

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

Rusk NN: Part 2 of 5

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

1985 February

The complete interview also includes Rusk MM: Part 1; Rusk OO: Part 3; Rusk PP: Part 4; Rusk QQ: Part 5.

DEAN RUSK: I personally believe that if we could have gotten a Laos that was anticipated in the Laos Accords that would have been a major step toward peace in the general area.

[break in recording]

SCHOENBAUM: Can we perhaps move on to Vietnam. I think that maybe the next, after Laos, the Laos Accords, a major event happened when LBJ was sent to Vietnam.

BUNDY: That was May of 1961. He was sent there as part of the showing of firmness at that time. I don't know if there is anything special to say about that Johnson visit. It was certainly way out in the open.

SCHOENBAUM: Why was LBJ sent on that particular visit? For instance, why didn't [William Averell] Harriman go? Why didn't Secretary [Dean] Rusk go? Why did Kennedy send LBJ?

DEAN RUSK: After all, LBJ was Vice President, and he was a very dynamic and kind of restless kind of fellow. Among other things, President Kennedy wanted to give him something to do as Vice President. When LBJ visited foreign countries, and he visited more than twenty-five during his vice-presidency, he did not want to go just for protocol purposes: social visits, that kind of thing. He wanted to discuss real policy with the governments that he visited. So he was briefed to the gills on Vietnam before he went out there, and came back with some very strong impressions about Diem and about the need for American assistance.

BUNDY: Let me inject there, Dean, you may recall a quotation attributed to him. The impression he brought back from that May 1961 treaty: "If I were reporting on the way the south Vietnamese feel about us--" and he used the analogy of a banker saying, "You're okay on your note now, but this is about it." In other words, that they didn't have much confidence in U.S. And that they needed to be reassured that we really were standing behind them at that point. You recall that particular remark?

DEAN RUSK: Yes I do.

BUNDY: I think he put it in a written report, in fact.

DEAN RUSK: Bear in mind that during that period, and indeed through Kennedy's term, we had only a limited number of people out there. We did not have Americans spread all over the

countryside. And one of the results of this was that we were relying, perhaps too much, on President Diem's own assessment of the situation. It was not until later when we got more and more people into the countryside that we learned that he had been, in effect, misleading us by over-optimism about the situation in different parts of the country. And indeed the situation was not nearly as favorable as he had tried to make us believe. And our General [Paul D.] Harkins, who was out there succeeding General [Lionel T.] McGarr.

SCHOENBAUM: General Harkins was appointed in January 1962.

BUNDY: McGarr was the old, Third Division commander. He tended to think in very old-line military terms, which we had seen displayed at the Honolulu Conference in December 1961. Dean, I think we want to talk a little about the Kennedy decision to send the major advisor presence, and the helicopters, and the rest in the fall of 1961. You came back from Tokyo and participated fully in that. And at one point the papers were flying back and forth, and [U. Alexis] Alex Johnson was negotiating then for the State Department and I was representing [Robert] Bob [Strange] McNamara. All this is in the Pentagon Papers in great detail. I would suppose there must have been quiet talks between yourself and President Kennedy, and perhaps with Secretary McNamara at that time, on the decision not to accept the [Maxwell D.] Taylor-[Walt Whitman] Rostow recommendation of sending, I think they said ten thousand men, under the guise of a flood relief corps, but rather to go the advisor's route. Do you want to comment on that?

DEAN RUSK: "Yes, that's correct. I think it's fair to say that up until the beginning of 1965 we had hoped that somehow we could provide the kind of strengthening and help to allow the South Vietnamese to take care of this problem themselves without the direct involvement of American combat forces. That was Kennedy's hope when he increased the number of advisors, increased military assistance and economic assistance, put in special equipment like helicopters, and aircraft, and other kinds of things. We were still hoping to be able to do this more or less as we had done in Greece, when the guerrillas were going after Greece. We didn't put American forces there. We gave sufficient help to the Greeks to allow them to wind this up themselves in their own country with a major assist from the defection of Yugoslavia from the communist camp. That was the basic hope. This raises an interesting question for the future if, God forbid, such a situation ever arises again. One can question whether our own policy of gradualism always left it open for the authorities in Hanoi to say to themselves, "Well, the Americans have done a little bit more. Maybe if we do some more, they won't." One can make an argument that when President Kennedy decided to intrude any American forces that he should have put in a stack of blue chips at the very beginning, say 100,000 men, as a signal to Hanoi that we were going to take this with the utmost seriousness. This policy of gradualism has been a general policy of the United States since World War II, in trying to resolve problems with the minimum use of military force in trying to avoid a general war. But if we decide next time, God forbid, that we have to put some troops somewhere, and we decide that we have to go in with a much stronger force at the very beginning, it has to be said that that lowers the nuclear threshold, and it invites an escalation of the war to much higher levels at a much earlier stage. But bear in mind that it was after six years of communist infiltration into South Vietnam and seven or eight months after the Gulf of Tonkin resolution itself before we bombed North Vietnam in any way. So there was not an itch on the part of the United States to turn this into a larger war. But that itself has some problems tied up in it that need to be followed up later on.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you have specific discussions with the President and Secretary McNamara at that time about, along these lines about whether hard and fast might be better than the slow, gradual, or was it--at the time when Berlin was still hot, it was at a time.

DEAN RUSK: Berlin was still hot.

SCHOENBAUM: Back when the Congo, as I recall, was causing trouble.

