

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk PPP
Theodore Chaikin Sorensen interviewed by Richard Rusk.
1985 March

RICHARD RUSK: I'm talking with Mr. Ted Sorensen, 1953-61 assistant to Senator John Kennedy, '61-64 Special Counsel to the President, later a Democratic candidate for the United States Senate. This is March 1985. Your first contacts with my dad: I guess that would be in the Kennedy White House.

SORENSEN: Well actually it was before the White House. It was after your dad was nominated by President Kennedy to be Secretary of State. We had a very hardworking transition period. We didn't have, as they have in recent years, these enormous transition teams that are appointed at government expense, or at somebody's expense, which move in and take over each of the departments and prepare these voluminous studies, and so on. Instead we had just the same handful of people who had been working all along with President Kennedy trying to get ready for the new administration: get the programs ready, get the policies, messages, personnel in line. And as each new officer was named by President Kennedy, even before he was sworn in or on the payroll, we expected him to go to work also. So your father was in that same category. The only good anecdote that I can remember was in that period.

RICHARD RUSK: Selection process and the transition?

SORENSEN: It was during the transition. I called upon each new member of the cabinet with a kind of a list of programs, policies, and so on, of the President that were drawn from his speeches, his campaign promises, the Democratic platform, what the Democrats had been trying to do, and so on, to review with each new cabinet member what the legislative program would be during that first year, 1961. So I had a meeting with your father in his hotel room. I have a vague feeling it was the Statler Hilton, but I couldn't be sure of that. In any event, we had a very good meeting. I liked him very much. I think it was our first meeting. I regret to say I have a yen for practical jokes. How my sister, at that time, and her husband were with AID [Agency for Internal Development] or possibly a private volunteer relief agency down in Costa Rica. And in Costa Rica around that time of year, maybe December first or something, they have what for us is April Fool's Day. The local Costa Rican newspaper had published a picture on their December Fool's Day, or whatever it is, in which they had superimposed the head of President Kennedy on somebody who was there meeting with the President of Costa Rica. And they put a caption on it saying, "President-elect Kennedy on one of his flights from Washington down to Palm Beach had his plane come first to Costa Rica where he met with President [Jose] Figueres [Ferrer] and pledged two hundred million dollars in economic aid." So my sister sent me this clipping. So at the end of my meeting with your dad, I said, "Wow there is one other pledge that the President has made. And I know it may be difficult to justify, but this is it." And I got out this clipping. Of course the article was in Spanish, but it was quite clear what it was all about. And I told him it was a pledge of two hundred million dollars made, or whatever it was. Well your father didn't know whether to take me seriously or not. (laughter) I kept a totally straight face. So he nodded

gravely and said, "Well if it's a commitment, we will honor it." (laughter) At that point I laughed.

RICHARD RUSK: You have that in your book.

SORENSEN: Do I? I thought I was giving you that exclusive. I didn't know it was in my book.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, you gave it to me, so I guess I can use it, but I'm gonna ask you if I could lift it from your book as well. You do have it in Kennedy.

SORENSEN: Sorry about that. I didn't know that. I'd forgotten it was in there.

RICHARD RUSK: If I could, I would like to refer back to some of the references in your book to my dad and perhaps have you elaborate briefly on them.

SORENSEN: Sure.

RICHARD RUSK: Page 303, you said of John Kennedy, "His interest in foreign affairs exceeded all others combined and this would include his degree of interest, his energy, his experience, enterprise." Can I take you literally on that, in terms of his time? The amount of time he spent on foreign affairs exceeded everything else he did?

SORENSEN: Of course, that would vary from time to time in the White House. During the civil rights activities, when they were at a pitch, I would say that took a very large part of his time. From day one, the economy took a very substantial portion of his time. But there's no doubt in my mind that his principle interest was in the foreign affairs area.

RICHARD RUSK: And in terms of his time overall during his three years? Is that the way to interpret that?

SORENSEN: Well, let me get my own copy here.

RICHARD RUSK: I knew he was interested in foreign affairs and very much wanted to run foreign affairs, but I wasn't aware of that terrific commitment of time and energies.

