

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
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Richard Holbrooke interviewed by Richard Rusk
1985 March

RICHARD RUSK: We're talking with Richard Holbrooke. Dick joined the Foreign Service in 1962, served in Vietnam from '63-'66 as a Foreign Service officer, '66-'67 on the White House staff, '68-'69 State Department involved in the Paris Peace Talks. Other positions: '77-'81 Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, plus is a long personal friend of the family back in Scarsdale. Dick, this isn't a finished product. We will edit the hell out of this thing. Why don't we just start at the beginning with your initial contacts with my dad, back in Scarsdale, I presume, and what influence he may have been on your life at that time.

HOLBROOKE: I first met Mr. Rusk probably around 1956 or '57. I was a sophomore--

[break in recording]

HOLBROOKE: --And I joined the student newspaper, the Scarsdale High School Maroon, along with David [Patrick] Rusk, who became my best friend in high school. Then when my father died in January of 1967, Mr. and Mrs. Rusk became like my second family. They almost took me in, and I must have spent more time there, including staying the night and sleeping over, than I did in my own house. At that time I didn't know anything about Dean Rusk except that he was one of Scarsdale's prominent citizens involved in the Town Club and school affairs, and president of some foundation. But I was in high school. It didn't mean much. I didn't know he'd had a distinguished government career. It never would have occurred to me that someday I would hold the same job which had been his, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and that in one of the most proud moments of my life my picture is now on the same wall in the State Department as his: the wall which shows former Assistant Secretaries of State for the Far East. David and I became closer and closer friends, and Mrs. Rusk became a second mother to me. I got to know the other children: the wonderful daughter, [Margaret Elizabeth Rusk] Peggy, and the unbelievably obnoxious second son, Richie [Richard Geary] Rusk, who--

RICHARD RUSK: (laughter) Strike that from the transcript.

HOLBROOKE: --Who at the time showed all the early signs of a career that would be misspent in crime, self-abuse and various other things. No, I don't think you should strike that. (laughter)

RICHARD RUSK: I came a thousand miles for this!

HOLBROOKE: I think it's very important that the family be seen in perspective, (laughter) They lived over in--you lived in Fox Meadow, didn't you?

RICHARD RUSK: I lived in Green Acres.

HOLBROOKE: Green Acres, right, and I lived in Edgewood. So David and I edited the Maroon together. The first time I ever heard about the Foreign Service was from Dean Rusk. He thought it was the greatest career in the world. I'd never wanted to be a newspaper man. But, in our senior year he came to a high school breakfast and he gave a speech. He said, "When you're thinking of careers, think of the Foreign Service." So that kind of stuck in the back of my mind. Then I went off to Brown in September of 1958.

RICHARD RUSK: What year was that?

HOLBROOKE: '58. I graduated in '58. I went off to Brown in September of '58 and lo and behold my junior year, '60-'61, Dean Rusk was appointed Secretary of State.

RICHARD RUSK: What were your reactions to the appointment? Now you had some time at Scarsdale to form some kind of an impression about my father. And based on that impression, do you recall what your reaction was?

HOLBROOKE: I was nineteen years old when he was appointed Secretary of State. I was enormously excited. It was the first time I had ever met anybody or knew anybody who had become a man of international importance. Since he had been very kind to me personally and enormously generous of his time and advice, since he had been a man of great standing, a kind of man of obvious principle--a very principled person who wasn't sort of one of the boys like some parents are with kids, but rather a man of some greater degree of aloofness--he was a man that we all respected. I don't remember much about that period, but I remember small things which I think your brother will also remember. He used to do the crossword puzzle very, very rapidly--the New York Times crossword puzzle--and we were always very impressed with that. I remember, in the summer of 1959 I went out to Berkeley for the summer and I stayed with Dave and Delcia [Bence Spinosa Rusk] at Berkeley. David and I took courses together and then we hitchhiked back across the country. We got back to Scarsdale and one of the courses we had taken was a course in communications with a lot of academic mumbo jumbo in it. We described it to your father and he listened to it and he laughed and dissected in with very cold--that cold analytical style of his: dispassionate. And it made a great impression on us.

RICHARD RUSK: What was the thing on? What was it on?

HOLBROOKE: It was some academic mumbo jumbo: a very obvious theory of communications masked in the abstractions of academia. But I do remember this about your father: that he exemplified the dispassionate, lucid mind. He had, and still has to this day, the most extraordinary ability to take a problem and analyze it in a way that clarified issues by cutting away a lot of the complexities and the debris.

RICHARD RUSK: Now we're both aware of the literature that's been written. You're talking about your own personal impressions based on your impressions of experiences with my dad. Is that right?

