

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk QQQQQ
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk
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RICHARD RUSK: I have a question about then Vice President Lyndon [Baines] Johnson's feelings toward South Vietnamese President [Ngo Dinh] Diem and a lot of the coup talk that was circulating in Washington. I'm looking at the bottom of page 291.

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall that Lyndon Johnson as Vice President was directly involved in the discussions about Diem prior to Diem's assassination. It became clear after Lyndon Johnson became President that he thought that the overthrow of Diem was a tragic mistake and that Vietnam would be better off if Diem had survived. But he did not really inject himself into the discussions about whether or not we could live with Diem, partly because he wasn't aware of the discussions taking place in the executive branch of the government.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember talking to him about it?

DEAN RUSK: Not while he was Vice President. I did talk to him about it when he was President. You see, the overthrow of Diem came very shortly before the death of President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy. There was not much of a time delay. So it became clear to us that President Johnson thought this had been a great mistake.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Halberstam, at the bottom of 292, says that, talking about Johnson: "He felt that Kennedy had played too great a role in the whole affair. A few months later, after Kennedy had been assassinated, Johnson would turn to a friend and say in an almost mystical way that the assassination of Kennedy was retribution for the assassination of Diem."

DEAN RUSK: Well, that could only have been one of those passing remarks that had not been thought out; not a lot of real substance in them.

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: --general approach. Let me add though, with emphasis, that there was no possibility that there was any operational connection between the death of Diem and the death of Kennedy. Lee Harvey Oswald was simply not involved with Diem or Southeast Asia or any of those places.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking about the limited Test Ban Treaty and the opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the passage of that treaty. Did you get involved in that debate with the Chiefs? Did [Robert Strange] McNamara rely on you at all?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we talked about that extensively in what I earlier called the Committee of Principles. Sitting on that Committee were the Secretaries of State and Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, among others. So the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was always wholly and completely involved in the talks. I myself did not sit down and wrestle with the Joint Chiefs of Staff over the issues that might have been involved in the Test Ban Treaty. Secretary McNamara would do that over in the Pentagon. And so it did not fall to me to argue any of these issues with the Joint Chiefs. The principal question we had with the Joint Chiefs was the question of verification. And during the period when we were looking toward a comprehensive test ban, including underground shots, there was pretty strong insistence by the Joint Chiefs on a level of verification that the Russians simply would not accept. But it was [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev who finally decided that we should go ahead with a partial Test Ban Treaty and leave underground testing for another time. So I don't recall any major problem we had with the Joint Chiefs on banning tests in the atmosphere or under water or in outer space.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you less enthusiastic than, say, John Kennedy or some of the Kennedy people towards the idea of arms control: towards that limited Test Ban Treaty?

DEAN RUSK: Not at all. I always felt that you should take whatever step you can at any particular time, then build on that and try to improve it and extend it later. So I had no problem whatever with the limited Test Ban Treaty. I was enthusiastically in support of it.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, we're talking about John Kennedy's personal, political commitment to the limited Test Ban Treaty. And was this something that he really pushed forward with considerable enthusiasm, whatever the consequences?

DEAN RUSK: He was strongly in support of the Test Ban Treaty and derived a great deal of personal satisfaction from the conclusion of that treaty. Bear in mind that that treaty was completed immediately after the very severe Berlin Crisis of '61-'62 and the Cuban Missile Crisis. And John F. Kennedy felt that we ought to continue to find some points of agreement with the Soviet Union despite our serious differences, because the world was just too damn dangerous if we did not make such an effort. And so he really got a lot of personal satisfaction out of the conclusion of the partial Test Ban Treaty--

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: One evidence of his deep interest in the signing of the treaty was that he helped to put together a very substantial delegation to accompany me to Moscow for the signing of the Test Ban Treaty. He had distinguished senators. He had a whale of a delegation to go over for that ceremony. It was clear that he took it with the utmost seriousness, and he wanted the Senate to do the same. He did work very hard for it, and really was very pleased that it did succeed. I myself was enthusiastic about the test ban as it applied to the atmosphere, under water and outer space. I was not all that enthusiastic about banning underground shots, partly because of the very difficult problem of verification in distinguishing underground shots from seismic events. But also because if we had a complete ban on testing two things would happen: one, our laboratories

would almost certainly be dismantled and we would lose a good deal of talent and capability in the nuclear field; and secondly, I thought that unless we had occasional proof-testing of our nuclear inventory, that over a period of time doubts would begin to build about whether or not our inventory was effective, was operational. And in time that would lead to fears and suspicions and the kind of political turmoil that we could do without. So I've never been all that enthusiastic about a complete ban on underground testing.