SORENSEN: You'll have to tell me what chapter it is because the paging is different here. What's the heading of the chapter?

RICHARD RUSK: "The Kennedy Team." Oh, hell, I must have had the wrong reference to it.

SORENSEN: Here we are. "His interest, energy, experience, and enterprise in this area exceeded those in all other--" Well it doesn't say he spent more time on foreign affairs than all others combined, so let's not read that into it.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. It's not a big point, but I was just curious. Later on you said, "Dean Rusk deferred almost too amiably," and of course other critics have said this in later years, later periods. Did John Kennedy, or anyone that you were aware of, ever confront my father on his

leadership style, on this degree of reticence, this tendency of his to defer issues that very definitely should have had the input and leadership of the Secretary of State?

SORENSEN: I doubt it. I doubt it. The only person who could have done that really would have been the President, and that was not the President's way.

RICHARD RUSK: He would not do that?

SORENSEN: No. I think, first of all, as I think I probably say in the book, the President liked somebody who was low key and not somebody long-winded. And because he was an activist foreign policy President, I don't think a [Henry Alfred] Kissinger or [Dean Gooderham] Acheson trying to dominate foreign policy from the State Department would have suited John Kennedy at all. So I think if you're going to get that kind of Secretary of State you're going to end up with that kind of Secretary of State.

RICHARD RUSK: So he more or less got what he wanted?

SORENSEN: I really think that's correct. I suppose there may have been occasions when he tried to draw out the Secretary a little more, but your dad wasn't reticent about being drawn out. I think there were those who would have preferred a more assertive, aggressive Secretary of State. And that was in part true because Bob [Robert Strange] McNamara did speak in such an authoritative way on any subject. He's a very commanding figure. And I have heard him speak with great authority and then an hour later he's changed his mind; he speaks with equal authority on the other side of the question. That tended at times to overshadow the role of the Secretary of State. And that's not a good thing. That gives a certain unevenness and imbalance to what flows to the President.

RICHARD RUSK: On page 304, you said, "At no time did John Kennedy regret having selected him." There have been a great many press reports and other reports to the contrary.

SORENSEN: I know that.

RICHARD RUSK: Including Arthur Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days*. I'll never forget his installment in *Look* magazine.

SORENSEN: I was *Look* magazine; he was *Life* magazine.

RICHARD RUSK: But of all the criticisms that ever were directed my dad's way in eight years, the only one that really nailed me was Arthur Schlesinger's. Why such disparity in view between the way you saw things and the way he saw things on that particular point? I guess I can ask you to speak for yourself and not necessarily him, but other people were saying the same thing.

SORENSEN: Now the question is, are we speaking on the record? No, no, you can leave that [tape recorder] on. But there are some things that I would like to point out to you to make as your findings, but without quoting me.

RICHARD RUSK: Fine. As a matter of fact, I'll send you this transcript if you want some editing prerogatives. I'll make a note of this.

SORENSEN: No, no. Don't worry about that. My point is this: Arthur is a very good friend of mine and a very wise man. He's a professional historian and I am not. And Arthur was in the east wing of the White House along with the social secretary. He was not in the daily flow of the business in the White House. He was not involved in the President's decisions. He was not involved in the President's informal conversations about those decisions. He was not involved in the cabinet meetings or the National Security Council meetings, or the press breakfasts, or the legislative leadership. And frankly, I think that my view of John Kennedy's attitude toward Dean Rusk is more accurate and better founded than Arthur's. Let me add a second point to that. John Kennedy had a quality, which is a good one in a politician and in a diplomat, of building bridges with anyone with whom he was talking. If he was talking with Ted [Theodore Samuel] Williams he could be discussing baseball batting averages; if he was talking with General [Maxwell Davenport] Taylor he could be discussing the latest infantry tactics. When he was talking with Arthur Schlesinger, and Arthur Schlesinger was saying, "You've got a lot of dodos in the State Department," John Kennedy was not going to say, "You're totally wrong Arthur." He instead would be drawing out Arthur to get Arthur's views on what he thought could be done to improve the State Department. So I don't say John Kennedy was all things to all men. He was not. But it doesn't surprise me that the face that Arthur Schlesinger saw was somewhat different than those of us who were working with him every day saw.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad has made only one comment to me on that point. He says there are only two people who are aware of his relationship with John Kennedy. One of them's dead. The other one's not talking. And he has modified that with me only because I'm doing this project. And still he has said very little, but he did say one thing, and that is that he offered to resign prior to the '64 election as he had earlier wanted to do when he first took the office. John Kennedy said, "Oh, don't do that." And I am quoting. "You're the only man I've got with any guts." So I don't know if that's the definitive John Kennedy analysis.

