

Dean Rusk Oral History Project
Rusk MMM
William Putnam Bundy interviewed by Richard Rusk
1985 February

[This interview took place while driving to the Atlanta Airport]

RICHARD RUSK: This is February of 1985. We're talking with Mr. William Bundy, former Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs from 1964 through May 1969. And we're recording Bill Bundy's recollections about Dean Rusk. Bill, you might want to just free-lance it, or go down there question by question, or however you want to do it.

BUNDY: I'll capsule the questions so that you can refer to them in the way that they appear on this page, and then you can put in the full form of the question if you want to do that. The first question is how do I assess Dean Rusk's influence with the two Presidents he served. I would say there was a considerable difference there. I think that Kennedy tended to take advice from everybody. Certainly gave Dean Rusk the pre-eminence as Secretary of State, and I would say that Dean Rusk was constantly somebody he would never have made a major move without consulting. But, in some respects he tended to get some of his ideas from others, and doubtless to check them out with Dean Rusk. I would say that with Johnson, Rusk was absolutely clearly the first among equals from the start and became progressively, over a period of time, clearly the most important of any senior counselors at any level.

RICHARD RUSK: What do you base that observation on? Apparently my dad's really critical advice came in private conversations with the President. And I'm also cognizant of the fact that Lyndon Johnson had a great deal of respect for Robert McNamara and leaned on him heavily, at least in the earlier years.

BUNDY: No question he did turn heavily to McNamara, particularly in '64 -'66. And in action decisions, what you should do in Vietnam on the military side, all of that, he did turn to McNamara heavily. I based my judgment more on feel than anything else that the Secretary was clearly, if I may put it this way, somewhat more at ease, and you felt he had a very clear inside track that he used in his own way with Lyndon Johnson. And you heard Johnson's references to him and saw the way he conducted himself toward him: It was extra respectful. Certainly Kennedy was respectful, certainly he treated him as the Secretary of State, but there was an extra degree of deference with Johnson. And very clearly Johnson never made a move without not only consulting, but really consulting in depth with Dean Rusk. That would be my judgment. I can't come to any specific thing and say everybody else was the other way and Dean Rusk was this way and it came out his way, but this was my feel of his degree of influence in those two situations.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad takes pride on the fact that he never would let any daylight form between himself and either of the Presidents that he served. Were you aware of any daylight as Assistant Secretary of Far Eastern Affairs on any given aspect of policy?

BUNDY: No, I was not, and I was well aware that he had this view of the way that he should advise the President and the way that he should, therefore, deal with his own subordinates who might have conflicting views, and not necessarily reveal clearly what his ultimate advice to the President would be. He tended, therefore, to take rather a judicial attitude within the Department so that he listened to the case; and it was as though he were a judge saying he would now take it under advisement and decide what his own recommendation to the President should be. I think some found that a little frustrating, as against other Secretaries who, without ever letting daylight show in public, at the same time their top subordinates might have known, as I gather it. And I wasn't in any other State Department administration and knew that he felt strongly about something in a certain direction. Secretary Rusk very seldom, if ever, gave that kind of a signal of where he was coming out on a tough call. Some found that frustrating. It didn't bother me particularly, but it was characteristic of his way of operation.

RICHARD RUSK: Bob McNamara in the Defense Department, I believe when approaching policies would get his department together and the various people within the Department would develop a departmental position. If there was some serious dispute amongst the individuals with respect to the position, it would be noted in the notes and things like that. Do you recall my dad working in that same fashion, trying to develop departmental positions on policy?

BUNDY: No, and you've put your finger on a very significant difference, because I did work, after all, for both men. McNamara, as the record shows on Vietnam alone, and I'm sure it was true on other things, put his views into written memoranda. And I think in some cases those were "eyes only" to the President I would think in almost every instance, and I certainly know of no instance to the contrary, to the Secretary of State unless conceivably on a military budget matter or something of that sort that was strictly within the Pentagon's jurisdiction and established policy. He would do that, and I don't recall exactly how he would handle the positions of others. I don't think he would say that his direct civilian subordinates agreed with him or disagreed with him in a case of that sort, unless he felt that a subordinate had a particular point of view that was very striking in a matter. I guess there may have been one or two cases of that, although I can't, at this distance of time, recall any. He would quite frequently, in memoranda, comment on the position of the Joint Chiefs, and I think, on occasion, probably quite frankly, say whether he agreed or disagreed or thought they'd gone into it as thoroughly as they might have and been as clear in their advice as they should be and so on. And he did it in writing. And he would, on occasion at least, check out the memoranda with his subordinates so that you knew what position he had taken. And in that somewhat different view of the most effective and best way for him to handle his role, he was, of course, relying on the discretion and the total confidence of the senior subordinates with whom he shared his views. I don't think he was ever betrayed either, on that [in] that McNamara had said this to the President and what he had said was not what came out, or on occasion that it was what had come out and that therefore McNamara was the one who'd carried the day, so to speak. Neither Rusk nor McNamara--and this was basic to their good relationship and to the human relationships between their departments as long as those two men were in office, which were remarkable in comparative historic terms. They were, neither of them, playing to the gallery.