RICHARD RUSK: Despite the fact that the nuclear arsenals have grown from several thousand warheads on each side to fifty thousand warheads in total? Do you still feel that way about the possibility of a comprehensive test ban back in the early sixties?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I don't think the ban on testing had much to do with the number of warheads that was being produced on both sides. As a matter of fact, I can't recall that we ever had any indication that any country ever failed in its first attempt to explode a nuclear weapon.

RICHARD RUSK: Really?

DEAN RUSK: The science is generally known. The technology is a little complicated, maybe a little expensive, but it isn't all that mysterious. You put a wad of material in one place, and a wad of material in another place and you throw them together and you get your explosion. So--

RICHARD RUSK: So you're not familiar at all with any unsuccessful nuclear test?

DEAN RUSK: I've never heard of a nation attempting to make its first test that failed in the attempt.

RICHARD RUSK: Isn't that an argument for a comprehensive test ban?

DEAN RUSK: Well, it's possible. It's possible. This is sort of an unbalanced part or sort of thing. I think for all sorts of reasons, including the environmental reason, it was very important to get this testing out of the atmosphere or under water or outer space. But again, whether I'm right or wrong, I didn't have the same enthusiasm with respect to a complete ban of all testing including underground testing.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, there have been some arguments made by physicists today that the technology of nuclear weaponry and nuclear physics is so well developed, and computer monitors are also so well developed, that we know exactly what will happen with testing. Therefore, an actual testing program is not needed. Did those arguments materialize back in the sixties?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, they were made. And I respect those arguments. Let me say that I would not campaign against a comprehensive test ban, including underground shots, if the question of verification were reasonably well satisfied. But one thing that was a concern to me was the dismantling of our nuclear laboratories, because people are not going to work in such places if

they have nothing to do. Given our kind of situation in our society, our Congress and budget and things like that, I was a little concerned about dismantling our nuclear laboratories and losing the interest and capabilities of key scientists in these nuclear questions.

RICHARD RUSK: Wouldn't that have been a good development in light of the world today that has developed arsenals of fifty thousand warheads?

DEAN RUSK: Well, if the same thing were happening in the Soviet Union. But they probably would be able to maintain their nuclear laboratories much more effectively than we would be able to, given our kind of society. But as I say, I wouldn't campaign against it.

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, John Kennedy, in his political campaign after the Test Ban Treaty, seemed to find a responsive chord from the American people in his trips to western states. He talked extensively about the idea of peace. Do you recall any of this? Did he discuss it with you?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think two things came together there: both important, both relatively simple. John F. Kennedy himself had a deep understanding of what nuclear war would mean. And as a person and as a President, the idea of nuclear war was simply appalling to him. He brooded about whether it would become his fate to have to push that nuclear button. And that was very much on his mind. And he had lived through some very serious crises where he had been required to look down the gun barrel of nuclear war and he didn't like at all what he could see down that barrel. The other element on that point was the basic moderation of the American people. The American people don't want war. They don't want to destroy anybody. We don't want anybody's territory. We don't want to take away from anybody anything that's theirs. There's a deep practical, down to earth common sense about the American people on such subjects. Despite the furor over the Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, we in the Kennedy administration sincerely believed that it was just too late in history for the two nuclear superpowers to pursue a policy of total hostility across the board. And so we spent a good deal of time looking for possible points of agreement, on large matters or small, which might broaden the base of common interest between our two countries and reduce the range of issues on which violence might occur. So the Test Ban Treaty was a major step in that direction. And then there was the Civil Air agreement and the Consular agreement, two important space treaties, and other things. So this interest of Kennedy's was sincere; it was personal, but it also elicited a response from the basic moderation and practical common sense of the American people. One important thing about the Partial Test Ban Treaty was that we knew that we had the capability of discovering any Soviet nuclear shots in the atmosphere or in outer space or under water. And we would know about it almost instantly and could inform the world if such shots occurred and then take a look to see whether, if anything, we should do anything about it under the circumstances. My guess is that had the Soviets exploded nuclear weapons in violation of the Test Ban Treaty, that we might have done some further testing ourselves, but that it would not have become an issue of war and peace, but that the Test Ban Treaty would have lapsed and then we would have to go back to the drawing board and start all over again.

RICHARD RUSK: This whole issue of "you can't trust the Russians" is somewhat superceded if there are ways that we can verify our agreement. Nevertheless, in another sense, we trust the Russians and they trust us every minute of every day of every year in the sense that we trust in their command and control system to hold: you know, that they won't launch any of their weaponry by accident. It seems like there is a massive amount of trust that each country is placing in the other, implicit in the realities of the Nuclear Age.

