell Smith, his undersecretary there, to represent him. We did not sign the Geneva Accords of 1954, although Bedell Smith made an important statement saying that any attempt to upset these accords by force would be viewed as something like a threat to the peace. Is that the expression he used?

BUNDY: I don't know the formulation he used.

DEAN RUSK: But it's an important statement we might want to dig out to insert here at this point in the transcript. Now, Bill, can you throw some light on what was in the administration's mind when we simply backed away from the Geneva Accords of '54?

BUNDY: Well, I better state my perspective. I was then with the Board of National Estimates of the CIA. But I was also the CIA Staff Assistant on the National Security Council Planning Board, which went through several major papers on Indochina and Southeast Asia in the 1952-55 period. So I followed it pretty closely, although I don't claim to have been privy to what President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles precisely had in mind at a given time. You had, as you said, the events of the spring of 1954 when Dienbienphu was under siege and finally fell. So the Geneva Conference convened with, in effect, with the French already on the way out. And [Pierre] Mendes-France came in to pledge to make peace immediately, and so on. So there were very few bargaining chips left. And what Dulles tried to do was to create a picture of some kind of a holding line. And part of that was an attempt at united action with the British, which didn't come off in April and May of '54, but which softened people up to the idea of some kind of a regional pact. And part of what he was trying to do, in effect to hold the line at least for the time being, was the formation of the SEATO treaty with the British, with the French, with the local nations, and with the protocol extending its protection to the successor states in Indochina: that is, Vietnam, South Vietnam by then, Cambodia, and Laos. And at the time, of course, nobody spoke of that treaty as being likely to involve any commitment to ground forces. The most that anybody talked about in the ratification discussions was the possibility that we would apply our air and naval power. And this, of course, was the period of massive retaliation.

DEAN RUSK: Massive retaliation.

BUNDY: Yes. But it was a treaty commitment and it contained the two clauses about how we would respond: how the alliance would respond in the event of armed attack, and how it would respond in what I think was called indirect aggression. So there was, I always thought, frankly, an element of bluff. That is, it was a commitment, but it was one designed to deter and try to prevent the thing from happening. And it wasn't at all clear at that point in 1954 that any viable government could be creating itself in Vietnam.

What happened after that was that Eisenhower extended very much increased economic aid and sent a military advisory mission, under General [John W.] O'Daniel and all of that in the fall of 1954, to the nascent Republic of South Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam as it was called. And then to the surprise of many, Ngo Dinh Diem turned out to be, at that period, a reasonably effective leader. And in the spring of 1955, and I remember this rather dramatically, he was threatened by opposing elements of a pretty unsavory sort. And he managed to ride it out and establish himself under control.

So what happened in the fifties--this would be my answer to your question, Tom--is that what had been a rather tentative shoring-up effort and commitment evolved during the fifties into a government that appeared to be standing on its own feet, and that we more and more were supporting and were committed to. Then you have the 1956 Accords. And my view of the history of all of that is best summarized in that speech I wrote along the way called "The Path to Vietnam," which I finally gave at the National Student Association in August, 1967 that went back over the whole history. It takes up the question of the election provision, whether the elections were supposed to be in both halves at once, or separately in the two halves, as to whether they should be reunited. The particularly compelling thing, I always thought, was the clear language that they were to be free. There was no real hope of free elections in the North.

DEAN RUSK: Or in the South.

BUNDY: Or perhaps in the South at the time of 1956. This was the view of the time. It's important to note that it was the view of President Kennedy, as a Senator. It was the view of pretty clear-cut later critics, but then more or less hardliners, like Hans Morgenthau, that this was a realistic thing to accept the division. In effect, we came to accept the division as being roughly similar to the previous division of Korea.

DEAN RUSK: And Germany.

BUNDY: And Germany. And a great many nations diplomatically recognized the Republic of Vietnam, so that the situation as the Kennedy administration inherited it, as I saw it, was a case where this had evolved into much more than a simple treaty, although the treaty was important. It had evolved into a support relationship in which our prestige and credit were very heavily engaged, which was perhaps not something anybody specifically foresaw or envisaged when it started. But that's the way it had evolved in that period. And you had Diem coming to Washington and being given red carpet treatment by Eisenhower in 1957 or '58. Then there were other developments where he was in some trouble towards the end of that period. In November 1960 there was an aborted coup against him. And that was part of what you inherited, Dean. But

it was a situation where the United States, through an ongoing course of conduct and treaty commitment, had got itself into the position of being pretty heavily committed even by the time Kennedy took over.