SORENSEN: I think that sums it up pretty well.

RICHARD RUSK: Is there anything else you can tell me about the President's relationship with my father that perhaps didn't enter into your book? Any anecdotes, stories, things that he might have said about him? Because I won't get it, really, from, certainly not my dad. And of course John Kennedy can't help me either.

SORENSEN: Well, all I can say is that John Kennedy was a man who was more interested in substance than in form. And therefore he would consult on major questions that concerned him, not those who had the right titles, but those who had the right stuff: the right ideas. On an issue involving business he might or might not consult the Secretary of Commerce, but he might also consult the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Treasury because he respected their views. I'm saying that because on every major foreign policy issue, John Kennedy consulted Dean Rusk. He didn't talk to Mac [McGeorge] Bundy and say, "Forget Rusk." He didn't talk to his brother, Bobby [Robert Francis Kennedy], or his White House advisers and say, "Forget Rusk." And he didn't bring Rusk in for form, because Kennedy didn't care about form. He

involved Dean Rusk in every important decision making event in the session because he respected his ideas and, as you say, his guts. Let me ask you a question. Are you his only son?

RICHARD RUSK: I'm the second son. I'm one of three children.

SORENSEN: Lyndon Johnson told me that Dean Rusk offered to resign when one of his sons got married.

RICHARD RUSK: That was my sister, Peggy [Margaret Elizabeth Rusk Smith], who married a black fellow in 1967--finish your story.

SORENSEN: No, that was all. That was it.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad made the offer, and I think Lyndon Johnson halfway threw him out of the office. He didn't take it at all seriously. The marriage is still going quite well and everything worked out.

SORENSEN: I'm delighted to hear that. But you can confirm it's a true story.

RICHARD RUSK: Yes.

SORENSEN: Lyndon sometimes was given to exaggeration.

RICHARD RUSK: No, he told me that. As a matter of fact, Bob McNamara just told me the other day that my dad talked with him, and he was really wondering just how big a thing that was and how damaging potentially it might have been to the President. There was a great to-do about it for the first week or so; and then we never heard about it again. Never heard. But I guess it was a significant step. Page 57, I have got you quoted as saying that John Kennedy surprised Dean Rusk by wanting to "look at everything from the beginning, from the ground up." Was this true with the Vietnam decision making? Did Kennedy, my dad, anyone in that era really go back and restudy the roots of that involvement?

SORENSEN: Well, that's a good question. Certainly Kennedy did not. And I obviously couldn't speak in terms of Rusk. What people don't realize is that during the Kennedy period there was not really a war in Vietnam. There was no massive deployment of troops by the North Vietnamese, and certainly not by the Americans. There was a fairly low-level insurrection. There were a lot of assassinations; there was kidnap; there was violence in the countryside; and clearly there was tremendous disaffection from the [Ngo Dinh] Diem regime. We never had a meeting of the so-called Executive Committee of the National Security Council devoted to Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right?

SORENSEN: Never. It never rose to that level. Now maybe that's bad too. Maybe that's the sin of omission. Maybe we should have paid a whole lot more attention to it than we did.

RICHARD RUSK: There were substantial steps taken during his term, and I'm sure you're

aware of what they were.

SORENSEN: But those were largely reinforcing the commitment that [Dwight David] Eisenhower had made to send military advisers there. We expanded the number of advisers.