DEAN RUSK: We had a very serious Berlin crisis on our hands which was immediately followed up by the threshing of the dangerous Cuban Missile Crisis. We, among other things, did not want to commit major forces in Southeast Asia that might be needed elsewhere. So that too added to our reluctance to jump into a major commitment of U.S. forces in Vietnam.

SCHOENBAUM: That was a rejection of the McNamara-Taylor report.

BUNDY: No, wait a second. Taylor-Rostow.

SCHOENBAUM: Taylor-Rostow. Yeah, that was--I think there was a lot of difficulty with that in the sense that just what the troops were going to do was not all that clear. The idea that they were just going to be a flood relief force, and already the flood was receding by the time you made your decision.

DEAN RUSK: A number of us had lived through all those experiences.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that true? The flood was actually receding?

SCHOENBAUM: Oh yeah.

DEAN RUSK: There was a general inclination in those days to look upon a military answer as the last resort. George [Catlett] Marshall once told us in the State Department that we should not begin to talk about these problems in military terms; to do so, tends to turn them into a military problem, and that must always be the last resort. So there was a reluctance to get into this more deeply than was necessary. Now, let me point out that when President Johnson became President in the tragic circumstances of November 1963, he tried for a year or so to make do with the decisions about forces that had been made by President Kennedy. He did not significantly increase the number of forces beyond those that Kennedy had authorized. But then in late '64 and early '65, following our election of '64, the North Vietnamese began to send the regiments, the divisions, and their regular army into South Vietnam and threatened to cut South Vietnam in two through the highlands area. So President Johnson then was faced with a situation which Kennedy had never had to face. I have sometimes speculated that after the election of '64, people in Hanoi said to themselves, "Ah ha! President Johnson has defeated Senator [Barry Morris] Goldwater [Jr.]. President Johnson said in his campaign that he does not want a larger war in Southeast Asia." So Hanoi might have said, "Well, that means that maybe we can have a larger war and the Americans won't do anything more about it." In any event, it was in that period that they begin sending their own organized regular forces into South Vietnam. And it was because of that that

President Johnson had to look at that and decide whether to get out or whether to try to meet that additional North Vietnamese effort. Throughout all this discussion, public debate and so forth, the term "escalation" has been largely reserved for American forces. Many people have overlooked the fact that the escalation of our own effort was a direct response to escalation of effort by North Vietnam. And yet, they don't take a look at North Vietnamese escalation when they use that word.

BUNDY: Dean, we went through November '61 and the introduction of the advisors. And then as far as Vietnam was concerned, the war went along on that basis. By May of '63 there were hopes that we could reduce the advisory presence over a period of time. It was the beginning of planning on that in which I happened to participate. And there was a later assertion by Senator [Michael Joseph] Mansfield and by, I think, Robert [Francis] Kennedy that President Kennedy said in sometime in the spring of '63 that he thought we ought to be moving to get out and that he really had that as a firm plan. Do you have light to throw on that?

DEAN RUSK: Kenneth [P.] O'Donnell, who was a former Secretary, once said that: And Senator Mansfield. I personally do not believe that John F. Kennedy, wearing his hat as President, came to any such conclusion in 1963, for one very unimportant reason and for one very important reason. The unimportant reason is that I had talked with him about Southeast Asia hundreds of times in one way or another. And at no time did he express any such thought to his own Secretary of State. Now that's the unimportant reason. The important reason is that if he had decided in 1963 to take our forces out in '63, following the elections of '64, that would have been tantamount to saying that he was going to leave our men in a combat situation there from '63-'65 for domestic political reasons. No President could live with that. He couldn't look his own senior colleagues in the eye. The verdict of history would have been serious. Had Kennedy said to [Robert Strange] McNamara and me in '63, "I've decided to take our troops out in '65 following the elections of '64," both of us would have had to say to him, "Then, Mr. President, you must take them out now. You cannot leave these troops in there for that purpose." And Kennedy was the kind of man to have seen that. So whatever he might have said, playing touch football at Hyannisport, or in the Rose Garden, or wherever, I just don't believe that he had come to that conclusion as President in 1963. Now, he was a man who liked to toss ideas around. So what he might have said in informal chit-chat, who knows? But, I just don't believe that he had come to that decision.

RICHARD RUSK: There's been some chatter to the effect that he was contemplating the beginning of withdrawal of American advisors by December 3, 1963.

BUNDY: Oh, no question!

DEAN RUSK: You see, there was a kind of burden, and Bill you can help me remember this, there was a kind of burden.

BUNDY: The planning was underway. And, indeed, in the McNamara-Taylor visit of September we said we would look to doing the first installment. But then we didn't do it because we thought in the meantime that the situation had become more serious.

RICHARD RUSK: That planning was definitely part of the record?

BUNDY: Oh, the planning is definitely part of the record. You should be prepared with plans to cut back. That began in May '63. I remember I was instructed to draw the plans at that time.

DEAN RUSK: There was a kind of burst of optimism in '63.

BUNDY: That's what I wanted to get at.

DEAN RUSK: I think Bob McNamara made some remark about bringing our troops home, that sort of thing. That optimism was based upon, in effect, inaccurate reporting from President Diem and his own people about what the situation was in the various parts of the countryside. When we got in there ourselves, and got more information, we discovered the situation was not nearly as hopeful as we had thought it was in 1963.

SCHOENBAUM: What specific areas were inaccurately reported? Was it the Strategic Hamlet Program and the troop-kill counts? Are those the two primary reasons?

