

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
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Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk
1985 November

RICHARD RUSK: This is November 1985. The questions for this interview are drawn from David Halberstam's book, *The Best and the Brightest*--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: What are your impressions of Edward [Geary] Lansdale?

DEAN RUSK: Well, he was an intelligent, thoughtful fellow. I think he sort of thought of himself as a kind of modern [Thomas Edward] Lawrence of Arabia. But he had done a very good job in the Philippines working along with [Ramon] Magsaysay in helping to erase the rebellious opposition during the Magsaysay regime.

RICHARD RUSK: How do you spell that?

DEAN RUSK: [Spells] But he had some thoughts about counter-guerilla type activities in Vietnam, but I think the scale of operations there was beyond his reach in many ways. But in any event, our own military did not want to follow some of his advice about how we should proceed. Whether, had we turned the whole thing over to him, we would have had a different result, I don't know, but I doubt it very much. But he was a stimulating fellow to have around and kept raising interesting questions.

RICHARD RUSK: We relied on him for basic information on that part of the world early in the [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy years, is that right? He was a fairly important figure.

DEAN RUSK: Well, having his experience in the Philippines did not necessarily transfer automatically over to Vietnam. Some people consider themselves experts on Vietnam whose own knowledge and experience was somewhere else, such as in Indonesia. One has to be careful about thinking that experience in one place is valid and relevant for another place out there. They are all individual unique countries and cultures.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me read you a paragraph on page 128 in *The Best and the Brightest*, "As for Lansdale, he had made a favorable impression on the President--As he walked in Kennedy greeted him graciously and said somewhat casually, pointing to Rusk, 'Has the Secretary here mentioned that I wanted you to be ambassador to Vietnam?' Lansdale, caught by surprise, mumbled that it was a great honor and a marvelous opportunity. He was deeply touched and even more surprised, for it was the first he had heard of the idea, and also, as it happened, the last. The appointment never came through; Lansdale later thought that it had been blocked by Rusk, though he also realized that Defense was less than anxious to have him in Vietnam."

DEAN RUSK: --very much about it. I think that people in the Defense Department were rather opposed to his going out there as ambassador thinking that he, as ambassador, would try to run the military side of it. The Defense Department did not want that.

RICHARD RUSK: Lansdale seemed a particularly futile and failed figure: the author of [a book on] how to fight guerilla wars the right way, being part of a huge American mission which used massive bombing and artillery fire against Vietnamese villages. Okay, you had this underlined. Talking about John [A.] McCone; this is page 155. "In October 1961, the President decided to send his own special representatives to Vietnam for an on-site fact-finding trip. He and he alone was responsible for the composition of the team, which would to a very real degree reflect the true outlook of the new Administration toward Vietnam and toward what were essentially political problems in that period. No senior official from State went, partly because Rusk did not want to get involved in Vietnam, partly because he did not believe it was particularly State's responsibility."

DEAN RUSK: No. I never thought that Vietnam was not State's responsibility. We had a very major interest and stake in what was happening in Vietnam. I don't recall that I ever forbade anybody from the State Department to join such a mission. Who headed that particular group? Does he say?

RICHARD RUSK: Well, let me finish. "The trip was first proposed as a [Walt Whitman] Rostow mission--just Rostow--but [Chester Bliss] Bowles, who had become extremely nervous about Rostow's militancy ['Chester Bowles with machine guns,' Arthur [M.] Schlesinger [Jr.] said of him] pushed hard for a high representative from State to go along to give the nonmilitary point of view. It should be someone of genuine rank, perhaps Bowles himself, but if not, at least an Assistant Secretary, perhaps [William Averell] Harriman. But Rusk was resistant; he still saw it as a military, not a political problem, [in this he was fairly typical of the generation of public officials who had come out of World War II and who saw State serving as the lawyers for the Defense Department--]"

DEAN RUSK: Well, that's not right.

RICHARD RUSK: This would have been the [Maxwell Davenport] Taylor--

DEAN RUSK: Was that the Taylor-Rostow mission?

RICHARD RUSK: Taylor-Rostow mission, yeah. Okay, bottom of page 158, a comment about Walt Rostow: "It was, finally, a sense that behind all that bounciness and enthusiasm, perhaps Rostow did not know who he was, that in the eagerness of the poor Jewish immigrant's son to make it, in the big leagues and with the Establishment, he had lost sight of what was Rostow and what was the Establishment, or perhaps knowing what was Rostow, he wanted to forget it."

DEAN RUSK: Well that kind of amateur psychological analysis drives me up the wall. Whatever Walt Rostow thought his problems were, it was not that. And Halberstam's comment on that isn't worth a plugged nickel.

