

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk NNN: Part 1 of 2
Kenneth W. Thompson interviewed by Richard Rusk
1985 January

The complete interview also includes Rusk OOO: Part 2.

RICHARD RUSK: We are talking with Dr. Kenneth Thompson, the director of the Miller Center at the University of Virginia. Ken was a former colleague of my dad's at the Rockefeller Foundation. This is January, 1985. And Ken, we will just start at the beginning. Explain how you knew my dad.

THOMPSON: We met after your father decided that he needed someone from the academic field in order to administer and carry out the international relations program at Rockefeller. The director then was a former dean of the Wharton School, Joseph [H.] Willits. He and your father got along quite well even though they were quite different. Your father used to joke about it. He would say, "Joe Willits is a Quaker, and sometimes Quakers will kill you with their kindness." He didn't agree with the quasi-pacifist ideas that Joe Willits had, but they got along very well, and they trusted one another. Willits had heard me give a paper--

RICHARD RUSK: How do you spell his name?

THOMPSON: W-I-L-L-I-T-S. He's been dead fifteen years or so. But he was a marvelous man. Terribly dedicated and devoted to your father. He directed the social sciences. Willits came back from a meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, I guess, and told your father that in addition to a couple of people they were looking at, they ought to interview me. So I was flown back from Chicago. I taught at the University of Chicago and also had taught at Northwestern University. Willits was very kind to me and encouraging about the paper I had given. He took me to see your father.

One of the things that anybody who met your father for the first time remembered was his presence. He was friendly, interested, asked questions, but didn't push anyone into the ground. He seemed to want to find out about you without in any way being an investigative reporter or trying to embarrass you. It was a good meeting. I don't know how the decision process worked, but--

RICHARD RUSK: By presence, in your dealings with him and the way you saw him work around the Foundation, did he have that sort of command presence that some leaders do? Like a George Marshall, who would be an exceptional case, because you knew when he walked into the room that George Marshall was there. He was in charge. Was there any sense of that with my father at all?

THOMPSON: He wasn't a command performance or presence type in the sense that he dictated

the agenda totally in a conversation. He was in a way too sensitive to other people's feelings to in any way push people around. He once told me something that I've never forgotten. We were talking about a personnel problem at Rockefeller years later and he said, "You can only knock somebody down once or twice in a year. If you do any more than that, they are not going to be able to function for you." Sometimes command responsibility involves giving orders, dictating what people do. But your father didn't do that. He'd say, "I've been thinking about this," or "Should we follow up on that?" He was skillful in drawing people out.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he have the capability of getting the maximum performance out of the people that worked with him, for him and for the Foundation?

THOMPSON: Yes, I think he did. I may have told you about one of the things he did with new people. He did it with me, but I watched it for years with other people. He'd go to the office of the newest staff member a day or two after the person came. He'd sit down and put up his feet, at least figuratively, and say, "I've been thinking about such-and-such for a long time. This is an area that seems to be important, but I can't think of anything the Foundation could do in that area." And the new recruit would spend, literally, the next two weeks doing nothing but thinking about that area. This was a challenge that was something people responded to. He got a lot out of people, including a great variety of people. And he had some tough characters to work with: lots of egos, prima donnas, a couple of people more distinguished than he was. And he said that.

RICHARD RUSK: At the Foundation?

THOMPSON: The Foundation. Warren Weaver was one and Weaver had a big ego. He was a rather passionate man. And your father handled the family as no president since his departure has done.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me interrupt. The comment that when my dad was at the Department of State he had at least two or three people at any given time who also wanted to be Secretary of State. He knew it. They knew that he knew it. George [Wildman] Ball was one of them, of course. So was Chester [Bliss] Bowles, and at one time, Adlai Stevenson. He had the same problem in the Department and it all worked out pretty well. He didn't have that ego clash that we've seen in other administrations.

THOMPSON: There are people I've known, you've known, who fear somebody who's brighter than they are, who have kudos in a certain field. Your father never asked that question at any time about somebody: were they stronger in such-and-such an area? He went after the best people, and he wasn't at all nervous about having them around him. One aspect of command was that he would be the center of the table, but not dominating a discussion. Rather, he operated through questions, suggestions, testing of people's ideas. He would throw out ideas. In some ways one of the most exciting periods of my life was when we all ate lunch together at a common table. He had Nobel Prize people. He had renowned medical and agriculture people: all kinds. But he always generated discussion among them. It never went sour at the table. After his departure, although there were some good people, it sometimes went terribly sour. There was no real discussion of that kind.

RICHARD RUSK: He was criticized later as Secretary for not providing a forceful, effective leadership in foreign affairs. Some people suggested he really wasn't a leader, but was the perfect number two. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. comes immediately to mind. Did you feel when you were at the Foundation that he was an effective leader and that the Foundation had strong leadership?