RICHARD RUSK: I get the feeling that my dad was in that same syndrome, where they more or less took whatever the policy and commitment as it stood in January '61, went straight ahead with it, and never once asked themselves the question: Is there something that we should be doing about that? That may be unfair, but that's the way I see it.

SORENSEN: No, I think there's a lot to that. There is a new study that I saw recently. I think it was done by or for, maybe, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, by the Legislative Reference Service. Does that ring any bells with you?

RICHARD RUSK: I've heard they're putting out some pretty good things.

SORENSEN: This is a sort of a study of the enlarging of our involvement in Vietnam. And I was amazed at how thorough it was. It looked to me to be very balanced. There had been a lot of careful research.

RICHARD RUSK: It just recently came out?

SORENSEN: It just came across my desk recently.

RICHARD RUSK: Well I can probably find it, based on what you told me.

SORENSEN: I found that it quoted the memos in which I was involved that I had certainly forgotten. Anyway, I urge you to get it, and would be more helpful urging you if I could remember exactly where it was. But I think you might find some things in there that you haven't found elsewhere. And your father might, unless his memory is a lot better than mine, find some interesting things in there also.

RICHARD RUSK: He's real sharp. His recall is good.

SORENSEN: I see that only covers through '61.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me make a note. Let me identify this and I'll get my own copy. Incidentally, I'm not writing a critical story of my dad or a comprehensive policy study. It's more of a son's story of his old man.

SORENSEN: Oh, I understand. That's the way it should be.

RICHARD RUSK: But I would like, as you are doing, your complete candor. And if I ask the obligatory type of objective question that might call for a critical response, go ahead. This is for an oral history too, and I don't want anyone accusing me of cooking the books on this thing.

SORENSEN: A radical magazine called *Mother Jones*, oh, I would say it was probably a year ago, had an article about the sons of fathers involved in Vietnam. Bob McNamara and his son were in there. And I don't remember that you were.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, I went in the Marines right after high school. I don't know if I would have fit the pattern or not.

SORENSEN: No. That was the whole point. It was the different directions that the sons have gone. But you might find it interesting. They may not subscribe to *Mother Jones* at the University of Georgia Library.

RICHARD RUSK: We'll find it. There's someone there who has it, I'm sure. I did get a call back in the sixties from a *New York Times* reporter who was doing that kind of story. They didn't identify what they were doing, but I could figure it out. When I told them about my Marine Corps service they kind of lost interest, although I did not go to Vietnam and was very happy for that later in the sixties. I went on to Cornell in the late sixties, and it was right in the middle of that antiwar stuff. I never got involved with it, but I swore to myself back then I'd someday write a book about my dad. And so, here I am.

SORENSEN: That's good. I think that's good.

RICHARD RUSK: You were involved in the hiring, the firing, and reassignment of Chester [Bliss] Bowles. I take this from your book.

SORENSEN: Actually your dad and I did that together. That was kind of a sad task. Anyway I think probably it's all in my book. Is there anything in there? I haven't looked at my book in a long time.

RICHARD RUSK: Is there anything you recall about my dad's exact performance there? It must have been very painful to him to do, because he was not really good a firing personnel or getting involved in that kind of conflict. You don't have any stories coming out of that experience do you?

SORENSEN: No. As I say, I remember when the time came I was sort of waiting, and your dad called me. So I think I first went and spoke to him. And he was very discouraged by the whole thing because he thought Chester was going to resign in a huff and make a lot of speeches and denounce everybody. So I went to see Chester, whom I knew and liked and admired, and tried to make it clear to him that although that particular assignment may not have fit his talents, other assignments would. However, that does remind me of another story which may or may not fit into your book. This I'm only telling second hand.

RICHARD RUSK: That's fine.

SORENSEN: That is that at some point, probably in the Johnson administration, George [Wildman] Ball went to your dad and he said, "Dean, I've always been very loyal and faithful and cooperative, haven't I?" Your dad said, "Yes you certainly have, George." "And I haven't

asked for very many favors while I've been here, have I?" "No, you haven't, George." "I mean, if I were to ask for one, I should be entitled to it, shouldn't I?" "If there's anything I can do for you George. What is it?" He said, "Please can I be the one that fires Roger Hilsman?"