DEAN RUSK: Yes. One thing that impressed me about the conclusion of the Southeast Asia treaty, during the sixties I looked back into the process by which that treaty was concluded, and that is the rather casual way in which we concluded that treaty. It did not give rise to far-reaching public discussion. And indeed the discussion in the Senate itself was rather casual. We sort of-- Bill Bundy mentioned that there was a feeling that maybe this was a treaty on the cheap because we had used sea and air power and did not require land forces. But I have the impression that we did not fully recognize the full consequences of entering a treaty of that sort when it was in fact ratified. That carried with it very large consequences.

SCHOENBAUM: Do you feel that this was a handicap for you? Did you feel this constraint when you came into office in '61? Would you have rather had a freer hand, as you would have had this treaty not been concluded? And would you rather have had the opportunity to make this proposal yourself, and use it as a vehicle to rethink--

DEAN RUSK: That's a rather hypothetical question because when Kennedy came in the Southeast Asia treaty was a part of the supreme law of the land.

SCHOENBAUM: Yes. I realize that.

DEAN RUSK: We had, by the most solemn constitutional process we have, pledged that we would "take steps to meet the common danger" if any of those covered by the treaty were subject to aggression. That itself linked how we acted in Vietnam to the entire structure of collective security in this postwar period.

SCHOENBAUM: Yes.

DEAN RUSK: We were concerned about how our conduct under the southeast Asia treaty might affect the perception in other capitals as to how we might act under the Rio treaty, under the NATO treaty. And that was very important in Kennedy's mind. Bear in mind that when Kennedy made the first important decisions to put some American military forces in Vietnam--

BUNDY: You are talking now of November '61, the decision to send several thousand advisors.

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

BUNDY: And we breached the treaty limits back in May.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. The treaty limits putting a limit on the number of French advisors that could be in Vietnam. We substituted ourselves during the Eisenhower period for the French advisors. Then President Kennedy, in light of pressures from the north, went beyond the numbers established in the Geneva Accords with American advisors. But before Kennedy made his final decision before his death to build up our forces out there to about 16,000 or so, there was very

much in his mind two key questions that I've commented on before.

BUNDY: These were in private talks with you, Dean. Or are you just speaking

DEAN RUSK: They came out in private talks. But I know that they were part of his immediate experience. And that is, what would have happened if [Nikita Sergeyeovich] Khrushchev had not believed Kennedy at the time of the Berlin Crisis of '61, '62? After all, Khrushchev had said we were going to do the following, and if the west interferes there will be war. Kennedy had to look at him and say, "Well, then, Mr. Chairman. There is going to be war. It's going to be a very cold winter." And the other question: What would have happened if Khrushchev had not believed President Kennedy at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis? Now, these were very important questions to President Kennedy.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, may I interrupt you? You make the point that SEATO, and our approval of SEATO locked us into our overall treaty commitments. SEATO, however, was also linked with Geneva and our performance in the Geneva Accords, granted the fact that we were not a signatory to that accord. There's another statement that's worth laying down alongside of Bedell Smith's. Apparently we declared at Geneva "It's [the U.S.] traditional position that peoples are entitled to determine their own future and that the United States will not join in an arrangement which will hinder this." Now, that was in July. In June, one month prior, according to the Pentagon papers we undertook steps to train and finance a large Vietnamese national army and other steps that did come out in the Pentagon papers, other measures to try to influence the situation there. Are you satisfied in the light of history with our compliance, at least in spirit, with the Geneva Accords and our performance? It seems to me to be a critical question.

DEAN RUSK: There's one point that Bill Bundy could help us on. It's true that the elections called for in the Geneva Accords were not held. I think one can make an argument that whatever the problems there, we should have gone ahead with those elections in any event. But those who make that point should blush a bit because there was no way that there could be free elections, as we think of free elections, in North Vietnam or in South Vietnam. The vote in North Vietnam would have been overwhelmingly in favor of Ho Chi Minh. But I'm not so sure at all as to what would have happened in South Vietnam.