DEAN RUSK: Well I think that the very fact that in 1985 we've put behind us forty years without the use of a nuclear weapon indicates that there has been a limit on the disagreements between ourselves and the Soviet Union. There's a line beyond which neither we nor they have gone, and I'm not sure I would reduce that to trust so much as a reliance upon the belief that the Soviet Union's leaders are not idiots and that they too understand the importance of avoiding that nuclear war which must never occur. I think we've learned that the Soviet leaders, whatever our differences are, whatever we think of them, are not idiots, that they have no interest in destroying Mother Russia any more than our leaders have in destroying America and the rest of the human race. I think Russian leaders understand fundamentally the bottom line in our relationship, which is that, whatever we think of each other, somehow they and we have got to find some way to inhabit this speck of dust in the universe at the same time. Now that represents a measure of confidence between the two capitals but it doesn't reduce itself to the kind of trust we have with them, say, Canada or Britain where we know that if we have an agreement with them, that as a matter of good faith they will perform. We still have to be concerned about verification. But still, at the end of the day the record proves that we and the Russians aren't out to destroy each other.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, did you ever take a swim with either Presidents Kennedy or Johnson in the White House pool?

DEAN RUSK: No, I never made use of what might be called the "social amenities" at the White House. I don't recall that I ever played tennis, for example, in the White House tennis court, nor did I at Hyannisport or West Palm Beach. When I visited the President, it was officially and on business. I was never a part of his family or social group, so I was never over in the swimming pool or anything of that sort around the White House.

RICHARD RUSK: Despite the fact that you liked golf, you like tennis--

DEAN RUSK: Oh I played golf with LBJ a couple of times.

RICHARD RUSK: Oh did you?

DEAN RUSK: As a matter of fact, I think I played golf with him in the last round of golf he ever played. I was down at the ranch and we went out to play a round. This was after he left office. And we played a round of golf on a golf course named for Lady Bird [Claudia Alta Taylor] Johnson.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall the name?

DEAN RUSK: It was called the Lady Bird Johnson Park or something like that, and there was a golf course there. And LBJ and I got a golf cart, of course, and he filled the golf cart with empty beer cans and bottles and things like that because it annoyed him that people would litter Lady Bird's park. And I remember it particularly--

RICHARD RUSK: He would drive around and pick up litter?

DEAN RUSK: Oh sure, yeah. He'd just fill the golf cart with all this junk that it annoyed him to find in Lady Bird's park. On the eighteenth hole, he was about thirty yards off the green, and he whacked at the ball and cut it almost half in two. This golf ball rolled and bumped and hopped around on the ground and went up and dropped into the hole. And I suspect that was the last good shot he ever hit. The only man in the world that I always knew I could beat at golf was Lyndon Johnson. He was a very poor golfer. John F. Kennedy would have been a very good golfer had he not had his problem with his back. Even so, he played some golf occasionally and did rather well. He was well coordinated and relatively graceful and would have been a good athlete.

RICHARD RUSK: Did LBJ play an honest game of golf? I somehow had the opinion that he'd be the kind of golfer who would have a bad lie and just sort of take his foot and nudge it out into the fairway or something.

DEAN RUSK: (laughter) Oh, I think when he and I played golf we didn't hesitate either one of us to improve our lies. We weren't using professional tournament rules or anything like that. We were doing it for fun and a little exercise. My golf game was pretty erratic because I just like to see the golf ball sail, I'd much rather see it go a hell of a long way than in any particular direction. So I had my trouble with golf balls off the fairway. I'm a left-hander and pretty erratic-

RICHARD RUSK: You could hit a long shot, I remember those drives you used to make.

DEAN RUSK: But I just like to see the ball sail, and I wasn't all that good about keeping it in the right direction.

RICHARD RUSK: What were Lyndon Johnson's attitudes and general views of the Department of State and Foreign Service?

DEAN RUSK: Well every President becomes impatient at times with the Department of State because these funny foreigners around the world just don't always act like a President would hope they would act. And a President tends to hold the Department of State responsible for that because for one reason or another we're not able to persuade these foreigners to act the way the President wants. Johnson was also impatient at times with questions of protocol. And we had to press him pretty hard at times to act in what might be called the correct way from the protocol point of view, because if one chief of state goes around kicking rules of protocol all over the place, then we get back to the period three or four centuries ago when questions of protocol led to violence and all sorts of things. He did give us one real problem at the Department. When we send out an ambassador, we have to get from that country what is called an agreement, notifying

us that that country is prepared to accept our nominee as ambassador. Well normally it takes about ten days or two weeks to get that agreement back from the country to whom you want to send an ambassador. Meanwhile, there were occasional leaks about these nominees. Whether those leaks came out of the White House, or possibly the State Department, or from people on the Foreign Relations Committee with whom we had consulted about such nominations, I don't really know. But these leaks infuriated Johnson, and so he--

RICHARD RUSK: Why?