RICHARD RUSK: Oh, is that right? That is funny.

SORENSEN: Now whether that's a true story, I don't know.

RICHARD RUSK: I think my dad may have reserved that prerogative for himself, although Hilsman, in his book, claims that he resigned.

SORENSEN: I always (unintelligible) to resign.

RICHARD RUSK: You weren't involved in the selection process of my father?

SORENSEN: No, not at all.

RICHARD RUSK: I have some questions here asking you to critique his performance in a general way, that type of thing. If you have anything to add above and beyond what you've already put in your book.

SORENSEN: I'm happy to respond to specific questions, but the book sums up my view.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad did note one thing in which the Department of State definitely did not do their job, and that was State Department staff work on presidential speeches. He said that even for himself, within the Department, people they had in the Department working on speeches just did a terrible job and they served up all kinds of garbage. There was nothing that the President could ever use.

SORENSEN: It's true. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: Nothing my dad could ever use. He normally would speak extemporaneously based on what he had. You do recall that, I guess.

SORENSEN: Yes. And of course President Kennedy used major speeches as a means of defining major policy, so it was important that we get input from the State Department. We didn't get all that much useable stuff. Yeah, we'd get some bits and pieces here and there that would be useful, particularly when we were going on trips abroad it was good to get background material on these countries, and so on, that could be used for the President's speeches. But in terms of basic policy, I think essentially what came from the State Department was what came from your dad directly to me.

RICHARD RUSK: I see. Now did that improve during that three-year time that you were there, the Kennedy years?

SORENSEN: I really can't recall. You know your dad's secretary is here in New York?

RICHARD RUSK: Phyllis Macomber. I understand that. Secretaries are great for stories.

SORENSEN: She's a terrific lady. I'm sure she's got a lot of stories.

RICHARD RUSK: The best stories I have have been the security people and the secretaries around from our town. During the Kennedy years the image came out about my father that he was a smart man but didn't quite have that same degree of brilliance of that Kennedy team and various Kennedy people, that he had sort of a conventional clichéd mind. How did you see his mind in comparison with the people that you worked with there?

SORENSEN: Well, I think he had a fine mind. It was a little less glittery than those who polished it up in the ivy league circuit. I never had any doubts about his qualities of mind. There are different kinds of minds that we're born with and different kinds that we are trained to exhibit to others from our education and experience. As a boy from Nebraska I was pretty impressed by Dean Rusk's mind.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. That's where you were from?

SORENSEN: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: I have one question about my dad, and it's the kind of question that only a son would really think hard about. And knowing John Kennedy as well as you did, you might be able to help me. It deals with command decision making and people like my father, people with good intentions, humane instincts, getting involved in decisions that lead to combat, war, men getting killed, suffering on a mass scale, everything that war entails. How does that affect these individuals in a personal way: health, their outlook? But specifically, how does it affect the decision making process? And I'm thinking about John Kennedy. And, of course, the Bay of Pigs was his first real involvement with mistakes and men paying with their lives. Did you notice any change over the President? I can ask you specifically about that. And then in a general way, it is a factor? Does it enter into the decision making process in ways that we don't fully understand?

SORENSEN: I hope it's a factor. I think that John Kennedy was deeply distressed about the needless and ill-advised loss of life at the Bay of Pigs. And I think he was determined to, particularly after that, to keep such losses to zero if possible and to an absolute minimum if not. And, in part, the brilliant response to the Cuban Missile Crisis was designed to minimize loss of life. We lost one life, that of a U-2 pilot.

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SORENSEN: The other courses of action, at a minimum, would have cast tremendous

bloodshed on both sides and, of course, could have escalated to all-out war, even nuclear war.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he ever talk about that? It was a highly personal type of thing, and you never see it in people's memoirs.

SORENSEN: If you look at the very preface of my memoirs, John Kennedy was talking about it a little bit during the Cuban Missile Crisis. And there may be some other references to it. But you're right. Mostly people don't talk about it. And it cannot be the only criterion for decision making or else you shrink away from every threat that anybody makes. But it's an important factor and I think it underlay the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration that your father led.