THOMPSON: Yes, I surely did. I think he is the best leader that they have had. Raymond [Blaine] Fosdick may have been equally good. Chester [Irving] Barnard was a very capable man. He had business experience. Except for Fosdick, there was nobody who was a better man. Your father brought us into areas that other people claimed credit for later. That included work in the developing countries and equal opportunity. He was the one who got us thinking about these areas. We really moved into those areas in his day and we got commitments. He got commitments from the trustees, for instance, to spend so-and-so much per year out of capital on aid in education to developing countries. [Jacob] George Harrar got the credit for it later on, because Harrar did organize some of it. And he turned a lot of it over to me. But the idea was your father's--your father was a leader in the sense that he was an initiator of new directions.

RICHARD RUSK: That's another thing that he was criticized for--not having fresh ideas.

THOMPSON: You know the Schlesinger thing is very understandable. Schlesinger tried to persuade your father to get the Foundation to commit multi-million dollar support to work in history.

RICHARD RUSK: I never knew that.

THOMPSON: And your father, at the American Historical Society, pressed him: "What would you do. What's good about this?" And they had a debate. I know Arthur Schlesinger because, obviously, we work in a similar area, and at one stage your father turned him over to me. I did reasonably well in handling him. But there were people like Schlesinger, whom your father had turned down, who never forgot it.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think that was the cause of some of that personal animosity?

THOMPSON: I think it was. His critics blamed it on the fact that he wasn't as much an intellectual as they were.

RICHARD RUSK: This debate that they had; was it a debate situation?

THOMPSON: Sure. Samuel [Flagg] Bemis, your father, Schlesinger, and several historians. It was a good, stiff debate.

RICHARD RUSK: Within the Foundation?

THOMPSON: No. At the annual meeting of the American Historical Society.

RICHARD RUSK: Were my dad and Schlesinger on opposing sides?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

RICHARD RUSK: Who came out on top?

THOMPSON: I thought your father handled it very well. Schlesinger, of course, was very articulate. But I think your father did.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember what was being debated?

THOMPSON: The support by philanthropy to history. And these people argued that it had not been what it should be. And your father argued that that was history's fault, it ought to come up with some programs that foundations could support.

RICHARD RUSK: And my dad resisted additional funding for whatever--

THOMPSON: Yes. And I think he would have given it. We did give it. We supported a lot of historians in our international relations program.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember when that debate took place?

THOMPSON: A couple of years before he left. It seems to me like 1958 or '59.

RICHARD RUSK: Did they make a tape recording of the affair?

THOMPSON: I don't know. It would be worth looking into at the archives. But one other thing your father did which I always thought was a mistake: Robert [Strange] McNamara and everybody else brought in platoons of supporters. They deliberately recruited people who would stand at their side. Your father picked people whom he thought were the most experienced people, like George [Crews] McGhee. They were old hands out of the Foreign Service. They were the best for the job they did. But he could have, and I think he should have recruited a few people anyway who were loyal to him. But again this was part of his sensitivity. He once said to me, and he said to several other people, "Look, do you know how many assistant secretaries there are in the Department?" And we said, "No." And I can't remember the number, but he said something like twenty-five or thirty. And compared to being a president or a vice-president of a foundation, I think he genuinely thought that assistant secretary was inferior. So he never pushed. But again, the Schlesingers and the sharp-shooters, I think, wouldn't have hit him as hard in the Department if he had block-fisted himself. He probably wouldn't agree with that. Instead, the kind of people he recruited were people like Roger Hilsman, whom he finally had to fire, and Dick [Richard N.] Gardner, Zbigniew Brzezinski. I guess Ball fired Hilsman.

RICHARD RUSK: Kennedy brought that one on.

THOMPSON: But Roger Hilsman, Dick Gardner and a number of other people, know terribly

ambitious people, and Brzezinski used some of us as channels when your father got in. They kept calling. I never had any pipeline to your father in terms of his having asked me to help in anything. But they thought since I had worked with him I could get their name in front of him. And I did send him names, but they were the wrong kind of people. They were people who had no loyalty to anybody. And they were people who were constantly looking for a chance to make a name with a Kennedy.

RICHARD RUSK: They contacted you at the beginning of the administration, looking to get on that Kennedy team.

THOMPSON: Called me at home.

RICHARD RUSK: Hilsman?

THOMPSON: Hilsman, Dick Gardner, Brzezinski. The known, most ambitious people in the academic community. He didn't take them all, and he didn't take them on his own entirely, but I think he would have been stronger in resisting some of the things that happened if he had had a little more of his own team. But I may be wrong. I don't know anything about the in-fighting that went on except what I read in the newspaper.

