

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

Rusk OO: Part 3 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 NN: Part 2; Rusk PP: Part 4; Rusk QQ: Part 5.

BUNDY: On that Monday night, then, that the Senate was informed about them [34A raids] and they pointed out how different they were. And then some steps at least were taken to be sure that they were kept separate geographically, from the rest, you didn't suppose that there was any justification on that score for the North Vietnamese attack?

DEAN RUSK: That's correct. Again, partly because they were in the midst of an aggression against South Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, yeah, okay: no point in fighting that one--

DEAN RUSK: Well, this came up in Nuremberg. The Germans claimed that their invasion of Norway was to prevent the British from seizing Norway, and the court held that that was nonsense, that an aggressor cannot claim preventative self-defense in the course of committing aggression. But there's another point about the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Senator [Wayne Lyman] Morse, who voted against it, charged at the time that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was an unconstitutional evasion of the war powers of Congress. Now it's true that that resolution did not contain a declaration of war in the technical sense, but surely it was an exercise of the war powers of Congress. If the Congress can declare war, surely they're able to take other measures short of declaring war that would be within the constitutional powers of Congress. In any event, when Morse raised that question, nobody else except Senator [Ernest] Gruening of Alaska seemed to agree with him in the entire Congress. So I never had any doubt about the constitutionality of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

RICHARD RUSK: I think the importance of the Gulf of Tonkin is the association it has with what came to be referred to as the credibility gap. This needs to be addressed.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I'd like to make a brief statement on that that some people don't like. I'd be glad to see some responsible institution like Brookings or the Columbia School of Journalism do an in-depth study, since World War II, on the relative credibility in foreign affairs (I'm not going to get into Watergate), the relative credibility in foreign affairs among the executive branch of the government, the legislative branch of the government, the news media, and the universities. And I would bet anybody, sight unseen, a thousand dollars that the executive branch of the government would come out on top in that study of relative credibility.

RICHARD RUSK: We could concede that point and still have problems with credibility with one specific policy and especially credibility problems with decisions that were made in the course of that policy and the way they were passed on to the public. That's, that's the thing--

DEAN RUSK: Okay, but it's important not to just generalize about credibility. Let's take a look at specific ones, and see what the for-instances would be.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, when did you fellows--When did the administration first think seriously and talk seriously about introducing American combat forces in Vietnam?

BUNDY: Do you want to talk about ground forces or do you want to talk about the possibility of bombing?

RICHARD RUSK: Uh, ground forces. When was it seriously on your minds to the point where it's not simply a matter of boxing the options but it's a very realistic alternative that you were considering?

BUNDY: I wouldn't have said that there was any serious thought of this before November [or] December [1964] as something that might happen, but even then the primary course of action being considered was the bombing.

RICHARD RUSK: It's '63?

DEAN RUSK: '64.

BUNDY: '64.

DEAN RUSK: I think it was not really until we were faced with so many units of the regular forces of North Vietnam coming down the trail that we talked seriously about putting in significant American combat ground forces.

BUNDY: Which isn't to say that there weren't, as there had been for years, SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] contingency Plans 4, 5, and 6, and all that sort of thing. So [plans] existed on paper. But they existed in a very different context.

RICHARD RUSK: One of the major, I think the major, question of credibility in Vietnam was Lyndon Johnson's pre-election statements as opposed to his performance two or three months later. And we did allude to this earlier. When he did make his statement that was lifted, perhaps out of context, from one or two speeches? I don't remember there being any clarifiers. I don't remember the administration or any of its top officials having back grounded to the press saying, "That's not quite the situation. We really have to keep our options open. We might possibly have to introduce combat forces." That miscue of his was allowed to play.

BUNDY: Well, it was allowed in a sense to play. But if I may I would like to inject a personal note in which you figure, Dean. You may not recall this specifically, but I certainly recall your part in it. I had been speaking in Tokyo on September 28, Tokyo time, which is the 27th in

Washington time. And I included in my speech a statement that we did not wish a wider war, but that if the other side kept pressing we might be forced to stronger action. It was some kind of language of that sort, which at that time and since at least early September, was boiler plate (that is, standard). That speech of mine happened to be reported on the same day that the President said what he said in New Hampshire, and the headlines interpreted and picked out that one bit. Concurrently, I had given the backgrounder there in Tokyo in which I said, "Yes, of course we had contingent plans for this kind of thing" which was what we had been saying to the press in Washington for a long while. That was picked up and reported verbatim by Robert Trumbull in the Times. So I literally went through a few days there when I wondered whether my stay in the administration was going to be, as I put it in my manuscript, "of record brevity." Then I came back and I went to see you right away, Dean, and I said, "Was I out of line? What gives?" And you looked at me and you said you understood why I had said what I had, and not to worry about it.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you catch hell from LBJ?