RICHARD RUSK: We've got quite a bit of talk from you on Walt Rostow of your own. Page 160, at the end of the Presidential campaign--

DEAN RUSK:--wanted two or three key people that I'd worked with before such as George [Crews] McGhee and [James] Harlan Cleveland. They were not looked on by Bobby [Robert Francis] Kennedy and others as true Kennedy people, and so I had to do a little wrestling to get those two appointments. But it wasn't that I wanted George McGhee and not Rostow. It's not that I had any particular objections to Rostow. But, I think Rostow then went on to the White House and became McGeorge Bundy's deputy for a while and then came over to the State Department, [interruption] George [Wildman] Ball had been a strong [Adlai Ewing] Stevenson [III] man, as indeed had I been in '52 or '58. But the post involved the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs. That was, in effect, the number three position in the State Department. Well, we soon moved to establish the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency where I thought William [Chapman] Foster would be a very good director in that agency. The fact that he was Republican in background was more or less irrelevant. He was a good public servant, able man, had considerable experience in public service. So I think the end result with Ball as Under Secretary of Economic Affairs and Foster as head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency worked out just fine. Now we soon had in the Department some very strong people on the economic side of things. There was George Ball and there was Tony [Anthony Morton] Solomon, now President of the Federal Reserve of New York, the most important Federal Reserve Bank in the country. We had Mike [Werner Michael] Blumenthal, who was working with the President's representative for trade negotiations. So we had a very strong team on economic matters and I delegated such things very extensively to those fellows.

RICHARD RUSK: Halberstam describes Ball as the "the last man in Washington to write his own speeches." You wrote your own didn't you?

DEAN RUSK: That isn't quite true. The State Department--well, most of the bureaucracies are very poor at writing speeches, chiefly because they are committee drafts.

RICHARD RUSK: What would you do, in your case?

DEAN RUSK: I would take a proposed speech prepared in the bureaucracy and go over it myself and shape it up and change it around and do with it what I wanted to do. Matter of fact, one of the failings of the State Department is that it has never been able to send finished speeches and finished messages over to the White House for the President and the President always needs somebody to shape things up in final form for him. But, no, the speeches that I gave were my own speeches, whatever people thought about them. I went over them carefully ahead of time and made a good many changes in them. The bureaucracy in writing speeches seems to overlook the difference between spoken English and written English. I mean, if when they get a speech prepared somebody would just stand up and read it to a group of eight or ten people, read it out loud, they'd see what a cumbersome kind of speech it was. They needed to put more life into it.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. This is page 189. Halberstam's comments about the Office of Far Eastern Affairs: "The incident was not surprising to Bowles or [James] Thomson because they were by then accustomed to it." Some more comment by Halberstam about Averell Harriman,

and this is the bottom of page 196: "And he had diagnosed the Kennedy Administration very ably; he had sensed that they needed him." Was Halberstam correct in his assessment of Averell Harriman's ambition for the post of Secretary of State?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, it's possible, but--

RICHARD RUSK: Did it complicate your relationship?

DEAN RUSK: No, not at all. I had several people working with me that would have been glad to be Secretary of State. They knew it; I knew it; they knew I knew it; and we worked without complications on that particular point. Averell Harriman would, I think, have been actively considered by John F. Kennedy had he been fifteen or twenty years younger. But Kennedy did not want a man of that age as Secretary of State. And I would have to think about it as to what kind of Secretary of State Averell would have made, but I never, I never sensed any personal problems with Averell. He was willing to serve the President whoever the President was. He served him well. He served him with like bureaucratic integrity, in a sense that he followed his instructions. He did not go around town backbiting his President or his Secretary of State, and so I thought that relationship was a reasonably good one.

RICHARD RUSK: Would you yourself request his assignment to various positions?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, I mean, he was a good troubleshooter to send off on special negotiations and I think I had a good deal to do with his being named as the head of our delegation in 1968 for the negotiations in Paris. And I welcomed his--I think I suggested we might see whether or not he would serve as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. Averell Harriman was not a man of overweening vanity, and despite his great experience, beginning with being a member of the Cabinet of Franklin [Delano] Roosevelt, being ambassador in London and Moscow and other places, he took the post of Assistant Secretary without grumbling about his own prestige or his own position. I always looked upon Averell as a very good public servant.

RICHARD RUSK: They tell a story about him, that he had received a call from either Kennedy or [Lyndon Baines] Johnson one time, and the President had asked him to take a particular spot. And Harriman said, "Of course I'll be willing to serve. Yes, Mr. President," and hung the phone up and then turned to an aide and said, "Now what was it I agreed to serve as?" (laughter)

DEAN RUSK: Well, when I called him--he was in Europe somewhere, I think maybe Paris--to tell him the President would like for him to serve as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, he said, "Of course. Whatever the President wants." Then about a half hour later he called me back and said, "Well, as you know Dean, I'm a little deaf. Which Assistant Secretary did he want me to do?" And I said, "Far Eastern Affairs." He said, "All right." He didn't even understand which one, but he was willing to do whichever one the President wanted him to do. He was quite a remarkable fellow.