DEAN RUSK: Well, he didn't like to have his hand disclosed before he was ready to announce it.

RICHARD RUSK: Why did it infuriate him?

DEAN RUSK: Well, also it made these foreign governments mad. It made them very mad to have the name of an ambassador hit the press before they themselves had given us their agreement showing that they were willing to receive him. But anyhow, Lyndon Johnson began to insist that we get an agreement within twenty- four or forty-eight hours. He really put the pressure on the State Department on that. And this was very inconvenient for us in the Department because that meant that we had to put almost unbelievable pressures on foreign governments to do something which under their own procedures usually took a little time. That seemed to me to be an unnecessary irritation in our relations with foreign governments because it really was unnecessary from the point of view of our international relations. Although from the point of view of Lyndon Johnson's approach to domestic matters and the question of leaks, one can understand it in part. But there were one or two occasions where Lyndon Johnson simply decided not to go ahead with the appointment of a particular ambassador because it had leaked ahead of time, and he just wanted to show the press a thing or two. So he changed his mind on a couple of appointments because of leaks.

RICHARD RUSK: You don't recall the instances?

DEAN RUSK: I don't recall the instances, no. But this was something that he insisted upon. It was very annoying to many foreign governments.

RICHARD RUSK: Were there any other ways in which Lyndon Johnson was kind of a prickly bush as far as the Department of State was concerned, in areas of protocol and diplomacy?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, there were occasional things that would pop up. For example, I went with him on his state visit to Malaysia. And under Malaysian protocol and ceremony, when they received him they played the Star Spangled Banner, our national anthem, about four times in a row in different parts of the ceremony and reception. President Johnson said to me, "Tell these people to stop playing the national anthem." (laughter) Well, there are some things that you just don't do.

RICHARD RUSK: What did you do?

DEAN RUSK: I made one or two motions, but did not carry out his request. When you're in that kind of a position, you're stuck with certain questions of protocol. For example, when a foreign visitor comes to Washington for a state or an official visit, the other embassies watch like a hawk the amount of time that a President spends with that visitor. If he spends a lot more time with one man than he's willing to spend with their man when he comes to Washington, then you've got a problem. So we had to work on the President to be sure that he followed the lines of protocol pretty carefully in receiving visitors.

RICHARD RUSK: These rules of procedure and diplomacy must have really built up some tension in LBJ. Maybe that's one reason why he let out his "yahoo" at the Taj Mahal.

DEAN RUSK: Well, diplomacy has been trying for two or three centuries to eliminate unnecessary disputes in protocol matters. For example, two ambassadors dueled in the streets of London in the seventeenth century over the question of precedence. At one point I seem to remember they tore down a gate of London so that two ambassadors could enter the city with their horse-drawn carriages side by side rather than one in front of the other. Beginning with the Congress of Vienna in 1815, we began developing rules of protocol which would give automatic answers to questions which would otherwise become very controversial. For example, in every capitol the relative ranking of ambassadors is based upon the date on which the ambassador presents his credentials, and that's just a rule and it avoids all sorts of controversy about precedence. You could have one hundred and twenty-five or thirty ambassadors at a reception in the East Room of the White House, and when the President and the First Lady would come in to form a receiving line to shake hands with these ambassadors the diplomatic corps would simply line up. And they'd be lined up within sixty seconds because each ambassador knew exactly where he was in the line and he knew behind whom he would come, and ahead of whom he would come, and it was all automatic, really. There was a time when these things could be extremely controversial, and so protocol reduces to automatic answers as many as possible of these questions which might otherwise present problems. Let me say that on these protocol matters that we had an extraordinary presence of chiefs of state, heads of government, and all sorts of high officials come to Washington for President Kennedy's funeral. Questions of protocol would have been impossible to handle on that occasion, so we simply sent the word around among all these visitors that we would not be able to follow rules of protocol, and they all accepted it in good grace, and there were no problems.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, getting back to Lyndon Johnson's personal attitudes towards the Foreign Service and State Department personnel--

