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Harry Walter Shlaudeman interviewed by Richard Rusk
1986 May

RICHARD RUSK: Interview with Ambassador Harry Shlaudeman, a career Foreign Service officer who joined the service in 1955. His primary area has been Latin America. He was in Bulgaria, I believe, from '60- '62; attached to the Dominican Republic Embassy from '62- '65; assistant director of Caribbean Affairs, '65- '66; and from 1967 to January of 1969, Special Assistant to Secretary of State Dean Rusk. During the Dominican crisis of 1965, what do you recall of my dad's performance, in a general way, and perhaps any specific comments you could make on it?

SCHLAUDEMAM: There was a meeting--this was, the best I can recall, the night of, it must have been the night of the twenty-sixth or seventh of April--in the Department in the Operations Center. The Secretary, the then-director of the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], I believe Cy [Cyrus Roberts] Vance was there, and several other people. Basically, the purpose of the meeting was to decide on what to recommend to the President, what to recommend that should be done. I recall that several of those present were not really very well informed and didn't have a very clear idea of what was going on. Your father was very well informed and very decisive. And I think he had already made up his mind what he was going to recommend. In any case, they left from that meeting and the decision was made that night to send troops in.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think that was my father's primary recommendation to the President?

SCHLAUDEMAM: I think so.

RICHARD RUSK: Or do you think he, at that point, had signed on with the President's wishes?

SCHLAUDEMAM: My own impression--this is only an impression--is that that was his own recommendation. Certainly it fit the President's desires, but I think he was convinced.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. I get the impression that Dean Rusk played a secondary role almost in the Dominican affair in terms of President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson's interest in it and in the way that he himself acted as almost the desk officer in that crisis. Is that a fair judgment?

SCHLAUDEMAM: That's very true. Once the decision had been made, and once it became a political issue, as it did almost immediately here in the United States, President Johnson was, I think you put it quite correctly, the desk officer, to the point that I can recall that several times in the middle of the night he himself called down to me or to Vance or to whoever happened to be his representative at the moment generally with exhortations about getting the thing finished. But you're quite right. And I think that your father in fact, given the role of Tom [Thomas Clifton]

Mann in all of this, and the President, I do not think your father was very closely involved in it after the decision had been made.

RICHARD RUSK: At the expense of policy? Did our policy suffer because of that?

SCHLAUDEMANN: No, I think not. I think that the major policy decision was made in May, or I should say early June, after Ellsworth Bunker had arrived. And he essentially was the one who made the decision, the decision being to go for elections. There was resistance to it up here. And I won't go into from whom. But there was quite a bit of resistance. I have the impression that your father supported Ellsworth throughout this. But that's when the important decision was really made: that is, aside from the decision to go in with the troops. And once the decision had been made, Dean and the rest left us pretty much with only the option of finding a way to get out and to leave a situation that was workable behind us. And I thought, and I argued from the very first, that the way to do that was through the elective process. I think generally that's the way everyone felt.

RICHARD RUSK: If I can get you to describe very briefly what you did as Special Assistant. What was the nature of your duties there? And then we can go from that into how Dean Rusk was as your boss. What kind of man was he to work for?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Well, basically my job was to run the office for him, to see that he got the things that he needed to make decisions; took care of organizing his calendar; I traveled with him a great deal; prepared, every once in a while, memoranda for him; generally I was a kind of combination of bag carrier and personal assistant. It really involved, I think more than anything else, being on hand when he needed something. He wrote a, very kindly wrote a report on me when, at the end of his term, in which he said that I was the first one he saw every morning and the last one he saw every night. And that's essentially what the job was.

RICHARD RUSK: Not a very envious job to have in that respect?

SCHLAUDEMANN: I wouldn't trade that experience for anything.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh really?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Anyway, that's essentially what I did.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. And what kind of boss was he for you?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Well, he was a very good boss. I think some people had trouble because he is a fairly reserved man, as you know, and he was not given to being the kind of boss who's always telling you exactly what to do. But I had no difficulty in that respect. He certainly couldn't have been kinder to his staff--extremely thoughtful. I could say, if you want, at this point, a few things about him that perhaps I hadn't expected when I took on the job. Would that be useful?

RICHARD RUSK: Oh yes. Go ahead.

SCHLAUDEMANN: I think the first thing that surprised me somewhat was that after all these years in public office, and after all these years as Secretary of State, that he still, I would say, he was still almost as nervous when he had to give a public speech. In my judgment Dean Rusk was the best extemporaneous public speaker I've heard in many of his speeches.

RICHARD RUSK: That's interesting.

