

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

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Virginia M. Wallace interviewed by Richard Rusk via unnamed Foreign Service Officer
(Questions prepared by Richard Rusk and read to Ms. Wallace in Korea by unnamed Foreign
Service Officer)

1986 June

WALLACE: I'm Virginia Wallace. I am a member of the Foreign Service of the United States. I am presently secretary to the American ambassador in Seoul, Korea. I was many years ago on the staff of Secretary of State Dean Rusk in Washington.

OFFICER: Virginia, when did you first hear of Dean Rusk?

WALLACE: Well, my sister Joan and I went to Washington way back in 1948 to seek our fortunes. We followed two college classmates of my sister Joan, who had gone there to pursue Masters degrees at Georgetown University. They attended their classes in the evening. Both of them held full-time jobs during the day. One of the girls, Irene by name, worked at the Department of State in the office of United Nations Political Affairs. That office was then headed by Dean Rusk. We used to hear about him from Irene. I particularly remember where I heard her talking about a party--I think it was a Christmas party--for all the staff members when they serenaded their boss about the other Dean. The Secretary of State at that time was Dean [Gooderham] Acheson. So it sounded as if it was a happy office with a well-liked boss.

OFFICER: I see. And when did you first actually lay eyes on Dean Rusk?

WALLACE: In retrospect' that was fairly interesting also. I entered the Foreign Service in 1957. I had two overseas assignments to Switzerland and Madagascar. I returned to Washington at an assignment in the office of personnel in 1961. I had never seen Secretary Rusk and I don't think I had ever seen any Secretary of State at that time. One day I heard that the Shah of Iran [Mohammed Reza Pahlavi] was in the building and that Secretary Rusk was going to be escorting him out through the main entrance of the State Department. And I happened to have my camera. So I hastened to the door to see both of them for the first time. I can only think now that many difficult years lay ahead of both of those gentlemen, but I think at the time I couldn't have talked either of them out of office if I said that I had powers to see the future.

OFFICER: I see. How did you happen to become associated with Dean Rusk? And what was your particular position on his staff when he was Secretary of State?

WALLACE: In my position in the personnel office I was secretary to the placement panels for officer and staff personnel within the Foreign Service. I learned of an opening coming up on the Secretary's staff for an assistant, mainly to help Mrs. Virginia Foisie Rusk with her role as wife of the Secretary of State. Also there was a second part to the job, which was drafting letters for the Secretary's signature: responses to letters he received about television appearances, speeches; letters from children who wanted advice about what they should study or wanted to know if

studying Latin had ever done him any good, and inquiries about his boyhood and his family. When I heard about the position I thought it sounded like something I might be interested in. I talked to my then-roommate who worked at the Department of Defense and she said--I don't know if it was an expression in those days--but, in effect, she said, "Go for it!". So I had to ask the very people for whom I was working then, and I had only been working with them for about six months. But I mustered my courage and went in to ask if my name could be submitted to be considered for the job. With some reluctance they agreed. So I knew--they told me--that I would be interviewed by several people, including Mrs. Rusk. So just about every other day I would go out to the hairdresser to get my hair done to be sure I would look as good as I could for these interviews. And little did I know at the time--I found out later--that Mrs. Rusk's own hairstyle was the subject of some interest. I had brought to my attention a number of letters from people who had ideas about how Mrs. Rusk should wear her hair in the future.

OFFICER: I see. From your own vantage point, what kind of man did Dean Rusk seem to be to you? Can you maybe give me a few descriptive words which come to mind?