RICHARD RUSK: It was Schlesinger's and some others' contention that my dad was a good man, but not as sharp intellectually as some of his peers. At least that was one impression that went out. You had a chance to know him as an intellectual, to get to know his mind over a number of years. Did he belong in that league?

THOMPSON: Surely he did. He didn't believe in displaying it or boasting about it, and he didn't write, as some of them did. He, Cyrus Vance and a number of other people have had a philosophy. If I had been in their shoes, I imagine I would have followed that, too. Your father once said if he had ever published the second of his Council on Foreign Relations lectures, he'd never have been confirmed. So, he was very sparing in what he published. He tried to avoid giving people targets. But you go back some time and look at his occasional pieces. The best paper that's ever been written on parliamentary diplomacy is a paper your father gave. The best proposal that was ever made, I think, in the late fifties on admission and membership of China in the U.N. was something your father gave at the Council on Foreign Relations. And his model was General George Marshall who refused to publish his memoirs, saying he did not want to profit from his public service.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he always have that gift for extemporaneous speaking at the Foundation?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes. But he worked. He thought it through. There are some people who have staff and let the staff write their reports. We all did drafts. Your father now and then would ask us to give him three paragraphs on this or that, but he was never content with three paragraphs. He rewrote and cast everything in his own mold. He had and has an economy of language which was very striking.

RICHARD RUSK: I've noticed with the oral history that when we do the transcripts of my dad, grammatically they are correct. He speaks in complete sentences and paragraphs so there is finished copy. Not many people have that capability. George Ball called him the most eloquent man he has ever known. And Ball has known a wide circle of people.

THOMPSON: Surely. He is eloquent. He captured his listener's imagination. That's another great tragedy in this whole picture because somehow that didn't come across on television and television interviews. At the Rockefeller Foundation and the Council on Foreign Relations, any place he spoke--to the Foreign Policy Association, small groups, big groups sometimes--he came across--what he's been doing lately. Everybody says that of the four or five secretaries of state that your father is by far the most lucid and clearest. Bill [William Pierce] Rogers and Cy Vance are on this commission that I have now, which your father proposed.

RICHARD RUSK: Bill Rogers prepared three months for this last one. He really took it seriously. He went to the Department and got briefings for it. He worked hard.

THOMPSON: He did pretty well, but your father was the best and he always has been. But somehow or another, on television that never came through. His face looked rounder than it is. I got into one of the broadcasts with Fred [W.] Friendly. Fred Friendly did a tape of your father. Your father was anxious. He kept talking about the thousands of man-hours that citizens put into volunteer activity in their communities. Now, that was never understood by the public. But it was another thing that inspired us. I would never have been on a school board in Scarsdale but for his encouragement.

RICHARD RUSK: I didn't realize that he was president of the school board.

THOMPSON: No, I was.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, you were president of the school board.

THOMPSON: Yes, I was president for five years, through the difficult times they had with integration. But I never would have done it with subsequent presidents. They believed if you did that type of thing, you chiseled the Foundation if you did it. Your father never did. He used to say that if you wrote articles, in order not to embarrass people just say 'Ken Thompson (or whoever it was) Scarsdale, New York.' Don't identify the article with Rockefeller.

RICHARD RUSK: Getting back to Dean Rusk as an administrator at the Foundation. Is there anything else that you could tell me or recall on his performance as administrator? Was he capable of making tough decisions? For example, if there were some staff people not performing, could he crack the whip like a good administrator occasionally has to do?

THOMPSON: Yes, but he wasn't premature. There was a fellow named Bob [Robert P.] Burden, who was questionable in his personal relations. Your father was patient. Bob was very bright; one of the brightest people your father ever--

RICHARD RUSK: May I close that door to knock down the background noise we might be picking up?

THOMPSON: Sure. You know there are some people who are trigger-happy in an administrative position. The first time they see anything wrong they will unload. That happened after your father left. [Robert Francis] Goheen and I were among the main ones who were candidates for the presidency. And Dr. John Knowles[?], who was a sick man--a classic case of paranoia--unloaded everybody. Thirty-five of us were asked to leave. He just went wild. Robert Coles, the psychologist, said, (he had been a roommate with John Knowles,) said it was obvious then that he as a sick man. So, if you mean by decisive, getting rid of people and that kind of thing, well, he didn't. But if you mean finding the right time and giving somebody a chance, seeing if they could produce, fitting them into different slots, then lowering the boom if they couldn't do the job, your father did that very well.

RICHARD RUSK: He did?

THOMPSON: Yes. But what he didn't have in the State Department--he had a clear field. He was the supreme authority in the eyes of most people. And he didn't, although there was some jealousy I am sure, he didn't have people waiting around. He used to stop in at the Foundation the first year he was secretary and say, in effect, "I don't know how many more weeks or months I am going to be secretary," implying "They are after me." He had nothing like that at the Foundation.

