

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

Rusk QQ: Part 5 of 5

Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk, William Bundy, and Thomas J. Schoenbaum

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The complete interview also includes Rusk MM: Part 1; Rusk NN: Part 2; Rusk OO: Part 3; Rusk PP: Part 4.

DEAN RUSK: I mentioned the other day the question as to whether we should have insisted that the Congress vote each year on the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

BUNDY: I think that's a question. The fact that there was never a great debate. That's something that Bill Moyers put into an article about 1969. And I throw this out: I think a Great Debate of sorts would certainly have taken place if the call-up of the reserves and the supplemental appropriation had been included in the July 1965 decision. And my own supposition is that one reason the President did not wish to go that route was that such a debate, while it would have in the end elicited, there was every reason to believe, the overwhelming support of Congress. (I think at one point the figure was a total of eleven members of Congress in both houses who might in the end vote against.) It would nonetheless have created a long debate at a time when four or five of the basic ten of the great society authorization measures had not been enacted, and that that played a part. But at any rate, there was not a Great Debate in July or August of 1965.

Another time when there might have been such a debate would have been in early 1966. And I think at that time there was a serious decision in which I was not involved and which I am aware only because of a cable that indicated one figure for the estimated cost of the war and it wasn't the figure that appeared in the final budget. It was a draft cable. It was cancelled. So there must have been a decision not to falsify but to minimize the costs of the war so that there would not be an occasion for Great Debate in early 1966, when you still had the appropriation measures for the Great Society to get passed.

Those were two times there might have been a Great Debate. And this has always seemed to me one of those very tough decisions. This President, President Lyndon Johnson, wanted in the deepest fiber of his being to bring about the essential Great Society legislation and to set it on the way. He believed the country could support and afford both. But he also believed that in the legislative situation there was a swing element that would say, "Mr. President, you can have your war or you can have your Great Society. But we are not going to give you both."

RICHARD RUSK: Right.

BUNDY: Let's stop it at that point.

BUNDY: I was thinking of people like Senator Russell.

DEAN RUSK: Bill, I once looked at the figures on this and I think it's correct in saying that the

costs of Vietnam each year were substantially less than the increase in our gross national product for that year. In other words, we were paying for Vietnam out of our fat. Maybe had it cut into people more financially, economically, the situation might have been somewhat different. But there's a very interesting question that Senator [Barry Morris] Goldwater addressed himself to in the early seventies. He got up on the Senate floor and said that he was tired of hearing all the complaints and alibis around the Congress that the President had exceeded his authority, that the Congress had been bypassed, things of that sort. And in that speech he set out chapter and verse the involvement of the Congress in Vietnam at all stages and from the beginning.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember the date of that speech?

DEAN RUSK: Ann Dunn [Dean Rusk's secretary] can give you the date. Now, one of my law students here at Georgia did a paper once on the question, "What did the executive branch of the government have the right to believe was the view of Congress about Vietnam throughout that experience?". Now the powers of Congress are given to the Congress as a corporate body, not to individual senators and congressmen. It's really quite revealing to see the extent to which Congress supported the Vietnam War until 1972 or 1971, when they rescinded the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. It simply is not true that Presidents ran away from the Congress on this issue. I remember for two years in a row Lyndon Johnson--and you remember this Bill--invited the entire Congress down to the White House in groups of thirty to thirty-five to have a chance to get a full briefing on Vietnam and to put in any questions or comments they wanted to make. And he went through the entire Congress two successive years with that technique. So there was full consultation between the executive branch and the Congress on these matters.

BUNDY: May I comment on an aspect of that, because of what I think would be one private exception and one public exception and they were both significant? One private exception was, generally speaking, Senator [Michael J.] Mansfield, who had spoken forthrightly at the meeting with the congressional leadership at the time of initiation of bombing over the Pleiku incident and said he would not do this, he would negotiate. And the President turned kind of red, and batted him down, in essence.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you at that meeting?