BUNDY: By '56 I think you would have had a real doubt because that was kind of a high point for Diem's prestige which was running pretty high at that time.

DEAN RUSK: And also remember that one million people left North Vietnam to come to South Vietnam because they did not want to live under the communist regime in the North. In any event, I myself could not find anything in the cables indicating that the United States had put great pressure on Diem in South Vietnam not to hold such elections. I think this was basically a South Vietnamese decision. But, Bill, you may know more about that than I.

BUNDY: I think Diem would have taken that position in any event. And we didn't try to talk him out of it. But that's a matter of the record in the Eisenhower administration. I don't know exactly. We certainly in fact supported him for the reasons that have been stated and that I stated in my historical review in which I went back over this. Now, as to just when in 1954 we started

giving military help to South Vietnam, which was the question you raised I think, Rich, I don't know the exact date on that. But there were rather clear limits on the number of advisors you could have, as the Secretary just said. We substituted ourselves for the French, in effect, under those limits. I think we adhered to those limits until well after the time when it had become clear that the North was supporting and promoting an attack against the South: I mean supporting, really sending in arms and other support. All this, as we knew--and I think this can be said safely for security reasons. We knew, particularly from the intercept networks that the command and control ran to Hanoi of the so-called Vietcong insurgency. And the supplies were coming down, the whole meat and potatoes of the thing, came from the North.

DEAN RUSK: Bill, wasn't it about 1959 that a specific decision was made in Hanoi to go after the South?

BUNDY: That is certainly the evidence from Hanoi itself. And it was the evidence that we finally pulled together, Dean, in a letter to Congressmen Evans that's printed in the second volume of a book called [The] Vietnam [War] and International Law, edited by Richard [A.] Falk at Princeton. The Evans letter was our recapitulation of the evidence. I don't think there is much doubt that the basic decision was taken then. And indeed, Dean, that was also the testimony, if I recall correctly, of our friend Janos Radvanyi, the Hungarian charge who defected personally to the Secretary of State in a rather memorable episode in 1967.

DEAN RUSK: And is now Professor of History at Mississippi State.

BUNDY: Yes. An interesting witness. But I think we were adhering to the Accords. We're talking about actions of the Eisenhower administration, in which neither of us would claim to be great authorities. But what was done there was justified and within the terms of the Accords that there could be military help to South Vietnam under the terms of the accords under very clear, prescribed limits. And we adhered to those limits, the United States, through the Eisenhower administration. Just speaking for myself, as I looked back on the record when I came to think in these terms, when I became Assistant Secretary in '64 and went back over the record and had to defend it in different ways, I thought the record was totally defensible.

RICHARD RUSK: And you went into it in some detail.

BUNDY: I did.

RICHARD RUSK: I remember critics of this policy really attacked our later commitment based on our compliance.

BUNDY: Well, there was always the argument about what the Geneva Accords say, and had we lived up to them. One met the issue on various fronts. I was persuaded that our record was defensible, that the people who had never truly intended to adhere to it, in terms of refraining from action against the South, were Hanoi.

DEAN RUSK: I think it seemed clear to us at the time that Ho Chi Minh was determined to bring under his control all of what was formerly French Indochina. Now, this raises an

interesting point of speculation about why he signed the Geneva Accords. And I wonder whether some of those at the conference, maybe the French, maybe the Russians, others had said to him, "Oh, go ahead and sign it. You're going to get it anyhow."

BUNDY: I can testify from fairly recent conversations with the Chinese that that was the Chinese advice to him at the time. And they took a certain amount of heat and Ho Chi Minh was unwilling to do this. Chou En-lai had to stop in Hanoi on one occasion, in effect, to put some pressure on him to accept it. But I think exactly as you say, Dean, it was a case of "Look, you're going to get it in two bites. Why worry?" Because the general assumption at that time was that South Vietnam would come apart and just wouldn't be able to find any kind of viable government.

DEAN RUSK: And these elections would open the way for them.

BUNDY: These elections would simply be a way [of confirming the expected collapse of South Vietnam.]

END OF SIDE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2



SCHOENBAUM: What did North Vietnam get from the Geneva Accords?