DEAN RUSK: Well, Lyndon Johnson had the usual misgivings at times about professional diplomats, but on the other hand he relied very heavily upon them. He himself pretended that he did not know very much about foreign policy, and therefore he leaned very heavily upon the State Department and professional diplomats. One thing I remember very specifically is that if a problem came up with another country he always wanted to know the real personal views of our ambassador appointed to that country. And if two countries were in dispute, he would want to know the views of our two ambassadors in the capitals to which they were assigned. He leaned very heavily upon professional advice during the formation of policy. Now he might not always agree with the professional advice, but he always wanted it. See, when he was Vice-President,

we had a foreign service officer assigned to him personally who would make available to him the daily flow of cables and whatever information he as Vice-President wanted about any particular situation. And then when he, as Vice-President, traveled to twenty-five countries or so, he was briefed to the gills about our relations with that country because he made a special point of not wanting to visit a country just to shake hands and make a protocol visit. He wanted to talk substance or policy with them. And he had some strong favorites within the foreign service, people like Llewellyn [E.] Thompson, like [Thomas Clifton] Tom Mann, like [William] Tapley Bennett [Jr.] END OF SIDE A He learned during his Presidency that the American professional Foreign Service is a diplomatic service that really is second to none in the world. It's always easy to poke fun at the professional diplomats.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, what about President Kennedy's views towards the Foreign Service?

DEAN RUSK: Well when a new President comes in he and particular people around him are inclined to have a little arm's length attitude toward the professional Foreign Service. But Kennedy came to have a great respect for the Foreign Service, and made a special visit over to the State Department once to talk to all of the assembled Foreign Service officers to tell them that he respected them and loved them, as he put it. And so it boosted their morale because you have these rumors going around town, usually coming out of White House staffers, about Foggy Bottom and so forth.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you remember when that was or in reaction to what crisis?

DEAN RUSK: No, I forget now just what occasion. But you see, President Kennedy used to have his press conferences in the Department of State. And I'd always meet him in the basement when his car came in and we went to a little waiting room for him where he could get ready. Sometimes after the press conferences he'd drop by my office and we'd talk about various things. He also came to have a respect for the professional service. I did have to quarrel with him occasionally about some of his ambassadorial appointments.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, in the last months of his life before his assassination, did President Kennedy ever express any real doubts to you, either personally or during your meetings with him, about such questions as Vietnam? Could it be done? Was it worth doing, if the French were not able to succeed over there with three hundred thousand men? Was he, in fact, increasingly dubious privately and personally to you about our policy over there?

DEAN RUSK: Any President is going to agonize about war. We didn't want that war. We didn't start that war. Americans were being killed, so we were continuously boxing the compass about all the questions and issues that surrounded that particular conflict. But I never heard from President Kennedy any thoughts about just abandoning Vietnam and forgetting the Southeast Asia Treaty and running out on our obligations under collective security. But of course we were continually looking at questions including a lot of the negative questions about that struggle. It was very much on our minds.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, other writers have stressed LBJ's sense of awe or deep respect for the Kennedy Cabinet that he inherited: people like McGeorge Bundy, Robert [Strange] McNamara. Were you aware of this attitude in Lyndon Johnson?

DEAN RUSK: Well you remember that six members of the Cabinet were on that plane halfway across the Pacific at the time that John F. Kennedy died. We went back to Hawaii, refueled, made a nonstop back to Washington. Well the next morning I went over to call on President Johnson. And in that conversation I encouraged him to build his own Cabinet: a Cabinet of his own choice so it would be his administration. But he was very anxious to maintain continuity and to assure that the public business of the country went ahead without being totally paralyzed by the tragedy of Kennedy's death. So he insisted that we all remain at our posts. He did make some changes later on, but he tried to get the Kennedy Cabinet to stay in office and continue to serve him. Well now that produced a little bit of a problem, because those members of the Kennedy Administration who were serving John F. Kennedy, the man, had some problems in transferring their complete loyalty and enthusiasm and support to Lyndon Johnson. But those of us who had served John F. Kennedy because he was the President of the United States had no difficulty in serving Lyndon Johnson as President of the United States. And to some members of the Kennedy White House, of course, the death of John F. Kennedy was a traumatic affair, something that they would never recover from. Some of them I think felt that they could not live with a new president in the White House, and one by one left the service. And of course, on certain positions Lyndon Johnson brought in his own staff for some of the key positions, such as the appointment secretary, his own personal secretary, and some other things like that. So some of the Kennedy people left fairly soon when Johnson put together his own immediate staff. In general his approach to the transition was to maintain continuity. So he asked us all to stay, and he made a few changes later on. But the main thrust of his attitude in November 1963 was continuity.

RICHARD RUSK: Of course, in his own way Lyndon Johnson was as brilliant as any of the so-called brilliant people around him.