DEAN RUSK: No. But Richie, I think the key answer to your question is that if anyone went through the experience that I did later on in the sixties when I was still in office, to look at the totality of what Lyndon Johnson had said about Vietnam during the campaign of '64, there would have been no credibility problem, no attempt of deception. But the critics, you see, pick out a few sentences or paragraphs here and there, and harp on that, and forget about everything else that he said.

RICHARD RUSK: But, again, that impression did go out. And again, the press may have lifted out of context Lyndon Johnson's remark about American boys not going to fight a war for Asian boys and that type of thing. But that impression was allowed to play; it was not corrected by the government. Again, you know it was on the eve of an election and--

DEAN RUSK: Well, Bill Bundy did his best to correct it. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, you participated in it a little bit too, and apparently [Warren I.] Cohen brings it out in his book. And there's a few quotes in there where you went along with that line. I won't say you did it with the same degree of enthusiasm that Lyndon Johnson did. But that impression was, I believe, allowed to play, and the people went to the polls thinking that Lyndon Johnson would not send American boys to fight a land war in Asia. That later changed and that had deadly effects on later policy.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I've said all I can say on that, and that is that those who single out certain sentences without looking at all that he said are simply guilty of fraud, whether it's the news media, or whoever it might be.

RICHARD RUSK: That's a legitimate point. At the time that all this went on, do you remember being concerned about it in government, the fact that this impression was going out and yet you knew what possibly may be in store for us?

DEAN RUSK: Well, let me point out that in the summer and fall of 1964 it was very much our own hope that we would not have to put substantial American combat forces into Vietnam. I mean, after all, we were living with the approximate number of forces that President Kennedy authorized. We were still at that point, trying to put the South Vietnamese into position to win this themselves, so that none of us wanted to put more forces into Vietnam. But then when the North Vietnamese built up their forces, we had to face that.

RICHARD RUSK: Conceding that point, again, do you recall, within government, discussing this perhaps misleading impression that went out prior to the election, and perhaps what you might try to do about it, or what problems that might cause for the future? How did you fellows not at the Presidential level feel about it?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall much discussion of that at the time. WB - I don't recall any either. Really, I never saw the full text of what the President had said. And I just didn't know what sort of thing this could be. It is important there to note the extensive consideration that had been given within the government, and that was basically no secret to the informed press, to the possibility of bombing North Vietnam. The President had made a statement in February about their playing a very dangerous game if they kept coming, words to that effect. [Robert Strange] McNamara had said in a speech in March--and I worked on that speech, and you cleared it, and went over it with Pierre [Emil George Salinger]--that we might at some point have to look at the possibility of stronger action. [Senator James William] Fulbright said it himself, and said it with apparent approval, in a speech almost identical with McNamara's in Time, about March 25 or 26, '64. Then again in May and early June, you may remember Dean, that along the way there when you went to the [Jawaharlal] Nehru funeral you and I went on via Bangkok and Saigon to a session in Honolulu at which we looked hard at the possibility and decided that it would not be recommended to the President.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

BUNDY: And then there was a brief period in June when we looked at the possibility that the President should go the Congress with some kind of a resolution. That was staffed-out and looked at, but that was rejected at the time by the President. I don't know, perhaps you can throw light, Dean, on whether there was any private discussion with the President about that at the time. It just seemed to emerge from the Oval Office that this wasn't the way we were going to go because we didn't have a clear action plan or any clear action intent and that it would simply get everybody all excited with no clear purpose.

DEAN RUSK: Bear in mind, Richard, that in 1964 there was every evidence of pretty broad support, both among the people and in Congress, for Vietnam and for the more or less moderate view that we were taking toward it. We did not want a larger war, but we've got to do what is necessary. And so there was no particular reason why we should get overly concerned because some of the protesters were trying to make a big point of this.

RICHARD RUSK: Yet, my impression is that the summer and fall of '64 was not a period of optimism, at least as far as Vietnam was concerned. The war was not going well, and our intelligence estimates were suggesting that, "We're in for quite a haul here: Our side is certainly

not winning; they might not be losing." But the future looked bleak. And within that context--and I think I'm right in assuming that that's what the context was--again, how could that impression go out in the fall that--

DEAN RUSK: You said that the American people went to the polls in '64 thinking that we were not going to make a larger war in Southeast Asia. But the American people did not go to the polls in '64 thinking that we were just going to abandon South Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Granted, granted.

BUNDY: No, it's fascinating if you look back to the book about the campaign by Theodore [Harold] White, *The Making of the President: 1964*, there is almost no reference to Vietnam. It got tangled up in another respect later on when Goldwater made some rather reckless remarks about possible use of nuclear weapons.

DEAN RUSK: Defoliating North Vietnam with nuclear weapons, things like that.

BUNDY: What with refuting those statements with the mushroom cloud advertisement and the other things of the period, inevitably, I suppose, there may have been in some minds the confusion. But I don't think any analyst of the '64 election would say that a significant number of people voted on the basis that nothing more would be done in Vietnam. I just don't think that stands up analytically.