BUNDY: Yeah. And that they would get a breathing spell themselves, and so on. This was a matter of both the Soviets and the Chinese, in this case, I think, according to all the testimony I have seen. Both were saying, "Look, relax. You'll get it anyway. We don't want to force the thing. There's just enough possibility the Americans would lash out in some unpredictable way, so it's better to make this deal."

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

BUNDY: And that's why they signed.

RICHARD RUSK: Ho Chi Minh himself later came under severe criticism from his own party.

BUNDY: That may well be.

RICHARD RUSK: From his people for having made this concession later as events unfolded.

BUNDY: But I think the point to nail down, as far as the way the hand lay, so to speak, when the Kennedy administration came in, and you came in, Mr. Secretary, was as I reconstructed it afterwards, and indeed as I felt at the time. Now you could argue about nit-picking the deal. But, basically there was not anything to be blamed for. And at any rate, it was water over the dam.

DEAN RUSK: Let's come to the Kennedy inauguration.

RICHARD RUSK: If we could back up for just a minute, Pop. That is, I'm not satisfied that we have run it down. There's a great deal of confusion and debate still remaining over these accords and our performance. These arguments go around and around and it's a major point of contention with critics of this war. They say that our credibility problems start right here. A lot of our later statements in the sixties that relate back to this period do not describe some of the ambiguities of our position. And when it later came out in the Pentagon papers and after the war, it accentuated the problems of credibility that we had. The French, for example, were not satisfied with our performance in the aftermath of the Geneva Accords, and they wanted us out. They thought Ho Chi Minh had won his case. They were not willing to contest it any more. They tried to discourage us from doing what we, in effect, went on doing and did in trying to establish a legitimate regime in South Vietnam. They didn't think we could do it. Are you privy to their thinking back at that time? And why were they encouraging us not to follow through with this when they, themselves, had made such an effort?

BUNDY: The French, if you looked hard at it, were of two minds. There certainly was an old, colonialist school in France who thought that since they were out, we weren't to succeed where they had failed. There was a little of that in French attitudes all the way through, I would say. And there French on the ground who obstructed us, who tried to undermine Diem, particularly through a nefarious outfit called the Binh Xuyen. I remember Joe [Joseph Wright] Alsop at the time quoting some Frenchmen he had met on the ground saying, "il faut avoir une petite experience de Binh Xuyen." Well, the Binh Xuyen would have sold the pass the next day. No question there were elements among the French who resented having the Americans there at all where the French had been, and who had this kind of negative "sour-grapes" feeling. But the French, as a whole, were different. They did sign onto the SEATO treaty. They certainly were not helping us in any particular way, but the French community on the ground, by and large, came to accept what had happened. So the French were of two minds really. You can find evidence either way. At any rate, it was not a significant issue by 1961. The French took certain positions, and they were very important positions, along about the SEATO meeting of April '64 and previously with [Charles Andre Joseph Mario] de Gaulle's neutralization proposals and so on. And the whole French attitude during the sixties is another story. But in the end, my impression would be that in the fifties was that the French came to accept that, to their great surprise, we had found somebody who was able to govern the place.

DEAN RUSK: As a matter of fact, the relative success of President Diem and the government of South Vietnam in the latter part of the fifties probably helped trigger the decision in Hanoi to go ahead and move, because otherwise South Vietnam would become too strong.

BUNDY: I think that's true.

DEAN RUSK: The success of South Vietnam had tempted the North to go after them sooner than later.

BUNDY: I think they felt they had to move. And, coincidentally, Diem was getting into some

internal difficulties and was narrowing his form of rule, causing legitimate discontent within genuine Southerners. So there was a little to work with. But the decision, I am convinced came in 1959. We didn't, I think, have it pegged precisely at the time, but we certainly had a very clear picture that Hanoi had stepped things up by the time the Kennedy administration came into power.

RICHARD RUSK: Wasn't it true, however--And by the term "French" we probably should limit it to the regime in power, which of course changes all the time. But wasn't it true that the French were working toward a policy of reconciliation with Vietnam, both with Diem and Ho Chi Minh? In the aftermath of Dien- bienphu and their defeat they knew they had to get out. They wanted to go down the trail of reconciliation partly to try to establish or hang on to whatever degree of leverage and influence they could have in that part of the world. Partly, also, they were afraid that if the West did not try this, the French and the Western nations would simply drive the Vietnamese into the arms of the Soviet bloc and Chinese bloc.