RICHARD RUSK: I wonder how it might have affected that Vietnam decision making. I wonder what way it works, what way it operates as a factor. Does it lock the men in or does it drive them out?

SORENSEN: You never know. Bear in mind that there were repeated recommendations to send U.S. combat troop divisions into South Vietnam during the Kennedy administration and it was never done. And there were also repeated recommendations to bomb North Vietnam. That was never done. And those recommendations never came from your father. They came from the Vice President; they came from General Taylor; and they came from Walt [Whitman] Rostow.

RICHARD RUSK: Warren Cohen wrote a book about my dad called *Dean Rusk*. Did you ever see a copy of it?

SORENSEN: No.

RICHARD RUSK: I haven't found a person yet who's read it. It was a dull book and it didn't sell. But he lays out the theory, based on whatever he could find of my dad's years in office, that my dad, up through 1965 more or less fought the Americanization of the war, the bombing of North Vietnam, a combat role for U.S. ground troops there, but in spring of 1965 when the President decided to go ahead in that capacity, signed on and for the remainder of the war worked primarily on trying to cut back on some military requests: less bombing, less escalation, that type of thing. As a general statement, does that fit in as a pattern with what you remembered?

SORENSEN: Yes. Of course I was gone before the spring of '65.

RICHARD RUSK: That's fine. But during the Kennedy years he showed a lot of doubt and indecision about--

SORENSEN: I wouldn't use the word indecision, but I would say he was skeptical of the request for U.S. combat troop involvement.

RICHARD RUSK: When my dad would meet privately with the President, would he ever tell you, would he tell anybody what my dad had discussed with him?

SORENSEN: Once in a great while, but I don't remember any on Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: I haven't been to the Kennedy Library and looked through those papers, but-

SORENSEN: You're going to have to spend a lot of time there. It's tremendous what they have to offer.

RICHARD RUSK: Would Kennedy give memorandums of conversation to his secretaries based on--

SORENSEN: Very few. Most of it was verbal. That's sad for history.

RICHARD RUSK: He didn't tape anything back in those days?

SORENSEN: Yeah, a few. They have released some tapes.

RICHARD RUSK: Would he have taped conversations with my father?

SORENSEN: I doubt it. I doubt it. Mostly he taped big meetings. He wanted to get people's votes recorded so they couldn't tell him later on that they took a different point of view. There was an interesting meeting that I recall quite well that you should ask your dad about and check the Kennedy Library about. I suppose it's probably mentioned in here also. And it involved the Congo. It was right after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and everybody thought, "Boy, America can really do anything I" It was a request for American military involvement with the U.N. [United Nations] in ending the revolution, the rebellion in Katanga Province in the Congo. And all of a sudden all of the doves were hawks. [G. Mennen] Soapy Williams and others were saying, "Yeah, we're gonna show them here just like we showed them in Cuba." And your dad, if I recall correctly, was very skeptical as to whether that was a prudent use of American forces. There was such a switch of roles on the part of the doves that it makes for interesting reading.

RICHARD RUSK: Well I'll look for that one. I'm not trying to build a case that my dad was a pacifist during those years.

SORENSEN: No.

RICHARD RUSK: There's enough rope to hang everyone back in that period of Vietnam. Martin Hillenbrand tells an interesting story, and it pertains to the Berlin situation. And John Kennedy apparently was a bit frustrated with the slowness of the State Department response. John Kennedy was more activist and wanted a solution to the Berlin Crisis. My dad was feeling there wasn't anything to negotiate. Martin Hillenbrand says that however, the State Department did send a report over in a rather prompt fashion to the White House. That report was lost. The aide who received it sent back to the Department and asked for another copy. They sent a second copy. That one was locked up in someone else's office and that guy went off on vacation, (laughter) and so, for six weeks or so there was no State Department response. Martin

Hillenbrand himself typed up a memo to the President explaining why the Department had been so slow on this matter and he's not sure that the President ever got the memo. (laughter) Do you recall any of this at all?