RICHARD RUSK: When you said he has been the most effective president they have had, are your other colleagues at the Foundation in concurrence with that? Or is that a generalized feeling? I'm certain it's yours.

THOMPSON: It gets very parochial because the agriculture people were happier under George Harrar. He gave them everything. Medical people were happier under some other group. But I think, those who are fair, would agree with my view.

RICHARD RUSK: The social scientists grieved when Dean Rusk became president of the Rockefeller Foundation.

THOMPSON: Sure. We had another director. Joe Willits was director and he retired; Norman [S.] Buchanan, who died quite early, became director; then I became director. We always knew that we had somebody above us who knew as much or more about the subject as we did.

RICHARD RUSK: You mentioned that my dad encouraged the Foundation to get into areas of food production and health care in Third World countries and take a broader scope. Specifically, what was my dad's impact on the Foundation?

THOMPSON: Well, it was a big effect because it was in his time that the trustees agreed that we should have a program in the Third World, which we would fund through expenditures of

capital. Harrar helped put the form on it after your father left. He was also interested in that, good at that.

Your father's jokes were things that lowered the temperature of every relationship. Instead of confronting somebody and saying "You're wrong, totally wrong," he would make a humorous reference to something. There was always a light side, a lilt to his encouraging reexamination of something you thought that was just totally one way. He helped you think that through.

As to the leadership thing, I used to dream about one aspect. I think this is kind of revealing if you want an anecdote. I used to dream, even when I was way down the echelon, about walking down the hall every now and then to your father's office. He was in the RCA [Radio Corporation of America] building on the forty-seventh or forty-ninth floor. His office was down a corridor. And every now and then, even if you were a pretty minor staff member, he called you in. Of course, I had an advantage because I worked in his field, but if you walked down that hall, you knew when you walked in the room that this was important business. You knew he wouldn't have called you unless there was something that he was interested in discussing, and you knew that he had at least a partial suggestion about how to handle the thing, but you knew that he also wanted you to think about it. We were under a lot of pressure--this comes late in his period at Rockefeller--to see if we could help with strengthening universities in Washington. We looked at possibilities. Washington is not a place for great universities.

RICHARD RUSK: Washington, D.C.?

THOMPSON: D.C. But he didn't give up on it. That's another thing: he never gave up on somebody's important ideas. He kept coming back to them and turning them around and trying out different ways of thinking about them. That may have led to this notion that he was indecisive. You learned an awful lot about decision-making by working with your father. The first try of the decision wasn't, practically ever, the way the thing came out. He kept turning it around, but not with agony where you would get sick with the thing. I dreamed about the fact, as a younger staff member, I'd get called down to his office. He would have a lot of stuff, more than I have here, on his desk. He'd be looking it over. He once had his secretary time him on how much time he spent on a given subject. I guess that was in the Department of State. He found that it was no more than five minutes he was able to concentrate on a single subject. Even at the Foundation things were turning over rather quickly.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that a pressure job for him? Was he under pressure there?

THOMPSON: No, but he tried not to let things sit. You know there are some people who just can't do anything with a piece of paper. They have to stick it in their coat and never really do anything. Your father kept moving things. You knew if he had an idea that you would get it back. And he would say, "I don't agree. Why don't you think further about that." He kept things moving. I would dream about this opportunity to go down. There was dignity in sitting down, or standing lots of times, in talking with him. You knew that if you had something good to say or suggest, it would be given a hearing. One of his favorite phrases was, "Good ideas get to the top faster than any place I know." So, if you had an idea, it would go up. He would think about it and talk about it. I used to commute with him, too, to Scarsdale. I'd try ideas out on the train and he

would think it over. I flew with him sometimes.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you know him best at the Foundation of all the people he worked with?

THOMPSON: I'm not sure. I admired him so much. I knew some of the other presidents and I got along. One of them appointed me to a higher level position than your father did.

RICHARD RUSK: Of the people who worked with him at the Foundation, you and he had the closest relationship?

THOMPSON: It was almost inevitable. His field was my field, on the academic side. We commuted together. I think he said to himself, "Here's a young man to be educated." But I admired him as a person, enormously as a human being.

RICHARD RUSK: What mistakes did my dad make at the Foundation, if he made any? Was there a darker side to his personality that isn't all evident to the rest of us? You know, every man is human, and not equally capable in all aspects of a job. What were his drawbacks if he had any? What were the things he was criticized for?