BUNDY: Well, there may have been more sophisticated calculations of that sort. But there was a good deal of just hanging on to the remnants of what they had. It is pretty hard for me to put it together exactly how it was perceived, Rich.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall any of this?

DEAN RUSK: Bear in mind that the French went through a period in which they were very sensitive and jealous of the idea that somehow the Americans were trying to replace the French in Asia, in Africa, in the Middle East. And the last thing in the world we had in mind was to insert ourselves in lieu of the French, because our basket was full. But the French were very suspicious of us in those connections. And this ramified in a variety of directions over the years. As Bill pointed out, the French government did conclude the southeast Asia treaty and undertook the same treaty commitments that we had undertaken.

SCHOENBAUM: Why did the French sign SEATO?

BUNDY: I don't know any detailed record on that score. I think they would have felt left out if they had not. They were preoccupied at that time with having some degree of unity on policy in NATO, the European defense force, and so on. I just don't know the record.

DEAN RUSK: And the French had some important economic interests in Vietnam. They had a good many rubber plantations. They had a lively trade. The principal trade of Vietnam with the outside world was with France. So they had some interests there that might have compelled them to do it. I come to the end of that French commitment in a moment. On the day before Kennedy's inauguration, President Eisenhower invited him in to meet with him. There was about four of us on each side. I was there. Bob [Robert Strange] McNamara was there. The then Secretary of State Chris [Christian] Herter was there, and the Secretary of Defense for Eisenhower [Neil McElroy, I think]. Clark [McAdams] Clifford was on our side. Within that conversation, the only piece of specific advice which Eisenhower gave to Kennedy was that Kennedy put troops into Laos. And as Eisenhower put it, "with others if possible; alone if necessary." Now at that moment, Laos was the place where most of the action was taking place. The North Vietnamese

had put significant forces into Laos. They were being supported by Soviet airlifts. And they clearly were moving to establish the Pathet Lao as the ruling force in Laos. So as soon as Kennedy took office, we looked very hard at Laos. The more we looked at it, the less inviting it seemed to think about putting American troops there. The terrain was very difficult. It was a land-locked country. Communications from the outside would have been difficult. And the Laotians themselves seemed to be a rather gentle people who had no interest in killing each other. When only Laotian forces were on the battlefield, a few explosions made a whale of a battle; there were very few casualties. Bill, I remember even one report that indicated that the two Laotian sides had left the battlefield and gone to a water festival together for ten days, and then had gone back to the battlefield.

BUNDY: I remember this vividly, and also one incident that I think is useful evidence of the way it was judged. Winthrop Brown was our Ambassador in Laos and a very wise fellow, also tough-minded where it was wise to be tough. But he came back for consultation, and I remember him sitting in General [Lyman L.] Lemnitzer's office--General Lemnitzer who was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs--with General [Charles H.] Bonesteel there, who was General Lemnitzer's aide. And Winthrop Brown is very soft spoken so you have to lean over to hear what he is saying. He said in a very quiet way, "The Lao will not fight. That's not the way they are made." And it was an extremely unpleasant message for the two generals who were listening to this. It came with interest to me. I was then a Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Pentagon sitting in on it. In short, this was a poor place to try to take a stand, according to the advice of the ambassador on the spot.

DEAN RUSK: Another illustration of this Lao character, if you want to put it that way, came a few years later when the King of Laos, up in his royal capitol of Luang Prabang, decided to bury his father, who had been kept in the ice box for years. So he assembled all the notables of the country, of whatever political persuasion, up to the royal capitol for the burial of his father. Well, we knew that substantial Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces were about thirty-five miles away. So our ambassador cautioned the king and said, "Your majesty, is it really safe to bring all your notables here on this occasion? After all, these people over here just might move in here and seize you." The king said, "They won't do that. I am burying my father." And the king was right. They went through this big ceremony up there. And the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese did not move. Anyhow, we looked at this and decided rather than put troops in Laos to try and find a diplomatic answer we moved into the Laos Conference of 1961-62, under the co-chairmanship of Great Britain and the Soviet Union. During that conference we made a considerable effort to reach an agreement that would produce a neutral but independent Laos as a kind of "island of peace" there in southeast Asia, which would be a kind of buffer from many points of view. And we made some significant concessions, looking back to the attitudes of the Eisenhower administration. For example, we agreed that there should be a coalition government in Laos made up of the right wing, the neutralists, and the communists. We agreed that there would be an International Control Commission made up of Canada, Poland, and India. We accepted the Soviet nominee to be the Prime Minister, the neutral Souvanna Phouma. He was not our candidate, he was the Soviet candidate.