BUNDY: Yes, I was at that meeting. And it was a very dramatic moment. And I think the record also shows more than one memorandum privately from Senator Mansfield to President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy, going back to 1963 that were profoundly skeptical of the venture in all respects. Of course, Senator Mansfield was the majority leader. He very seldom said this publicly. The man who did say it publicly, of course, and this is leading into a question that you know more about perhaps than anybody, Mr. Secretary, and that's the question of Senator [James William] Fulbright's position, the administration's dealings with Senator Fulbright, what you think Senator Fulbright's reasoning was, why he behaved as he did, and progressively--and I think you would agree--made it extremely difficult for the administration to present its case seriously through the Foreign Relations Committee through procedural devices and so on. For example, [he] made it impossible to even bring the transcripts back to the State Department. So there came to be a very edgy and almost hostile relationship between the administration and the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on this issue. Now I am leading up to the

question of asking the Secretary to comment on that because you know it probably more intimately than anybody.

DEAN RUSK: First, let's talk about Mike Mansfield. The three people who actually signed the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] treaty in Manila for the United States were Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Senator Mike Mansfield, and Senator [Howard] Alexander Smith of New Jersey. Many years later when Mansfield was reminded of this he said, "I did so reluctantly." When I went back to look at the transcripts of the discussions in the Senate about the ratification of the SEATO treaty, Mike did not express any reluctance in what he said to the Senate about asking advice and consent for that treaty. There's a case where one of those who entered into the pledge for the United States left that ship when the going got tough. Now also, Mike Mansfield as Majority Leader was the not the kind of majority leader that Lyndon Johnson had been. Perhaps Mansfield's method was in reaction to Lyndon Johnson because Lyndon Johnson had the view that the Senate had to act as a corporate body at the end of the day and he would mobilize the votes on whatever was coming up. Many of them on behalf of President Eisenhower. But Mike Mansfield generally took the view that there were a hundred senators, each of them entitled to their views as their votes. And he would not operate to build the majority that was necessary to let the Senate act as a corporate body. So things were a little difficult there. Bill Fulbright was an Oxford man who probably learned at Oxford that it was "infra dig," unworthy, to agree with anybody else. He's an instinctive maverick.

RICHARD RUSK: How do you spell infra dig?

DEAN RUSK: I-N-F-R-A, D-I-G. Beneath one's dignity. There's a place in the Senate for mavericks; they're needed. But when a maverick becomes Chairman of one of the important committees, you begin to have problems. When Bill Fulbright presented the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to the floor of the Senate, and took questions on it, you will find the answers he gave at that time were the answers that Lyndon Johnson would have given. I remember one point particularly he was asked if this gave the President authority to introduce large numbers of troops out there. And Fulbright said, "Yes, this gives him that authority. We hope it won't happen. We're not looking forward to that. But it gives him that authority." That was Lyndon Johnson's view at that time. But I think Bill Fulbright was swayed by the rising tide of liberal voices who were coming out in opposition to the war. He considered himself to be a liberal. When [John Bertram] Johnny Oakes took over the editorial page of the New York Times, and [James] Russell Wiggins at the Washington Post gave way to [Benjamin Crowninshield] Bradlee, the attitude of those two papers changed, just by those personnel changes, in each case in one spot of the newspaper. I remember looking back to the time of the signing of the SEATO treaty and the New York Times editorial lead off, "This is a great diplomatic victory for President Eisenhower and Secretary John Foster Dalles." As it went on this editorial was in full support. Well, I sent that up to them during the sixties and said, "How do you think this looks in light of the attitudes of the New York Times?" And I got back a very labored thirty-page memo from Johnny Oakes trying to explain the turns and twitches of the New York Times.

RICHARD RUSK: Did they publish that?

DEAN RUSK: No.

BUNDY: Of course they never--

RICHARD RUSK: Do you have it? It's down at the Department?

BUNDY: It's probably in the Department.

BUNDY: I have a letter or two of exchange on it. He really didn't forthrightly say "Get out" at any time. He would always say "Get into a negotiation," never specifying what he would settle for. It was a kind of maddening form of a mosquito bite all the time, without ever saying, categorically, yes. This isn't worth it. Get out!" In fact very few of the opponents said that during the time we were in office. As to Fulbright, I want to touch on one specific set of events, Dean, which I am sure you will remember vividly. Fulbright had two sets of hearings in February and March 1966. He had one in which he had you on the stand for a long, long time. And he had General [James M.] Gavin and some opponents of the war or questions on it. Gavin was actually saying, "Get settled in enclaves and work from there." Well, [George Frost] Kennan, in the same hearings was saying "We've got to stick with the commitment." Kennan came later to take a perceptively negative view as to the whole enterprise, but not then. And the second set of hearings was with experts on China, which I think Fulbright thought would produce startling testimony that the experts on China didn't agree with the administration. In fact, that second set of hearings, which you can find very readily but which were never publicized by the committee, showed the China experts in effect saying, "What you need is containment with communication." I think that was the catch phrase [Arthur] Doak Barnett used. But in fact the China experts generally said the administration has got to do more or less what it's doing. It's got to be concerned about China.