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally, my dad gave me a comment on you that you might be

interested in. He said he delegated to you extensively during your tenure and always with complete confidence. And he had high words of praise for everything you did. That's something he just passed on to me yesterday, and I'm sure you're probably aware of that. It must have been a bit frustrating not to know what was in his mind at certain times. And, people have criticized him for that. We've talked about it. Did it really affect your role as Assistant Secretary? Was it a hard thing to work around: you know, not knowing what was in the mind of the Secretary of State? Apparently there were some folks back there in the Department who took pride on their ability to read the Secretary's mind through things like his facial expressions, and nervous tics, and things like that. Were you able to develop that kind of antennae?

BUNDY: Well, you could tell the direction that he was thinking at that particular moment. But certainly I well knew that he might take a different view for any of a host of other reasons, and that indeed he should, particularly if it involved the concerns of other regions, or whatever it might be. There is a kind of ultimate basis of policy recommendations that ought to exist at the Secretary of State's level. I didn't find it frustrating. I did find McNamara's style perhaps tending to engage you a little bit more, and I suppose there's just a little bit in being flattered to know, in a very private way, what the position of your chief is. But I didn't find it frustrating as a matter of being able to do my job.

RICHARD RUSK: This business of the policy review after the Tet Offensive, did you know what my dad was up to there?

BUNDY: I did not know at the time, and I could not in hindsight when it became an issue answer the question whether, as the outward appearances were, Clark Clifford was the one who effectively pushed to put the idea of a partial bombing halt into the President's speech of April first. I would have said at the time that that had been Clifford, from what I had seen with my own eyes. But as I reflected on it in later years, it seemed to me entirely possible that Clifford had been pushing on a swinging door in that Thursday morning meeting that I described in the taped session we had: that he'd been pushing on a swinging door, and that both Secretary Rusk and the President were already pretty much of that mind, and that Rusk played a part in bringing LBJ to that mind. But I couldn't have told that at the time, and that accounts for a report that I've seen in print which is true, that not long after that I saw Clark Clifford on a social occasion (it happened to be a party on the wedding anniversary of my parents-in-law) and told him I thought he'd rendered the country a very great service. This was after Hanoi had responded to the partial bombing halt, because the underlying fact was that my professional judgment given to the Secretary and to others was that the partial bombing halt might be a wise thing to put into the speech because it would show a real will for peace on the part of the President, but that I really didn't think the odds were very good that Hanoi would go for it. I turned out to be wrong, and therefore the idea looked better by April 13th than it had, at least from the standpoint of its being likely to lead to negotiations, prior to that. You then ask whether Dean Rusk's influence may have been underestimated in many accounts because of his habit of advising Presidents only in private of conversation. I think that's entirely possible. And that's inherent in the way he chose to operate. I always remember a rather wise saying that a great-uncle of mine said once used to quote: "There are times in life when you can either do things or get credit for them." And Dean Rusk preferred to do them. I don't think the record will ever show, perhaps, all of his influence. You ask whether it would be possible to write a full biography. Well, it'll be a full biography, but

