

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

RICHARD RUSK: --Department of State and perhaps some that weren't. How frequently did you have those things and what degree of your own preparation went into those conferences?

DEAN RUSK: Well, of course, I didn't want to hold press conferences that seemed to conflict in time with any press conference the President might be having. I would space my press conferences in between Presidential press conferences. And bear in mind that I had those Friday afternoon background sessions and that took some of the pressure off of official press conferences. But I did quite a few. I didn't have a regular schedule. We would decide when we were going to have one and then let the White House know so the President would know that I was going to have one.

RICHARD RUSK: To frequency, how did your record compare with, say, [John] Foster Dulles or any of the people who took over after you were there?

DEAN RUSK: I have never made a study of that. Of course, when I would go off to a meeting somewhere as the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Foreign Ministers or something like that, I would usually meet, at least, the American press in connection with those visits. There were lots of informal interchanges with the press here and there. Coming out of congressional hearings there were usually some reporters around who would want to ask you some questions.

RICHARD RUSK: Did the press ever complain that you may not have been as accessible to them as they would have liked?

DEAN RUSK: I suppose that no amount of access is ever enough, so there might have been some complaints. But I wasn't particularly aware of it. Now when a press conference was scheduled and you knew that there were going to be several hundred reporters there and a battery of television cameras, that would be circulated around the Department the day before. And they would prepare all sorts of notes on things that might be coming up. And then on the day of the press conference I would meet with a group of colleagues, maybe four or five, to go over anticipated questions and discuss how they should be addressed and so forth. It is interesting that very rarely do you get an unexpected question at a press conference. So you can go to a press conference pretty well prepared. And I used to take some notes along, in a black book of some sort, so that I could refer to certain things where figures and particular facts might become involved. But many of my appearances before congressional committees were in open hearings. The press was there. And although I was sometimes described as "the silent American," actually I was one of the more garrulous Secretaries in terms of what I actually said in testimony and press conferences, and things of that sort: public speeches.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall any press questions that really caught you by surprise or as a bit unusual. I know you got one on your lecture circuit here in Georgia at least. This one fellow who--

DEAN RUSK: The one who asked me about the second coming of Christ? I didn't get any questions like that. Of course if you get a question like that, it is pretty easy to say that that question catches me unprepared and I will ask the press spokesman to fill you in on that at your press meeting tomorrow, or something like that.

RICHARD RUSK: Go ahead and read that one instance into the tape here. This is sort of a summary of all your experiences.

DEAN RUSK: You mean that question? Well, after a lecture to about 600 people a year or two ago, when we got to the question period, the first question came from a distinguished gentleman sitting down on the front row. And he rose and said, "Mr. Rusk, a number of my colleagues and I are convinced that the second coming of Christ is imminent and could occur at any moment. What is your view of that?" The audience began to laugh, but he looked like a pretty serious and decent fellow and I didn't want to embarrass him. So after a moment's pause I said, "Well, I will have to leave that to the good Lord and He has not taken me into His confidence." But that was a genuinely new question.

RICHARD RUSK: In spite of some of your criticisms and complaints of the American press and media, you really think that our country is well served or better served by our press than any country in the world? Now, can you compare and contrast our press and our media with perhaps what you experienced elsewhere in the world?

DEAN RUSK: I think on the whole the British press is somewhat more, shall I say, respectful of public officials. The American press is pretty aggressive in driving in for the story. In France they were pretty tame during [Charles Andre Joseph Mario] de Gaulle's period. When he would hold a press conference the press would all assemble there in a big room in one of the palaces. And after they were assembled, he would enter. Then he would simply acknowledge different reporters around the room for questions and he let them ask several questions before he would say anything. Then he would say what he was going to say anyhow and walk out.

RICHARD RUSK: Have you seen one of those?

DEAN RUSK: I have seen them on television.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that just Charles de Gaulle? That's not the way they do things?

DEAN RUSK: Not necessarily. The Japanese press is pretty aggressive. Every time I made a visit to Japan during my term, I would have a press conference. And at each one of these I would get the question, "Do you regret the bombing of Hiroshima?" And I would always give them the same answer. I told them that I regretted very deeply every casualty on both sides of that war, beginning with Pearl Harbor and ending with the surrender in Tokyo Bay. Because I was not going to accept just a one-sided responsibility for the events in that war. When you go into a

number of other countries, the behavior of the reporters when you are having a press conference might be rather mild, but some of their stories might be a little keen or vicious, or whatever. But on the whole the American press shows a vigor which you don't find generally in press stories other parts of the world.

RICHARD RUSK: So training here in this country is pretty good for what you're going to run into abroad?

DEAN RUSK: Oh yes, sure. It almost made it duck soup for you to go abroad.

RICHARD RUSK: In terms of an aggressive press, my goodness, you see scenes where a public official will literally have a dozen mikes stuck right in front of his face and press people following him as he is walking into a building or out of a building.