RICHARD RUSK: Ben [Benjamin H.] Read said, and I think others have said the same thing about Harriman, that he was really respected by the Soviets. If for no other reason, they regarded

Harriman as in their own image, the true capitalist, you know, the great railroad baron. And he apparently had quite a relationship with some people on the Soviet side.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Averell did have pretty good contact with Russian leaders. There are many things he didn't agree with them on. But yes, he was what the Soviets, in their ideology, considered to be the ruling circles of the United States. He came out of top capitalist circles. But he'd also had a lot to do with the rather difficult relationship we had with the Russians during World War II. And I think they looked upon him as a person with whom they could do business. He was simply not a red hot ideologue on our side where everything Russian was anathema. And so he had pretty good ability to deal with the Russians.

RICHARD RUSK: They tell the story about Harriman--page 197 at the top: "At one staff meeting of high level state officials: Rusk, Ball, Harriman, the Assistant Secretaries. Rusk has dressed his--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Say that again.

DEAN RUSK: It was just possible that Averell Harriman didn't even pick up that part of the conversation. I don't think he was withholding that information for any particular reason. But, he had a hearing aid and he would turn it on and off at his pleasure and there were a good many things that he just didn't hear. I suspect that is what happened there.

RICHARD RUSK: This probably sounds more like it. Talking about Bob [Robert Strange] McNamara's extraordinary grasp of facts and statistics: bottom of page 217.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Bob McNamara was a very intelligent fellow and was always seeking the facts. He used statistical methods a lot. But there were times when I thought that he tried to reduce to numbers values which simply could not be reduced to numbers. But I don't remember particular instances of that. But he had a very inquiring mind and would not take anything for granted, so that he would readily jump in to ask for the facts, ask for the data, in support of some idea that somebody had tossed on the table. He was a prodigious worker. He would get to his office around 7:00 or 7:30 every morning, and I think he had a very positive influence on the whole system. But he wore himself to a frazzle eventually and sometimes tried to rely more heavily on numbers than the numbers themselves would warrant.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Did you ever tell Bob McNamara that you thought he was over-emphasizing numbers and trying to quantify things that could not be quantified? Did you ever bring that up?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall that I did. I would do it implicitly by talking about the values themselves and not in terms of numbers. But he was a very able colleague. Matter of fact, he carried the policy burdens with the Joint Chiefs of Staff so that I never had to sit down and wrestle with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on any subject, whether it was arms control or Vietnam or whatever it was. He would do that inside the Pentagon. He was in charge in the Pentagon when

he was Secretary of Defense. No question about that, [interruption] Underneath all these numbers Bob McNamara was a very compassionate person. He did have a strong feeling for the aches and pains of the human race and that was apparent from time to time. And he was reasonable in conversation. He didn't just come in and bang the table and say such and such is contrary to the national security interest of the United States, nor did I bang the table with him and say such and such is contrary to the foreign policy of the United States. Those sweeping generalizations have very little meaning. We would put these ideas up on top of the table and look at them, analyze them, talk them out to find out why they might be contrary to the national security or the foreign policy of the United States. And he recognized that at that level national security interests and foreign policy interests merge into an indivisible whole. You just can't separate out, "This is national security; this is foreign policy." And so he was a good colleague in terms of finding a national policy in the midst of so much complication. RR - Top of page 219, McNamara's role in the escalation of the conflict; Talking about Robert McNamara's alleged dove-ishness and the extent of his true advice inside policy decision-making circles on Vietnam. DR - Well, a major new situation developed in 1965 because at the end of '64 and the beginning of '65, the North Vietnamese began moving the divisions and regiments of their regular army into South Vietnam and threatened to cut South Vietnam in two through the highlands area. So President Johnson and top members of his team had to face a new situation which Kennedy had not had to face. And it was during that period that Johnson, in effect, said to McNamara, "Now you're my right arm and you're responsible for handling the military side of it," and turned to me and said, "Now you're my left arm and it's your job to keep alert as to the possibilities of resolving this matter through negotiations or peaceful means." And McNamara took that as his assignment and realized that there had to be substantial military reinforcements in Vietnam if we were to prevent this heavy escalation by the North Vietnamese from just taking over the country.

RICHARD RUSK: Page 243, talking about John Kennedy's attitude toward nuclear weapons, and Daniel Ellsberg as well: "Shortly after lunch Ellsberg received a call from Adam Yarmolinsky who had been present during the meeting." Talking about Bob McNamara's alleged--What shall we call it?--abhorrence of nuclear weapons and some question in his mind as to whether he would ever be able to recommend the use of those things.

DEAN RUSK: Well, that abhorrence of nuclear weapons was solidly based upon an understanding and knowledge of what nuclear weapons would do. That abhorrence was shared by myself, by President Kennedy, by President Johnson, and has to be shared by anyone in authority in the United States. During the fifties, during the period of when the slogan "massive retaliation" was going around, it was apparent that that was an empty phrase because if anyone looked seriously at the impact or the results of using nuclear weapons, they would back straight away from it. I remember Harry Truman was meeting once with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and talking about a certain contingency. And one of the Joint Chiefs said, "That will, of course, mean nuclear war." And Harry Truman almost came up out of his seat, and he said, "Who told you that?" And this general said, "Well, our strategy is based upon that." And President Truman said, "Well, you go back and get yourself some more strategy. You're not going to put me in that position." Those who talked about using nuclear weapons in this postwar period, have really been playing verbal games and have not really grappled with the reality of what their use would mean. And to me it's perfectly natural that a Secretary of Defense would be strongly against the use of nuclear weapons because he would know something about what the results could be.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Interesting. Tape's rolling. This is highly conjectural, but you were part of the nuclear chain of command. Could you have given an order to launch, Pop? Under any circumstances?

