

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

The complete interview also includes Rusk NNN: Part 1.

THOMPSON: The other thing that I think I ought to say is--because I think this tells the whole Vietnam story in a way. After this Bermuda conference, the conferees picked an official delegation of three: General [Matthew B.] Ridgway, Charlie [Charles Woodruff] Yost--have you heard this?

RICHARD RUSK: I remember Ridgway. Going to the White House, was it?

THOMPSON: No, he went to your father's office.

RICHARD RUSK: Go ahead. Give me a little description of it and how it was set up.

THOMPSON: This was wild. It was a two-day conference. It was in Bermuda and it had been stormy, so some people got there late. The more outspoken critics dominated it for a while and then--

RICHARD RUSK: When was this held?

THOMPSON: I think 1967.

RICHARD RUSK: Who were the sponsors of it?

THOMPSON: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Joe [Joseph Esrey] Johnson was the other one: Charlie Yost, General Ridgway, and Joe Johnson. They were the official delegation that were going to see your father. But then they said in the meeting, "Ken Thompson knows Dean Rusk best. Why don't we send him ahead to soften him up first. You give him a report on the discussion and tell him what you think and then we'll come with the official view." It's the only time I was sent as an envoy to your father. I don't get into that kind of thing, never did get into that kind of thing. Your father was very gracious: four [o'clock] in the afternoon he saw me, we had a drink--two drinks I guess. And I told him everything that had been said at the meeting: mounting criticism and worry that the Vietnam effort had gotten out of hand, and all the arguments against Vietnam. And he said, "I agree with everything you say. But now tell me what you want me to do tomorrow morning." He learned that from George [Catlett] Marshall. He used to tell us that that was what Marshall did. But it fit, and I was speechless. I didn't have any suggestions.

RICHARD RUSK: You didn't have anything?

THOMPSON: I didn't have anything to tell him. Now, you can justify that by saying how could I, never having read the cables, but--

RICHARD RUSK: Did he ask you back, to come back with some suggestions?

THOMPSON: No, because I think he knew I didn't have any. He was willing to look at things like that. But still, he believed nations had to hang together and--

RICHARD RUSK: What I've asked you to do with that question, kind of, is to write my book.

THOMPSON: Sure.

RICHARD RUSK: Just try it off the top of your head--

THOMPSON: I started to say before that I once had a small part in arranging a meeting of your father with Reinhold Niebuhr. These two were giants for me; still are. I wrote a book *Masters of International Thought* and Niebuhr is one of the eighteen thinkers. He's really the centerpiece of it. Your father and he just didn't communicate at all. Here were two people who both believed in religion and who both were hardliners in many ways.

RICHARD RUSK: Where was this meeting that you arranged between my dad and Reinhold Niebuhr?

THOMPSON: It was at Columbia University and Union Seminary.

RICHARD RUSK: Just the two of them?

THOMPSON: No, but they sat together. I had urged somebody at Columbia to invite your father when Niebuhr was to be there, or vice versa; I can't remember. I said, "Why don't you get them to sit together?" And they did. And they both told absolutely opposite stories about it. Niebuhr couldn't understand what Rusk was driving at, and Rusk couldn't understand what Niebuhr was driving at. In one sense, it was understandable for your father because he was much simpler, used simpler language. Niebuhr was hammering away at the fact that nations still are sovereign states, they are going to pursue their own interests, and that they're not all the same; that the Asian state system is not Europe and that you can't do certain things in Asia that you could in Europe. And your father held to the view that regression had to be resisted and collective security was the best hope. The same difference was apparent when they met in Washington at a conference of theorists of international relations.

RICHARD RUSK: What year would that have been? While my dad was in office?

THOMPSON: No, before. Maybe 1959 or 1960. I wrote up this--

RICHARD RUSK: A conference, September 1959, the article is named "Towards the Theory of International Politics" by Kenneth Thompson.

THOMPSON: And your father was--well, you'll see with some of the language, why your father would have been impatient with him, because while Niebuhr's language was nothing nearly as abstract as international relations writing today which your father always called "talky talk," but still, it was not his language. But the other thing that happened was Niebuhr was more conscious, I thought, than your father of the limits of American power and even then was beginning to say that in Asia we don't have the means of enforcing or imposing our will on other societies.