But Fulbright, from that point on, was on a confrontation course. I think that's fair to say. And that affected, I think I'm fair in this, Dean, the way he actually conducted the business of the committee in terms of administration testimony and all else.

DEAN RUSK: Right. Well, I don't think that even when he was Chairman that Bill Fulbright reflected the views of the committee as a whole. He was in a minority on his own committee much of his time. But--

SCHOENBAUM: Can we move on to, since we only have a few minutes left, can we move on to the events of 1968 and finally, peace negotiations did at least get started?

RICHARD RUSK: Tom, if you want to talk about '68 and the peace negotiations, how about backing up to the post-Tet Offensive policy review and, Pop, your role in that policy review? Warren Cohen, if I may restate his thesis briefly, took the point of view that, as you have said publicly, you realized that because of the reaction of the American people that you were going to have to take a different course. You fought for a bombing pause. You recommended against the deployment of 206,000 additional troops. Apparently Clark [M.] Clifford was going down that same trail to some extent. Cohen says that neither one of you knew what the other was doing, up to the point where it came time to advise the President on the contents of his presidential speech. And then you had a glimmering of insight there. Can you comment on that?

DEAN RUSK: My main memory is not very clear about a general policy review following the Tet Offensive since Bill Bundy would have been right in the middle of it.

BUNDY: There was a thoroughgoing review that started with assessing how we should respond to [William C.] Westmoreland's request.

DEAN RUSK: At that time, yes.

BUNDY: Broadly described as 206,000 additional troops.

DEAN RUSK: Let me say that I have a clear recollection that submission of the 200,000 figure from Westmoreland was, in effect, invited by President Johnson, that he had asked Westmoreland what, in certain contingencies, would Westmoreland think that he would need. Any commander who has that kind of invitation from the President is going to submit one. So he put in this figure of 200,000. But it was a contingency kind of figure to start with, and it had no chance of getting approval from Washington. The Secretary of Defense, I, and the President, we were all three against it.

RICHARD RUSK: From the start?

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you participate in--Didn't Clifford come in after [Robert Strange] McNamara resigned? Who was in charge of that policy?

BUNDY: The cable came in just in the last day or so that McNamara was still Secretary of Defense. He left February 28 or thereabouts. Clifford took over at that point. And it was Clifford who presided over the working group that reviewed that. That included for a time Secretary [Henry H.] Fowler at the cabinet level. You were not directly engaged, obviously, because you--

DEAN RUSK: I attended some of those meetings.

BUNDY: Some of the early meetings.

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

BUNDY: But Philip [C.] Habib and I represented the Department. Paul [C.] Warnke represented the working civilian level of Defense. We had just about every input we could get. And then it came, if you recall, Dean, to the question of bringing in the elder statesmen. And their advice was much more "Find a way to negotiate or cut this down. At any rate, don't build it up." And that was the 25th of March. Along the way we had looked at various possibilities of inserting into the President's speech not only the decision on how many forces which in the end was a very small number, but also whether this speech should include an affirmative offer in the negotiating area. It was a time when the President's speech had become the policy statement for practical purposes. And along the way, Dean--and I certainly remember this well--we reached the point

where we were looking at the possibility of just stopping the bombing on something akin to the San Antonio formula: stopping all the bombing, or cutting back the bombing to the 18th parallel or 19th parallel. I've forgotten. But at any rate--

SCHOENBAUM: Parallel?

BUNDY: Above the 17th. It's defined in the terms of a parallel. It was essentially the communications line. It was a partial bombing halt. And I remember working on a cable and getting your approval for it, Dean, asking Ellsworth Bunker, for his judgment. He thought the total bombing halt would be very hard for the South Vietnamese to take. In effect, it would affect their morale. He was negative about that at least at that time. He didn't say that it couldn't be done at a somewhat later time. And he said possibly they, the Vietnamese, could be persuaded that the partial bombing halt made some sense, or at least was acceptable. And that was where it stood until we were looking at a draft of the speech. (This is an occasion recounted in many memoirs.) We were looking at the text of the speech, which must have been about the eleventh draft, that Harry McPherson brought over from the White House. And we were looking at it in a session in your office, in which Clark Clifford was present. You, of course, were presiding. And I think Phil Habib was present. I know I was. And that was when Clark, I won't say exploded, but came out very vehemently that we had to get much more peace into that speech, and that we had to have a firm proposal. Walt Rostow was there. And I was always, in hindsight, astonished at how readily Clark's motion carried. I always suspected--

RICHARD RUSK: He was too.