DEAN RUSK: Under no circumstances could I have given an order to launch nuclear weapons initially, as a first strike. I personally think that the United States is committed to using nuclear weapons only if we ourselves are struck with nuclear weapons.

RICHARD RUSK: What about a Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe?

DEAN RUSK: Well, that's one possible exception because we have in Western Europe a substantial number of tactical nuclear weapons. If the Soviets were to launch an all-out conventional attack on Western Europe, they would soon find themselves in the areas where these tactical nuclear weapons are located. No American President is going to let them capture those weapons. But the Russians know that. I have, myself, never seen any evidence of a Soviet intention to attack Western Europe. You have to derive any such intention from capabilities, as the military are accustomed to doing because a troop commander in the field has to give thought to the enemy's capabilities and the worst that the enemy can do. Otherwise he might lose his own forces. But that's a very different thing from looking at real intentions.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me read the first paragraph on page 243. "Shortly after lunch--"

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: These weapons are present in the real world and must never be used, and a nuclear war is the end of everything. See, remember that Kennedy had spent a good part of a day early in his administration going over with an expert staff and three or four of his senior advisers, including myself, the total effects of nuclear war, both direct and indirect. And he had a very healthy respect for the destructive power of nuclear weapons. And that's the beginning of wisdom on these nuclear weapons is to understand what they mean. And he had that understanding deeply within him and--well, I'll add the point--I think I've said this somewhere else, but--

RICHARD RUSK: His comment to you at the end of the meeting?

DEAN RUSK: No. In terms of delivering a first strike, I have very serious doubts that the President or the President and Congress combined have the constitutional power to launch a first strike because I do not find in the Constitution a power to destroy our nation.

RICHARD RUSK: We have that--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: There are efforts to put greater controls on nuclear weapons. We were looking at the top paragraph on page 244.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I was aware of Bob McNamara's energetic pursuit of this problem of safeguards on nuclear weapons and was wholly in support of it because I felt that it was very important for us to do everything that we possibly could to prevent the accidental explosion of a nuclear weapon. In these Permissive Action Links were an important part of that. But, we also discussed this problem as a technical matter with the Soviets because we were interested in their not having accidents that could create misapprehension and misunderstanding as to who was doing what. We don't want an accidental beginning of a nuclear exchange. So this is a very important development. When you think of both human beings and technology, you have to realize that there is the possibility of mistake, and therefore you should do everything you can to prevent such accidents. Since I myself have always felt that we are committed only to a second strike possibility--That is that we could never launch a first strike and would launch a second strike only if we were certain that the United States itself was under nuclear attack: I mean by that actually receiving nuclear weapons on our territory--the business of slowing down our launch capability did not bother me because I thought we--

RICHARD RUSK: We'd have to absorb one strike.

DEAN RUSK: We'd have to slow those down anyhow: that we are not going to get involved in the possibility of a first strike.

RICHARD RUSK: Were your two Presidents in agreement with you on that point?

DEAN RUSK: Oh yes. Very much so.

RICHARD RUSK: You talked about this?

DEAN RUSK: No question about it. You see, even--

RICHARD RUSK: With NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] being the only exception in terms of policy.

DEAN RUSK: Well, with these tactical weapons in NATO, in the event of a general Soviet Warsaw Pact attack on Western Europe would trigger these tactical weapons, I have no doubt. But I have never seen any intention on the part of the Soviets to launch such an attack, nor has the deployment of their forces ever been aimed at such an attack.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you get into the technical questions, the technical matters of these Permissive Action Links?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I was briefed on it, but I didn't get into it as an operational matter.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you get involved with McNamara's effort to install this system?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, yeah, sure. I supported it.

RICHARD RUSK: In what kind of ways?

DEAN RUSK: In the National Security Council discussion.

RICHARD RUSK: Talking with the Joint Chiefs?

DEAN RUSK: Well, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense.

RICHARD RUSK: Your two Presidents--Robert Kennedy was in agreement?

DEAN RUSK: Oh yeah. President Kennedy and President Johnson supported it fully, moving in this direction.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you have a feeling that the initial system that McNamara found when he took office was in fact pretty chancy?

DEAN RUSK: Well, not as chancy as all that. But, what you have to do is to try to get as close to one hundred percent perfect protection on these things. And that meant doing whatever was humanly possible to be sure that these things were not fired without authorization, did not explode without authorization. Just in transporting these nuclear weapons from one place to another within the United States requires very, very careful planning and procedures, methodology, to be sure that a nuclear weapon riding a railroad train, or a truck-trailer, combination would not go off when they're not supposed to, or in those very rare cases where a bomber would in fact be carrying a nuclear weapon, to be damn sure that if that bomber crashed that that nuclear weapon wouldn't go off. So there are a good many aspects of it that needed attention and they got attention, and I think we're in pretty good shape on that now.