RICHARD RUSK: Now, how could my dad come through that CBI [China/Burma/India] experience and not be impressed with the limits on American power in Asia? I just don't understand. What did you think of [Warren I.] Cohen's book? Did it look like an accurate job to you, at least--

THOMPSON: At points. I used the Cohen book and some of its good stuff. But if he's as wrong on other things as he is on some issues about the Rockefeller Foundation, then he could well be wrong on the State Department. So I don't think it's the whole story. Your father didn't get credit at the Rockefeller Foundation for much that he initiated. He'd get even less credit with rivals at the State Department.

RICHARD RUSK: I have a question about command decision-making and guys like my dad, as humane as they are with very human qualities, getting involved in wartime decision-making and making decisions responsible for men losing their lives. In the case of Vietnam, many lives, many Vietnamese lives suffering on a vast scale, everything that war entails. What happens to a guy like Dean Rusk, who comes down this trail responsible for these decisions, what happens to him personally? What happens to policy? What happens to his sense of options, the alternatives? What's it all about?

THOMPSON: All right. He never lost his humaneness. Did you know Willard Dean who lived in Scarsdale?

RICHARD RUSK: No.

THOMPSON: Willard was in the milk business and had a son who was missing in action. Mr. Dean asked me to call your father, and your father turned over heaven and earth to find the son. He never lost his humanity where he could do something to help. He, in that sense he--

RICHARD RUSK: Did they find the boy?

THOMPSON: I think they did. They found him wounded, but I think he made it. I'm not quite sure. They moved him to a base hospital at your father's orders. They moved him to another hospital. If he lived, it was your father's doing. And, you know, he would never tell anyone about this.

RICHARD RUSK: Was Jeff McGrath killed in Vietnam?

THOMPSON: I think so.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, I remember my dad getting involved in that one somehow.

THOMPSON: His humanity never changed.

RICHARD RUSK: I don't doubt that my dad kept his sense of humanity. I'm wondering what that sense of humanity did, what it meant to him going off down that trail. Would it tend to lock a man in, knowing that every dead American was followed by another dead American, followed by more, and more, and more. And this--you know, do you reach a point where it's too late for you to turn back, knowing that if you begin to re-examine you begin to think that this is all a mistake, that these are not--do you not simply, as a policymaker, having made a mistake you're -- you know you're a murderer, you've sent men to their deaths for no purpose whatsoever. Would that pressure, would that fear, tend to lock you into a policy and tend to make it more difficult for you to keep your perspective on what was going on?

THOMPSON: It could. It could.

RICHARD RUSK: Or would it work the other way?

THOMPSON: You know, he didn't get much support. George [Wildman] Ball takes an awful lot of credit. When they open up all the records, I'll bet behind the scenes Rusk offered as many limiting the war suggestions as George Ball did, even though he was the spokesman for the policy. You father was against the Americanization of the war. That's clear. He never got credit for his restraint in the Cuban Missile Crisis, because he's hinted to me and others have told me that he was a voice against bombing, looking for an alternative. It's a hell of a way to earn a living to have to make decisions where people are being killed but--one of the things he used to talk about was what if instead of hundreds, maybe thousands, or millions of people are killed. I think he really believed if opposition went too far, why nuclear war might follow.

RICHARD RUSK: You remember his saying that?

THOMPSON: I think he was worried about the consequences. I think that politics was part of the problem. Kennedy, after all, when he went to Dallas had a speech in which he was going to tell the people of Dallas that we now are number one again. He'd said we'd be number one, and now we were number one. [McGeorge] Bundy, when he was here, said no working politician of that period could afford concessions, at least in the first term. I think that one clue to the whole thing is the political pressures. Then another clue, of course, is that cast of characters, which was unfortunate. He kept looking for leadership alternatives in Vietnam, and none of them would do. He also had to learn from scratch about this. Nobody knew about the Vietnamese.