BUNDY: The troop-kill counts weren't that much of an issue at that point. I think it was the degree of security in the countryside.

DEAN RUSK: It had to do with the areas that were under--

BUNDY: We did have people in many parts of Vietnam by that time. I remember in September '63 when I was a member of the McNamara-Taylor group, that a fellow named Rufus Phillips, who was very active getting around the countryside, said, "Look, it's a lot worse than the reporting mechanism is reporting." We had our own reporting mechanism in place. But we still depended, as the Secretary said, a lot on the Vietnamese. Let me turn to the Buddhist crisis and the decisions concerning Diem.

DEAN RUSK: All right.

BUNDY: Perhaps you want to tell that in your own way, as you saw it in the spring of '63 when [Frederick E.] Fritz Nolting [Jr.] went on leave and the Buddhists started burning themselves and so on. Along the way there, individuals in government, particularly in the State Department: Roger Hilsman, [William] Averell Harriman, perhaps yourself, came to feel that this was going to be pretty hard to hang on with Diem. Can you describe your own feelings and role in that?

DEAN RUSK: During the spring and early summer of '63, President Diem adopted policies which were probably inspired by his brother, [Ngo Dinh] Nhu, and Madame [Ngo Dinh] Nhu, that greatly alienated many of the Buddhists in the country. It alienated the students in the universities, and at the same time alienated a good many elements in the armed forces. We were very much concerned that President Diem's policies were going to lose any kind of support that he had among the people of South Vietnam. Indeed, we went to him several times trying to get him to turn some of these things around. Among other things, we tried to persuade him to get his brother, Nhu, out of the country. We suggested that he send him to Washington as ambassador,

or something of that sort. But he wouldn't do that. Our lack of success in getting him to turn some of these policies around caused us publicly to cut back on aid to Diem. We cut back rather sharply at some points of our aid program because of these policies. Then came a crucial moment in August 1963, at a time when President Kennedy, Bob McNamara, and I were all three out of town. A telegram went out to our Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, which seemed to put us pretty strongly behind the idea of a military coup to overthrow Diem. This telegram was cleared by open telephone. And when I was called to get briefed on this outgoing telegram, it was read to me in the most general terms. And also I was told that President Kennedy had already approved it. Under those circumstances, I thought that I would in effect let it go through. But when the three of us got back to Washington over the weekend, and we looked at this cable, I think we all three agreed that it went considerably further than we wanted to go. And we tried to pull back on that telegram somewhat, as far as Henry Cabot Lodge was concerned. But bear in mind that at that time, the numbers of people that we had in Vietnam were so small compared to the total problem, that we did not have the capacity to make the decisions as to whether President Diem would remain in power. We could not have supported him if his own people and armed forces had turned against him. We could not have thrown him out if he had their support. I don't know what various Americans might have said to various Vietnamese in September, October, and November. I am convinced that when people out there, when the generals, for example, decided to make their move, when you take your life in your hands in a situation of that sort, the United States is a very long way away. When you decide to make what John Locke called the appeal to God, you are on your own. Whatever any American types might have said to the Vietnamese without authorization from Washington, I think that the opposition forces generated by President Diem himself were, in fact, responsible for the coup d'état. Now, Henry Cabot Lodge was told that in the event of a coup, to do what he could to insure the personal safety of President Diem. When Cabot Lodge heard that the coup was underway, he telephoned President Diem and offered to make arrangements for his safe departure from the country, and something of that sort. But President Diem fled to another part of the country [Cholon, a suburb of Saigon], hoping to find some military forces that would support him.

BUNDY: Actually, he didn't leave Saigon, Dean.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, he didn't leave Saigon?

BUNDY: No, he didn't leave Saigon.

DEAN RUSK: I thought he was on the way when he was captured?

BUNDY: Well, he may have been about to leave, but I don't think he ever got out Saigon.

RICHARD RUSK: He was killed in Cholon.

BUNDY: He was taken and held in Cholon. And it was on a truck between Cholon--

DEAN RUSK: How far is Cholon from Saigon?

BUNDY: Well, Cholon is the Chinese suburb of Saigon.

DEAN RUSK: I see.

BUNDY: Essentially like Brooklyn and New York.

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

BUNDY: But along the way there, one of the questions that gets asked--There was one meeting in early September at which Paul Katzenberg of the State Department was present. And General [Victor H.] Krulak, I think, who was either about to go over or had just come back from a first look-see that President Kennedy directed, at which there was a mention by Katzenberg possibly, but also perhaps by I believe, Robert Kennedy, "Is this really worth it?" And the question I put to you, did you get the feeling that anybody, particularly the President at that time, really thought seriously of withdrawing at that stage?

DEAN RUSK: On various occasions, Bill, we boxed the compass of possibilities. And when you box the compass, withdrawal is always one of the elements to be looked at. But we did not seriously think of getting out of Vietnam to the point of where that kind of decision was pregnant and ready to be made.

BUNDY: There were no private conversations of that sort? Because I think the record would indicate that you rather sat on it and said, "Let's not start talking that way," which could mean that you just didn't think it was the right forum for it, or anything of that sort.