DEAN RUSK: They certainly didn't vote on the basis that we were going to pull out of Vietnam.

BUNDY: No, it's a hindsight business. And the gut point, Dean, which I think you implied but I think it would help to have the answer on the record is, are you aware of any time in 1964 at which you believed Lyndon Johnson had, in his own mind, made the decision that we would turn to stronger action?

DEAN RUSK: No. This is one of the complaints I have about the commentaries written by the so-called analysts in the Pentagon Papers, because in one of their pieces about this they said that our administration had come to a consensus in the summer of '64 to start the bombing of North Vietnam. Well, now, you can't have a consensus on a matter of that sort that does not include the President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense; and there was no such consensus in the summer of '64. Indeed, it was not until February of the following year that we began the bombing of North Vietnam. And that was several months after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and four months after the '64 election.

BUNDY: What role did the Pleiku incident have in that?

DEAN RUSK: Pleiku was the basis for a retaliatory strike in February against North Vietnam, but that was looked upon at the time as a tit-for-tat retaliation. It was not yet a systematic bombing effort. Then when we saw the build-up of traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we went into much more systematic bombing beginning in March. From there on it developed as an interdiction.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me pursue that for a minute. As I recall, you were out of action at the time of the Pleiku thing. You had a flu or something like that--

DEAN RUSK: I was having the flu or something. We were off in Florida and George [Wildman] Ball sat in for me.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. While you were in Florida. Did you consult directly with the President at that time, or with George Ball?

DEAN RUSK: I might have had a conversation or two with George, but I did not have direct conversation with the President. After all, I was on an open telephone down there. And my practice was that when I was away on a foreign trip, or in this case, when I was away ill, that the Acting Secretary, in this case George Ball, had my full authority and knew that he was on his own and need not look over his shoulder at me.

BUNDY: Let me backtrack still further. Because you will well recall that about three days before the election of '64, there was the attack on the Bien Hoa airfield with our B-57s caught on the ground with inadequate local security which was supposed to be supplied by the Vietnamese. And the President decided not to react to that. Can you throw light? Because there had been within government at that time a national security memorandum saying that if there was another incident directed sharply at American forces, similar perhaps to the DeSoto patrols whether on land or sea, we would probably respond in the same way. But we didn't do so at Bien Hoa. Was the election timing decisive?

DEAN RUSK: Well, it might have had something to do with it. But it's also true that Lyndon Johnson did not at any time rush into the escalation of the war. He took a lot of time over it, and when he made a decision he wanted it executed immediately. But he wasn't looking for a larger war. Except for the men and women who carried the battle in their families, I don't know of anyone who agonized over Vietnam more than Lyndon Johnson. And so if he decided to, in effect, brush aside this attack on the airfield down there that you're talking about, this was not untypical of him when particular instances came up and the recommendations or the urges might be to go ahead and blow this thing wide open, because he didn't want to blow it any wider open than he had to.

BUNDY: Then you get a similar thing when the Brink's officers' barracks in Saigon was dynamited and several officers were killed on December 27th. And again, in that case Max [Maxwell Davenport] Taylor in the field, indeed Max had also recommended retaliation for the Bien Hoa incident, but this time he did it rather fervently and was turned down. And I think the President was then, at least briefly, in Texas. I'm not sure where he was.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think, again, it was part of LBJ's general attitude to make decisions in terms of the general overall strategy and purpose of the struggle, and not to react to each passing incident. I mean, for example, when the Japanese landed on one or two of the Aleutian Islands at the beginning of World War II, well we didn't drop everything else to go up there and chase them off that American soil. We went on with the war, and at long last, we put a little force into the

Aleutian Islands and found that the Japanese had already evacuated. But you don't let your major purposes be diverted by, in effect, incidents of that sort, even though they might be painful at the time.

BUNDY: But Pleiku was the incident that did prompt a response?

DEAN RUSK: A retaliatory strike, because that was a rather serious attack on a position held by a considerable number of Americans.

RICHARD RUSK: And then can we talk about the actual introduction of American combat troops; that is another decision that I think the record should be full on. I know that is another example that people, in conversations at least, will cite as being a problem that they have in terms of credibility: the idea that the administration did not at least prepare the American people for this major decision. It was a change in the role of the Americans from being advisers to the role of being actually fighting as combat forces in American units. And at the time it was announced that this represented no change in policy, no real change in American role, and I think President Johnson even said that in so many words.

DEAN RUSK: I think you could say that it was not a change in policy. But there was, of course, to that extent, a change in roles. There was an additional role. But--

BUNDY: Let me clarify for the record, because I think there are two different things: One was in March when the Marines were landed--

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, March 8.

BUNDY: For peripheral defense of air bases and so on there. In April there was a slight additional step-up. The problem with credibility, some have argued, centers on late May and early June.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right.