RICHARD RUSK: He never looked back and re-examined the roots of their commitment. My dad was against that SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] commitment at its beginning. He knew that was bad law, a bad treaty, and yet it became the law of the land in '56. So he felt a need to uphold it, despite the fact that it was still a bad law, probably. I wonder if he helped get us into this situation because of too much concern about legalistic principle. You know what I mean? Too much concern with legalism.

THOMPSON: Well, he might have because he was trained in that period. Now another interesting thing about it is that he said [George Frost] Kennan and [Hans Joachim] Morgenthau went too far in their criticism of legalism and law, and yet Dean Rusk was the person who encouraged the Rockefeller Foundation to support the work of George Kennan and people like that. He didn't encourage very many, four or five or six people that he had known in government. Usually when somebody comes out they have dozens of people to whom they have made promises, but your father was discriminating. He was legally trained, and he was more disposed to recognize the legal factors than some of the others were. I think it's a great tragedy to me because I think a whole series of things closed in on all of them, and the other side didn't cooperate at all, they kept trying to open channels to negotiations. The Republicans in 1968 tried to close those channels. Nixon's emissaries tried to discourage the thing. It must not have been easy working with [Lyndon Baines] Johnson, because Johnson was a passionate man. He and your father did have common geographical background, but your father had forgotten more about foreign policy than Johnson could ever have learned. Yet his concept was, the Secretary serves the President. And he must have swallowed hard many times trying to reconcile those things.

[break in recording]

THOMPSON: Compared with your father, LBJ wasn't a very nice man. I am referring to some of the recent literature on LBJ. But in that literature, it talks about his sexual activities. But he was--(unintelligible)--party was just begun. Johnson desperate to do something he had--(unintelligible) tells about Johnson's dreams of being overrun, his grandmother being overrun, maybe that's made up, covered a lot of stories. But there must have been some things said in those discussions, just as they were among your father and some of us at (unintelligible).

RICHARD RUSK: Notes of the Tuesday luncheons? That kind of thing?

THOMPSON: He had always said that they jarred him--(unintelligible) along with their own (unintelligible).

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: My dad was a good negotiator?

THOMPSON: He was an excellent negotiator. He admired [John Foster] Dulles because Dulles was a good negotiator. He used to say Dulles was the best negotiator he had ever known. Your father did come up with some proposals for ending the war. They didn't work. The other side didn't respond. I think everybody underestimated them. He said, "They just keep coming." "I was wrong," he would say. "They won't stop at a certain point. They just kept coming. We underestimated that." But who could know that? We really don't think that foreign policy for us is like foreign policy for other countries. That's why we opposed the balance of power, and spheres of influence, and all the other things. We forget about the Monroe Doctrine, wiping out the Indians and all this. But I think that that makes it awfully hard to be a trimmer, a Halifax, to

compromise and to accept to the limits. There's not much you can do. It's much more attractive to speak loudly. Your father was a folk hero for a moment when he said that America had looked eyeball to eyeball and [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev blinked. That, Americans can understand. But they never understood some of his proposals for arms agreements. All the talk about star wars and all these things, that appeals to Americans, too--less to your generation, maybe, but to some of your generation.

RICHARD RUSK: According to Warren Cohen's *Dean Rusk*, Dorothy Fosdick's reaction to my dad's appointment as secretary was one of shock. And she felt that it wouldn't work, and there was something in his makeup that wouldn't enable it to work. She said he had a fatal flaw. I forget exactly what it was. If my dad did have a flaw that he brought with him to that job, despite all his other qualities, preparations, and training for that thing, what might it have been?

THOMPSON: I have trouble being objective about Dorothy Fosdick because your father was more responsible than anybody for getting funding for her when she left the government to do some writing. And Dorothy Fosdick was not a very easy, accessible person. She was a child of a famous parent.

RICHARD RUSK: Raymond [Blaine] Fosdick's daughter?