THOMPSON: The only thing I can think of is I used to hear somebody interested in the foreign policy area and international studies say, "Why doesn't he give me more reign to develop all kinds of things?" But when I would reflect on that, I realized that whenever I had something for consideration he paid attention to it. So, it was the passing feeling for somebody, like a kid, who couldn't get everything he wants right away. But that's about the only thing. Of course, that was also the strength; he wasn't palsy-walsy with anybody. Once he got home, except for these occasional dinner parties that your mother and he would give, you didn't see him. One reason was that he traveled a lot, even then, as you know: Washington weekends. He said he never went back to Washington, but I felt he kept contact with Washington pretty well. He never ruled it out. We flew into National Airport one time. We had this conference of theories of international relations, pretty much the figures of the field. I talked him into that, although it didn't take much talking. [George Frost] Kennan, [Hans Joachim] Morgenthau, Arnold [Oscar] Wolfers, Reinhold Niebuhr, and other people who were writing about theories.

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THOMPSON: Anyway, I said about Washington, "Wouldn't you want to go back sometime?"

RICHARD RUSK: To Washington?

THOMPSON: To Washington. He said, "No. I had enough."

RICHARD RUSK: Did he mean it?

THOMPSON: I don't know. He might have then. He was very surprised that he was considered in the early Kennedy selection process. David [Kirkpatrick Este] Bruce was mentioned. Chester Bowles was mentioned. All these people were mentioned. He used to tell us when we would see him at the luncheon table, "The only reason that they might be thinking of me at all is that I have been away long enough that they have forgotten that I've got feet of clay." One reason, I think, he was so attractive to all of us is that there was no pretense. I've written about national self-righteousness and pretense. He personified the absence of pretending. Weakness? He never--you know they used to write--one of the stories was that in his first stint, people wrote on the toilet walls in Washington, "Rusk is gonna get you!" or something like that. There was the myth that he was tough on people, and catered to [John Foster] Dulles and establishment and that he was always looking up to the people about him. That's part of the two-man thesis.

RICHARD RUSK: This bit on the toilets, the graffiti. Where was that? In the Department in the early years?

THOMPSON: It was in the Department. I think what lay behind that was that he wasn't a gladiator. He used to say, "I don't like to ham it up." And he didn't throw his arms around you. He didn't tell you much, even if you worked like hell to make a good presentation as a trustee, he never told you this. But you could tell. And if you blew it, you could tell then, too. You know people who are constantly exuding enthusiasm, flattering you constantly; that's the farthest thing from your father. But he paid a small price for that. People could say, "Well, he didn't give a damn about us." But that's the way he dealt with everybody.

RICHARD RUSK: Are you a close friend of Dean Rusk?

THOMPSON: I'd surely hope so. Whenever I've had trouble, I'd call him. He's the first person I call.

RICHARD RUSK: The reason I ask is because there are some people who question whether or not he really would share the kind of intimacies that close friendships call for. Would he confide serious questions or serious concerns with you?

THOMPSON: He confided interests and concerns. He used a phrase and I have heard him use it several times. He'd say, "So-and-so wants my job." Well, it's good training for a young man to know that. There are two or three people in the building, not Jim Young at least at the moment, who wants my job. You live in a much more real world if you know that that's part of life. You could confide in your father, and he would listen, when you really needed help: not just to gossip. You know, he gossiped once in a while. He had stories. Just to get in there on each and every occasion to throw the ball around. He told stories at the poker club. Have you ever heard of the poker club we had?

RICHARD RUSK: In Scarsdale?

THOMPSON: Your father formed a poker club in Scarsdale with members of Foundation staff.

RICHARD RUSK: No, I haven't.

THOMPSON: It was a lot of fun. As soon as he left it fell apart; it only lasted for a couple of more times. He liked to play poker.

RICHARD RUSK: Would you play at our house?

THOMPSON: We played at your house some. It rotated around. That was a lot of fun.

RICHARD RUSK: I remember a lot of poker games at the house. That's right.

THOMPSON: There was a lot of good will. But even there he never let down his hair on this kind of thing totally. He'd joke. I never saw him make a fool of himself. And I think in the long run you respect that a lot more than you do if somebody's constantly giving you the business.

RICHARD RUSK: You joined the Foundation in what year?

THOMPSON: Well, I was a consultant from about '54, '55, '56. Then I really got into it in '56.

RICHARD RUSK: You missed his Reese Subcommittee testimony on the tax-exempt status of the philanthropic foundations?

THOMPSON: I came in just at the end of that, but then the other one--what was that?

RICHARD RUSK: Two back-to-back subcommittee hearings on--

THOMPSON: There again he handled them masterfully. He put us to work. I worked on the IPR [Institute of Pacific Relations?], for instance, which they were challenging. We collected the facts. We didn't scold people for having challenged it. But he--go back and read his testimony.

RICHARD RUSK: I did.