BUNDY: When the mission was expanded to include aggressive patrolling outside the perimeters. In other words, you didn't simply sit behind your perimeter and wait for the other guy to hit. To that extent we were now forcing the battle. And that, in my own judgment--And I remember being bitten by it at the time. You had the press corps on the ground in Saigon well aware, because they were up there and could see what was happening, that this was going on, and reporting it. And then the question was asked in some different context, and a different reply came out in Washington. Certainly the press on the ground wasn't fooled at all. I agree that it was perhaps a little bit fudged, but it wasn't a deception of the press in the place that most counted.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, the press had to learn by events what the change of role was.

DEAN RUSK: No one should expect us to brief the public in advance of troop movements. I don't recall any increase in forces out there that was not made public at the time.

BUNDY: No, this was a change in mission, a slight change in authorized action.

DEAN RUSK: Change in the details of mission, but not a change in policy. The policy was to help South Vietnam fend off North Vietnamese aggression.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, at some point or another, American ground forces were introduced to fight on the soil of Vietnam. And you know, we went into it in stages and steps. But it seems to me that the problem we got into was that the President was not out in front, announcing his policy and being candid with its full implications. As a matter of fact, reading from your manuscript, Mr. Bundy, the impression that you had at the time, I think, was that there was some uncertainty within the administration over this lack of candor. And I remember your words, "This unwillingness of the President to step forward and announce has cast a shadow on his group of advisers."

BUNDY: Well, let me say, part of that might have been hindsight judgment. I don't recall being especially concerned about it at the time, except on this one essentially rather small point of early June. But that gets you to the June-July policy review and the decision to very markedly increase the troop level and the way that was dealt with. And along the way, Dean--and this is a general question--a lot of people--and I may say I, myself, have come to believe this--feel that Johnson's policy in informing the public at this point was in part influenced by the very strong desire he had to get the major authorizing measures of the Great Society through Congress. He had vividly in mind the picture of [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt in 1933, that you only had so long to make major changes of this sort, and that you needed to get your structure in place in the form of the authorizing legislation. And the last thing in the world, I always felt at the time, that he wanted was to be forced into major new decisions on Vietnam while this was going on. And, my question to you, Dean, is, did he ever talk to you in this sense? Did you get any, as it were, direct evidence that that was very much on his mind?

DEAN RUSK: He didn't talk to me about the interrelationship between the Great Society and Vietnam. I would add, however, that no President has kept in touch with Congressional leaders more than did Lyndon Johnson. The record will show that he had more communication with the Congress than any President in our history before or since. And some of it would be meetings in the White House, some of it would be telephone calls to individuals. I'm sure he called Senator Dick Russell, for example, several times a week during that period. And so, I'm sure he was aware of the interconnection between these two situations. But, you see, we had strong support in the Congress at this time. Bear in mind, and this bears a little bit on a question that Tom raised, the American people are not the Commander-in-Chief, and they do not make decisions about strategy in time of conflict. The American people played no role, for example, in our deciding along with the British that we should give first priority to the European theater in the war against Hitler and any secondary priority to the war against Japan. These are not things that the public decides. Now, it's true that when you take action, you should inform the public, because they will be informed anyhow, and you should inform them. But to take them into your confidence, if such were possible, in advance of decisions is simply not in the cards.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember advising President Johnson on this matter of how to present this change in role to the public? Do you remember advising him? Do you remember being troubled by his response?

DEAN RUSK: No, not particularly, because, to me it was of no particular concern. Because, although the fellows on the ground out there were doing some things that they had not been doing before, the policy remained the same, we were trying to assist South Vietnam to defend itself. The policy was there.

RICHARD RUSK: But the policy changed dramatically somewhere along the line. When we introduced American ground forces in spring of 1965, we went from aggressive patrolling to the next step up and to the next step up.

DEAN RUSK: And each step was known to the American public.

RICHARD RUSK: Through events, because the press reported, but never really by definitive Presidential statement.

SCHOENBAUM: But let me ask this: At some point didn't you feel that while you had public support for this step, for this step, and for this step, at some point this policy of gradualism would lead you to get too far out in front of what the American people were going to support you on? Isn't that basically what happened, that people supported the war in Vietnam, but at some point, and of course it varied for various people, they started getting off the train, as it were, and that was the tragedy?

DEAN RUSK: Well I think the decisive change in public opinion occurred in late '67 and the first half of '68 when the casualty figures continued to come in every day. The Vietnam struggle was on television, in everybody's living room every day, and we could not tell the American people when this struggle was going to be over.

RICHARD RUSK: And they foresaw the next step.

DEAN RUSK: A good many people at the grass roots simply concluded that if we couldn't tell them when it was going to be over, which we could not with any fidelity, then we might as well chuck it. I think that occurred not until, really, the first half of 1968. Now you had protesters over that, but they weren't the grass roots of the American people.