SCHLAUDEMANN: But before he did it, I can tell you, he was always uptight. I used to get him a drink or two so he'd be relaxed enough to go out there. We also had an interesting experience with him. One of the reasons I was brought onto that job was that I had the reputation of being a good drafter. And I think maybe Ben [Benjamin H.] Read thought maybe I could help write speeches for him. What I found out was that, although he never would say it, that he knew as well as I did that he was a much better speaker extemporaneously than he was with a text. We would prepare a text, but he never used them. He had a little card usually that he'd write maybe a dozen points on in his handwriting, which is so small I'm sort of surprised he could read it. And that was it. That was the extent of his preparation. And as I say, he's a superb extemporaneous speaker, which he still is. I heard him just two years ago.

RICHARD RUSK: Yep. George [Wildman Ball] called him the most eloquent man he's ever known.

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yeah. Absolutely. I think that's the case. But as I say, the kind of nervousness that he had about this did surprise me and during my time with him, he did an enormous amount of public speaking. And we traveled all over this country with speeches usually about Vietnam. But anyway, that particular aspect interested me. Well there were two things about him on trips: he had no interest whatsoever, for which I don't blame him, in sightseeing. He didn't want to sightsee.

RICHARD RUSK: All business, huh?

SCHLAUDEMANN: He also did not--and this is sort of contrary to that--he did not like to work on airplanes or in cars. And, of course, what he liked to do on the plane was to play bridge. We had one very momentous trip I went on with him. We went to a SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] meeting in New Zealand. And while we were there--

RICHARD RUSK: Would this have been right after that Tet Offensive?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay.

SCHLAUDEMANN: Well this was right after--in fact we were in the air when the President announced his decision not to run. So it was an extremely momentous time. And it was while we were in New Zealand that the North Vietnamese announced that they were ready to negotiate. In fact, I went in and we got a telegram from the Department, from the Acting Secretary, recording

this radio broadcast from the North Vietnamese. I was awake. And I guess it was about three o'clock in the morning. And I went in and got him out of bed. He was very irritated. And he said, "Why, this doesn't mean a damn thing." He went back to bed, and about an hour later he came around and got me out of bed. He'd changed his mind and he was going to respond to the cable.

RICHARD RUSK: And that was the cable announcing Johnson's decision not to--

SCHLAUDEMANN: No. No. It was the cable informing him that the North Vietnamese in a broadcast had said that they were now prepared to negotiate with us. And the cable was asking him how the Department and how the government should react. And he at first, as I say, he was very irritated.

RICHARD RUSK: He probably told you a George [Catlett] Marshall story or two, huh? (laughter) Okay, I know all about it.

SCHLAUDEMANN: Anyway, on that trip we went to Australia. And while we were in Australia, Martin Luther King, [Jr.] was killed and riots began. And the President told him to come right back. So we set off from Australia and we flew non-stop from Honolulu to Washington--ten hours, I think. And we played bridge solid for ten hours. That was the longest bridge game I'd ever been involved in.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right? For ten hours?

SCHLAUDEMANN: But he had remarkable resilience here. I remember he got off that plane and onto the helicopter for the White House and he was all ready for action. Well those were a couple of things that impressed me about him, to some extent surprised me about him. There's a story I've told about him that may be at least partially apocryphal. I'm not sure. I've told it a number of times, and I may have embroidered it.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, that's the way it goes with stories. Go ahead. We'll take it.

SCHLAUDEMANN: This was at the end of his term. He called me into the office one day, and he had a couple of sheets of paper on which he had some scribbles. And he said, "I've been keeping kind of track of my press conferences over these years about what kind of questions they ask. And," he said, "I figure that something like seventy percent of the questions that I've gotten in these press conferences have had to do with the future, with what's going to happen on down the road." And he says, "You know, that's very difficult." He says, "I'm no better on the future than anybody else. But I'm hell on the past."

RICHARD RUSK: I'll be darned. That's cute.

SCHLAUDEMANN: Well, there are a number of other stories. One of the--I suppose another momentous--we had a number, when I worked for him, including the Seven-Day War. I guess one of the most memorable was the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. He was--you may have this already--I don't know. But he was testifying on Vietnam before the Democratic National

Committee, and he was on television. And I was sitting in the office watching him when word came in that the Soviets had gone into Czechoslovakia.

RICHARD RUSK: Was this network TV?

SCHLAUDEMANN: I think it was.

RICHARD RUSK: Or local TV somewhere?

SCHLAUDEMANN: I think it was network, but I'm not sure. It's something--

RICHARD RUSK: You were watching it. Where was he?