WALLACE: Well, basically, I found him a very kind man, which made me feel very bad later when at least one of his detractors wrote some very unkind things about him, in my view. Secretary Rusk gave an impression of warmth. I think he was somewhat reserved. Some people found him somewhat distant, but certainly not unapproachable. I guess like most of us he was a composite of his heredity, his environment, his early experiences, and the times in which he lived. There was a twinkle in his eye which conveyed a personal charm. I think he probably occupied a special place in his family when he was a boy, and later in the family which he headed. He was a standout in school and so he was a favorite of teachers. He was used to succeeding, I'd say, as a student and later in life in positions which he held. When he was in office he was very dedicated, hard-working. He was usually in the office late into the night when he didn't have some "must" social engagement on his calendar. I think that he would give--He did give a lot of thought to any decision that he had to make. Once he set a course I think he would have had difficulty changing his mind. However, I believe that a person who held a contrary view and talked to him about it face-to-face would be very much respected by Secretary Rusk, and was. On the contrary, I think people who went behind his back and talked about disagreements that were existing in the administration would be a cause for disdain. Things haven't changed too much since, in any administration.

OFFICER: What kind of Secretary of State do you think Dean Rusk was? Was he effective? Ineffective? Was he too loyal to the Presidents he served? Or do you think perhaps he stayed in office too long?

WALLACE: Well, I've had an opportunity to tell Dean Rusk since he left office that I do not know how I would have decided some of the things that fell to him to decide when he was in office. But one thing I do know and that is that whatever decision he made or whatever advice he gave a President, it was because he thought it was right at the time. And he said to me that if that were true it was because George Marshall was a model for him. Secretary Rusk often mentioned that when he was in office and later. He certainly had no idea of any future monetary gain or occupying any other higher position; nothing like that would have affected any decision he had to make. As far as effective or ineffective, I guess from my position that would have been hard to

judge. But I think anyone in those days of the long period of Vietnam would hardly be called supremely effective: anyone who had a part in the decision making in those days. I know that he took each decision, each step, very seriously. I recall Mrs. Rusk telling me that in a period from late 1964 until February '65, he would often sit quietly. He seemed to be weighing some very important decision. And I was at their home in February '65 when he returned from a meeting at Camp David. And later I was quite sure that that particular meeting at Camp David was the one at which it was decided to greatly increase the troop involvement in Vietnam. And so I had no doubt that that was what was occupying his thoughts. Surely he was loyal to the Presidents he served. I think that he would consider loyalty telling them honestly what his views were, and after the President made his decision about following a certain course, it would be his duty to help him execute his policy. And if he couldn't do that, he would think that a cabinet officer should resign his office. For himself, he certainly stayed in office too long. I remember seeing a letter after he was in office four years in which an offer was made, and he could have named his work and named his price. But President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson was in office, after having succeeded the assassinated President, for just a short time. I am sure Secretary Rusk felt that the President needed him to stand by his side. The person who made that particular offer was in a position to back it up. And later, after eight years in office, when he left it, I think very few wanted to be associated with him because of Vietnam. So he didn't get any such lucrative, or very many, offers for sometime after he left office. So for himself he stayed in office too long.

OFFICER: Can you tell me something about Mrs. Rusk and her role as wife of the Secretary of State? And maybe a little about your own relationship with the family?

WALLACE: Oh, Mrs. Rusk worked at her role as wife of the Secretary of State as hard as he did at his. I think in the early days she was determined that he would go down in history as the greatest Secretary of State that ever was. Of course, she herself was also interested in government; she was a political science major. She was her husband's student at Mills College. She attacked her job--if you may call it a job--as wife of the Secretary of State, with great vigor. She attended just about every country's National Day reception for the eight years Dean Rusk was in office. He usually did not attend these. She received every foreign ambassador's wife in Washington on an individual basis at her home for coffee or tea. She also welcomed wives of American ambassadors in her home as they were back visiting Washington or going out to assignments for the first time. For these visits she did research, which I helped her to do, on the background of these ladies, on their husbands and families, and their countries. She was very active in organizing a group called "The Hospitality and Information Service" for diplomats and their families. And at that time, there were many small countries becoming independent and sending representatives to Washington for the first time. Many of the ladies had never been outside, for example, their small African country. Mrs. Rusk thought it was important to make them feel at home. And many volunteers came forward to arrange trips and programs for these people; not just ambassadors' wives or people from small countries, but all diplomatic people who wanted to join in. Many of the programs took place during the day, so for the most part they were women and wives who attended. But there were some evening and weekend events as well. She also took a great interest in preparations for social events, social functions at which she and her husband were to be hosts at the State Department for visiting dignitaries. She was in on the preparations and plans for the guests list, the flowers and the food and so forth. She also was involved in the project--the Americana project--of decorating the Eighth Floor in the beautiful