SORENSEN: I recall the President, in the summer of 1961, being very frustrated at the inability to get a response to the Soviet demand on Berlin, and that, in part, he blamed the State Department for simply bureaucratic inefficiency, and in part the fact that just the wheels turn so slowly in terms of consulting with each of the other allies who had a stake in that answer. I don't remember about it being locked up and somebody on vacation. No. I have my doubts about that.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh you have doubts about that?

SORENSEN: They could always find another copy.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, but it was an embarrassment to whoever was receiving that stuff at the White House. I'll try to run it down, but I thought maybe you would know.

SORENSEN: McGeorge Bundy would remember. Have you talked to him?

RICHARD RUSK: I'm seeing him this afternoon. Of course, there's been a great deal of speculation about what John Kennedy would or would not have done about Vietnam. In the literature, I ran into a date of December 3 for the withdrawal of some American advisers.

SORENSEN: That's correct.

RICHARD RUSK: What is the substance or truth of that?

SORENSEN: That was an announcement from the White House that, I think was publicly announced as to the first of what they hoped would be a series of withdrawals of American advisers. Small. Obviously we weren't withdrawing them all. What it really meant, I don't know. Just answering the broader question, I don't think that John Kennedy, based upon his experience in the Bay of Pigs, had any confidence in military situations. I don't think, based upon his interest and determination to negotiate at Berlin, over the Cuban Missile Crisis, in Laos, and elsewhere, would ever have preferred a military solution to the negotiated solution. Again, by taking a look at Laos and other crises where he recognized that the United States cannot prop up regimes halfway around the world just because they're anticommunist regimes, I don't think he would have poured half a million men into Vietnam. I don't think it for a moment. On the other hand, he had accepted the U.S. commitment that preceded him. He was well aware of America's responsibilities to the world as the only counter against communist expansion. I think that he felt that U.S. strength could often be used as a bargaining tool without actually sending the troops into combat, much in the same way that it was used around Cuba and used in Laos. So, for all those reasons, I don't think he would have plunged all the way into Vietnam as Lyndon Johnson did. On the other hand, as he was quoted as saying more than once that it was tough to find a way out.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad has said that he never recalls John Kennedy raising with him

significant doubts about our course of action. You know how selective people's memories can get even against their best intentions.

SORENSEN: He's on record. Kennedy said at one point, you know, "This is South Vietnam's war. It's up to them to win or lose it, not us." That's an important clue. We would always get complaints from the South Vietnamese. Another time he said, "Any time they say they don't want us there, we'll be on the next boat out." That's an important clue also. He wasn't saying, "We're there. America's committed there. It's in our vital interests. We have to be there regardless of what the South Vietnamese say." Anyway, it is speculation. There are those who say, "Well, in the second term he was going to do something different about Vietnam." And I don't believe that.

RICHARD RUSK: Where can I bet greater light on this December third partial withdrawal of American advisers? You remember it as being a definite concrete thing, publicly announced, something we were committed to: I think something like a thousand advisers.

SORENSEN: I remember the meeting in which your dad, McNamara, Bundy, and I, and others all participated, in which that was decided upon.

RICHARD RUSK: Is it in your book?

SORENSEN: Probably. But if not, the Kennedy Library surely has it.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember the approximate date of the meeting?

SORENSEN: Maybe a week or two before he died.

RICHARD RUSK: Were they using that withdrawal to try to move the Diem regime towards moderate--

SORENSEN: Probably.

RICHARD RUSK: You think it was also a serious effort to perhaps deescalate that conflict? You were in that meeting, is that right?

SORENSEN: Well, I was in that meeting. I was never really an action officer on Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll ask Bundy about that. That's the way you see it?

SORENSEN: That's about it.

RICHARD RUSK: A couple of little minor things: You don't remember any great impact or significant impact of the Kennedy assassination on my dad, do you? Did you notice any change in him after the assassination?

SORENSEN: No. I was suffering some impact myself. Didn't notice it on others.

RICHARD RUSK: It affected everybody. Kids. I can clearly remember what it did to me or how it affected us at the time.

END OF SIDE 2

Richard B. Powell
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