it just won't show every last bit and piece of where his influence was thrust at critical times. And I think that's an omission, but there are plenty of biographies where that is true to one degree or another. Your next question is that since Dean Rusk tends to shy away from conflict and confrontation as a matter of habit, did this cause him to defer, did I ever see him fight for his position? I don't think it did cause him to defer. One, of course, couldn't reach a definitive judgment, because one didn't know what he was saying privately. And by the same token, it would have been contrary to his code of operation to fight at a given moment if he could possibly do it in any other way. And most of the time that was certainly the case, he could get to the President; he had the last word if he wanted it. That was certainly the case in his relationship with Johnson. And so he wouldn't need to fight. But I don't recall a case where he did, as it were, go to the mat on a sort of framed issue. I certainly can recall many times when he expressed very clear and strong reactions in ways that pretty strongly implied how he would come out and stick up for them. Next, do I recall moments when he showed real emotion? I think there were several personal occasions when something happened to an individual that he cared about or was associated with. I don't happen to have those fresh in mind. And I think there was one time, when the war was going in a very messy way, or something terrible had happened, and he said, "You've just got to remember we've been through this before, and we've got to hang on," was the thrust of it. It used words that were perhaps a little similar to what he said in the taped session about having been through this before and that you didn't let go. The United States of America does not let go in this kind of adversity.

RICHARD RUSK: Would that have been in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive? He might have been referring to a comment by Dean Acheson made during the Korean War: "The United States cannot be treated like this," or something like that.

BUNDY: Yes, there was a phrase like that, "You just can't do that to the United States of America." How would I assess him as an administrator? Was he able to hire and fire people, and so on?

RICHARD RUSK: My dad says he's the man with ice water in his veins. Does that ring true? You know, I conjure up different images when I hear that. I don't quite believe it, but--

BUNDY: I would have never said that he had ice water in his veins, though he got cooler the tougher and more important an issue was. He could get quite irate at what I too would have regarded as unforgivable stupidity, carelessness, or any form of bad faith on anybody's part.

RICHARD RUSK: You recall instances of that?

BUNDY: Oh, I can't remember a specific one at this moment, but he certainly had a one hundred percent code of integrity and candor, certainly among the people you were dealing with. And anybody that tried to slip one by him was going to get the back of his hand and probably find himself doing something much less interesting in the future. So, he had a very clear level of emotion about that kind of thing. And I would not have thought of him as ice water at all. Now the next question was to rate him as an administrator, and could he hire and fire people effectively. Well, I think he handled the State Department well. The flow was clear, there was little waste motion. It was a shaken-down department even before I came into it, which was three

years after he had taken over it. So I really never saw how he operated in establishing that pattern and getting the people he wanted, and that limits my usefulness as a witness on this subject. I think he did--I say this frankly: I think he did find it hard to fire somebody face to face, and that he was, if anything, too compassionate on this kind of thing. And perhaps that he didn't take charge as strongly as I on occasion, and I think others, wished him to do on the selection for people for ambassadors and other posts. But that may have been partly because he was always careful about where he stood, not only, and of course pre-eminently, with the President himself, but that he didn't see the need to get into confrontational situations with members of the White House Staff who might at a given time be pushing a particular candidate. He wanted to sort a thing out carefully before he came up with a clear conclusion. And there were cases, and I can remember a couple, where there were alternate candidates for an ambassadorship, one from the political channel and one from the professional channel, and you couldn't tell whether he had gone down the line for the professional one, because that was part of his code of operations. But I think it did mean that he didn't get into the process as much as I think some of the Secretaries have done, and I don't think it was his strongest suit.

RICHARD RUSK: Roger Hilsman has claimed in his book that he resigned that position. My dad has said that he fired him. You replaced him as Assistant Secretary. Can you shed any light on what happened with Roger Hilsman?

BUNDY: Well, I had no personal knowledge at the time as to why Hilsman was leaving. I think your father would have a very clear and succinct statement as to why and the circumstances if you chose to ask him for it. But my knowledge of that is hearsay from, originally from George Ball, and more recently from your father. And in that case, I think the impetus came directly from President Johnson.

RICHARD RUSK: Were there other people he should have fired during his tenure?

BUNDY: By the time I got there, I don't think that was the case. I didn't have that feeling about any individual who worked for him. They were all loyal and I thought effective, with none who in any sense, called out for being fired. One obviously had slightly different ratings for different individuals, but there were none that you asked, "How can he possibly keep that person in that job at all?" The next question was: did he get the best possible performance? I think he certainly scored very high on that. You felt that he was delegating a great deal of responsibility and that he expected performance, but at the same time he would back you up. I did have direct personal experience in September 1964 of his backing me up when I'd gone out on a limb by making some statements to the press in Tokyo that appeared in contradiction with a speech by the President. (I had said that we might at some point have to consider stronger action against North Vietnam.) There was no question in his mind. He knew why I had said what I'd said, and he backed me completely. And you always felt you would be backed, and you always felt that it was up to you. You had a sense of being on your own. It was a healthy feeling. You knew that he'd be there if you needed him, so I would say he scored high on that.