DEAN RUSK: Well I think one of the things which would surprise some scholars when they get into the thirty-five million items in the LBJ Library is the sheer intelligence of Lyndon Johnson. That was concealed from a good many people on the northeastern seaboard by his southern accent and his corn pone stories. He was a very intelligent man. Remember that his brain had been honed by several years as the majority leader in the Senate where he had to be prepared to take on any question from any direction on matters pending before the Senate. He was never paralyzed by an inability to comprehend the most complicated issues. As I say, that will really surprise some people as they dig into the record.

RICHARD RUSK: He's right there on a par with everyone else you served?

DEAN RUSK: Yes.

RICHARD RUSK: George [Wildman] Ball used to say of Lyndon Johnson that he didn't suffer from an inadequate education, he suffered from the belief that he'd had an inadequate education.

DEAN RUSK: I think there's a lot to that.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop what about these B-52 bomb raids on Vietnam? What was your position regarding the use of those planes in that kind of conflict?

DEAN RUSK: One of the problems about using B-52s up in the far north was that the B-52s were relatively slow, and were sitting ducks for any North Vietnamese modern fighter planes or surface to air missiles. I didn't see much point in exposing B-52s in that kind of bombing. We did use B-52s along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and also, oddly enough, in close support of ground troops. Those who designed the B-52, I'm sure never in the world thought they would be used to give close support to ground troops, but they had an extraordinary degree of accuracy in their bombing. I won't describe the technical details of why that was so, but they could put down a--

[break in recording]

DEAN RUSK: But they proved very valuable in, well around Khe Sanh for example in giving a-

RICHARD RUSK: How close to our own positions could an American commander bring in a B-52 strike?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, three or four hundred yards without any problem.

RICHARD RUSK: That's amazing!

DEAN RUSK: See, they would drop direction finders ahead of time, and with the use of those they could pinpoint bombing from the B-52s to an extraordinary degree.

RICHARD RUSK: These things would be up to twenty thousand feet or so?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: Only one Secretary of State served longer than you did, and that was Cordell Hull. Was that a record that you wanted?

DEAN RUSK: No, not at all because Cordell Hull had served into Franklin [Delano] Roosevelt's third term. And given our present constitutional limitation on presidents, it's very unlikely that any Secretary of State is going to top Cordell Hull's record. I kept track of that point just because I would get questions about it and I thought that I ought to know the answer. I think there were maybe four or five Secretaries of State who had served through two full Presidential terms, but because in the old days you had your inauguration in March, or something like that, it was only by a few days that I served longer than three or four of the others who had served through two full Presidential terms.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that a record you're kind of proud of?

DEAN RUSK: No, it's just something that I checked on because I'd get questions about it and I wanted to know the answer. As far as longevity is concerned, I'm convinced that eight years is too long on that job under modern conditions.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, this idea of the United States, or any country, trying to exercise moral leadership in world affairs. What does that term mean to you?

DEAN RUSK: Well, regardless of people in the news media and Soviet propaganda and other sources of criticism, the United States does have an extraordinary standing among the nations of the world. I don't believe that there is any nation, including the Soviet Union that thinks we're trying to take away from them anything that's theirs. I don't think we're feared by nations all over the world. I think if one stands off and looks at it from a distance, by and large, American foreign policy since World War II has represented a responsibility, a restraint, and a generosity, which is really very impressive. And many foreign ministers have spoken to me about that in our bilateral conversations with them at the United Nations or elsewhere. It is an important factor, but it is not the critically decisive factor when you get around to those things where power is directly involved--

RICHARD RUSK: Talking about the quality of moral leadership, this--

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, I mean for example, in the campaign of 1956 Adlai [Ewing] Stevenson [ill] almost lost me when late in the campaign he came out in favor of a unilateral halting of all testing. I thought that halting testing was great, but I thought we should get the Soviet Union to join in halting testing--

RICHARD RUSK: He wanted to do it unilaterally?

DEAN RUSK: He wanted to do it unilaterally. And he almost lost me on that issue because there are matters where power, resolve, determination are also decisive: I think in the Berlin Crisis of '61-'62, the Cuban Missile Crisis, issues of that sort. I was never in favor of letting the house of cards come tumbling down around us through weakness, isolationism, indifference, attitudes of that sort that contributed so much to sending my generation of students into World War II.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop if you read some of the recent histories, some of the revisionist histories of American foreign policy, they project a colder, bleaker reality in looking at the real influence of the U.S. overseas. Your views by comparison almost sound, certainly idealistic, somewhat innocent, perhaps naive, in terms of the real impact of our country overseas, for example in the internal domestic politics of other countries, perhaps the effects of our economy overseas, the effects of business competition and monopoly abroad. I think you're familiar with some of this revisionist history. How would you respond to it?