DEAN RUSK: Perhaps I was somewhat affected by having experienced some other very dark-looking situations. Shortly before this [In July 1950] the Allied Forces in Korea had been driven down into a tiny perimeter around the southern port of Pusan. And things looked very glum indeed. And General [Douglas] MacArthur was recommending that we withdraw from the Korean peninsula. In World War II, a few months after Pearl Harbor, things looked very bleak: Hitler's forces were attacking Leningrad, Moscow, and Stalingrad, [Erwin] Rommel was rushing through north Africa toward Cairo, the intelligence people told President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt that the Russians would be knocked out of the war in the course of the next six to eight weeks, the Japanese had destroyed the heart of our fleet at Pearl Harbor and were rushing through Asia and we could see no way to stop them. So I had seen some dark periods before, and I was not willing to yield to this kind of thing just on the ground that things looked bleak.

RICHARD RUSK: What about yield to the discussion of that option? I think that's probably the point to be addressed. Kattenburg remembers being put down rather sharply without any discussion over a withdrawal option whatsoever. And he remembers you as being the one who lowered the chop.

DEAN RUSK: I would think that that kind of discussion should be at the top.

RICHARD RUSK: Too many people around the table?

DEAN RUSK: Very privately and at the top. Because if you have that kind of discussion going on all up and down the line, the first thing you know you read it in the press.

SCHOENBAUM: And Kennedy did not show any propensity to discuss that at all?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: You didn't have that discussion of the withdrawal option at the top at that particular time in the Vietnam process. Is that right?

DEAN RUSK: No, I think that this was noted as a possibility, sure. But the decision went the other way. You see, Bob McNamara used to have a personal talk about every week, usually on a Saturday or Sunday morning, in my office. And we would go over these things, just the two of us, in considerable detail at some length. These talks would run two hours or more. I am sure that we talked about all aspects of the situation as we saw it. So, yes, I think the idea of withdrawal was discussed, but rejected.

RICHARD RUSK: Any records of those talks?

DEAN RUSK: I doubt it.

SCHOENBAUM: What about--This is the time of the [Charles Andre Joseph Marie] de Gaulle neutralization proposal.

BUNDY: That was true. In August of 1963, it was when that was first made. What was your reaction to that?

SCHOENBAUM: Was this discussed or was it just regarded as "These French again!"?

DEAN RUSK: In 1961 President de Gaulle has said to President Kennedy that there would never be another French soldier in Southeast Asia. And for all practical purposes, de Gaulle at that point resigned from the SEATO treaty. Similarly, Pakistan was not interested in assistance to Vietnam because, from their point of view, the Southeast Asia Treaty was aimed at India. Indeed, they delayed the signing of the Southeast Asia Treaty for a full day because Foster Dulles was making it clear to them that this treaty was aimed only at the communist powers, and not aimed at India in any way. So Pakistan was out of it. Britain, for reasons of its own, did not feel that it could take an active part in coming to the defense of Vietnam. So there were three principal signatories of the Southeast Asia Treaty, who were apparently not prepared to lift much of a finger to do anything about it.

BUNDY: The British were deeply involved from '63 on in the confrontation in Malaysia.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, that's correct. They had their own problems in Malaysia. And also they had some domestic political problems at home about getting involved in Vietnam. So the absence of these three was a burden that we had to bear. It left the burden on the regional members of the SEATO treaty, including Australia and New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand.

SCHOENBAUM: What kind of discussions did the neutralization proposal have at the top between you and Kennedy, you and McNamara? Did it have any substantive discussion or was it dismissed?

DEAN RUSK: We were not very much interested in the neutralization of a unified Vietnam under Hanoi control, because that would not have been neutral. If you could consolidate the position of South Vietnam and let it become genuinely independent, then the question of neutralization was at least thinkable. You see, under the Southeast Asia Treaty, there were the three protocol states. There was Cambodia and Laos and South Vietnam. And we had in the Laos Accords of '62 agreed that Laos would no longer be covered by the Southeast Asia Treaty. Souvanna Phouma had already announced that he did not consider himself covered by the Southeast Asia Treaty. But that left South Vietnam. Bear in mind that by this time a good many governments had recognized both Vietnams. It was one or the other of the Vietnams. I think it's worth pointing out that in this postwar period there developed these divided states: Germany, Korea, Vietnam. We took the view that the two halves of these divided states were sufficient political entities to be entitled to the protections of international law and to be subject to its obligations. If one half attacked the other that was aggression, even though theoretically these states were still unified. I can assure you that if the West Germans had sent sixty regiments of West German troops into East Germany, the Russians would not look upon this as a family quarrel among Germans. And we had a pretty good war in Korea when the North Koreans invaded South Korea. There was never any doubt in our mind that South Vietnam was entitled to the international law of self-defense, to be protected against aggression and to ask assistance in defending itself against aggression.

SCHOENBAUM: What is your feeling about the de Gaulle proposal? Was he in bad faith?

BUNDY: Oh, I don't think he was in bad faith. I'll answer that in my own way, but perhaps you want to come ahead, Dean, to what I thought was a very poignant conversation. The French at this period took a distinctly different view of China's power than other people did. They thought China was going to be in every sense, not just a regional sense, a great power much sooner than other people did. And, in effect, they thought China was bound in one way or another to become the dominant power in Southeast Asia. And it was ridiculous to resist this. Dean, I am paraphrasing. You may recall it more specifically and poignantly, more or less what [Maurice] Couve de Murville said at the SEATO meeting, when you had that private meeting with him in April of '64. It seemed to me that that was the gist of what he was saying at that point. The French just were prepared to say, "Let it go and we will live with the result." That's the way I read what Couve said on that occasion.