THOMPSON: It's about as cogent as anything can be. He doesn't take any flak, and yet he is not provocative. It's very strong and firm. Nobody did that the way he did. The Foundation can thank him. After he left there were a couple more instances. When he left, the lawyers, in effect, took over. Harrar turned the next congressional hearing over to [Chauncey] Belknap, the lawyer. And that was another interesting illustration. Your father got along very well with the lawyers, Debevoise and Belknap. But there was never any question who was calling the shots.

RICHARD RUSK: Who was handling the case.

THOMPSON: When George Harrar was there, Belknap would move in and take over; the same with John [Davison] Rockefeller, III. John Rockefeller, III wanted to become famous for youth, population, and all these things. And after your father left he pushed us around an awful lot.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right?

[Tape deletion (55 seconds) at request of Richard Rusk and Kenneth Thompson]

THOMPSON: And I sat up, as George Harrar and your father always would, the Saturday night and Sunday with John Rockefeller, and John Rockefeller said, "I see you've got some cancellations. There's a million dollars that we are not spending. Let's put it all in population." And your father would never have given into that without a project. I said, "That's fine. We certainly ought to do a lot for population. But we've got to have programs. The staff has to look at efforts in this area that look as though they will get some place." He said, "Oh, no we don't." I resisted. But during that period after your father left, except for a few of us resisting that way, there wasn't the same quiet but determined effort to keep John Rockefeller involved and interested, but not to let him run things. And I have always thought the reason your father--well, maybe he said, "No."--the reason your father was not asked when he left the Secretary of State job to be a board member was because John Rockefeller never quite forgave him.

RICHARD RUSK: No kidding.

THOMPSON: He may tell you. He may have told me all wrong.

RICHARD RUSK: My Dad said it was never a problem. And, again, he might have been speaking for the oral history more so than--

THOMPSON: It was never a problem because he kept it from becoming a problem. But John would constantly throw things in. Well, [Henry Alfred] Kissinger is a good example.

RICHARD RUSK: During my dad's tenure there was not ever an instance where John Rockefeller was able to steer the Foundation in the direction that he preferred. Is that right?

THOMPSON: Not without full officer discussion. I mean, we responded to things. We did get into population. Although, again, on population your father had a much more measured, balanced view of what we could do on that. He thought we ought to do it, and he pushed for Bob [Robert Warren] Barnett and others in the Department of State, but he kept it in balance, whereas John Rockefeller wanted it to be everything. And he never forgave me; and I don't think deep down he ever forgave your father in a much greater way. When your father left they started coming in all kinds of doors. Laurance [Spelman Rockefeller] came in on the environment and provided a yacht to John Knowles--up and down the Hudson on a yacht--and wined and dined him. And we got into the environmental area without the necessary staff-work. Your father knew each one of us pretty well. He knew our strengths and weaknesses. He did in the Department too, I think.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, we were talking about personalities. I had asked you what kind of boss he was with personnel. While we are on this subject, can you recall anyone else that might have some insight on my dad at the Foundation?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes. Gerald Freund is one. He was vice-president for awhile at the [Douglas] MacArthur Foundation, but he's left. He lives in Connecticut now. He works for a couple of foundations in New York, and if you want I can send you his address.

RICHARD RUSK: How about my dad's personal secretaries?

THOMPSON: They were good.

RICHARD RUSK: Catherine Tolles?

THOMPSON: Yes, she became my secretary. I would think that a man's secretaries would be insightful, if they are willing to talk, as anyone you could talk to.

RICHARD RUSK: Who was that secretary of the Foundation?

THOMPSON: Flora [MacDonald] Rhind?

RICHARD RUSK: Flora Rhind.

THOMPSON: She's got it all wrong. Her interviews with him are just all wrong.

RICHARD RUSK: In Warren [I.] Cohen's--.

THOMPSON: --Warren Cohen's book where he quotes Flora Rhind.

RICHARD RUSK: Go ahead and correct the record.

THOMPSON: Well, he kept Flora Rhind where she belonged when he was president. He was a real gentleman with her, always polite and gracious. But he never let a secretary think that they knew as much about medicine or agriculture or social sciences as the staff did. And after he left, that changed totally.

RICHARD RUSK: She started getting involved in politics.

THOMPSON: More and more. And then they hired Kellum Smith. He came from an upper-class family in New York and was trained in the law, but never practiced law. You haven't heard of him.

RICHARD RUSK: I sent Flora Rhind one of my letters, and she wrote back a feisty response. I could tell she was a real tiger all right. I am looking forward to interviewing her.

THOMPSON: Well, she has a right to her ideas. It deteriorated steadily. One of the things those people were in your father's day was servants in the interests of the staff. They did the work that needed to be done. After he left there were four or five people who became tyrants. One was his secretary. Another was a fellow named Henry [John] Romney. Your father wouldn't have stood him for ten minutes. He did, I have to admit, put out some fairly good publications. But he was allowed to triple or quadruple the amount of money spent on public relations, something your father resented.