THOMPSON: Harry Emerson Fosdick. Then she tied herself so closely to the senator from Boeing or Lockheed, Scoop [Henry Martin] Jackson. I don't know what she means. I think the fatal flaw was in the situation, not in Dean Rusk. Nobody could deal with a situation with so many forces pushing in the wrong direction. The tragedy is much more related to that than any fatal flaw, because I think he had more of the attributes required than anyone I knew: experience, great skills as negotiator, easy manner, charismatic effect on people--smaller groups anyway--knowledge, character. I don't know where the fatal flaw is. A fatal flaw: go down the hall and ask about all the things that I am not doing here. Just about everybody will tell you something, some flaw. The Miller Center didn't exist until I started it, so I am reasonably happy. If I weren't, well, I would talk myself into thinking I was. But there's always someone ready to point to a fatal flaw, and there is usually a taint of self-interest involved in that. My great regret, and I don't know nearly enough to say this, is that your father had a small platoon of people around him at the Rockefeller Foundation, who would fight at the drop of a hat if he were attacked.

RICHARD RUSK: While he was there or while he was in Washington?

THOMPSON: While he was there. Norman [S.] Buchanan was one. Bob [Robert S.] Morison was another. He's an MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]-Cornell scientist; very productive. But Bob Morison ran foul of trouble when your father left. He couldn't do anything right for George Erhard, maybe because they were both scientists. But your father knew how to deal with him. There were others. Joe [Joseph H.] Willets had great respect for your father. He was one of the pacifists your father joked about, but they respected one another.

RICHARD RUSK: Were there occasions when you fellows would have to fight for Dean Rusk? Did you have those kinds of battles back at the Foundation?

THOMPSON: I think so. I don't know how many. We had some crises with Arthur Schlesinger and other people. But I didn't see much of that in Washington. George Ball, sure, he said nice things about Dean Rusk. But the few receptions where I went to, I got the feeling that George Ball was seeking public favor as much as he could.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad did not have with him in the Department a cadre of Dean Rusk people, willing to fight for him. My dad, himself, was not willing to fight for himself. As a consequence, policy got affected as well, because he would not fight. He followed the Marshall model but he was not a George Marshall, as [David] Halberstam said. He didn't command automatically. He didn't have that mystique and prestige that George Marshall had on matters of policy.

THOMPSON: But think of the difference of people around Kennedy: [Nicholas de Belleville] Katzenbach, Bobby Kennedy, a whole group of people who just defended Kennedy whatever he did. They were always at his side. Your father never had anything like that, and probably didn't want it. Probably, today, if you ask him he would say--

RICHARD RUSK: "Forget it." You're saying his unwillingness to fight either for himself, his own personal reputation, or his policy, actually hurt policy?

THOMPSON: He fought for his policy within the system, but defended the President's on the outside. So nobody ever knew what his policies were. He really believed that the President must be served by the Secretary of State.

RICHARD RUSK: You said his TV personality as Secretary of State didn't come across to the public.

THOMPSON: I think this is right, but I don't know why. Now he does. That Georgia thing. You played football. If you had been hit two or three times, you start raising your head and begin to look for the guy coming at you. You don't lower your head, that throws you off. I think he started looking around. He may have lost his spark of vitality and the excitement that surrounds him. If he said to some of us, "Go to that window and jump out," we wouldn't have thought twice before we said, "No, we won't."

RICHARD RUSK: He had that kind of loyalty.

THOMPSON: You also had to know him well. I got to know him, and Bob McCannon and Bob Morison. We got to know him. The medical doctors got to know him. Other people got to know him. He said once when Charlie [Charles] Frankle was attacking him on Vietnam, that Charlie Frankle was two doors down. And Charlie Frankle never once offered any alternative. And when Frankle left, he said, "Rusk would never listen to me."

RICHARD RUSK: He said the same thing about [William] Ramsey Clark, that Clark could go all the way to Hanoi, but while he was Attorney General, he could not turn and whisper in my dad's ear (unintelligible). The same thing.

THOMPSON: They're not nice people. Ramsey Clark can be a snake. Your father had a sense of responsibility. He thought it was his duty and responsibility: his, and not somebody else's. Whereas these people--Ramsey Clark--pretended, hammed it up right from the bleachers.

