

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection  
Rusk SSS: Part 2 of 2  
Carl Thomas Rowan interviewed by Richard Rusk  
circa 1985

The complete interview also includes Rusk RRR: Part 1.

ROWAN: When we had the big fight over whether Pierre [Emil George] Salinger and Art [Arthur] Sylvester were going to totally bar the press from going out on any military operations at all, or flying on helicopters and so forth, Dean Rusk sided with Bob [Robert Joseph] Manning and me, and for the liberation of the rules for the press and for the maximum feasible cooperation. And in most of those fights he stood up. When it came to the fights over whether, say, Barry Zorthian in Saigon, the USIA [United States Information Agency] guy who was the top official dealing with the press, could get in to certain meetings and certain briefings and really know what he was talking about, my recollection is that your father came down on the side of candor and cooperation with the press. But, you know, there were all kinds of little infightings and digs and so forth. John [A.] McCone--I think his name was McCone, your father would remember--who was the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] director at the time, had this great habit of going to [Lyndon Baines] Johnson on his own and giving Johnson his version of what press policy ought to be, what policy ought to be with regard to USIA's broadcast facilities, etc. And I often got in a hell of a flap, because Johnson would then call me. I was at the German Embassy having lunch one day and the ambassador came over and said, "The President wants to talk to you." So I got up and went to the phone, and Johnson said, "John McCone was just over here and he was telling me that we ought to do this and we ought to do that," and blah, blah, blah. And I kind of got pissed off. I said, "Mr. President, McCone has so many problems running his operation efficiently, I don't for the name of God know how he can find time to tell you where I ought to have transmitters, when the transmitters ought to be on, what we ought to be broadcasting, etc." So we had a little session and got that worked out.

[break in recording]

ROWAN: I sensed what your father realized was that while it can be a pain in the neck having to deal with the press, there are times when you can learn a lot from dealing with the press. I mean, it is extremely important for a Secretary of State to listen sometimes as a couple of newsmen are talking about what the Secretary of Defense told them in a briefing yesterday, or what the line is that's being put out at the White House.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. That raises the issue of the press and the media as an intelligence source for the government. Based on your experience in government, and out of government in journalism, how does the press stack up with the intelligence agencies and the intelligence services of the various bureaucracies as a means of information gathering, and with respect to accuracy on various matters of foreign policy? I'm thinking about Vietnam, but that same question could be applied to intelligence in general. You know, John Kennedy used to spend a great deal of time reading the papers.

ROWAN: I can tell you that the press does a pretty damn good job. And I'll toot my horn on a couple of instances after leaving government. I was the guy who went to Panama and found out from the good general down there that he was going to break off negotiations; he was fed up, etc. And when my report came back on television, the rockets went off to Bill [William John] Jordan, our ambassador down there, who was a personal friend of mine, but who knew nothing about what was going on. When I went to Iran to do a one-hour television special, I came out of there and I went down south. And I reported that the situation was infinitely more serious than anybody imagined, that the Shah looked like a goner to me, both physically and politically. Our Ambassador in Tehran sent reports saying, "Rowan is full of shit." They could not afford to say it publicly, but some Iranians in the embassy in Washington sent up to the television station secret little messages saying, "Anybody who thinks Rowan doesn't know what he's talking about is crazy as hell, as they will find out as the weeks roll by." Christ! The next thing you know, the Shah was deposed, etc., and there you go.

RICHARD RUSK: I always had the opinion that the press does a pretty good job, really, getting out the fundamentals of a story.

ROWAN: Yeah. They make a lot of mistakes, too. But if you get the guys who work hard at it and talk to a lot of people--Well, one of the things that happened when I went to Iran, I insisted that the Shah and his government put no restrictions on me and that I have carte blanche to talk to anybody I wanted to, including the opposition, which I did. And, oh God, it burned some of the people up: the old SAVAK [Iranian Security and Intelligence Organization] guys, etc. But when they wanted to try to clamp down, when I was down in the country talking to some of the opposition, the Shah kept his word. Rut when I got back to Tehran, the old ambassador had flown over. And I said to him, "I want to tell you something. This situation is infinitely more serious than you've been led to believe."

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