RICHARD RUSK: Your area of the world was under intense scrutiny with the war in Vietnam and a lot of Presidential interest in that one. Was my dad able to and did he delegate extensively to you in an area of the world that was being watched so closely by the White House itself?

BUNDY: Well, I did have to come to him in the first instance, probably more than any other Assistant Secretary because of that fact. But he would be relying on me in between times for a great deal of execution of a kind that I think other Assistant Secretaries probably had to handle as well. But I certainly didn't feel that he was looking over my shoulder on the things that, once we had the decision, could only come from the very top, a great deal of the time on Vietnam. What was he like to work for? Well, I think I've more or less described that in that he was a good boss to work for. Did his penchant for privacy complicate? Well, I think I've more or less answered that. Was he as nonassertive and non-communicative as some of his critics allege? Not with me at all, partly because we did see so much of each other, and because, while he did not go out of his way to say, "Look, you ought to understand, this is where I start from on this problem," but you'd get to know all about it as you went along. So, I had no problem of that sort, although I think those who saw him more rarely might have had. He didn't, as it were, go back to square one and he didn't have much of a taste for playing with ideas: "Let's come at this problem this way. What would happen if we did this?", that kind of thing. He didn't go at it very speculatively, although very often he would have particular suggestions for doing this or that. But anything resembling a bull session just wasn't his style.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Just how familiar was he with the extensive history of that conflict in Southeast Asia? Did he seem knowledgeable to you on that? Would he ever, or did he ever in your experience, go back to the very roots of that involvement and say, "Hey, let's take another look at this," and perhaps reexamine the fundamental assumptions that went into that war?

BUNDY: Well, did he know enough about the history? And the answer is certainly he knew enough about the history and was quite solidly grounded in it. Did he ever sort of say, "Didn't we contribute to the problem by this or that way back then," or "Aren't we to be blamed somewhat for this?" That he did not do.

RICHARD RUSK: No? Did he ever say or take part in this process of going back into the history of Vietnam and restudying it once again in the light of reexamining the assumptions that underlay that policy?

BUNDY: No. Well, the assumptions were always, in effect, current assumptions. I think he would have felt it was a waste of precious time and energy to argue about the wisdom of what had been done in the past. And in a sense, we were always reexamining the premises of the policy: was it still valid to do this in the light of what we then knew about its difficulties, and so on and so on. The answer is, he didn't go back into history to chew it for its own self, but he knew it very well. Now, next question: you note that in my manuscript, as you read it, Dean Rusk at times does not appear to have been a major player and his name is not mentioned maybe as frequently as one would suppose. How decisive a role did he play? Well, let me explain about my manuscript, as I was doing to Tom Schoenbaum on the way to lunch today, that that manuscript was written deliberately avoiding getting into personalities. And you will surely find his name as often as any other, and perhaps more. (I believe more.) But I was deliberately not trying to try to allocate who was responsible for what or anything of that sort. It's a manuscript aimed above all at what were the policies and particularly the perceptions, the judgments, and information in the hands of the people making the decisions. How decisive a role? I think he

played a very, very important role. It's difficult to imagine that we would have behaved as we did broadly or in a great many specific key decisions without his input and concurrence. Moments of major influence? Again that's hard to isolate what was his because, for example, I don't know whether his was the voice that tipped the scales, to take a lesser example, going into the December 1965 bombing pause. This or that negotiating move? As I've already said, I don't know whether he was the one who was decisive in going for the partial bombing halt of April 1968. So, it's hard to identify these things. And that gets back to the fact that his ultimate advise to the President, in my experience, was tendered in private. Not that he didn't come out with his position in the Cabinet Room, but if it was a tricky and tough issue one suspected, and I think with reason, that he had usually talked it over beforehand. I never saw a case--and this is perhaps striking; others may remember differently. I never saw a case where LBJ was surprised by the position that Dean Rusk took. And that's pretty indicative, because the odds on that happening between any two individuals, however compatible in their general outlook, do not point to the figure of zero.

RICHARD RUSK: My question is on the psychology of command decision making and how it affects people like my dad when casualties begin to mount.

BUNDY: Well, I think the expression of the response differs according to temperament. And, of course, there's a little difference, perhaps you can't justify it in logic, between the case where an air traffic controller makes a mistake a two airplanes crash as a result, and other kinds of cases.