RICHARD RUSK: I told you that story that Ben Read had about that missile that went ballistic and went over Cuba. Are you aware of any other incidents that perhaps you haven't told me about?

DEAN RUSK: Well, there was an accident in Germany somewhere fairly recently with one of ours, and the Soviets had their accident. It crossed over northern Norway and landed in Finland, but apparently none of these had nuclear weapons on board. But a couple of atomic bombs were dropped off the coast of Spain and we had to retrieve those. And that took quite a lot of doing because they were dropped at sea. And that created a good deal of consternation among the Spanish people and our ambassador.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that while you were in office?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. And after these weapons were retrieved, our ambassador made a special point of going out there and swimming in these waters so that everybody would know that there was no danger. That was Ambassador [Angler Biddle] Duke. But it's something that has to be watched.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall anything else anecdotally from that incident?

DEAN RUSK: No, I've been thoroughly briefed on these safeguard systems and I'm convinced that if any terrorists tried to seize one of these weapons in transit, or anything like that, that that's just asking for suicide.

END OF SIDE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

DEAN RUSK: I'm convinced that if a terrorist tried to seize one of our nuclear weapons, say in transit from one point to another that he would find that was just suicidal for him. And I doubt very much that a terrorist would know how to fire one of these weapons even if he got hold of one because that's a pretty tricky business.

RICHARD RUSK: I didn't tell you about that State Department fellow at Davidson who gave the talk on nuclear terrorism and told me that they had broken up several efforts to develop a weapon.

DEAN RUSK: I doubt there would be any that I did not know about.

RICHARD RUSK: No incidents of nuclear terrorism back in your period?

DEAN RUSK: No. Now, there's always a possibility that some crank could claim to have spotted a nuclear weapon in New York City, Chicago, or someplace, with all sorts of demands, but I don't lose sleep over this particular (unintelligible).

RICHARD RUSK: Did you have contingency plans that you were aware of on how to deal with the question of nuclear terrorism back in your time?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall that we did. Because the circumstances in each case would be so different, so unique, that it would be very hard to generalize about these things. But if we became convinced that some terrorist had in fact stashed away a nuclear weapon in one of our cities, I'm quite sure that there would be an immediate search of every cubic inch of such a city, and that the constitutional amendment about unreasonable searches and seizures would go by the board and we'd just look at every cubic inch in that city.

RICHARD RUSK: Probably involve citizenry as well?

DEAN RUSK: Sure. They would really go after that.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you aware of the Chiefs' opposition to McNamara on the installation of some of these safeguards?

DEAN RUSK: I think probably Halberstam overstated that, because the Chiefs would have no rational basis on which to oppose them. My guess is that they did not.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, sure. The rational basis would have been that it would have slowed down American reaction time potentially and made it more difficult to get the weapons off the ground.

DEAN RUSK: Well, there may be some of the Chiefs who thought that instantaneous reaction time was important. But after all, in an earlier stage during the fifties, the Chief of the Air Force, Curtis [E.] Lemay, who used to be head of the Strategic Air Command, used to say that if any son-of-a-bitch sticks his head up we ought to drop a nuclear weapon on it. That was his approach. But that's not responsible at all. I must say I'm impressed with the capabilities of the Strategic Air Command. When I would travel around the world or around this country, I would occasionally find myself dropping by a SAC [Strategic Air Command] base for refueling or something like that, and I would always make a point of going to the ready room to have a few words with the pilots who were sitting there on two or three minutes alert: Just sitting there hour after hour, just to be there. And I made a point of trying to tell them that the job they were performing was an extraordinarily important job and that although it may appear to be dull and boring to them at times that it was a critically important job and that we all appreciated what they were doing.

RICHARD RUSK: Ever visit the crews of nuclear submarines or--?

DEAN RUSK: No I never went into a nuclear submarine. I don't care much for submarines to start with, but I never had the occasion to do it. Those fellows have a tough time being at sea for months and months at a time. The maintenance of morale of our submarine crews is a tough problem because it's very difficult service. I did visit the Strategic Air Command Headquarters near Omaha. Went down underground there and saw the whole works. As a matter of fact, I took one cue from them. I remember that as a part of their demonstration, they pushed a button and immediately about sixty nuclear firing commands came on line: instantaneous.

RICHARD RUSK: Communications?

DEAN RUSK: Communications. And so it occurred to me that if they could have that kind of communications to fire these things, that I ought to have that kind of communications to prevent their firing. So I went back to the State Department and talked it over with Congressional Appropriations Committee. And so we greatly improved the communications of the Department with our key embassies abroad by beefing them up and making them much more modern and up-to-date. And that was very much of a plus.

RICHARD RUSK: That was the operations room you're talking about?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Could you press the button and come on line with all your embassies around the world?