way that it eventually was decorated. And one who visits it today can see how that project was carried on with great results. And all of her work was not, I would say, self-sacrificing, because she was very interested herself in meeting people and in government and in traveling. And she was as well, of course, sincere about wanting to do a very good job for our country.

OFFICER: I see. What was your most memorable day as staff assistant in Secretary Rusk's office?

WALLACE: Without question it was the day their daughter, [Margaret Elizabeth Rusk] Peggy, married a young black man named Guy Smith. I would have liked to have gone to the wedding; it was taking place in California. But Secretary Rusk wanted me to stay in Washington and field any questions that might come from the press and others, to keep questions about this private event out of the Public Affairs section of the Department of State. Some correspondents, such as social writer Betty Beale,--she's one I remember--were surprised that this courtship could have taken place under their very eyes in Washington. But very few of the reporters would have recognized Peggy if she were not with her parents. The Rusk children pursued their own private lives quietly. They were not particularly interested in taking part in the Washington social scene. The older son and his wife--the oldest son is David [Patrick Rusk]; he married a young lady from Argentina--were more active on the social scene in Washington than the two younger Rusks: Peggy and her younger brother Richard [Geary Rusk]. On Peggy's wedding day, I received a lot of questions from the curious. Only one reporter--he was from California--do I recall being nasty. But I was on the phone constantly all day long. And there was always another call waiting. Someone was kind enough to go to get me my lunch. And during the course of the day Robert McCloskey, who was the spokesman for the State Department at the time, did call me and say that he knew that Public Affairs was not supposed to get involved with press inquiries concerning this private family matter, but they were there to help out. But, he said he was getting good reports, which I appreciated. And the next day the dean of the State Department press corps, who was at the time John Murmann Hightower of the Associated Press, called to congratulate me on my handling of the press, which I certainly also appreciated. And Secretary Rusk himself was back in Washington the day after the wedding. And the first thing he did was to call me and thank me for my service to his family.

OFFICER: Did you ever travel with Secretary and Mrs. Rusk? And if you did, do you have any particular memories of your overseas travel?

WALLACE: At the beginning of the period--the six-and-a-half year period which I worked with them--I did not travel. However, I used to work in preparing Mrs. Rusk for the trips. And then when they returned I was usually presented with a long list of thirty or forty names of people to whom letters of thanks should be written. And I guess I showed that someday I would like to go along. So I was included on a trip to a NATO meeting in Luxembourg. And after that, I guess I proved that I was indispensable because I went along on all trips to foreign countries when Mrs. Rusk accompanied the Secretary. Secretary Rusk was always more relaxed and at ease with everybody on these trips. He seemed to enjoy playing bridge on the plane. I can remember a small dinner we had in Rio de Janeiro when there were no social commitments for the Rusks in the evening. It was a small group, and we had a very relaxed and pleasant conversation. Just as we concluded the meal the lights in the hotel went out, and everyone was handed a candle to

make his or her way back to a room. The Secretary was included in those who received a candle. I visited Europe several times, Latin America on a couple of trips, Asia, Australia, New Zealand. We were at the airport in Wellington departing when someone brought the Secretary the news that Martin Luther King [Jr.] had been shot. We were supposed to stay overnight in Hawaii, but we just stopped for refueling there. There were all kinds of rumors about what was happening in Washington, so he felt that he had to get back. And when we arrived at Andrews Air Force Base, they had brought in special troops and there were very few people on the streets. And it was indeed a very eerie scene in Washington that Sunday morning. I was not with the Rusks on the trip to Japan when the plane had to return, when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated. That's also a memorable day for me. I was in Washington, and it was certainly memorable for everyone there and elsewhere in the United States.