BUNDY: We had come to judge him as able to hold his own as much as any man could.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. So we concluded the Laos Accords. But the trouble is we got no performance from Hanoi on those Accords. For example, they did not stop using Laos as an infiltration route into South Vietnam, which the Accords would have required them to do. They did not allow the coalition government of Laos to operate in the communist held areas of Laos. They did not allow the International Control Commission to come in and take a look at what was going on in the communist controlled areas of Laos. The failure to get any performance on the Laos Accords was a very bitter disappointment to John F. Kennedy. I should insert here that when he decided not to put troops into Laos, he said at that time, and I remember it very clearly, that if we have to make a fight for Southeast Asia, we should have to make it in Vietnam.

SCHOENBAUM: He said that to Eisenhower?

DEAN RUSK: No, he said that to his own administration. Because there you had people who were prepared to fight for what they believed in. And the communications were much different. We had access to Vietnam, South Vietnam by sea and by air, and so forth. So he decided then, at the time that he decided not to put troops in Laos, if the battle had to be made it would have to be made in South Vietnam.

SCHOENBAUM: You say that Kennedy was very disappointed about the failure of the Laos Accords. But wasn't there at the time a school of thought that the Laos Accords were really not worth the paper they were written on, and that they were buying time for further confrontation for both sides, and the reason the Soviet Union signed the Laos Accords were that they really wanted to buy some time and wanted a breathing spell? What about that sentiment?

DEAN RUSK: Had we gotten performance on the Laos Accords, they would have been very satisfactory from our point of view. But whether Hanoi and the Soviet Union, China and others simply looked upon that as buying time, is possible. But it would be hard to prove.

SCHOENBAUM: There was a statement in Mr. Bundy's book that there was a school of thought that regarded the Laos Accords as face-saving on our side and buying time on the other side.

BUNDY: Oh, I think that was undoubtedly the way some would have seen it, and an important point with a bearing on the future. Certainly the Accords were violated in various and sundry ways by the other side. In the end we too were driven to violate them; though this was always after the other side had done so. Basically we tried very hard to keep those Accords in shape, and we still believed, even after the situation in Laos had become hotter and the communists had withdrawn from the coalition, and so on, that it was terribly important to keep that framework as a basis for a Laos of the future. Preserving Souvanna Phouma's position and keeping it alive was very much a part of the way we handled all the operations in Laos. After the situation deteriorated from 1964 onward, we were guiding on Souvanna Phouma. We wanted to not acknowledge what we were doing publicly because we knew Hanoi wouldn't acknowledge what it was doing. And if we did, we would appear to be breaking up something that we thought had promise for the future in some form.

DEAN RUSK: By the way, Souvanna Phouma insisted upon one point which gave us some problem with some of our own press people. He insisted that whatever we do in Laos be done

covertly, not be overtly acknowledged, because he did not want to tie his own hands in a way over the activities of the United States and Laos. So he was the one, and after all it was his country. We felt that we had to do what we could to comply with his wishes in the matter. But then that got us in trouble later with some of our own press people who thought we were trying to hide something. Well, we were. But it specifically--