DEAN RUSK: By teletype. And for many of them by telephone. In those days we had scrambler telephones which usually worked, but not always. They were still in a fairly primitive state. But they're much more efficient now. These scrambler telephones are much improved and so the whole communications network has been greatly improved. I also had a telephone communications capacity with every foreign minister in the Western Hemisphere. And I didn't have to use that very often, but it was there in case I needed it.

RICHARD RUSK: And instantaneous?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. Well, just pick up the phone and call them.

RICHARD RUSK: When you and the Soviets would talk about these technical safeguards, our system and then your questions about their system, would you share information about what we were doing? Give them suggestions?

DEAN RUSK: It's my impression that we did. Now, those talks occurred at the technical level rather than at my level, the political level. But I believe we explained to them how these Permissive Action Links worked, for example. And I'm sure they have something comparable because they don't want an accident to occur either.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. Anything else along the lines of these safeguards?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think so. I think that's enough.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Were you involved with the selection of Henry Cabot Lodge [Jr.] as Ambassador to Vietnam? In general how would you assess his performance over there?

DEAN RUSK: A few months after I became Secretary of State, Henry Cabot Lodge came in to see me. I had known him quite well during the period when he was a senator and also while he was a delegate to the United Nations during the [Dwight David] Eisenhower administration and I was then serving at the [John Davison] Rockefeller Foundation in New York. So, we were friends, but I would not say intimate friends. We were not in the same social circles in any sense. But in this conversation, he told me that he thought that he had one more tour of public service in his system, but he did not want to waste that on an easy job. He specifically said he did not want a comfortable embassy anywhere, but that if anything came along which was really challenging and important that we wanted him to take on, he would be glad to think about it and would probably do it. So when the ambassadorship in Vietnam came open, I remembered this conversation with Cabot Lodge and I talked to President Kennedy about it, and we agreed that it would be a good idea. After all, Cabot Lodge had been one of the standard bearers for the Republican Party in the Presidential race of such and such. [You will have to fill that in from the World Almanac.] He had long served us as our representative to the U.N. [United Nations]. He was

well- known both in this country and around the world. And we thought that he would be a very good man for the job, based upon his own abilities. There was the additional plus that he was a known Republican leader. We had strong bipartisan support for Vietnam and this was true among the Republicans as well as among most Democrats. And so we asked him to take it and he accepted. It was a gallant thing for him to do because he had something of a heart problem, and Saigon was not the most restful or comfortable post to be on. But he worked hard at it; he handled himself with dignity. I think he was effective, and I've always been grateful to him for the service that he rendered out there with considerable personal sacrifice. I'm sure his service in Saigon didn't do his heart any good.

RICHARD RUSK: Kennedy defeated Cabot Lodge when Kennedy first ran for the Senate.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: But there was no bitterness between them.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Talking about the famous cable that was sent to Saigon drafted by Harriman, [Michael Vincent] Forrestal, [Roger] Hilsman, and George Ball on Saturday, August 24.

DEAN RUSK: 1963.

RICHARD RUSK: Probably 1963: at the President's suggestion, according to Hilsman. Is that true? Did the President--

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall that, because that cable went out at a time when the President and Secretary McNamara and I all three were out of town. I mean it was cleared with us by telephone, by open telephone.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. I'm aware of that portion of the story. You don't know whether or not this was a Kennedy initiative?

DEAN RUSK: I would doubt that very much. I think there had grown up a number of people who thought that [Ngo Dinh] Diem had to go. Some of those were in the government; some of them were in the press corps. But when Kennedy, McNamara, and I got back to Washington and had a look at the text of this message, the three of us realized that it went further than we wanted to go in the direction of unseating Diem. So we took steps to pull back on that telegram as far as Cabot Lodge was concerned.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Let me quote Hilsman. The bottom of page 263: "The President was furious with the cable mixup."

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Any comment on Kennedy's reaction to this cable?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think the principal mistake as far as that cable was concerned was that there was no hurry about it and it could have waited until the President and McNamara and I were back in town and could take a look at it. It was sent out precipitously. I was called on an open telephone and given some impressions of the cable, but in very guarded tones because we were on an open telephone. And I was told that President Kennedy had already approved it. Well, from what I heard on the phone and that information, I went along with it by telephone. But then when I got back to Washington and actually saw the cable, I had strong feelings that it went far beyond where we should go because at that time we had only a very limited presence in South Vietnam. We did not have the power to sustain Diem if he had alienated the Buddhists and the military and the students and other major parts of this population. On the other hand, we did not have the kind of presence that could have overthrown him. We only had a handful of troops out there, for example, to start with. And coup reports that a situation like that would come in every few weeks from one source or another and most of them turned out not to mean anything. So we became more cautious about that question and felt that it was not up to us to decide whether or not Diem should stay, but that it was a matter for all the other groups in South Vietnam, particularly the armed forces and the Buddhists and the students and others.

RICHARD RUSK: You really weren't in favor of the idea of trying to overthrow Diem by American initiative?