BUNDY: I would put it a little earlier, Dean, because I would have said at the beginning in about June of '67 there was a lot of talk in the press about stalemate, and that--

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BUNDY: By the summer of '67 there was this talk, but within the administration from the President on down. And there may have been some lowest levels, or pretty low levels who disagreed, but it was the honest conviction that we were making headway. This was my own impression. My own recollection is in what I've said in the [William Childs] Westmoreland case, and on many other occasions. You did have a problem in the sense that the talk of stalemate was rising. You had a rising tide of serious objection coming at you from many quarters by the summer of 1967, I would say, and that's where you began to run into the sense that there was no way of saying, "Look, we're moving fast enough to say that it'll be under control within a particular prescribed period." I don't think that could have been said.

DEAN RUSK: There's one point that I might mention here; perhaps I mentioned it somewhere else, Richie. We gave some consideration to sending the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution back to the Congress every year for an up or down vote in the Congress about what our policy in Vietnam should be to hold the feet to the fire of the Congress to this matter. Well, President Johnson talked to some of the Congressional leaders about this and they strongly advised him not to do it. They told him that the resolution would pass but with not as good a majority as it had at the beginning, that he ought to live with the resolution that he already had and not come back every year. In retrospect, I still think that it might have been better for us to put that to the Congress each year so that we would have a clear view in the executive branch as to what the view of the Congress was on this matter as a corporate body. I think we let the Congress--But you know as late as 1966, Senator Morse made a, put in a resolution to rescind the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and there was a motion to table his motion, and he only got five votes in the entire Senate in behalf of his resolution, against tabling. The rest of them voted it right out of the ballpark. Now, bear in mind, Richard, that through much of this period, the principal criticisms we had from Capitol Hill came from the hawks, not the doves: from those who wanted to do a lot more in terms of the use of force out there. And we had to, since we did not want a wider war--because we had a wider war than we wanted anyhow--we had to fend off that kind of criticism. It might be interesting to note here that during some of this period, from about '64 to '67 or so, Bob [Robert Strange] McNamara got the reputation of being a kind of dove and I got the reputation of being a kind of hawk. Well, this was directly related to the two audiences we were speaking to. When he went before the Armed Services Committee down on the Congress and stated the administration view, he sounded like a dove among all those hawks on those two committees. But when I went down to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to state the same administration view, I sounded like a hawk because there were doves there to take me on, you see. So part of this was the difference in our two audiences.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Now McNamara has said since that in--He said in Times, according to Times, was saying--By 1967 he, I think his words were that he concluded that the war could not be won, that the numbers--He said, "There is something wrong with the numbers." He said that to the Congress, the numbers part of it, but he never said that to you?

DEAN RUSK: He never said that to me personally.

BUNDY: No, that's an important point. I should have made an exception when I said the administration from the President on down, at least senior levels, believed that we were making

headway as of the summer and fall of 1967. I think, in hindsight, that was not the private view that Secretary McNamara had, from all the testimony and all else at the time. John [T.] McNaughton--John McNaughton died in July '67, and recall he would occasionally say, "Gosh, it's just not working the way it should." But that's not the same as saying that we weren't making some headway. And I never talked to McNamara, either, in any sense where he expressed himself as firmly as he has done in later years about his feelings at the time. Let me go back and I guess we can, perhaps, break at that point and then come back to talk a little for the record about the decision announced on July 28, 1965 for the big troop increase.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

RICHARD RUSK: 125,000.

BUNDY: And I think the written record with which you're surely familiar is pretty clear on the memoranda of late June and early July. I had one and George Ball had a more important one forthrightly urging that we find a way to get out. I was for a sort of middle "hold on for a time" posture for a short while, although I had changed my view by July 28. And you had a memorandum, Dean, to the President at that time which I suspect was decisive. And did you have other conversations with him, as it were, one on one?

DEAN RUSK: Oh yes, I--you see, both with Kennedy and Johnson, we would talk about Southeast Asia in between times. I mean, standing on the White House lawn waiting for some visiting VIP to arrive, or at a White House party of some sort, or anything of that sort. Many times we had a chance to chat informally about Southeast Asia, so there was a lot of give and take there in between and around these memoranda.

BUNDY: In my mind, and I think historians tend to agree, the decision of July 28 divides into two parts: the decision in principle that Westmoreland should have the forty-four battalions, that such strength additions should go in, that was made about July 17 or 18 before McNamara had actually returned from Saigon, at least the record would lend itself to that conclusion. But then you may recall, Dean, there was a meeting on the 21st at which the Pentagon recommendations included a call-up of the reserves and a major supplemental appropriation. And then over the weekend there was a reconsideration and some new staff work was done. And McNamara came back and said, "We can do what Westmoreland wants without these measures." And the President then, in, as it were, expounding the options, in effect added this option and endorsed it. Were you consulted, as I assume you were, between those two? Because it was a significant change both in the form of the decision and particularly in the way it was presented to the country--to drop the two measures that would have required congressional action. And that could have had, in the case of the call-up of the reserves, a significant additional impact on the public? Can you throw light on how that change came about?