SCHLAUDEMANN: It was here in Washington. Anyway, we got this and we sent the word, sent the message to Ben Read, who was with him. And you could watch on television, somebody, I suppose it was Ben, came up behind and handed him this note. And he looked at it and he didn't turn a hair. As you know, he had the most remarkable self-control. But in any case, after a couple of minutes he said, "Gentlemen, I'm very sorry but you'll have to excuse me. I have to go." He got up, and the first thing he did was to call me and tell me to get [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin into the Department, that he was going to stop by the White House, but that I should get Dobrynin, which I did. We sat there I suppose for forty-five minutes. Of course we didn't have anything to say.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, right. Dobrynin was fully informed as to what was going on, as opposed to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Go ahead.

SCHLAUDEMANN: But it was quite an occasion. And then the Secretary finally arrived and he was closeted in there giving Dobrynin hell for at least an hour.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you hear any of the exchange?

SCHLAUDEMANN: No, but it was rough I'm sure. One of the things that I saw recently, you may have seen, Dobrynin, at his own farewell party, said that Dean Rusk had taught him how to drink American bourbon. Well let me tell you, as far as I'm concerned that's another Soviet lie. Maybe that happened before I had anything to do with it, but I know that the two of them always drank scotch. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, right. Yeah. These are good stories. Let me tell you one that Ben Read told me.

[break in recording]

SCHLAUDEMANN: That's really the last one I--at the end of this period he decided that he would brief all of the people who were running or wanted to run for President. And this was coming up to the '68 election. I don't know when this started. I can't remember. But anyway, we had all of these people in. I remember Harold [Edward] Stassen came. He was always running for President. He came in a taxi. I'd never seen--(laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Well, look, when you've run as many times as he had and never made it, I'll bet you take taxis. Go ahead.

SCHLAUDEMANN: And we had George [Corley] Wallace. It was really a kick. For Wallace, the Secretary got over several general people from the Pentagon.

RICHARD RUSK: Just for Wallace?

RICHARD RUSK: Huh?

RICHARD RUSK: Just for Wallace, these generals? (laughter)

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yeah. I can't remember that the others--well, maybe one or two that he did have of the military guys. It was mostly about Vietnam, of course. What was the name of the Georgian with the pickax?

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, Lester [Garfield] Maddox.

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yeah, he was another one.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh my God. Wow.

SCHLAUDEMANN: Anyway, Wallace, they sat him on the sofa against the wall. And your father sat on his left in his easy chair, and there was a general on his right. What I didn't realize was that Wallace was already going deaf. And he kept sliding up and down this sofa, depending upon who was speaking. I'm not sure he ever got any of it.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll be durned. I'll be durned.

SCHLAUDEMANN: It was I think a very valuable. Well, that's about it. We had a lot of fun, as I say. It was a very trying period for your father: very, very rough. He held up well and came out with his head high. I have the greatest admiration for him.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, there's a lot of tragedy been in that story.

SCHLAUDEMANN: There sure was. But he's a very strong man. We always felt we could depend on him. Along the ladder, I think that your father was a product, as I am, of the second World War and that whole period. And I think he believed very strongly that we couldn't allow that to happen to us again. We had to head them off at the pass. I think he had a very strong historical view. He also, of course as you know very well had this attitude toward the Presidency which was very strong.

RICHARD RUSK: Sure. I'm aware of that.

SCHLAUDEMANN: But I think it accounted for a number of things. But I think in general, yes, he did believe in what we were doing and I think he was the most effective person in the administration. That's what I think.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, it's the story I prefer. The implications of the other story are devastating for that point of view. But I do believe, when you look at his story as it relates all the way back to Georgia and the thirties, and Oxford, it has to be the latter. Although some people who are very close to him, and were officially back there in Washington, some of them even lean toward the idea that he was a technician.

SCHLAUDEMANN: He was no technician. I'll tell you, though, he was a technician when he wanted to be. One of the things that he's never gotten much credit for is the NPT [Nonproliferation Treaty] Treaty, which he had a great deal to do with. He actually did work on the technical points of that treaty, and I think deserves some major credit for the fact it was completed.

RICHARD RUSK: I'm real interested in that.

[break in recording]

SCHLAUDEMANN: --tell you that, as you said, they were in there all the time.

RICHARD RUSK: This was Adrian [Sanford] Fisher, and who was the other?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Butch Fisher and--I can't remember.

RICHARD RUSK: But he was working on the technical points?

SCHLAUDEMANN: This I know, he actually worked on the text. He actually drafted, did a good deal of the drafting as they went along. It was much more than just sitting there and telling them and giving them general guidance. He was really in the middle of it.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: --the effects of this wartime decision-making. How did it affect him personally, physically in terms of his health, perhaps even in terms of his policy recommendations? Have you got any insight on that?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Well you have to remember that by the time I got there the decisions had been taken. You see what I mean?