DEAN RUSK: No, no. We didn't have the muscle out there to make that decision. And I was strongly opposed to what later came to be the assassination of Diem. We had told Ambassador Lodge that if a coup should occur, he should take what steps he could to insure the personal safety of President Diem. And when the coup started, Cabot Lodge communicated with Diem and offered to be of any help he could about his personal safety. But Diem fled to another part of the country hoping to find some forces there that would support him. But, he was caught on the way and was killed by some of his South Vietnamese soldiers.

RICHARD RUSK: What was Kennedy's reaction to that, to Diem's death? Do you recall?

DEAN RUSK: I think he very much regretted it. All of us did. Diem's central problem was that he let his brother [Ngo Dinh] Nhu and brother Nhu's wife [Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu] press him into actions and policies which progressively lost support in the country for the Diem regime. He had a major problem with the Buddhists and he alienated the military. And he got to a point where he was simply not capable of pulling the country together and trying to present a solid front to the Vietcong and North Vietnamese.

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: --within our own government at that time.

RICHARD RUSK: There were differences of view in our government?

DEAN RUSK: About whether Diem should go or not. And so I cannot certify what might have been said to some generals out there by some of our lower-ranking personnel in the State Department, in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], or wherever they might be. And it's just possible that down the line more encouragement was given to the coup which overthrew Diem than people topside in Washington wanted them to do. See, President Diem had done a number of very good things in South Vietnam during the late fifties and early sixties. He brought about a reconciliation with the dissident sects that were very troublesome in certain parts of the country. He brought South Vietnam into a rather rapidly growing economic prosperity. As a matter of fact, his progress, the progress of South Vietnam, in the late fifties and early sixties might have triggered the decision by Hanoi to move before they had no chance to succeed in South Vietnam because of the progress being made in South Vietnam.

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: Of course in the summer of '63, we publicly cut back on some of our aid programs to South Vietnam as a demonstration of our displeasure with some of the policies that Diem was following, particularly with regard to the Buddhists. And we urged President Diem to get his brother Nhu out of the country: suggested to him, among other things, he might send him to Washington as their ambassador in Washington. But Diem wouldn't budge on his brother, and his brother and his brother's wife Madame Nhu did a great deal to bring him down.

RICHARD RUSK: Tape's rolling. Do you think that in the aftermath of that Saturday cable that the cable was in fact retracted?

DEAN RUSK: Through indirect and subtle means it was basically retracted, but I don't think a cable went out saying "Forget cable so-and-so. It's all wrong; we should take another view." We did it in stages over a period of time.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, talking about the bottom of page 262:

DEAN RUSK: My mistake was not in misreading the strength of the enemy, but the persistence of the North Vietnamese. I thought the time would come when the North Vietnamese, as it happened in Korea and the Berlin blockade and other situations, would find the job ahead of them too tough and would call it off or come to the negotiating table and find a way to wind it up. But their persistence was almost incredible given the casualties that they were suffering.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. What was our intelligence community saying about that particular point? Do you recall what their estimates might have been on their ability and their willingness to fight to the finish?

DEAN RUSK: Well, there was a variety of intelligence reports on that kind of thing. A few of them turned up in the Pentagon Papers, but those that were found in the Pentagon Papers are not representative of the total output of the intelligence community during this period. There was a selection of documents for use in the Pentagon Papers. But, there were differences within the intelligence community as there were in the State Department, Defense Department, and White House.

RICHARD RUSK: Top of page 268 in Halberstam: "Although [Frederick E.] Nolting [Jr.] had participated in the debate--"

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, you have some comment on Fred Nolting, our Ambassador in South Vietnam.

DEAN RUSK: Well, Fred Nolting had been a pretty strong supporter of President Diem and was very much upset when the coup overthrew Diem. He and I have a different recollection on one-- Matter of fact I remember very clearly, Fred Nolting came to talk with me in my office and I tried my best to persuade him to return to Saigon as our ambassador, and he simply refused to do it. He now denies that. But, as far as my own recollection is concerned--

RICHARD RUSK: He denied that you had made the offer to return him?

DEAN RUSK: It's very clear in my own mind that I tried to get him to continue as ambassador and he refused. But, he and General [Paul D.] Harkins, who was head of our military mission out there in the early sixties, served at a time when our own information about what was going on in the countryside was very limited and our people were relying pretty heavily on the reports they were getting from President Diem.

RICHARD RUSK: This would have been in '51?

DEAN RUSK: '61, '62. But, President Diem was giving us a much more rosy picture of the situation than the facts would support. Later, when we got our own people into the countryside in much larger numbers we found the situation to be worse than Harkins and Nolting had been reporting, based upon reports that they had had from President Diem and his people. And so, in a sense, Harkins and Nolting were victims of President Diem's misinformation on the situation in different parts of the country.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Some of the press coverage of our Vietnam policy was quite critical even in the very early sixties--1961, '62--from people like Malcolm [Wilde] Browne and David Halberstam with the *New York Times*. In view of what actually happened over there in South Vietnam, do you think they were perhaps more on the money than we gave them credit for being at the time?