DEAN RUSK: I think, in part, some of us, including myself, were concerned that if we called up reserves and National Guard, that then our strategic reserve would be drawn down to practically zero. And we had to be prepared for the possibility of another round of crisis over Berlin or something of that sort, some crisis in NATO. And I was very reluctant to see us draw down the strategic reserves to that point. But, secondly, I was concerned about whether or not that kind of

increase in American forces would, in effect, say to the South Vietnamese, "Okay, fellows, you can relax now because we've taken over the war." And how to introduce larger American forces and still sustain an increased effort by the South Vietnamese was quite a problem. And there were South Vietnamese leaders, you will recall Bill, who worried about the same point.

BUNDY: Sure, periodically, sure.

DEAN RUSK: And so this was not an easy decision to make. And--

RICHARD RUSK: Did the South Vietnamese regime ever request the introduction of American ground forces in a major way? Wasn't that part of the problem? Wasn't that a question of some embarrassment for our side that they never really asked?

BUNDY: I think you couldn't have any real doubt. Certainly at this period there was no doubt they wanted them very badly. I don't know that we ever got a written statement to that effect, but there was never a problem that worried me inside. It worried me, perhaps that we hadn't ever got a specific document along the way, but not otherwise.

DEAN RUSK: Well, there's no question that those various leaders there in South Vietnam wanted us to take additional action whenever we decided to step up our own action. We never had any opposition from them. There was some discussion do you remember, back earlier?

BUNDY: Way back with [Nguyen] Khanh and before that with [Ngo Dinh] Diem.

DEAN RUSK: In the early sixties about what the impact would be about the increased presence of American forces in Vietnam.

BUNDY: Diem was not keen on it, nor were we. So it was not a difference of view then.

DEAN RUSK: You see, they still had fresh in their memory, the memory of the French colonial war. And they did not want anything that appeared to be a revival of anything that smacked of colonialism. A large American presence there gave them some concern at the beginning, but then when the North Vietnamese effort stepped up as it did, those fears disappeared into the woodwork.

RICHARD RUSK: What about at this time, didn't Khanh want to invade North Vietnam? And didn't Khanh ask the Americans to consider invading North Vietnam at this time?

BUNDY: This would have been in the spring of '64 when he was in charge.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, '64, '65. Khanh was very shaky, in and out months before that.

BUNDY: But I don't recall Khanh--Dean, you may recall--

SCHOENBAUM: What about [Nguyen Cao] Ky or [Nguyen Van] Thieu? Did they want to invade the north?

BUNDY: I don't recall any time that they ever mentioned that, and if they did they certainly would have got short shrift.

DEAN RUSK: Well, there was some discussion of it, I remember, and from some of the Vietnamese. But the big question in my mind was whether South Vietnam itself was strong enough to bear the impact of that kind of an increase in the war effort if the North Vietnamese and possibly the Chinese stepped up the ante substantially. And there was a military memorandum I remember once, Bill, maybe you can help me recall it, which discussed the invasion of North Vietnam by our ground forces. In this memorandum it said, "We do not believe that the Chinese will come in. But, of course, if they do come in, that would mean nuclear war." Well, now in a military memorandum that was just a piece of fine print, but for something that the President is reading, that sentence just pops out of the page at him. You see? And it's a very different thing to let this struggle in Vietnam become a nuclear war between ourselves and China.

RICHARD RUSK: Harry Truman was presented with one of those papers one time and he said, "Well you just go back and get me some more options," something like that.

BUNDY: Well, I don't recall a precise paper of that sort, but that was indeed the thrust of some, at least of the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] contingency plans: that of course you could defend only so far by forces you put on the ground, and then you go to nuclear war. And that line of thought, in effect a carryover from the old Eisenhower period, was present in the plans that existed in some of the early 1960s periods. But I don't recall it in the '65 time frame.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Secretary George [Catlett] Marshall once told me after the war that you must never expect a general to think he has enough. With a little smile, he said that his rough rule of thumb in World War II was to give a general half the resources he asked for and then double his mission; and that rule of thumb worked out pretty well. Now, when we talked about throwing a defensive line across Laos, to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the ground, the bill put in by the military for the additional forces that we needed for that just went out through the sky. As a matter of fact, I think one thing we might have done better in Vietnam was to make better use of the Vietnamese. In Korea, we gave General [Douglas] MacArthur seven divisions and said, "Now that's all you're going to get." And so he fleshed out those forces with a lot of Koreans, right down to the rifle squads. There were times when an American division in Korea would have seven thousand Koreans in it. And that not only fleshed out our own manpower, but also left behind a group of pretty experienced and well-trained Koreans for the formation of a Korean army. We couldn't get our military in Vietnam to go down that trail very far in terms of using South Vietnamese in backing up American units. I couldn't even get Westmoreland to agree to use South Vietnamese truck drivers in quartermaster units trucking supplies to American forces in the field. All these things we had to do all on our own.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you feel that the military's reason for that opposition was valid? Their point of view was that the Vietcong had infiltrated virtually every level and aspect of that society.