DEAN RUSK: Well I've had my problems with revisionist historians, as some people call them. Self-criticism is the life blood of a democracy, but sustained self-flagellation can be its destruction. In some circles, including some academic circles, it becomes the fad and the fashion to tear ourselves down. And then some of these revisionist historians just make egregious errors

of fact. One of the first of these revisionist historians, a professor at Vanderbilt, wrote a big thick volume on the origins of the Cold War in which, among other things, he said that we attacked North Korea, rather than North Korea attacking South Korea. His name is [Denna Frank] Fleming. I went through his book very carefully at the time, and there were simple errors of fact almost literally on every page, and I've never seen any revisionist historian grapple with the fact almost literally on every page. And I've never seen any revisionist historian grapple with the fact that after V-J [Victory over Japan] Day we demobilized almost completely, and almost overnight. Then [Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili] Stalin embarked upon a series of adventures that started the Cold War. I think that the revisionist historians as a cult, have been responsible for a great deal of misunderstanding. Of course we made mistakes, and of course we've done some things we ought not to have done, we've had disappointments and frustrations, but on the whole, I'm--

RICHARD RUSK: You would tend to think that these would be honest mistakes rather than mistakes of more insidious purpose.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think some of them are not honest mistakes, because they could easily have checked them.

RICHARD RUSK: No, I'm talking about our mistakes.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, our own mistakes. We've made some mistakes, such as the Bay of Pigs. We made the mistake when John Foster Dulles got mad and canceled the negotiations with [Gamal Abdel] Nasser for building the Aswan Dam through the combination of the World Bank and other projects. No, we've made some mistakes. When Eugene [Robert] Black, then president of the World Bank, was negotiating the Aswan Dam business with Egypt, I was then at the Rockefeller Foundation. And I agreed with Eugene Black that if his negotiations succeeded, that the Rockefeller Foundation would invest rather heavily in an examinations of the non-engineering aspects of the Aswan Dam: such things as its effect on agriculture, its effect on the environment, even what it might mean for the snail disease, bilharzia that was such a devastating thing in Egypt. But then Foster Dulles--I forget now the exact occasion--simply got mad and canceled off these negotiations. And then the Egyptians turned to the Russians, and paid no attention to the long-range non-engineering impact of the Aswan Dam. And so they had a good many problems resulting from it. It might have been anticipated and something done about it.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, good point. Pop any regrets after the fact about your decision not to go to Nassau and help negotiate the Skybolt affair? I believe you instead attended a diplomatic function in Washington and sent George Ball in your place. And as a consequence some critics have said that Robert [S.] McNamara played too extensive a role at Nassau and that was one of the reasons the Skybolt affair blew up into the major issue that it did.

DEAN RUSK: Well it is true that I had already long scheduled the annual dinner for the Diplomatic Corps at the State Department before the Nassau meeting was arranged. I didn't really feel that I should snub the entire Diplomatic Corps in order to go to one bilateral meeting with one country. It went beyond that. Before the Nassau meeting, a year or two before, Bob McNamara had alerted the British Minister of Defense that Skybolt was in trouble, and that it

might not be possible for the United States to go ahead with its agreement with Britain about Skybolt. But for some reason, apparently the British Minister of Defense did not prepare his own cabinet in his own situation in London for that contingency. And so when it was announced that Skybolt was being abandoned, the British pretended that this had come as a great shock to them. But in any event, I knew what the result of the Nassau meeting was going to be.

RICHARD RUSK: Had you been there the end result from the American point of view--

DEAN RUSK: Would have been the same--

RICHARD RUSK: Could you have handled things in such a way that the British wouldn't have felt so jerked off by the American position?

DEAN RUSK: Well, this was really a British responsibility. I mean, they had been alerted long before Nassau that Skybolt was in trouble. But they had not braced themselves, or prepared the British public or the Parliament for that possibility. Now it's possible that they pretended some of the shock and dismay in order to get the agreement that was eventually reached at Nassau. But you see, our own relationship with the British on nuclear matters, I think, leaves something to be desired because they were close partners with us in the development of the Atomic Bomb during World War II. But then with the [Brien] McMahon Act passed just after the war, 1948 I think, we by law just broke off that close relationship with them on atomic matters. I for one felt rather badly that we had done that because the British had played a pretty key role in these nuclear matters during the period of the Manhattan Project. And some of their scientists, like [Ernest] Rutherford for example, played a pretty major part in the basic physics that led to the Atomic bomb. But--

RICHARD RUSK: What year was the McMahon Act?