DEAN RUSK: Well, in part their reporting was in the nature of self-fulfilling prophecy, because at a very early stage they turned against what we were trying to do out there, and their reporting reflected that. There was an Australian, Peter Arnett, for example, was another one of those who was clearly opposed to what we were trying to do. And I personally think that they were biased in their reporting. I don't raise a constitutional issue about whether they had the right to report as they did. But, it seemed to cut across the editorial policies of the *New York Times* until Johnny

[John Bertram] Oakes became head of the editorial page. But, I think there was a good deal of biased reporting from out there and Halberstam and these fellows were a part of it. Of course, I probably was biased myself, because I had a client: the United States. I was trying to support United States policies determined by constitutional process. But, I was unhappy at times with Halberstam's reporting.

RICHARD RUSK: I don't think any of those gentlemen went out there with the intention of reporting critically about our policy. Could it be that they just saw realities on the ground in Southeast Asia that would have defeated whatever we tried to do? Let me quote you Barbara [Wertheim] Tuchman at the very end of her book [Joseph W.] *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*. She made the comment that in the end the Chinese went their own way as if the Americans had never come at all. Were we up against realities on the ground--realities of, oh, politics, culture, their social arrangements, their history, the language barriers--that just were bound to defeat American objectives out there? I think that's what those early press critics were trying to say.

DEAN RUSK: Well, I don't agree with that approach. When an armed battalion is coming down the road to shoot at people, they're going to get what they want in the short run unless somebody stops them. That has very little to do with cultural differences. After all, when Vietnam was divided at the Geneva Conference, a million people fled from North Vietnam to South Vietnam because they did not want to live under the kind of regime that they knew Ho Chi Minh was establishing in the North.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you know that the CIA, according to the materials that have been made available, participated in some propaganda campaigns to scare Northern Vietnamese about consequences of a communist takeover up there and were behind part of that?

DEAN RUSK: Well, it's possible that CIA encourages this movement of voting with one's feet. But, you can't say that CIA pulled it off. After all, a lot of these people were Catholics and they knew what the communist attitude toward religion was. No, I think we had pretty good support among the people of South Vietnam. In the countryside, for example, they wanted to run their own villages in their traditional way and they didn't care very much for this idea of an all-intrusive kind of a communist system that they were being threatened with. But those are things one can argue about.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, it certainly reflected the difficulties Vietnam has had with unifying and fully developing South Vietnam, There's still a lot of unrest.

DEAN RUSK: Well, the authorities in Hanoi, in trying to consolidate their position in South Vietnam, in Laos, and Cambodia have a very severe case of indigestion at the present time. They are finding it very difficult. And you've had all these many tens of thousands of people we called the boat people--who again voted by their movement--trying to escape from what they were running into. Many of them lost their lives. A good many of them made it out. No, I don't think you can explain what happened in terms of cultural differences.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't think that we had a situation there comparable to the situation in China, where I think George [Catlett] Marshall came back with the conclusions that we really didn't have the power and influence to affect internal Chinese developments out there--believe that that was the same thing that [John Stewart] Service, Edmund Clubb, and John Paton Davies, and a lot of those China specialists were saying at the time?

DEAN RUSK: Well, you have to break that down into individual attitudes. But, it's true that we did not have a decisive influence in China. After all, there are seven or eight hundred million people there in China and after the war we had no important presence in China. We ourselves had been disarmed. And even if we had remobilized millions of troops we could have done no more than maybe hold a few spots along the coast of China, without any real impact on these seven or eight hundred million Chinese all over the country.

RICHARD RUSK: Those same factors did not apply in South Vietnam?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think so to nearly the same extent.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking about John Kennedy. Pop, did he have a lot of doubt and confusion in his own mind about whether we should be in South Vietnam?

DEAN RUSK: Well after all, this was the kind of war that he didn't want; President Johnson didn't want. It's a war we could have done without. But Kennedy did attach great importance to the structure of collective security that had been established in the postwar period. I said somewhere else that when he made the initial decision to build up our military presence in South Vietnam, he had in mind two very important questions: What would have happened if [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev had not believed him during the Berlin Crisis and again during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

RICHARD RUSK: That we have.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. President Kennedy's principal hope was that with modest kind of help on the military side, and a lot of help on the economic side and in supplying arms and things like that, that we could put the South Vietnamese in position to handle this problem themselves. He did not want to Americanize the war during his Presidency. Now, what he would have done had he faced the new situations that developed in early '65, no one can know. But when he decided not to put troops into Laos, he said that if we have to fight in Southeast Asia we have to make that fight in Vietnam. And so I don't think that he was troubled by our attempt to assist South Vietnam. He, I think, was disappointed that there was not more to support out there. This was a point that I raised with him in a cable from--I think I was in Tokyo.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. You said, if I remember the relevant quote, "We have to be careful that we don't attach ourselves to a Trojan Horse."

DEAN RUSK: But we'll have to look very seriously at the question of what there was to support out there. And I thought that that was a question that had to be looked at very seriously when we made our first moves to increase the number of military in South Vietnam. President Johnson did not want the larger war. For his first year in office, he pretty much got along with the number--

END OF SIDE 2