DEAN RUSK: Well there was some possibility of that, but in terms of many of the things that were involved, trucking supplies and things of that sort, that would not have been much of a consideration. No, there's been a kind of a tradition in our military that they want to do things themselves, with our own forces. I can remember at the end of World War II, after V-E [Victory in Europe] day the British were ready to send their navy out to the Pacific to take part in the war against Japan. Our navy resisted that. They didn't want the British navy horsing around out there and getting in the way. We wanted to do it ourselves. Well, this is a cast of mind of some of the military people that I have never fully appreciated.

RICHARD RUSK: Is this a good place to quit?

DEAN RUSK: I thought today we might take advantage of the presence of my friend and colleague William [Putnam] Bundy to reflect a bit on some of the lessons learned from the Vietnam experience. I suggest this not in terms of simply rehashing the past, but in trying to identify some questions which deserve further study by the State and Defense Departments, by the war colleges, by civilian colleges and universities, to see whether we can clarify any such problems which might arise in the future.

We've already talked about certain lessons, for example, the rather casual way in which we entered the Southeast Asia Treaty. There was not far-reaching public discussion, not even long-term deliberations in the United States Senate. It was done quickly and without real attention. Now, to commit the United States to take action in common defense with an ally is a very serious step, and it should be taken only after full consideration of all the elements involved. So that would be number one.

I further made reference to the gradualism with which we responded to the North Vietnamese attack and raised the questions as to whether when President Kennedy decided to put American troops into South Vietnam, he should had not have started with a real body of troops, say 100,000, to try and make as clear as possible, and as early as possible, to the North Vietnamese that we would take this very seriously. There is the possibility that by our gradual response, we always left it open to the authorities in Hanoi to think that if they just did somewhat more, that we might not. And that is something which needs to be considered.

And I think there's another important point: Vietnam was the first armed struggle which was fought on television in everyone's living room every day. One shudders to think what might have happened in World War II if Guadalcanal, and the Anzio beachhead, and the Battle of the Bulge were on television every day and the other side was not doing the same thing. War is the principal obscenity on the face of the human race, and it's horrible, whatever else one says about it. And so, I'm inclined to think that if the Congress, God forbid, ever has to take up this kind of situation again, that it should pay attention to censorship from the very beginning. I don't pretend to have a clear and specific answer as to what kind of censorship that might be, but at least the kind of censorship that was present in World War II.

And perhaps we ought to give some thought to what is done about fake stories filed out of a war zone. There was a lot of that going on in, during Vietnam. For example, a television camera and reporter would go to a deserted village which was being used as a Marine training base, and they

gave a cigarette lighter to a Marine and asked him to light the thatched roof of one of these huts, and he did on camera. And that went around the country as an example of the Marines burning down a local village.

I remember another picture that went all over the country: a picture taken out of the door of a helicopter of a poor old woman with her hands folded in prayerful petition begging to get on to the helicopter. Well, that picture went all over the country with the caption, "U.S. Forces Refuse to Evacuate Old Woman." Well, I had that checked into and found that if that cameraman had just turned his camera 90 degrees, he would have had a picture of a helicopter filled with old women, and the caption didn't point out that if he'd gotten himself off the helicopter, that old woman could have gotten on. So there's a problem about how far we go in a wartime situation in permitting such a wide range of fake pictures and fake stories coming out of a war situation. I don't know, I don't have the answer. But this question of censorship is one I think that must be addressed if we ever get into some such situation again. Bill, what do you think of these points I've just made and would you like to go on from there and add one or two of your own?

BUNDY: I think they are excellent. Let me just give the gist of something that I can send along if anybody wants it. I had occasion to speak at West Point in the spring of '83, and I led off by saying that most of the speeches I've given, particularly in campus situations, have been on why did we get into this, why did successive administrations, and basically the Congress, support this and believe it was the right thing to do, and so on; whereas I thought the question on the minds of the cadets at West Point must be "Why didn't we win?"

And I made three rather broad points. One was that I thought we erred, and this was an error that went back into the fifties but that wasn't corrected as soon as I wish it had been in the sixties, in not developing much of a real cadre of people immersed in Vietnamese society. We had diplomats chosen for their command of French, which was indeed the language that helped with the top people. But we didn't have people who knew Vietnamese, and we didn't start systematic substantial training on that until we were pretty well already in in '65 or even later. And I think that could have made quite a difference in our grasp of what was going on in the country and our whole feel for it, its political life and so on, in which we were never as effective as I think we might have been. In fact we were pretty ineffective a good deal of the time. And that was point one. And I remarked that if we were supposed to be an imperialist and colonialist nation we didn't act like it. That was a fairly broad and general point and applied on the civilian side. And on the military side, in some ways the military were a little better at this, but in the latter stages, certainly, the groups we sent out that were Vietnamese language-trained were immensely valuable in a great many cases. That was point one.