DEAN RUSK: Well, one reporter almost really got into trouble with me once. I was coming out of a hearing of a Senate committee and I didn't want to say anything to the press. So I told them that I was not going to say anything, and I started walking through the press. And one of these reporters grabbed me by the arm and held me. Well, for personal reasons it just infuriates me for anybody to grab hold of me. And there on camera I made some very harsh remark to him and he turned loose of me just before my big security man was about to knock him flat. And he got a narrow escape on that one.

RICHARD RUSK: Was that Gus [P. Peleuses]?

DEAN RUSK: No, that was [William P.] Bill DeCourcy, the former Pittsburgh Steeler. But that kind of thing you just must accept from reporters.

DEAN RUSK: There is a mass of information available in the United States that you don't always get abroad. Many television networks abroad don't begin until say 3:00 in the afternoon. And they don't have as long a news programs and things like that as we do. Of course, we have far more newspapers than most countries do, so that the sheer mass of material that is available for any citizen who wants to make an effort to get hold of what is known is really quite impressive. I might just make a brief comment about secrecy. I think the role of secrecy has been greatly exaggerated. At any given time there may be a few secrets in the nuclear field; there may be a few secrets in the electronic field. And at any given time there might be a few temporary secrets about, say, your negotiating position when you are going into negotiations because you don't want to expose your whole card face up on the table in negotiations. But there were very few secrets actually that are really secrets.

RICHARD RUSK: That are significant secrets?

DEAN RUSK: That's right. As a matter of fact, if we Americans could talk solely among ourselves as Americans, there wouldn't be many secrets. But the trouble is that when we talk to ourselves, the rest of the world is listening in. And you have to always bear in mind, if you're a President or a Secretary of State, that you have got other major audiences there listening to what you are saying. You have got not only the American people, you have got your allies, you've got

your adversaries, you've got the Third World people. And it isn't always easy to put things in the appropriate way to each audience because they are very diverse audiences. So that creates some problems at times.

RICHARD RUSK: I suppose a lot of those countries have a certain amount of difficulty separating out from this battle of voices what was really the American position as opposed to what was said?

DEAN RUSK: Yes, we are pretty confusing on this because we are an open society that talks a lot and writes a lot. So we send out millions of signals every day out of our society, and you have to watch that a little bit because it could be quite easy for another government to read those signals wrong. So you have to spend a fair amount of time being sure that other governments understand the views of our own government and that their own guesses as to what these views are may not be right.

RICHARD RUSK: We talked earlier about the problems with leaks. Were you ever personally responsible for leaking information inadvertently?

DEAN RUSK: Well, this may sound rather odd but when I said something, it wasn't a leak because I had the authority to declassify.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that right?

DEAN RUSK: I remember, once coming back from a press conference, one of my Department colleagues was waiting for me at the door of my office. He referred to something I said in the press conference. And he said, "Mr. Secretary, that is not our policy." And I could only grin at him and say, "It is now." But actually there was only one leak in my eight years that gave me any trouble. That was that leak about my remark that "we were eyeball to eyeball and the other fellow just blinked." Because there in the middle of that very dangerous crisis, for some colleague to leak that at a time when any consideration of face or prestige might have made a difference, I thought was unforgivable.

RICHARD RUSK: And that was leaked during the crisis?

DEAN RUSK: During the crisis, yes. But Secretaries of State normally are not as bothered by leaks as Presidents.

RICHARD RUSK: You said earlier that you had never personally believed in trial balloons and a person didn't do that type of thing. What's wrong with that? It seems like a marvelous way to float a policy idea without actually following through to the point of a new policy. It is a way of getting back some public response or congressional response on how something is likely to work out. Presidents use it all the time. Why did you personally feel that--

DEAN RUSK: Well, I thought that--It depends on what you mean by trial balloon. If you are floating something as policy that is not policy, then you are abusing the press. And if you want to float a trial balloon you can just go up to Capitol Hill and try it on senators and congressmen.

Now, I don't have any problem with people talking about alternatives in question forum. But to present it as policy just to see what the reaction would be, I think is a phony and one should not abuse the press that way. I would never myself, on my own initiative--I think I said this the other day--put anything off-the-record in talking to a reporter. If he asked me a question, I might say to him, "Now I can only answer that off-the-record. Do you want it in that form or not?" Sometimes he would say "Yes," and sometimes "No," and take his chances on getting it from somebody else around government.

RICHARD RUSK: We discussed earlier possible ways the media might be able to improve their performance. And your suggestion was separate press conferences for TV and the written press. Do you have other suggestions?