DEAN RUSK: 1948 I think, but you'd better check that.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you involved in that?

DEAN RUSK: Not really, not really. But the Congress took the bit in its teeth.

RICHARD RUSK: That was a congressional initiative?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, and just decided that we would not continue any cooperative basis either with Britain or Canada, both of whom had worked very closely with us during the Manhattan Project. I knew that at Nassau some arrangement would be reached to permit the British to continue their nuclear program. And I was quite relaxed about it. Now there were some in the Department of State at that time who felt that we ought to put pressure on Britain to get out of the nuclear business entirely. I felt that that was not our job; it was not our business. And I felt that the British are grown people, they're just as intelligent as we are and know how to decide what is in their own national interest, that we should not box their ears trying to get them to abandon their very limited nuclear force. So I'm sure that there were some people in the Department who didn't like it that I did not go to Nassau to sabotage what turned out to be the

agreement reached at Nassau. Well I was content with the agreement. I knew it would happen. And so I simply sent George Ball in my place.

RICHARD RUSK: Was there any crying at your grandmother's funeral?

DEAN RUSK: Well, that was one of the first things I remembered as a very small child. But we were not like the Southern Irish, we didn't hold wakes at funerals. But in the Christian tradition, particularly Calvinist Christian tradition, death was not something to be afraid of. It was a part of life; the two experiences shared by every human being are birth and death. So we didn't make that much of a to-do about some death, even in the family. I remember my grandmother's funeral because her sons, about seven or so of them, sang at the funeral. They were the pallbearers. But it was a very simple and dignified family affair. That's the way I personally prefer it.

RICHARD RUSK: Did the family ask the mourners not to cry at the funeral? Of course you wouldn't have remembered that.

DEAN RUSK: People in Cherokee County don't cry a lot, they don't go around wailing.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah right. (laughter) Okay.

DEAN RUSK: Ask your question.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah Pop, Halberstam quotes you, saying, "Young Dean was very much church-oriented. His sister would remember him walking around the house reading the Bible aloud."

DEAN RUSK: Well, you see we were pretty strict about such things as the Sabbath. One of the things we could do on Sunday was to memorize the Bible. I have no doubt that I, in the process of memorizing substantial parts of the Bible, would walk around the house reading it because I was trying to memorize it. At my church they gave us what were called pearls to put on strings for parts of the Bible we'd memorized. I earned a lot of those pearls by memorizing all sorts of things from the Bible.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, they say the Rhodes Scholarship is a propellant in American society, that it opens many doors. Did you find that to be true?

DEAN RUSK: Well, my interest in the Rhodes Scholarship did not come from personal ambition in the world at large. It came more out of the passion for education that I developed when I was growing up. A Rhodes Scholarship was about the only way I felt that I could get any post-graduate education after I graduated from Davidson. I simply didn't have the resources to pursue graduate education in the usual way because it took money to pursue post-graduate education.

RICHARD RUSK: [quoting Mr. Rusk] "It was the principal way that I knew of at the time."

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. But one thing about the Rhodes Scholarship that one has to bear in mind, and that is that Cecil [John] Rhodes' attitude of finding the well-rounded person means that in general, that a genius cannot get a Rhodes Scholarship. I've sometimes said that the Rhodes Scholarships are for a high level of mediocrity, because of this insistence upon a "well-rounded" approach to life.

RICHARD RUSK: Where true geniuses are often solely focused in a particular area.

DEAN RUSK: Cecil Rhodes himself focused the scholarships on people who are interested in public service. He had this silly notion that somehow the Anglo- Saxons had a special talent for ruling the world, and he wanted to help develop talent for that purpose. Well, in general, most Rhodes Scholars have not entered public service, although quite a few have, in the Congress, in the Cabinet, and on the Supreme Court and places like that. But most of them turn out to be professors and lawyers and doctors, people in that kind of activity. But in any event, my interest in a Rhodes Scholarship did not come from any seething ambition to be a big shot, so much as a way to get some graduate education.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you think the proposition holds true, however, that Rhodes Scholarship, that title, does open doors and ring bells?

DEAN RUSK: Oh I think there's a certain--

RICHARD RUSK: Were you aware of it?

DEAN RUSK: I think there's a certain kudos that still attaches to a Rhodes Scholarship, and that might have some influence. I notice when I'm introduced to audiences, they usually make reference to the fact that I was a Rhodes Scholar.

RICHARD RUSK: Looks good on a resume.

DEAN RUSK: So it makes some difference. Matter of fact, I got my first job after leaving Oxford simply because I'd been a Rhodes Scholar.

RICHARD RUSK: Right.

END OF SIDE 2