OFFICER: Did other members of your family ever meet Secretary or Mrs. Rusk?

WALLACE: Some of my family members, a sister, niece, two nephews, did visit me in Washington and did meet them there. I remember that when I was returning with my two nephews from New Jersey, we were about forty-five minutes down the road and they said they had forgotten to bring along their good shoes. And I said, "I can't take you to the Rusk home in your old sports shoes." So we turned around and went back to my sister's home. I think today, probably, she and I would both be surprised if a ten and twelve-year-old appeared at her door with other than sports shoes on. On another occasion I traveled with the Secretary and Mrs. Rusk to Arizona where he was speaking at a luncheon in Phoenix. My sister Marilyn and her husband Joe came up from Tucson and attended the luncheon. Afterwards we joined Secretary and Mrs. Rusk for a very pleasant afternoon under the Arizona sun at the beautiful Biltmore Hotel outside Phoenix. Also in this gathering were one of the Secretary's security agents, and his son who was a professor at Arizona State University, and that young man's wife. My sister and brother-in-law had never expected to be in such a small friendly gathering with the Secretary of State, and they thoroughly enjoyed the experience. And Secretary Rusk seemed to have a very pleasant time with our family members as well.

OFFICER: How did people in the State Department and in the Foreign Service feel about the Rusks?

WALLACE: The State Department and Foreign Service personnel greatly admired and liked the Rusks as people. They got to know and meet many of the workers « all levels in the Department and around the world. They exhibited a sincere appreciation of what those people were doing for the United States and it was reciprocated. There were many touching farewells when Secretary Rusk left office. I remember the one President and Mrs. [Claudia Atla Taylor] Johnson attended on the eighth floor of the State Department, with the President's little grandson crawling around on the floor. It was evident on that occasion that the President knew his Secretary of State had gone through a lot in his and the country's service. And President Johnson showed a sincere appreciation on that occasion. With regard to farewells, The Hospitality Information Service was giving a special one for Mrs. Rusk. The Secretary had said he didn't think he could attend. I knew she was disappointed, and I also knew that other cabinet members and wives were planning to attend. So I took it upon myself to write a little note to Secretary Rusk explaining what was my view of the situation, and he made it possible for himself to attend. And I'm sure he

was glad that he did because, during the course of the evening, a special personal message from the President was received. I also remember the farewell in the diplomatic lobby of the State Department when Secretary and Mrs. Rusk were leaving for the last time in their capacity, the eve of the inauguration of President [Richard Milhous] Nixon. And there was a great throng in the lobby cheering them on their way.

OFFICER: Do you have any anecdotes that might tell us something about the Dean Rusk you knew?

WALLACE: There was one my sister Joan has reminded me I must tell. After he was out of office for some time and I was back in Washington from Moscow to serve on a promotion panel, I was invited to join in celebrating the joint birthdays of Mrs. Rusk and Guy Smith at the Smith home in Stafford, Virginia. Mrs. Rusk was already at her daughter's home and Mr. Rusk was flying up from Georgia and renting a car at Washington National Airport to drive down to Stafford, Virginia. The plan was that he would pick me up at the main entrance of the State Department. I headed for that door in what I thought was plenty of time. But lo, when I got outside I saw that he was across the street waiting. On seeing me, he started the motor and headed up the semi-circular drive. When I got in the car he said, "I was up here once before but the guard told me to move." I said, "He must have been a new guard. Do you think he recognized you?" And responded the former Secretary of State, "I don't know. I just moved." My sister and I have speculated about how many former Secretaries of State would have reacted in that way.

OFFICER: Thank you very much.

WALLACE: You're welcome.

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