BUNDY: I always suspected that you might have already talked to the President in this sense yourself. Was that the case?

DEAN RUSK: The President and I agreed that the clear signs of a change in American opinion, including the grassroots, meant that we had to make a major effort to bring this war to a conclusion, by negotiations if possible. I must say that I got quite a surprise out of Clark Clifford. Before he became Secretary of Defense, he was called in as an advisor at various times. He was a friend of LBJ's. He would sit in and, I think, was on the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and things like that. As an advisor, he was always a super hawk. But then when he became Secretary of Defense he seemed to move very rapidly to the point, not of bringing this matter to a successful conclusion, but to find ways to get our forces out of there. And I don't know what might have been in Clark's mind on that rather drastic change in his attitude.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you ever discuss it with him?

DEAN RUSK: In various ways. Clark had always been very sensitive to politics. He could see the effect of this on the Democratic party. I think that was always very much in his mind, well it was in his mind during the Truman administration.

SCHOENBAUM: But hadn't you in fact experienced a change insofar as you thought that the American people were no longer supporting. And, therefore, you had to adopt a different course. Wasn't that your view too?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, it was. I thought it might still be possible, perhaps I was a little naive in this, to somehow to get the North Vietnamese to the conference table and bring it to a conclusion, somewhat as the Korean War was brought to a conclusion. But that was not to be. We had a great difficulty during the summer and early fall of 1968 in getting the Paris talks started. The South Vietnamese were very upset about appearing at such talks along with the North Vietnamese. And President [Nguyen Van] Thieu was very resistant on that, as you know.

BUNDY: Let me come back to the question, which was a question that may not be worth debating but it is debated, of the paternity of the partial bombing halt. Had you not discussed that with the President by the time we asked for Bunker's judgment on that? Because even a cable of that sort wouldn't have gone out without that kind of discussion. It was my assumption at the time.

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

BUNDY: Had you had other discussions with the President about that possibility? Because it did not seem to take you by surprise. You agreed to it at once. And by that evening, you sent a cable to Bunker saying, "This is what the speech will include, and we want your final comment."

DEAN RUSK: Yes I had kept--

DEAN RUSK: My general practice was to keep my flanks and rear covered by keeping the President very much informed and involved in what we were doing. So I am sure that I did discuss that with the President. I don't remember the details. I think Lyndon Johnson was prepared to make a maximum effort in the summer and early fall of '68 to get some negotiations going which might bring this thing to a conclusion.

RICHARD RUSK: In his memoirs, *The Vantage Point*, Lyndon Johnson credits you more so than Clifford with being the one who helped persuade him that we had to start cutting back. And his quote was "Dean Rusk understood more than any other man how I wished to move."

DEAN RUSK: Yes. Well, I tried to keep in touch with him at all times.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall specifically things you might have said to him?

DEAN RUSK: No I don't, because we talked about these things so often.

RICHARD RUSK: Did it take a real effort on your part?

DEAN RUSK: No.

RICHARD RUSK: He was willing to go in that direction?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. You see, every casualty in Vietnam took a little piece out of Lyndon Johnson. I remember driving with him through a relatively small, Texas town. And people were

out on the sidewalks to wave and say hello. He looked at them and he said, "Dean, those are the mommies and daddies of our men in Vietnam." It was always on his mind. So he doubted sometimes the validity of the tactics which might have been used in some of these earlier bombing halts and attempts at negotiations. But he was never unwilling to bring this thing to a conclusion if any satisfactory basis could be found for it.

SCHOENBAUM: Were you in touch with him at that time on a daily basis, on an hourly basis? By phones?

DEAN RUSK: Well, let's usually say a daily basis.

RICHARD RUSK: You were unaware of what Clifford was up to the point where he made his remarks?

DEAN RUSK: There were some things going on in the Pentagon that I was unaware of. For example, there's an untold story about how the Pentagon Papers came into being. But I've done that on another tape. Well, let me show you something that will intrigue you. Well, let's cut this thing down.

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