RICHARD RUSK: I think he also made the argument, reading from your manuscript, that the Chinese policies were defensive in nature. He was making this argument, and apparently did not persuade the American Secretary of State with that, given, perhaps, Chinese behavior.

BUNDY: Perhaps that conversation didn't register strongly. You had had other intimations of the French view, from de Gaulle on down, for at least three years.

END OF SIDE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

DEAN RUSK: I think we could have entertained the idea of a neutralized South Vietnam if there was a South Vietnam. What we did not accept was the idea that a Vietnam under the control of Hanoi would, in any event, be neutral. And it would still create problems for Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and other countries in southeast Asia. By the way, I myself never invoked the so called "domino" theory in respect to southeast Asia. President Kennedy once picked it up from President Eisenhower in a press conference and seemed to embrace it. To me, this was not a problem of a game that children play on the living room rug. Even when I left office, there were large numbers of North Vietnamese forces in Laos; and Laos was not Vietnamese. There were hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. And there were substantial North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia; the Cambodians are not Vietnamese. And then every week men in arms would come across the northeastern frontier of Burma from China. And every week almost saboteurs would slip across the 38th parallel in Korea to do mischief in the South. So I didn't have to look at dominos. All I had to do was to look at what was happening on the ground. The doctrine was the doctrine, in effect, of the world revolution, communist expansion, communist aggression. People used to call Ho Chi Minh a nationalist. Sure, he was a nationalist. So was [Adolf] Hitler. The nationalist Ho Chi Minh wanted Laos and Cambodia, as well as all of Vietnam. He used to say that regularly. But when I would quote him on that, he would look at me as an old cold warrior. And I was just lining up what Ho Chi Minh himself was saying.

BUNDY: Let's just wind up to the Kennedy assassination because Diem was overthrown in the way you described by a military coup. And they had the new government in which [Duong Van Minh] Big Minh figured heavily and some civilians too. But even before President Kennedy died, I remember we had a conference in Honolulu in which we compared notes. It seemed clear that the coup had had enormous public support, but equally that the situation in the countryside was going very much to the bad. I think that report was conveyed to you and to President Kennedy before he died; and then particularly to President Johnson when he took over. Did you have any talks with President Kennedy before he died about his reaction to the situation as it stood at that point?

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember specific talks based on the idea that the situation came to be very bad, except that we talked several times about the very serious point that President Diem himself was moving in ways which was alienating his own people: important segments of his own people. President Kennedy was fully aware of the public expressions of opposition to these policies which we had made through the public cutting back of aid and things of that sort.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, the Diem assassination and coup d'état, again, is a major point of contention in the aftermath of Vietnam. And looking back, are you reasonably satisfied that it was primarily a South Vietnamese affair? Critics suggest that there was a good deal of American

complicity. Did you fellows ever conduct your own postmortem within the Department, within government, to see exactly what we did do over there? For example, did you debrief Henry Cabot Lodge when he came back to find out exactly what he did?

DEAN RUSK: There's a good deal of cable traffic on that. You know, the rumor of coups were coming a dime a dozen out there. This happens in a good many countries. Yet, one has to be very careful because sometimes these people who are allegedly plotting coups are acting as agents provocateurs of the government trying to find out what we would say to people who were plotting to overthrow the government. The generals had organized a coup two or three times, then called it off, hadn't they Bill?

BUNDY: They had been unable to mount anything effective in August at the time of the cable you spoke of. Then after the return of the McNamara-Taylor group, of which I happened to be a part, in early October and when President Kennedy did adopt the policy of limiting certain kinds of aid and giving a rather clear cut signal of disapproval, which was an attempt to get Diem to shape up, then the Generals did come back. And this time they clearly were much more organized and meant business. There was an authorized contact with them through Lucien Connie, who actually worked for CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and was responding directly to the instructions of Ambassador Lodge, in which they were told if there were a change of government and if they conducted themselves responsibly, the United States in effect would continue to support a successor government. They were not specifically encouraged to act. That was the policy that the President agreed to after the McNamara-Taylor trip, that we should not encourage a coup but that we should be prepared to acquiesce in one, in effect. I know of nothing outside the record. I think there was one attempted answer to your question. There was a look at all the traffic at a later point. In fact, under the [Richard Milhous] Nixon administration they were supposed to have gone back over it, and even thought of using it for political purposes perhaps. But I don't recall any re-inquiry because in fact, as the Secretary said, the cable traffic was extremely full at this time. And I at least never got the feeling that there was anything we didn't essentially know.

RICHARD RUSK: I would like to take the time to read just a brief account of Lodge's activities the morning of the coup. This is from a Vietnamese source. "Apparently he had gone to give, to talk with Diem that morning." What's that?

BUNDY: I think when Admiral [Harry D.] Felt was in town.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. "Lodge kept President Diem busy until past 12. And each time Admiral Felt goes to leave, Lodge asked another question. We know now from the Pentagon Papers that Lodge knew all along that the coup would be staged and that he was simply pinning down President Diem to deny him access to his staff. Downstairs, Mr. Nhu--"

BUNDY: Who's saying this?

RICHARD RUSK: This is Diem's press secretary.

BUNDY: I frankly don't give that testimony credence. I know of no evidence that Lodge knew precisely when they were going to move. That it was a possibility and might be imminent, yes. But I think this is a Vietnamese source to be discounted.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll let that one go.

DEAN RUSK: I see. Well, normally.