END OF SIDE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

BUNDY: If you've made a clear mistake, or if you took six extra drinks and killed people in a car, that kind of very direct proximate responsibility where there's an element of error or terrible negligence involved is one thing. In the case of Dean Rusk--and I think this had permeated many of us through the war, but probably him particularly because he had been a colonel of infantry on the staff sending men into battle--that you reckon that you've made a sort of broad calculation that this had to be done and that inevitably in the nature of war people would be killed, men would be killed, Americans would be killed. And you weren't insensitive at all either to the fact that others, including your enemy, were being killed. And so you have that, as it were, factored in and lying behind every decision you take. Now, then you ask yourself, "How much do you think about that?" And I give my own psychology, because it may have had some relation to his: You ask, "Does it help me do the best possible job I know how to do given the amount of energy and emotional reserve I have? Does it help or hurt for me to express those emotions." In my case, I never felt it would help.

RICHARD RUSK: To express those emotions?

BUNDY: To express those emotions. That's simply just not the way I'm made. And I think that

was, to a considerable extent, true of Dean Rusk. He never was without having factored in that element that people die in this. But he had a direct and immediate responsibility. I think sometimes, and I remember that my old colleague of many years, and a man I greatly respect and am very fond of, Chester Cooper, in his book *The Lost Crusade*, speaks of driving by Arlington on his way to work in '67 or along in there and thinking of the new crosses in Arlington Cemetery. Well, if I'd driven by the cemetery I'm sure it would have crossed my mind, too, but Chester Cooper was less close to policy at a given moment. The fact that you had all you could do to answer the questions in front of you, that you didn't have much time to think about this in this way, and you didn't feel any sense of helplessness. There was no reason to feel helpless. And you had to ask yourself at the beginning and end of every day had you done all you knew how to do. You didn't ask that consciously, either, it was just what you were trying to do. Now that's my own personal reaction. And I kind of think that was Dean Rusk's. I don't think either of us, to put it another way, would have felt impelled, as Lyndon Johnson did, to go grab the reports, the after-action reports of a particular air raid. I think, in that respect, Dean Rusk would have felt as General Marshall did. People were always amazed that General Marshall went home at four o'clock all through the war. And the answer was that General Marshall knew that he'd performed at his best for a good solid eight hour day and that he wasn't at his best if he hung on longer or if he expended emotion on other things. And I think that was a model that Dean Rusk followed in a lot of respects, likewise.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, there's some real insight there, and I thank you for it. It's a pretty painful question for all of you involved in that decision making. Do you think the mounting casualties may have helped lock my father in to that policy in the sense that, the phrase that David Halberstam once used, "One dead American begets another dead American, begets another dead American--" that type of thing? The feeling that we had to make this thing work out because of the very expenditure in lives that were being lost. Do you think it might have served to operate in that capacity?

BUNDY: That would be the ultimate in speculation. That's too internal a question for anybody to answer for anybody else.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me qualify that just a shade here. When I say lock a man in, I'm speaking of his human instincts, not his vanity or his pride, you know, the feeling that human life is sacred and you know, that if he would be locked in, it would be because of his very feeling for his fellow man.

BUNDY: Well, I don't know. Certainly, I'd intellectually reject that. I thought that the calculus had to be always in future terms. And I guess, on occasion I know, those close to me have felt I was too, if you will, coldblooded on that. I remember discussion with Elliot Richardson, who'd been a medical corpsman with the Fourth Division right through the European campaign. And he said, "Suppose you'd figured that you had one chance in a thousand of being hit on a given morning, and you got through that morning. And you got through nine more mornings without being hit. What were your chances of being hit on the eleventh morning? Were they now reduced?" And the answer was they weren't reduced, it was exactly still one in one thousand if that was your correct percentage figure. And I always felt the same way about the casualties that you had to play the hand as it lay that morning. Now, I'm sure there is an undertow effect there