RICHARD RUSK: When my dad left the Foundation, you quoted him in your article as having said, "Whatever happens, don't grieve me." Were those exactly his words?

THOMPSON: He recruited good people. He made them feel as if they had a job to do. He supported them when they came forward with ideas. There was a marvelous atmosphere. Your father used to joke about one thing. He'd say that sometimes he thought his main job, when he visited universities and spoke to them, was to introduce faculty members to one another. And he meant it. He'd give a lecture and some of the faculty had never met the physicist or the chemist over in another department. And he would meet them and know them, and had respect for them. But that was never true in the department. Everybody knew everybody else. And that big table--I joined the Century Club about that time--I never went to the Century Club for a lunch if I knew your father was going to be at the Rockefeller table, because that was the way a high table in the best sense ought to be, with stimulating discussions. And also if we had Dulles or a guest who had something to say, your father, after the person had left would stick his head in and say, "What do you think?" about whatever it was he said, some piece of it. So you knew you were supposed to be listening.

RICHARD RUSK: My memories of my dad back in those years were at these parties that we would throw at our house: great big affairs with hundreds of people. There was always a group of about twenty to thirty people in a circle, laughing and carrying on, and in the middle of that circle would be my dad. They would be hanging on his every word. I do recall that.

THOMPSON: You know who the people were too, don't you? Around ten-thirty or eleven p.m. we couldn't find him. All these rather prominent people in Scarsdale would say, "What's happened to Dean?" "Where is he?" We finally would wander into a library, or whatever it was, at these people's houses, and there were thirty youngsters sitting cross-kneed on the floor and your father was answering such questions as, "What can we do as individuals in the foreign policy area?" He was terribly good with young people.

RICHARD RUSK: How much contact did my dad have, that you were aware of, with John Foster Dulles of the Eisenhower Administration? How much involvement with foreign policy issues back during the fifties, as President of the Rockefeller Foundation?

THOMPSON: I'm not sure because--and he wouldn't have told me. I think Dulles called him up. And when Dulles spoke at the Council on Foreign Relations--

RICHARD RUSK: I'm aware of some of the contacts that he had, but I just wondered how

widespread they were.

THOMPSON: Dulles proposed your father as president of the Rockefeller Foundation, I'm told. That's another debatable thing though. Some reporter said only Dulles was responsible for your father's appointment. I don't think that's true.

RICHARD RUSK: He had patrons in other places?

THOMPSON: Robert [Abercrombie] Lovett.

RICHARD RUSK: Moving ahead to his appointment as secretary. What was your reaction to that appointment, to the news that my dad had been selected for that post?

THOMPSON: Great enthusiasm. I thought it was the best appointment I had known of in my lifetime. I thought it was wonderful.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you think he could handle that job with all that is required of an American secretary of state?

THOMPSON: I thought if anybody could, he could. But maybe nobody can. When this business of critics started coming out, everybody knew how tough it was.

RICHARD RUSK: Did any aspect of his performance as secretary surprise you at all, given the man that you knew at the Foundation in the fifties? Were you surprised by anything he did in office or any aspect of his job?

THOMPSON: I wasn't surprised. You know, the Test Ban Treaty, these various moves were countless on his watch. He talked about that. He started us with diplomacy studies. It was on the top of his mind. So that didn't surprise me. I guess I didn't know how tough the political equation was going to be, because he did, as I tried to say in the article--I think there's evidence, and I haven't seen all the documents--he sought to avoid the Americanization of the Vietnam war; did things behind the scenes. You must have sat up this way. One time he gave a talk in Scarsdale and a group of us went, I think, to your house. My wife and I, maybe John [William] Gardner and his wife--I don't know--your mother, several couples that they knew. It was public affairs at all. They liked it. And we all were arguing that the thing is getting out of hand in Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Where would this have been? In Spring Valley, Washington, at the house?

THOMPSON: No, it wasn't. It was at the house of a couple in Scarsdale. He came back to get an award.

RICHARD RUSK: He gave a speech at the high school.

THOMPSON: That's right. Your mother was especially passionate in that discussion.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right? I want to know about this. My dad, my mom, John Gardner, his wife--

THOMPSON: I think.

RICHARD RUSK: --Kenneth Thompson--

THOMPSON: --my wife.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember the year roughly? Surely it would have been '65 or later.

THOMPSON: Yes, it was '65-'66. You can find it on the award, I think.

RICHARD RUSK: I could look up the date of his trip.

THOMPSON: But he was a little flip about it, I thought. But he probably had to be because everybody was going after him. And he just said--and he tried to turn it off. Even your mother got into that session.