Point two is something that does not appear in the record, but it is an essential backdrop: If you look at the thing cold-bloodedly, in hindsight at any rate, and ask yourself when the time to start moving to stronger action might have been, I think you place that time some time in 1964.

DEAN RUSK: Late '64 and early '65.

BUNDY: Well, I would even put it sooner.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I see, you would put it sooner than that.

BUNDY: I'd just put it sooner than that on strategic grounds, Dean.

DEAN RUSK: Right.

BUNDY: About the time that we sent that first Seaborne mission up to Hanoi in June of '64. This was the Canadian who agreed to serve as an interlocutor.

RICHARD RUSK: Yes.

BUNDY: I thought that if you had a clear board and Bismarck in charge, or whoever you wish-- Don't pick Bismarck, necessarily, but somebody who didn't have to worry about politics or anything of that sort, or elections--that that would have been strategically the right time to start putting the pressure on the North. And if we'd done it in a determined way, maybe we'd have persuaded them they had to at least pull back at that time. But that was simply out of the question. And this is the point that I haven't seen covered quite as much as it should be. It was out of the question, not particularly because of the nature of the 1964 campaign or the fact that Goldwater emerged as the opposition candidate, but because, essentially, President Johnson at that time--and people forget this very much, I think--was still in the throes of taking over, still regarded as a successor who had to earn his own spurs. He was not in a strong personal position to get into this kind of thing. And so I would regard it as at least extraordinarily difficult, not for him to react as he did at the Gulf of Tonkin, but for him to take a determined initiative. That has to do with our political system, partly because it was an election year, but especially because he was in the position of being a President who did not as yet have a personal mandate at that period. Well, that's debatable, but I think it's a point that's neglected. You don't find it in the papers, but it was almost palpable in the atmosphere as I look back on it.

The third point is one that I later found was one that some of the thoughtful military people have now been saying. If you asked what might an alternative military strategy have been, I find myself drawn to a strategy that, to the best of my knowledge, was never really seriously put forward. Indeed it would have been quite antithetic to the way the military thought in that period, and, indeed, thinks generally about the undesirability of static defenses.

Specifically, suppose that in '64 we'd made the case that the guts of the whole thing was what was coming down from the north--and that case was very strong--and said that we were going to put a "cordon sanitaire," a barrier, right across just below the seventeenth parallel, and were going to extend it into Laos so that it, in effect, could not be outflanked short of the Mekong River. It would have been a very large undertaking. It would have involved--and this is a question we were discussing yesterday--our quite overtly breaching the neutrality of Laos, and would have involved intense disapproval, I'm sure, at least at the outset, from Souvanna Phouma. But if you ask yourself, would it not have been possible to create a line if you had put in all the engineering equipment you knew how, and, say, somewhere between four and six divisions to man a line of that sort, I think you could have done it. Of course, you'd have had to have naval forces, too, to interdict anything coming down by sea. But in the end you would simply have

blocked the north from intervening. That's a line of thought I think has been developed in a book by Colonel Harry [G.] Summers of the Army War College.

But of course that's utter hindsight, because to the best of my knowledge, nobody even suggested that kind of thing until we got into the so-called Jason Project, I think about 1966, which is a lot of sensors and things of that sort. But it wasn't a thoroughgoing defense. Those are three points I made in that West Point speech.

DEAN RUSK: Yes. Now, in retrospect, it seems that there were a number of questions on the military side which should have been looked at. For example, we did not have the unity of command in Vietnam, even among the Americans. The battle in the south was being handled by General Westmoreland; the bombing of the far north and North Vietnam was under the command of CINCPAC, Commander in Chief, Pacific, in Honolulu; and the B-52s remained under the operational control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington. Now, in addition, Westmoreland did not have direct command of the Vietnamese or other allied forces that were in Vietnam, such as the Koreans, and the Australians, and so forth. One effect of that disunity of command was that each headquarters tended to think that it would win the war itself, by its own means, its own programs. And that put a good deal of pressure on Washington from CINCPAC in Honolulu about the bombing program in the north. They were going to win this war by bombing the far north. I must confess that there were times when I felt that the impact of the bombing in the far north on the outcome of the war was perhaps not worth the cost in terms of men and planes that that bombing entailed. But all of the effort out there should have been, in my judgment, under a single command so that the resources could be concentrated on the primary mission, which was to keep North Vietnam from overrunning South Vietnam by force. I mentioned that once to Bob McNamara, but he told me that he had too many other things before the Joint Chiefs of Staff to deal with. He didn't want to add that one to it at that time. And, I think that's a matter that.

BUNDY: Well, that's a current issue, too, Dean, of course. General [David Charles] Jones, when he stepped out of the Joint Chiefs, made recommendations to tighten the military commands, structures, and lines of command. Always that gets on to the issue, do you want a more powerful chairman? Are you going to have a German general staff? I happen to think the advantages of the tightening would far outweigh any such dangers.

END OF SIDE 2