and it just doesn't come to me to give it eloquent expression, but it was one that I certainly tried to resist. My hunch would be that Dean Rusk did too. Post-Tet offensive: All of that question, the policy review after the Tet, I think we covered that on the tape and I don't think I can add much there. Next question has to do with whether Dean Rusk may have worked too hard at the job. Well, I thought he did, and so did the three or four people who were very close to him with whom one could talk about that sort of thing in total confidence. He didn't seem to have any favored way of relaxing that he could do except for the occasional golf game. And I guess I told you personally the story of his going up to take a week off in New York and he wanted to drop in at the World's Fair, so he dropped in at some national pavilion and promptly the word got round, and then he felt he had to go to many more national pavilions. In other words, his sense of duty was just absolutely overpowering. And I think at a certain point that can be negative in terms of your being on top of the job. Now, no question he was very tired, at least the last two years. I was trying to think afterwards when I began to feel tiredness very much present in him. And in my own mind it started about the time of the Manila conference in October '66. After that I can recall only flashes of the zip and freshness that he predominantly had, certainly in the first year of 1964 and again in 1965--I think he got progressively tired. And I think he did on occasion get too much into detail. He read cables--and that's a good thing to do, but you can get a little too much of it. He didn't intervene in questions of detail. He used to say that he could flip the cables in the morning and say, "I know what the answer to that one's got to be." And then the answer might or might not come to him personally for review. But that he was absorbed by detail, there's no question, and anybody would say this of him, that he was--Dean Rusk had the capacities of a truly great staff officer. And one of the problems when you are in a job that is indeed very largely a staff job in a sense that you're an adviser to the President, but is also a command job, you've got to spread yourself between the two. And I think he, perhaps, did get a little caught up in detail.

This was always on policy questions. I don't think he was excessively preoccupied with administrative detail or things of that sort. And long-range planning? Well, I think by the time I saw him in the Department, we had shaken down into broad grooves on most policy, and Vietnam was a matter you could say needed to be thought of perhaps more in long range terms, but I didn't have too much occasion to see him in that role. And I didn't feel that there was that much that we could have improved in terms of long-range planning in Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Was he a little contemptuous of long-range planning? Contemptuous is probably too strong a word, but was there some friction between him and the so-called thinkers of the Department: people who liked to do a lot of that type of planning--George Kennan, Chester Bowles, and so on?

BUNDY: Well, I think the problem with planning-minded people, as he saw it, wasn't that they wanted to take a long-range view and think generally, it's that when they'd done it, they often didn't come up with anything. At least--and I don't want to make this personal because I didn't work in the Department with either Chester Bowles or George Kennan--the feelings I got from Dean Rusk toward planning efforts of a similar nature were okay, but as he used to say again and again, one of my very favorite sayings: "What is it you do at the end of the day?" In other words, it doesn't mean all your attention is on short-range things, but that if you do a long-range planning exercise, you've got to try to say: What does that? How do we move toward that?

What's your broad plan of action? And I think he had great impatience with papers that simply chewed the rag on a subject without coming up with something fairly concrete.

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally--

[break in recording]

BUNDY: Now we switch abruptly to your question whether tactical use of nuclear weapons was ever considered. To the best of my knowledge, no. I think there was a theoretical idea of putting an atomic mine or something across the Ho Chi Minh trail at some point. But it was an idle suggestion; I don't think it ever appeared in any paper. That's all I can even recall except that any mention of nuclear weapons was consistently negated from a very early stage.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Okay, very good.

BUNDY: You ask about Dean Rusk's field trip to South Vietnam in April '64. I don't recall anecdotes of that trip. I'd been on a similar trip with McNamara when I was working in the Pentagon the previous year. And I guess my feeling would have been that for all that, Dean Rusk was there only forty-eight hours or a little more maybe, that he didn't try to get into the same degree of depth as McNamara, though he undoubtedly benefitted a lot by seeing what was going on. But I never thought that any number of trips would have made that much difference. Did he have a feel? I think he had a pretty good feel for what was going on and I don't think it would have made that much difference to be able to turn to people who had been on the ground. There were a lot of such people around. I mean, just in the direct line he had Philip Habib, he had Leonard Unger who'd been in Laos. Those were my two deputies, both of whom had been in the field extensively. I don't think there was anything that would have made a great difference in this area.

RICHARD RUSK: Interesting. Incidentally let me--

[break in recording]