DEAN RUSK: Well, when I was in England, I used to appreciate what the *London Times* used to refer to as its 'leader column.' On the right-hand page of the editorial page of the *London Times*, there would be an in-depth story about something: a country or situation. It was not hot news; it was background. It filled in a lot of important information and gave you more context about what was going on. And I would like to see somewhat more of that kind of writing in our press. Now the *Christian Science Monitor* does a fair amount of that. But in these newspapers, the foreign news people are fighting other parts of their own newspaper for just space. There are very severe limits on space, so they tend to concentrate on what might be called "hot-flash news." But some of them do a better job. The *Wall Street Journal* does a little of this. But I think that any citizen who wants to be reasonably well informed should diversify his reading of news: read more than one newspaper, more than one weekly news magazine.

RICHARD RUSK: What would you read regularly as Secretary of State?

DEAN RUSK: I would, of course, almost always read the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. But then I would read the *Christian Science Monitor*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *Louisville Courier Journal*. And I would have a good many things clipped for me so that I could get a pretty fair sampling of what was being said about important matters in different parts of the country. And then I could call for the full edition if I wanted it. I remember on one occasion President Kennedy got mad at the *New York Herald Tribune* and cancelled the White House subscriptions to the *New York Herald Tribune*. And they wanted me to do the same thing in the State Department, and I wouldn't do it. I said, "Look, we are paying large amounts of money to find out what is being said in the press on the People's Republic of China. I want to know what is being said in the *Herald Tribune*." So I wouldn't cancel.

RICHARD RUSK: Kennedy wanted the State Department to cancel?

DEAN RUSK: Yes. You see, he had cancelled the White House subscriptions to the *Herald Tribune*. But I wouldn't follow suit on that.

RICHARD RUSK: Peter Braestrup wrote a book called *The Big Story*. His theme there was that the press misread the Tet Offensive a little bit and slanted the coverage from the Tet Offensive. That theme has been picked up by several other people, including Leslie [Howard] Gelb in *The Irony of Vietnam* and Harry [G.] Summers [Jr.] in his book, *On Strategy in Vietnam*. At the time

that Tet happened and in the aftermath, did you personally have problems with the coverage of the Tet Offensive by the American media?

DEAN RUSK: Well, there is a very important question locked up there. From a military point of view, the Tet Offensive was a very serious setback for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. They shot the wad, as it were, just like Hitler did in his Battle of the Bulge in World War II.

RICHARD RUSK: You really believe that?

DEAN RUSK: I really believe that.

RICHARD RUSK: You really do? Like the report that 55,000 of Viet Cong casualties, for example?

DEAN RUSK: And yet what turned out to be a striking military defeat for them was turned into a brilliant political victory for them in the United States. And how that came about is to me a very interesting question. And I think part of the story has to do with the way it was reported by our media. After all, if you put on the television tube Viet Cong inside our embassy compound and things like that, you create the impression that everything is going to hell. But it is a very important question. Somebody is going to have to do a lot of work on that someday, and Peter Braestrup's book would throw a good deal of light on that.

RICHARD RUSK: Were your own intelligence services which were supplementary to press coverage--I presume they were your primary sources of information--Were they reported back that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were taking a hell of a licking? Before Tet I presume there was a good deal of confusion even from you fellows.

DEAN RUSK: Well, at the beginning sure. You see, we were expecting some major effort by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. But the thing that surprised us was that they would launch that effort right in the middle of the Tet holidays. For cultural reasons, we really didn't expect it, any more than we would have expected our own allied forces to launch a major offensive on Christmas Day.

RICHARD RUSK: You were expecting rather than a wide series of attacks upon Vietnamese cities and villages, weren't you more looking for something up around Kassar?

DEAN RUSK: No, we were expecting pretty widespread effort throughout the country. Now the American troops were in a pretty good position for that offensive, and a good many of the South Vietnamese soldiers had been given the usual Tet leave for a few days to be at home with their families. And when they got back into it--and I think there were only one or two cities where there was any serious resistance by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese--and they did not get any general countrywide uprising by the people that they were counting on--things like that.

RICHARD RUSK: Why did the American press fall down on the coverage as far as Tet was concerned? You may have had problems throughout for the duration of that war, but Braestrup makes the point that it was specifically with respect to Tet that the press really had problems,

more so than, say, with other aspects of the war. To what do you attribute some amount of coverage?

DEAN RUSK: Well, it may be that by that time disillusionment over the war was pretty widespread and that had something to do with it. Then the moment-to-moment kind of reporting you get in things like that, and the absence of real understanding of what might be called "the big picture," but--

RICHARD RUSK: Well the newsmen themselves would personally be at risk in something like that. The cities were under heavy attack.

DEAN RUSK: Yes, but a lot of this reporting came from people who were sitting around the bars in Saigon. There were considerable differences among the reporters themselves out there as to how they would go about getting their stories. I don't--we lost some reporters and cameramen out there--went out and got themselves in trouble--but there were others who simply played it the easy way.

Well I think that's about all I can take for one night.

RICHARD RUSK: That's good. It's been a good tape. I'm about out of questions.

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