RICHARD RUSK: I've got to follow that up with this question: Did you ever ask Henry Cabot Lodge specifically his degree of involvement with the final events that led up to the assassination of President Diem?

DEAN RUSK: There are cables from him, which I think are quite clear and open on that. I don't think he concealed anything from us. Now what some CIA type might have said to some General at a particular point, without--

BUNDY: Even that was under pretty tight control. I don't get the feeling that he did anything affirmatively to assist in a way that his passage would suggest. And I know of no inquiry that later indicated that.

DEAN RUSK: The trouble with coup d'états is you can never be sure that what comes next will be any better than what was there before.

SCHOENBAUM: How was it to work with these new people? Well, you had Big Minh and then another coup by [Nguyen] Khanh on January 30?

DEAN RUSK: We went through several changes of government out there. Each one of those brought with it a cost because when the Generals moved against Diem, many of the people who worked with Diem were considered to be ineligible for posts in the new administration. That turned out to be true with successive coups out there. So the amount of eligible manpower, trained manpower which you had, continued to diminish. Now, Bill, this reminds me that we had all sorts of programs for South Vietnam: agriculture, public health, education, and all sorts of things. And we were pressing these pretty hard upon whoever was the government of Vietnam. I once remember counting about forty-two or so of these programs that we were pressing upon the South Vietnamese. The trouble is that these programs were simply beyond the administrative capability of the South Vietnamese government. They didn't have the apparatus that could give them effect, and that was one of the frustrations involved. In theory, there are lots of things that might have been done to help. But who was to do it? They simply weren't capable of carrying out a good many of these programs we were trying to press upon them.

SCHOENBAUM: Was Khanh's coup based on the suppression of the neutralist sentiment within South Vietnam at that time? And, did we have any part in Khanh's coup on January 30, 1964?

DEAN RUSK: Bill, I don't recall that we did. I think there had been some rumors that Big Minh might be interested in some kind of peaceful settlement with Hanoi. But how far that would have gone, nobody knows, because he didn't have a chance to test it out. It's possible that Khanh and

some of the generals thought that Big Minh might be moving in the direction of an unfortunate kind of peace with North Vietnam.

BUNDY: That was what he said to his American advisor, Colonel Wilson. He said that there were a lot of people toying with neutralism and Wilson simply reported the remarks. And Lodge didn't read it as indicating that Khanh himself was going to move. My impression would be strongly that Lodge and the mission were caught completely by surprise by the actual coup. At that stage de Gaulle had made another noise about neutralization and also had recognized China, recognized Peking, which we did not approve of.

DEAN RUSK: I had the impression, Bill, that many of the Vietnamese we were dealing with had been educated in France. And they had learned from the French that every man has his own political party. And they just found it very difficult to set aside their differences and consolidate into a single, strong political movement that could get the job done.

RICHARD RUSK: Apparently, there were ten changes of government in twenty months' time after that Diem assassination. Do you recall ever getting involved with trying to bear down a little bit on some of the South Vietnamese generals? I know at one point Maxwell Taylor gave the Vietnamese generals a good tongue lashing for their behavior. Were you part of that effort at all, Pop? Surely it must have been a very frustrating time for you with the American position.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, it gave reality to that question I had raised on that telegram from Tokyo in the very beginning that a big question was: What is there to support? But on the other hand, we will adjourn for a moment and go to lunch. There is one point, Bill that has always intrigued me. For years out there we had Americans in ones, and twos, and threes, and fours scattered all over the countryside, doing all sorts of things: public health stations, agricultural projects, and things of that sort. I never saw a report that any of the South Vietnamese people betrayed these lone Americans and turned them over to the Vietcong. And I've asked that question of many American veterans of Vietnam and they have never been able to cite me an instance of that. Now there were times, some situations, where the Vietcong clearly would tolerate some of these activities, such as health stations and things of that sort. For example, Dick [Richard] Holbrooke was working down in an area of the delta all by himself, in a place filled with Vietcong, but the Vietcong didn't bother him. They let him do what he was doing down there.

RICHARD RUSK: Why?

DEAN RUSK: Because perhaps they themselves, some of their own people, would benefit from health stations and things of that sort; possibly because they didn't want to alienate the villages by interrupting this kind of thing that was going on. I don't know what the reasons were.

RICHARD RUSK: Possibly not to alienate the United States.

DEAN RUSK: And there were, of course, some villages, Bill, where they would cooperate with the government by day and with the Vietcong by night. This was because the villagers were basically survivors. They would bend to the wind and try to preserve themselves. Well, let's suspend this for the time being and go to lunch.

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: When Lyndon Johnson became President in the tragic circumstances of November 1963, he tried very hard to establish as quickly as possible the sense of continuity in the government. And he did that in terms of trying to keep people at their posts; and, indeed, in terms of policies. So he tried for the first year and almost a half of his Presidency to pursue the general path that Kennedy had laid out as far as Vietnam was concerned. I think it was not until early '65 that he significantly increased the number of American military in Vietnam beyond the levels that had been pretty much authorized by President Kennedy. He was still preoccupied with the effort to put the South Vietnamese into position to take care of this problem themselves without the commitment of major combat forces. During the campaign of 1964 Lyndon Johnson had said such things as, "We don't want to send our boys to Asia," and things of that sort. But that was not all he said. He also said during that campaign that we would not let South Vietnam down. And if you look at the totality of what he said during the campaign, it is my judgment that he did not mislead people in the campaign of '64 as he was later charged to have done.