RICHARD RUSK: She did? Do you recall what she might have said?

THOMPSON: Is there any way that you could get us out? Did I tell you that I wrote about the Bermuda Conference in '67, I think it was? The Carnegie Endowment organized a conference at Bermuda which had people from the left to the right: [Daniel] Ellsberg.

RICHARD RUSK: This is something separate, additional? I'm interested in that. Go back to this other thing for a minute. Who initiated the discussion?

THOMPSON: I'm not sure. I just think we were all so concerned about the criticism he was taking. More of the criticism--.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you meet with him in that house for that purpose? Or did you just happen to convene?

THOMPSON: We were just having a drink.

RICHARD RUSK: Having a drink, huh? And you sat down, eight of you or so, in a room and got into Vietnam?

THOMPSON: I think he was like a physician in an operating room. He just steeled himself to deal with this. Because on a couple of these instances his words were not the Dean Rusk I had known at the Rockefeller Foundation.

RICHARD RUSK: I need to know what happened. I need to know an answer to that question.

THOMPSON: Well, for instance.

RICHARD RUSK: Get back to this thing! I just want to take my time with it. How long did that talk go on?

THOMPSON: Oh, twelve at night.

RICHARD RUSK: Three or four hours?

THOMPSON: No, a couple of hours.

RICHARD RUSK: He really wouldn't get into the discussion of the issues with you in a give-and-take situation? Was that the problem?

THOMPSON: He (unintelligible) it off.

[break in recording]

THOMPSON: --I think if we had anything to offer.

RICHARD RUSK: Nothing to offer in terms of an alternative to what we were doing?

THOMPSON: Yes, how you get from here to there.

RICHARD RUSK: Getting out was always an option?

THOMPSON: Yes, it was.

RICHARD RUSK: Senator George [David] Aiken's comment was, "Let's declare the thing won and get out."

THOMPSON: Yeah, but the President feared that. And he was working for the President, and he probably feared it.

RICHARD RUSK: Now, okay. You've had a chance to think about my dad that evening, on that issue.

[break in recording]

THOMPSON: On the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], he was the one present just unyielding on that. He said it would ruin the developing countries. And Nelson Rockefeller picked up a guy and caused nothing but trouble, But your father said in congressional testimony that he would never know or hire anybody from the CIA.

RICHARD RUSK: For the Foundation?

THOMPSON: For the Foundation.

RICHARD RUSK: I see, because of the project that he offered him?

THOMPSON: Yeah, right. You know, Walters [?] is a good man who had gotten, in dealing with other countries, to believe everybody's CIA. He would think I was CIA.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he ever tell you that Allen [Welsh] Dulles in the fifties asked to have copies of the memos of conversations that Rockefeller officers had had with representatives of this country? (unintelligible)

THOMPSON: Yes, he was.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad said, "No," and it turned out that they read the mail anyway.

THOMPSON: He was like a rock on this. He never yielded. They found their own ways. You know, that must have been what he got from his father, his grandfather. I don't know how much you are getting into that. I never forget when he went back for his mother's final illness. He told us that he had never realized what a different world she lived in. He said she trusted everybody. She never had a bad word for anybody. She believed in God. She believed that God would take care of man. He said it was such a different world, and yet he almost said it with envy because all of our lives had become so much more complicated.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he ever discuss religion with you?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes.

RICHARD RUSK: He did?

THOMPSON: Never with a pretentious--

RICHARD RUSK: His personal religious views? He would discuss that with you?

THOMPSON: Only indirectly. He went to church regularly. He never criticized. One of the disasters that I had--a couple of people that I admire in my life--your father was one of them; Reinhold Niebuhr was one of them; Hans Morgenthau was another. When I got the Scarsdale Bowl once, McGeorge Bundy said I was the only person he knew in the world whose two closest friends were the number one defender of the Vietnam War and the number one critic of the war, Hans Morgenthau.

RICHARD RUSK: Interesting.

THOMPSON: But he--I can't put my finger on it. But there was no question that he believed in Providence.

RICHARD RUSK: He believed in the Deity.

THOMPSON: He believed in phrases like--and he used to use quite often--"Work like everything is depending on you. Know that in the end everything depends on God." So he was an inspiration that way. I was writing, and at a lot of foundations I would have been buried by people who had no sympathy. I was writing about religions and politics, ethics and politics. And he encouraged me. He didn't tell me to stick a Rockefeller label on it, but he encouraged it. He encouraged other people. And he was very proud of the program we had in moral and legal political philosophy. I ran that when I first came. He had lots of thinkers. He sat in on all the selection committee meetings. That's another action that disproves Schlesinger's view, because the scholars knew he was an equal. He had read as much as they had read. And he knew this was a first rate (unintelligible).

END OF SIDE 2