BUNDY: Actually, except for the absence of public statements, we didn't hide it worth a hoot, Dean. I always thought that was one of the great hypocrisies of the later period. Because every member of the press who was anywhere near Bangkok, let alone Vientiane, knew what we were doing. And every senator who came to the same cities, and that included specifically Senator [Stuart] Symington, who held some big hearings later on in the late sixties after you left, Dean, about how the secret war had been conducted. Hell's bells, if I may use blunt language! Stuart Symington had been the house guest of Ambassador [William H.] Sullivan in Vientiane and had watched exactly what was happening in that war in every way, shape, and form. (I might add that there is a vivid description of how the war was conducted in Ambassador Sullivan's recent memoirs.) Anyway, that's jumping ahead a little bit. Let me come to what I think was an important element of this, Dean, as far as Vietnam policy was concerned. That is, by May of 1961 the decision had been made to get into a conference on Laos to neutralize it and not to try to force a confrontation there. Secondly, of course, we had had the Bay of Pigs debacle. And I get the feeling, Dean, that these events had an effect on the decision for those first increases in advisors and so on within Vietnam, the decision to focus on Vietnam, the first real focusing on Vietnam in the Kennedy administration, was in May of 1961. And it was against the backdrop of the decision to go the neutralization route in Laos and the setback, in psychological and in other terms, that we had had at the Bay of Pigs. Is that a fair summary, Dean?

DEAN RUSK: I think that's right. Now later, when it was clear that we were getting no performance out of Hanoi on the Laos Accords, we tried to get the British and the Soviets, as cochairmen, to try to exercise some real pressure on Hanoi to comply with those Accords. In that effort, it seemed clear to me that the Soviet Union was not willing to press Hanoi very hard on this point because they were concerned that they would simply press Hanoi into the arms of China. That, more or less neutralized their influence as far as getting performance on these Accords was concerned.

SCHOENBAUM: A very, very striking way that the Soviet hand diminished. The Soviets had been responsible for the airlift in Laos in late 1960. They had been very, very active in that. Then, the holdback. They couldn't affect Hanoi without running into the problem you named.

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: What was your specific reaction to the signing of the Laotian Accords? Did you think they would work?

DEAN RUSK: I thought they were good Accords. But I didn't know whether they would work or not. We had hoped they would work because, you see, the Accords included at that point that all foreigners would get out of Laos--ourselves, the French who still had some elements there, the North Vietnamese--and that we would all leave Laos to be managed or mismanaged by

Laotians. And we were not concerned about that possibility. After all, the head of the communist forces there, what was he, the brother-in-law of the Prime Minister? He was related to the King.

BUNDY: That was Souphanouvong.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, Souphanouvong was a relative of the King, I believe.

BUNDY: I think so. Yes.

DEAN RUSK: So we thought that if we would just leave Laos to the Laotians, that that would be a situation we could all tolerate. But the North Vietnamese went right ahead with their effort to take over.

BUNDY: That becomes part of the '64 story. Going back to 1961 again, the Laos negotiation was under way in the summer of '61 with a lot of worry in Washington about whether it could be made to hold and all of that, particularly among those who had accepted the Eisenhower view. John [M.] Steeves, for example, I remember was very worried about it. He was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. And [William] Averell Harriman was going ahead with the negotiations with Sullivan working with him. And all of that was underway and already it was edgy. But we were persevering on that course. And that was part of the backdrop to the important decisions of the fall of '61, where it suddenly looked as though things were going very badly. There were floods and so on. And that was when the [Maxwell D.] Taylor-[Walt Whitman] Rostow mission was mounted to go out to Vietnam. I think, Dean, at that point you were in Japan or somewhere just at the very beginning of that exercise. And you sent in a cable saying in effect, "I'm worried about whether this is really a solid place to stand our ground."

DEAN RUSK: Yes I was, I think, in Japan at the time this was being considered back in Washington. And I remember sending a cable. And I think that cable may be in the Pentagon papers. I tried to make the point that a decision to put any American military forces into Vietnam was a very important decision, that you shouldn't make such a decision unless you were prepared to see it through, and that one of the main questions that we had to look at was what there was to support in South Vietnam. And I was not necessarily opposing the decision. But I just wanted people to realize that it was a very important and fateful kind of decision to make.

RICHARD RUSK: You warned of the dangers of us committing ourselves to a "losing horse."