RICHARD RUSK: Were those his words, "hammed it up"?

THOMPSON: "They hammed it up." That was one of his favorite phrases. He said, "I'm never going to 'ham it up.'"

RICHARD RUSK: This idea that it was circumstances, more than the flaw, that led to that situation, that's something I can use. I believe, and I will take the position that Vietnam was not inevitable, that it was the product of men making decisions. My dad was one of these men. And yet, maybe there is something inherent in the American character that ultimately led to something like this. You know, it didn't have to be Vietnam. It didn't have to be a fifteen- or twenty-year war. But because of our attitudes, somewhere around the world we were going to get into some real trouble.

THOMPSON: You know, your father kept us out of much worse trouble.

RICHARD RUSK: That's the point we are making.

THOMPSON: And he was proud of that. That was the greatest thing that could happen to his watch, he said. What scares me today about Caspar [Willard] Weinberger and these people is that they don't have the sense and restraint that your father had. Your father could be a hardliner on a lot of things, but he also was in control of himself.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad has wondered--

[break in recording]

THOMPSON: Another thing worth looking into is the courage of Dean Rusk. It was enormous--

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RICHARD RUSK: He didn't fit the conventional role.

THOMPSON: No. For instance, he told me one time when he had been at Mills College he applied for a grant; the Foundation turned him down. He laughed about it.

RICHARD RUSK: The Rockefeller Foundation?

THOMPSON: Yeah. And he said, "I might have a better chance now for a grant."

RICHARD RUSK: On behalf of Mills or the Institute of Pacific Relations or--

THOMPSON: No, just a grant to Dean Rusk to do some writing.

RICHARD RUSK: Back in the thirties he applied for this?

THOMPSON: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: To do some writing. I wonder what he would have written about?

THOMPSON: I don't know, maybe international peace. But he was turned down. He mentioned that a couple of times, not with any bitterness, though, which most people had. But he wasn't the traditional academic. He didn't come from an American graduate school. Some people laughed at him and said, "He isn't really a scholar in the usual sense." But he had the moral courage to more than hold his own whenever scholars got together. He wasn't intimidated. In fact, men like Morgenthau greatly admired him.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he have sufficient self-confidence for that job, do you think?

THOMPSON: Secretary of State?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah.

THOMPSON: I think he did when he went in. I think this buffeting may have hurt. I don't know.

RICHARD RUSK: He offered twice in his eight years, maybe even three times, to resign in mid-August.

THOMPSON: On the other hand, nobody other than [Cordell] Hull had a longer tenure. He stuck it out; he stuck it out. And you and I and twenty-one other people probably would have given up and gotten out, but he stuck it out, and held his own, and continued to do what he thought was the right thing to do. So I think there is a clue to his strength in this moral courage business that, after all, is a central idea in political philosophy. And he was interested in political thought. He knew what political thinkers said in the past. And he encouraged the rest of us. He would give books to the trustees when I administered a political philosophy program for the Foundation. And he would say, "You ought to read this. This is a good book on power," or authority or whatever it was on. No other president ever did that. They talked about new varieties of rice, health delivery systems, but Rusk really wanted--

RICHARD RUSK: He was involved in ideas.

THOMPSON: He was involved in ideas. He wasn't afraid of them. And there is another point we ought to get into, the creativity of Rusk. Because--

RICHARD RUSK: These are all things that have not come out in the literature that has been written. He has not been credited for any of these qualities.

THOMPSON: Well, the prize that he got at Oxford and maybe things before that [the Cecil prize]. But just about everything he wrote, which he spent any time doing, was a work of art. The things I quote, if you go back into my writings, you will find nuggets of Rusk, on American diplomacy and emerging patterns. I gave the Stokes lecture at NYU [New York University]. I drew on ideas that I learned from Dean Rusk.

[break in recording]

THOMPSON: That is what the media quoted. What the media quoted about your father was the "yellow horde." That wasn't the real Dean Rusk.

RICHARD RUSK: What did you think of Halberstam's book about my dad?

THOMPSON: I'm sure many of his sources are probably made up. But that's too strong. There was not real integrity there.