RICHARD RUSK: Right, they were made in '65, in essence, yeah.

SCHLAUDEMANN: I think it weighed on him very heavily. It's quite obvious. I think--you know, one criticism I would have of him was that he, because he's again, of the past, he was, I think overly solicitous, overly sensitive about the role of the Pentagon and the military. I have a

hunch, from things he has said to me, that he was not satisfied with the military conduct. And I think in retrospect, I think he probably should have gotten more into that, should have questioned the way these people were trying to do the job out there.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he ever say that to you?

SCHLAUDEMANN: No. I say, that's just an impression I had. I do know that when [Creighton Williams] Abrams took over, he told me at one point that he thought that unlike [Williams Childs] Westmoreland, that Abrams was on the right, you know, in pursuing Vietnamization and in giving up this crazy search and destroy business. So I think he had a very clear perception of the military part of it. I think what happened was that he was so conscious of all of this fighting that was going on between State and Defense, and determined that that should happen when he was Secretary. But he went a little too far, I think, the other way.

RICHARD RUSK: Good point. Good point. In the avoidance of conflict, he subordinated policy to some extent.

SCHLAUDEMANN: You can, of course--technically it wasn't his policy, but--

RICHARD RUSK: It certainly was, though.

SCHLAUDEMANN: But as the strongest man in the administration next to the President--

RICHARD RUSK: My dad was?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: [Walt Whitman] Rostow called him "first among equals."

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yeah. You know Johnson really depended upon him enormously. One of the things you may have heard, one of the chores he had to do for Johnson was to try, when dissension broke out in the cabinet over Vietnam, he was the one who had to bring them all together and try to keep them in line. That sure was a chore he didn't like at all.

RICHARD RUSK: Anything--we could talk all day and it would be extremely interesting. I'm not sure if you have time for it. HS - Well, there are a lot of other people I think you can talk to. Have you talked to Phil [Philip C.] Habib?

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Let me roll the tape here. What about that last year in office, 1968? I know personally, as his son, that he was under terrific pressure. In terms of his health, how did he hold up from the health point of view, fatigue? What about drinking? What about his own mental health? Did you notice any real problems?

SCHLAUDEMANN: I think he probably was drinking too much. You know, I mean he kept it under control, but I think he probably did. He was very tired part of the time. I can't blame him for that.

RICHARD RUSK: I picked that up in the oral histories we've done with him. He's pretty sharp on all periods of his life. But 1968 is, a lot of that is like a blur to him and he has trouble recalling things in that final year.

SCHLAUDEMANN: I think that's what happened. It really was terrible on him.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, it was.

SCHLAUDEMANN: I walked down with him when he walked out through the C Street entrance.

RICHARD RUSK: You're talking about his final departure from the Department?

SCHLAUDEMANN: You see, there were an enormous number of people. And the applause for him was like something, I am sure, that no other Secretary has ever had: the affection for him. It was really chilling, spine-tingling, because of the way, you know, the high ceilings--it reverberated around them. It was really an unforgettable moment.

RICHARD RUSK: I haven't heard that. I wasn't there for it. This was the main entrance going out?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yeah. The main entrance on C Street.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he say anything?

SCHLAUDEMANN: No, no. Of course, as is customary, the office was open to anyone who wanted to come and say goodbye to him all that day. And many, many came in long, long lines waiting to shake his hand.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right? Is that right? Oh, this is fascinating. I missed it.

SCHLAUDEMANN: I don't know any Secretary, certainly in my time, which had the affection and respect that your father had.

RICHARD RUSK: Isn't that something? [Pause] Anything further on that final story?

SCHLAUDEMANN: No, I think that's it--just calling it an emotional moment.

RICHARD RUSK: Any more moments like that?

SCHLAUDEMANN: No, I don't think so.

RICHARD RUSK: How many people were there to see him off?

SCHLAUDEMANN: Oh, God, I don't know: hundreds. I mean, the place was jammed. These are people who worked there, normal people who work there. Once in a while, too, another thing he would do, he had some trouble in keeping straight the African countries. He's not alone in this.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. Well, they're hard to keep straight.

SCHLAUDEMANN: You know the little tray you pull out on your desk?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, I've heard about that. He kept a map of Africa.

SCHLAUDEMANN: But he also, every once in a while, particularly when he had an African visitor, he would call the desk officer directly and ask him what the hell this country did. These guys were always so shook up, you know. He was always very nice about it.

RICHARD RUSK: Well I heard he was good with the so-called little people at the Department.

SCHLAUDEMANN: Yeah. I think that was reflected in his departure.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, I hate to do it--

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