RICHARD RUSK: You make that point in your manuscript that even within that speech--that Johnson's remark was lifted from the overall context of, "We must stick by our commitments."

DEAN RUSK: But then as I indicated earlier, at the end of '64 and beginning of '65 the North Vietnamese substantially increased their infiltration into South Vietnam, using regiments and divisions of their regular army to do so, and developed a significant threat to cut South Vietnam in two through the Highlands area. And that could have caused some major problems. So President Johnson had to look at that new situation which President Kennedy had not had to face. As we all know, he decided we should try to achieve our basic objective out there, which was to prevent the overrunning of South Vietnam by North Vietnam by military force. Johnson was not looking for a pretext to enlarge the war. Some people have charged that somehow the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was some kind of devious maneuver on Johnson's part. That was not so at all. When the incident occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin, when the first one occurred, we decided more or less to ignore it because we thought it might be trigger-happy local commanders doing something that was not necessarily a decision of their high command. But when the second attack occurred, then we were faced with the implausibility of local commanders being responsible and thought that perhaps this was an effort by North Vietnam to drive us out of the Gulf of Tonkin, which they were busily using to infiltrate men and arms into South Vietnam by sea. But when that occurred, President Johnson called together about thirty of the top congressional leaders and talked about the incidents in the Gulf. He told them about these retaliatory air strikes he was planning to make. But then when that was all over, he turned to the experience with Taft at the time of the Korean War. When Truman met with the congressional leaders about putting our forces into Korea, it was agreed on all sides that Truman should proceed on the basis of his Presidential powers, reinforced by the United Nations Security Council resolutions, and that he should not come to Congress on that point. But a few days later, Senator Taft, Robert [Alphonso] Taft, who had not been at that meeting of congressional leaders with Truman, got up in the Senate and said that he supported what President Truman was doing in Korea, but he strongly objected to his doing it without coming to Congress. Well, Lyndon Johnson remembered that. So at his meeting of congressional leaders at the time of the Gulf of

Tonkin, he talked to them about the Taft experience and said that he felt that if we stayed in Vietnam much longer, or had to do more, that the Congress would have to take the question up. And the congressional leaders in that meeting urged him to come down to the Congress for a resolution. They said it could be a short resolution, it would be passed promptly with a good strong vote, and, "We can get this point behind us." So that was the origin of Paragraph 3 of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution--Paragraph 2, excuse me--in which the Congress declared it to be the policy of the United States to come to the assistance of those protected by the Southeast Asia Treaty, including the use of armed force "as the President shall determine." That resolution was passed rapidly and overwhelmingly by the Congress. Bob McNamara and I testified for a little while before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then we went over and testified briefly before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and that was it. And only two Senators in the entire Congress voted against it: Senators [Wayne] Morse and [Ernest] Gruening of Alaska.

SCHOENBAUM: The Gulf of Tonkin resolution, though, is one of the things that is puzzling to many people, particularly the second incident. There's a certain school of thought, and probably the dominant school of thought, is that the second incident never took place, at least in the fashion it was reported at the time. The idea is that Admiral [Ulysses S.G.] Sharp on the Maddox reported that he thought something took place but he was not sure.

DEAN RUSK: I don't think Sharp was on the Maddox.

BUNDY: No, Sharp was in Honolulu.

DEAN RUSK: But when a couple of staff people of the Senate Foreign Relation Committee later "investigated" the second incident, they talked to a sonar man--they talked to this man and that man, but they didn't call the two captains of the destroyers, who were available to them, who were perhaps the only two "all-sources" people on board those ships.

BUNDY: That's a very important point, that "all-sources," because [Jerome] Herrick, the captain, was privy to the intercepts.

DEAN RUSK: Yes. In my own thinking--

RICHARD RUSK: What do you mean by the "all-sources?"

BUNDY: "All-sources," in government terminology, means that you are in the picture on intercept materials.

DEAN RUSK: You know the kinds of highly classified stuff.

BUNDY: The DeSoto patrols, specifically the Maddox, did carry intercept black boxes. Nothing particularly unusual or strange about it. This was a ship equipped for intercept. But the product went forward immediately. And the only person on board the ship, I believe, aside from the specially cleared people who operate the black box, who knew what was coming in on it was Captain Herrick.

DEAN RUSK: Well, there is no question that in my own mind at the time I had no doubt that Hanoi thought a second attack was going on.

BUNDY: Based on the intercepts?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: Evidently Hanoi and North Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, celebrates the Gulf of Tonkin incident as part of its national experience. Evidently they take claim for it now.

BUNDY: That's interesting. I didn't realize that. You were briefed on the intercepts that day?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, every day! Every day!

BUNDY: This was a marvel [the special INR man], you may remember.

DEAN RUSK: Hour by hour during this period.

BUNDY: I remember you called me in Martha's Vineyard that Tuesday morning, the fourth, I think at about 10 or 10:30. And I've always figured that at that point you probably did not have anything but the intercepts. Do you recall?

DEAN RUSK: Pretty much so, yes.

SCHOENBAUM: That morning was August 4th?

DEAN RUSK: In any event, Tom, in answering your question, if anybody thinks I believed one thing and said another during that period, they are just lying.

SCHOENBAUM: Well, that should be on record.

DEAN RUSK: Because--

RICHARD RUSK: We don't deny that, Pop. It's just a question of establishing the rest of the story.

DEAN RUSK: Of course, I wasn't out there on the sea at night, there in those troubled waters.