RICHARD RUSK: It's a narrative type of writing. What about his style of journalism, making up entire sections of dialogue without attribution?

THOMPSON: That's the other thing. To use the biblical term, none of these people were worth tying your father's shoes because he was a person so much better than they were. You mentioned the secretaries. They all respected him. They did respect him. He had a very--

RICHARD RUSK: Any of those gals still around?

THOMPSON: You ought to find--Kay [Catherine] Tolles may be still around.

RICHARD RUSK: Where's she?

THOMPSON: In New York.

RICHARD RUSK: You wrote a book about [Winston Leonard Spencer] Churchill and dedicated it to my dad. And what was his comment?

THOMPSON: He said simply that he was glad to see it. And there were some passages he referred to. And he said, "But I'm not Churchill." I can't remember the context. But Churchill had all the luck. He had bad luck up until World War II, but then he had luck.

RICHARD RUSK: And then it was lucky that he was thrown out when he was.

THOMPSON: It was lucky. But your dad didn't have that luck. Your dad was an unlucky Secretary in many ways. That's why I tried to say that in the article.

RICHARD RUSK: He was there in office when all the contradictions of our containment doctrines in a changing world came to a head.

THOMPSON: Everybody had said that there would be trouble if we tried to universalize containment. But nobody had to execute a policy when we were universalizing until Rusk.

RICHARD RUSK: If you don't universalize that policy, then how--

[break in recording]

THOMPSON: We want our own universal religion, democracy, as much as those who have made a political religion of communism. We followed the religion of democracy in helping Third World countries. And (unintelligible) in Ghana. I was trying to get--

RICHARD RUSK: And my dad was probably in a sense too firm a believer in that particular creed to fully appreciate what was happening elsewhere.

THOMPSON: Could have been.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you explore that line with him at all?

THOMPSON: Your father would say when Niebuhr or others would say we can't control situations on the periphery of our own power and influence, his answer always was that what's on the periphery moves inescapably towards the center. And that's why he felt that Vietnam and these other crises would, if he didn't do something, be in the center of the conflict. You had to deal with them when they were on the periphery or they would become final and more serious threats.

RICHARD RUSK: Here we would have the Vietnamese in alliance with the Soviet Union, and Soviet warships (unintelligible), and nuclear power in southeast Asia.

THOMPSON: On the political/religion thing, I don't think he was too sympathetic with that idea. I think he thought fundamentally there was a difference, as most Americans do, between democracy and communism. There was so drastic a difference that to compare what we were doing in any Messianic way with what they were doing, was just a misconception. And yet, you know, my idea of the ideal mix of wisdom on foreign policy would be to put together the insights of four people: Winston Churchill, Dean Rusk (both on the practical side), Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. And if you could blend those competing views and the underlying assumptions they had, I think you would have the wisest possible conception of foreign policy. But we never did. I got on this kick early with Churchill, who on more than seventy occasions, including for the first time in the Fulton speech, called for negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States. And he influenced [Harold] Macmillan, and he influenced [Dwight David] Eisenhower. And your father would always say, "Well, what is there to negotiate? What can we negotiate?" Churchill didn't answer that. But Churchill knew that unless somehow you could--

RICHARD RUSK: My dad would say that within the Foundation to you folks? Or was he involved in this larger debate?

THOMPSON: No, within the Foundation. He and I would talk because he felt that I--you know, I didn't know what I was talking about. He said, "Well, what can you negotiate?" And yet, [Dean Gooderham] Acheson, Rusk, all the Secretaries including the present ones, are building power or resisting aggression. But Churchill always said that you have to have two quivers to you bow: power or force and willingness to parlay. And I think one of the ironies is that Dulles and Rusk both were consummate negotiators. Rusk negotiated all kinds of things I knew about. And yet, he didn't accomplish what--but he tried, I'm sure, whereas Acheson never tried. Acheson was so gun-shy because of the Red-Dean charge that he didn't try at all, I don't think. Your father would probably disagree. Well, it's awfully easy to talk when one has never had responsibility.

END OF SIDE 2