BUNDY: Your next question is my opinion of the Warren Cohen book. Just on skimming it, I thought it was pretty unsatisfying, but that was a very quick skim and not the basis of any usable judgment. Did Dean Rusk volunteer to go as Ambassador at the time that [Henry] Cabot Lodge departed in the early summer of 1964? I was told that everybody in the senior circle had volunteered and with sincerity, but I have no first-hand information. In connection with my manuscript on Chapter 12, page 32, you ask what it was Prince [Norodom] Sihanouk had said after the assassination. You'd have to look that up, but he made some very derogatory remark, "Now we're rid of this little something or other," and it was nasty and out of his usual character but it caused considerable feeling. Next you ask about my own point of decision on whether we should, as it were, "put in our stack." That's the phrase LBJ used, oh, sometime in the late fall of '64 I would say. I can't identify when that was true of Dean Rusk. I think he would have said the same thing that he has said about Lyndon Johnson, that until you actually decide you haven't committed yourself, and I don't think he probably had. Domestic politics was definitely a factor and yet, as you say, it wasn't discussed. Well, that is right. The only time I can remember any

kind of explicit discussion would have been in the early summer of '64 when we were talking about what the campaign was likely to be like and whether it would make any sense to have a congressional resolution, and so on. That was in very specific timing terms whether you could get Congress to act on something in the limited time available as of June, when the idea was rejected.

RICHARD RUSK: That's a pretty involved question. I guess to get a good answer to that might take some time. You did discuss it at length in your manuscript. But that was really the only occasion that you can recall domestic considerations being discussed?

BUNDY: And that was more the congressional timetable. It's sort of palpable a little bit that politics indicated we ought to stay on course and not get into stronger action. And then there was a memorandum that I included in my manuscript that I wrote on July 31 or so, 1964, indicating what I thought our course of action was going to be through the election if it was possible. Let's see, we've covered the question of when people thought of ground forces. Let's not worry about that. You asked about the White Paper in early 1965, mentioned in chapter 22, p. 36 of my manuscript. You raised the question whether we might have used the intercept evidence that existed of the command network running to Hanoi, and so on, which carefully analyzed, and was extraordinarily convincing, that Hanoi was running the show. I think the question was put to John McCone of CIA who ultimately had the responsibility for protecting intelligence sources under law, and he was very much opposed. And I think rightly, because that was a potentially enormously important source of intelligence. I'm not commenting on how valuable it may have been later on, but that was a professional judgment.

RICHARD RUSK: Incidentally--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: --in trying to finish everything. If we've got a few left, we can finish--

BUNDY: The next important question--I think we've covered this question of LBJ's not being totally candid about the evolving changes of mission in early '65. Was there at any time serious discussion of policy differences? Not in which I ever felt that there was a square opposition at all between Dean Rusk and others, but certainly indications of where one was moving were very clear. I don't know. You call that 'going to the mat.' I never, certainly, felt that any conversation I had with him was going to the mat in the sense that I was sharply disagreeing with him, but we certainly were arguing different factors vigorously with each other.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me ask a follow up on that. Robert McNamara and my dad had a very close relationship. It's been compared to the [Robert Abercrombie] Lovett-Acheson relationship of the early '50s. And evidently Robert McNamara did start to form some serious doubts about the war in 1966, I think, as early as '66. Yet my dad says that he never once shared those doubts with him. Why is that? And a related question would be that, my dad says of all the senior advisers, only George Ball fully expressed his misgivings and his doubts and here--

[break in recording]

BUNDY: Whether serious differences or different assessments of how well we were doing were shared, particularly the pessimism that became increasingly clear in McNamara's mind and that Dean Rusk says was not shared with him, I didn't get that myself more than indirectly and I'd worked very closely with McNamara. And whenever we saw each other we had a way of being very frank with each other. I think he was at some pains to conceal that or the degree of it because he didn't think it would help. He could bring up a point and point out an individual fact, but it would have been different to give a total assessment, and I don't think he was that sure of his assessment, at least until the latter part of '67. "The dark and tangled stretches in the decision making process" is actually a quotation from Roger Hilsman. It's simply that there are pieces where a lot was oral and that kind of thing, and there certainly doesn't mean there's any mystery, in my judgment, about Dean Rusk except on the point that we've covered already. I don't know exactly what his private advice to the President was, but I would doubt very much if it differed that much from what I was kind of broadly judging to be his position.

RICHARD RUSK: He's been called a very private sort of man and I can attest to that as his son. Do you feel that you know Dean Rusk? Do you think you know him?

BUNDY: Oh, indeed. I think I know all the important things. Indeed I do. You asked about the quality of our intelligence. Well, I think intelligence was pretty good. I'd give them pretty good marks on Vietnam for broad assessments and that kind of thing. I think the field intelligence was not quite first-rate for a long time and I think it got progressively better.

RICHARD RUSK: That would have been after, during the--

BUNDY: Roughly '67, somewhere along in there it started to get better. The Westmoreland trial period. I haven't gone over it to see how much was really new in what was turned up at that trial. I have the impression that its contribution to history in the really basic sense of the intelligence at Tet will be much less that is now being said.