RICHARD RUSK: You, yourself, raised the point that perhaps one of the things in retrospect that you could have done was have any of the military staff people or Lyndon Johnson's top advisors to pick up the phone and call the captains of those two destroyers and find out for themselves what the story was.

BUNDY: That was what Sharp was doing.

DEAN RUSK: That's what we were doing.

BUNDY: There's one point about that, and I've stressed this in my annex. But I've stressed it a lot in discussion of this in open settings, and nowadays we can talk a little more openly about these things. The point is that you couldn't discuss the nature of this evidence on the open phone, you had to discuss it only on specially cleared, secured phones. I'm not sure if Sharp had such a phone to Herrick. So, in their talk Herrick was probably saying, as I read it, in effect, "I'm not sure you could prove this by the physical evidence, but you have the intercepts in front of you." He would do this by some indirect form of reference.

SCHOENBAUM: The intercepts were the messages between the Vietnamese?

DEAN RUSK: It was what Hanoi was saying to themselves, you see, that kind of thing.

BUNDY: There were alerting messages, then the get-going message. And the a post-action report, which was totally wrong. But wrong after-action reports happen all the time.

DEAN RUSK: This is not the time or place to sort of sort out the actual reality of the second attack. I just say for the moment that at the time I was convinced that a second attack was underway.

SCHOENBAUM: Do you now think there was a second attack?

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

SCHOENBAUM: You still think that a second attack was underway and actually took place?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. Now, for those who think that Lyndon Johnson asked for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution as a kind of pretext or to authorize preexisting plans, I point out not only the background of how the Gulf of Tonkin resolution came into being, but also I point out that it was not until that following February, several months later, that we first bombed North Vietnam. We weren't looking for a pretext to start the bombing of North Vietnam. We didn't start the bombing of North Vietnam and the systematic bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail until the North Vietnamese clearly were stepping up in a major way their infiltration of South Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Can I ask a follow-up on the Tonkin Gulf? And that is, to what extent do you think we might have either intentionally or not intentionally provoked the North Vietnamese patrol boat attack with previous covert missions

SCHOENBAUM: DeSoto missions.

RICHARD RUSK: Along the coast by operating in the Straits?

DEAN RUSK: The North Vietnamese were using the seacoast there for the infiltration of South Vietnam by North Vietnam. From our point of view this was prohibited conduct. This was unlawful conduct on their part. And we were operating to try to intercept this infiltration, which

we were completely entitled to do under the general doctrines of self-defense, collective self-defense. To call the exercise of self-defense a provocation which the aggressor can use to its own advantage as a provocation just doesn't make any sense.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. But we went a step further. We called their attack unprovoked. You know, to what extent was that really not true? We were operating in the area. Could they have legitimately confused those destroyer missions with covert support of these 34A raids along the coast?

DEAN RUSK: Well, even if they had, they were in the process of committing an aggression. We were in the process of exercising self-defense. So they cannot rely upon the doctrine of provocation.

SCHOENBAUM: Another thing, then. Isn't the administration--could the administration have done a better job of basically selling this, establishing this to the American people in some better way? Because, even today most, probably most people, think that--most people who have followed Vietnam have a lot of doubts about, particularly, the second Tonkin Gulf incident.

DEAN RUSK: I didn't have any impression at the time that, as far as public opinion was concerned, there was any great problem about it.

SCHOENBAUM: At the time it was 85 percent support.

DEAN RUSK: A couple of [James William] Bill Fulbright's staff people tried to raise a real question about whether or not the second attack had anything to it.

RICHARD RUSK: We now know about the covert actions against North Vietnam.

DEAN RUSK: Sure. Covert actions along the seacoast of North Vietnam to intercept this infiltration to the South.

BUNDY: Actually, this was an attack, Dean, by motor torpedo boats. But it was against the bases the other side was using for those kinds of infiltration.

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you in support of those covert operations?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. Sure. Sure. I mean those who are exercising self-defense are not required to sit like petrified rabbits waiting for the snake to strike.

RICHARD RUSK: I grant you all of that. I just wondered to what extent we brought, you know, we caused some of these, helped cause some of these credibility problems that followed when we claimed this was an unprovoked attack. We were operating in that area and these facts never really came out until far later.

BUNDY: No, the existence of such attacks was known and discussed at the time. Dean, did you participate in what I believe was some kind of briefing of a group of senators that included Morse on the Monday afternoon after the first attack? The first attack was on a Sunday. And then on a Monday afternoon, there was some kind of briefing of senators, who included Fulbright and Morse, in which the nature of the 34-A operations was discussed, and the fact that they were at some distance from the DeSoto patrols and, indeed, the destroyer hadn't even gone into the area till thirty-six hours after the torpedo boats had been there, and so on. I think all that was brought to the briefing and in the Senate debates several senators referred to it as though they knew. The Senate knew about this; the key senators.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. And there's not--by the way--

BUNDY: Did you participate in that briefing?

DEAN RUSK: I did. I think I remember that.

RICHARD RUSK: You did get specifically into those questions?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. Sure.

RICHARD RUSK: The covert actions?

DEAN RUSK: When the Senate Foreign Relations Committee completes the publication of its executive sessions transcripts, people will discover that the Senate committee was up to its ears with information on Vietnam at all stages of the situation.

BUNDY: You know, that's a very interesting point. I've had occasion to review the draft, which I think is now virtually final.

END OF SIDE 2