DEAN RUSK: That phrase stands out. Right. By the way, I don't know whether this is worth the amount of tape it takes up: In the Laos Accords there is a classic example of the importance of accuracy and precision of language, where you have more than one language equally authentic. During the negotiations Averell Harriman and his Russian colleagues took up the question of the powers of the International Control Commission to operate in any part of Laos, throughout Laos. But we were faced with the problem that the International Control Commission [ICC] had a communist representative and that we didn't want to let him veto the exercise in the International Control Commission. Let a majority vote decide. Well, we finally got that agreed with the Russians. Then we were faced with the fact that there was a coalition government in Laos and it had communist elements. We did not want the communist elements in that coalition government

to veto the movements of the International Control Commission. So we wrestled over that one for quite a while. And, finally, the Russian negotiator told Averell Harriman that of course we could accept that. But he said to Averell, "We've got some difficulties on our side, so don't rub our noses in it." In effect, be careful about the language. So Averell Harriman worked out the language that, referring to the International Control Commission, "In carrying out the above obligations, it is understood that the International Control Commission is acting with the consent of the Laotian government." That's the progressive present in English. All right, that was put in. Then later, when it was clear that this was being violated, we went to the Russians with these violations and they said, "Well, let's get out the Accords and see what they say." There is no progressive present in Russian or in Laotian or in French. So the Russian looked at the text and said it is understood that the International Control Commission "acts with" the permission of the Laotian government, which is a very different thing than saying "is acting with," you see. So Averell Harriman had not taken pains to conform the language to bring out the real meaning on that point.

RICHARD RUSK: I must ask one question about the Laotian settlement. This is what the revisionist historians say and I don't claim to be among them, not with all sincerity. But you inherited your situation in the sixties. Yet the roots of that go back to the fifties. The critics suggest that the Eisenhower administration, at the time of the Geneva Accords, had the chance to go ahead with the successful neutralization of Laos, but elected to try for one or two additional steps: They elected for a Laos more congenial to American interests; they supported the right-wing [sic] elements and, the critics suggest, driving many of these potential neutralists into the arms of the Pathet Lao. Again, it is Laos and the problems with it in the 1960s, and the problem of noncompliance with the Accords. A case where the past history might suggest that we overreached. Again, you inherit your situation, but you are also bound by the history of that situation to some extent.

BUNDY: Well, let me comment on that because I know a good deal about Laos. For a brief period in 1959 I filled in as kind of a desk officer on Laos because I was reporting to the Secretary of State at the Geneva Conference on Berlin and there were many Laos developments and no expert in the delegation to interpret them. And I don't doubt that the decision of early 1960 to back a fellow named Phoumi Nosavan, a right-winger, did disturb the structure. Now whether there was justification for that, I now forget. But in any case, as far as the Kennedy administration was concerned, the first thing they did was to embrace the man who had been thrust aside by the Eisenhower administration, namely Souvanna Phouma.

RICHARD RUSK: I see.

BUNDY: And to ease Phoumi out of the picture. It took them to early 1964 to get rid of him completely so that he went back to Bangkok and was no longer in the play. If there was error or a thrust away from the sense of the 1954 Accords, it was, I thought, amply rectified under the Kennedy administration.

SCHOENBAUM: I might as well ask: In your book it appears that as to Laos, Dean Rusk was the primary advisor. And you mentioned on a couple of occasions that Rusk gave Kennedy the advice to follow a two-track policy: negotiate but keep the stick in the closet, or keep the club in

the closet. Can you elaborate on that? Was Dean Rusk the key figure, in terms of formulations and conclusions to the Laos Accords?

BUNDY: Well, I would say he most certainly was the key senior advisor. Dean, I'm talking about who had responsibility in Laos. And I was saying that the basic decision to go this route was very definitely on your advice. A very large role came to be played on Laos by Averell Harriman, first because Kennedy used him right away. He was an able Ambassador at Large. He sent him out, in effect, to find out what sort of fellow Souvanna Phouma was, in February of '61. And Averell reported, "This fellow has got some guts and quality and he's worth backing." And that became a very important part of it. Then, Averell was the negotiator in Geneva, but I am sure always under instructions. I was in the Pentagon at this time and only on the margins of it. But I would say that the policy was what the Secretary had recommended and kept a very close eye on, and the execution was in the hands of Averell Harriman.

DEAN RUSK: I don't see how the revisionist historians could find fault with the purposes of the Laos Accords, from our point of view. The idea was to get everybody out of Laos and leave the Laotians to run their own country: neutral, not aligned with any side.

END OF SIDE 2

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