RICHARD RUSK: The Pentagon Papers alleged that American intelligence was, for the most part, pretty good, at least in terms of pointing out the degree of difficulty or expressing the pessimism with which this thing might go, and the tenacity of the North Vietnamese. Is that the way you read the intelligence? You said the field intelligence was bad early; it got better later. But did the intelligence assessments tend to agree with each other on the important points or were they really boxing the compass in this Pearl Harbor syndrome, as my dad once referred to?

BUNDY: I think the question of warning of something and protecting oneself, that's kind of the Pearl Harbor syndrome. But, no, I think the National Intelligence Estimates--the ones that came out in blue covers--were on the whole without sharp differences of opinion and were broadly useful. Next question was the role of Richard Holbrooke. Well, he was special assistant to Nick Katzenbach when I saw him in action and he seemed a very useful man in that role. But I wouldn't say he had a very important role as I saw it at that time. Now the question of a narrowing of the circle of advisers. There I would say that the circle of those really engrossed and all the rest was certainly big enough in November and December of '64 and indeed in previous considerations in '64. And I would say the same, basically, about June and July '65. It

tended to get somewhat narrower after that. There were very few sorts of really serious group reviews of where we stood after that, after July '65, and it tended to narrow a little bit progressively as you went along. And there was no provision for any kind of a systematic structure to assess the war and our policies and programs. Frankly, this is a point I wish I had discussed with Dean Rusk when we were talking, though it wasn't as important as what we did discuss. He speaks rather happily about the Tuesday lunches as a vehicle for decision. And, as I have written elsewhere, I found them very frustrating and hard to get good read-out from; and I never did see the minutes of them which he was quoting.

RICHARD RUSK: You were at two meetings?

BUNDY: Two meetings. But I always was involved, or almost always involved, in the sense that you'd know that something that was in your area was on the agenda. But you'd only know it at the last minute. And the assemblage of papers and, above all, the read-out was just totally different from NSC meetings in the Eisenhower era which I had known very well indeed as the CIA staff assistant on the planning board. Frankly, I found from where I sat it was a frustrating and, I thought, ineffective mode of decision making. So I kind of wish we'd discussed it.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you in the inner circle as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, after July of '65 on Vietnam policy?

BUNDY: It was no problem for me, but there were quite frequent times when I felt under constraints as to the number of my subordinates I should consult. I think I almost invariably would have consulted with my deputy for Vietnamese affairs and usually bring in the desk man, but only on political matters, things of that sort. I'm describing something in rather general terms. I don't think I can make it more specific, but it did get narrower after that. Was Dean Rusk confident in his views about where we were going in Vietnam or did he have grave doubts? He never expressed to me basic doubts. He often said, "We're in trouble and there's lots of difficulty," but it was always with the underlying sense that we could overcome these. Was he confident of his capacity to handle the job? I would say in the years that I knew him, very definitely so. I don't know how much gradualism--that's a point that he covered in his taping. I don't think I'll try to do that. I have no anecdotes on Dean Rusk and Charles de Gaulle. You ask about the sense of ideology as a central factor in decision making. I would have said it was less of a factor with Rusk than it certainly would have been with, say, John Foster Dulles, but it was present. I would have been pretty much with him on that, perhaps a shade less ideological. I didn't think it was a very dominant factor. What was his finest hour? I don't really have a nomination for that. I just haven't thought in those terms. His state of health I've commented on. In the last two years he was not in good shape, and it was apparent that he was living on guts a great deal. As to LBJ being difficult to work for and sometimes abusive with his staff and advisers, I know no evidence that he ever went in that direction in the slightest degree with Dean Rusk. And I might add that while he was occasionally--on two occasions at least--very blunt indeed with me, it was not in an abusive way.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. That was something he reserved for his personal staff.

BUNDY: Pretty much, so far as I could tell--

[break in recording]

BUNDY: Final question: Did Dean Rusk ever contribute to the credibility gap? Well, it's hard to say that anybody made no contribution at all to the credibility gap, because you're almost bound to find yourself saying something that you in fact believe but which is belied by events. And you see, the credibility gap never divided neatly into things that the administration said that may have been exactly what an objective person would have said at that point given the information available, but turned out to be belied by events.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah.

BUNDY: In other words, you've got to split them up. I think his record in that area was in general very good.

END OF SIDE 2