HOLBROOKE: That's right. I'm not talking at all about the literature.

RICHARD RUSK: Certain things, you know, have reappeared in the literature and--

HOLBROOKE: No, I've seen it time and time again. There are times when his ability to clarify things also verges toward oversimplification, but there are other times where he had the most stunning ability to cut through the complexities and get to the root of the matter.

RICHARD RUSK: Why would he engage in oversimplification? Let's follow that up now, without going off on too big a tangent.

HOLBROOKE: Why, I don't know. I mean, it's just that he has a mind in which--he operates from principles and he applies principles. I remember him telling me once that you operate the principle of the government from the--that the government derives its power from the just consent of the governed. Then he listed a set of principles, and he said, "The complexity for foreign policy is if the principles come in conflict and you have to choose." But he is a deeply principled man in an era where pragmatism, which really is often a code word for a kind of rudderless, compass-less foreign policy, has taken over.

RICHARD RUSK: More than a technician, a belief in these deep moral principles?

HOLBROOKE: Oh, absolutely. The description of Dean Rusk as a technician is a profound misunderstanding of what he is. He is a loyal appointed official and he does not believe that he should make his views take the place of elected officials, but he is not a technician. Now, in 1961 and 1962 I was a senior in college and I didn't exactly know what to do with my life. Because of Dean Rusk, and only because of Dean Rusk, I took the Foreign Service Exam. I took the oral [sic] in December of 1961 and I passed it, so I was invited to come to Washington to take the oral exam. In April of 1962, while still a senior at Brown, I came down to Washington and I stayed with the Rusks out in their house in Spring Valley. You were still there at the time when I stayed there. I went in and took the oral exam. They gave it to me, and they did not know I was staying with Rusk. And in fact, Mr. Rusk told me not to tell them that I knew him, and he was very adamant that I not allow the slightest implication of friendship. And this is so characteristic-

RICHARD RUSK: He told you that?

HOLBROOKE: Made it explicit. He said, "You stay as a friend. I'm not going to lift a finger to help you and you shouldn't tell them we know each other." And I think that was an obvious example of his ferocious hostility to anything that smacks of nepotism or favoritism or influence peddling. You know, everyone does that. That's the way a lot of the world has come to work. But Dean Rusk will never do it, as I'm sure you know.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. He pulled a string for me one time and Stewart [Lee] Udall got me a job at Glacier National Park as a kitchen porter.

HOLBROOKE: I remember that.

RICHARD RUSK: That was the only time.

HOLBROOKE: And you had to work your butt off for the whole summer and you had to sing in the evenings too, right?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah. Well--

HOLBROOKE: Entertain.

RICHARD RUSK: I had a good summer. But that's the only occasion that I recall where he--

HOLBROOKE: When I passed the oral exam they took me in and they gave me the exam and they told me right afterwards I had passed. And I went back that night and I told him and he seemed genuinely pleased. He gave me a book which was [Ernest Mason] Swatow's Guide to Diplomatic Practice--S-W-A-T-O-W [sic]: a famous old book of the practices and principles of diplomacy, basically nineteenth century. And he wrote in it, "To Dick Holbrooke as he enters the world's greatest profession." I think he really believed that then and believes it today. And I certainly believed it then and I still believe it today even though I'm no longer in the Foreign Service. Neither is he. He and I had some similar experiences: we both were career people; we both got political appointments; we both left. He returned to the government. Maybe I will someday.

RICHARD RUSK: Dick, I'm aware of the one article you wrote in Anthony Lake's book. Do you have anything else in writing that I should be reading as background on you, or any other books that you yourself have felt relevant?

HOLBROOKE: I don't think I have any writings that are relevant.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay.

HOLBROOKE: So I entered the Foreign Service in 1962 and I took the entering class: the A-100 course, which is the course for an entering Foreign Service officer. And we graduated in September and we're sworn in. And Mr. Rusk then did one thing, but he did it very slyly. He asked to talk to that entering class of the Foreign Service, which he never did. But he wouldn't let anyone know why. But he actually did it because I was in the class. And we came up to his conference room; we sat around with him.

RICHARD RUSK: How big a class would that have been?

HOLBROOKE: About twenty-five or thirty people. You'll find it in a schedule for September of '62. And he talked to the entering class for about an hour and he told us what he believed in. And if there's a record of that, I'm sure there isn't a word he said then that he would change today. I can remember a few of the things he said still to this day, because your father always made such a great impression on me. He was asked about the Berlin crisis, which was then at its height, and he said that his objective would be to pass the Berlin crisis on to a successor. That was typical of him, these very clear-cut, unemotional, unsentimental views.

(phone rings)

RICHARD RUSK: Go ahead.

[break in recording]

HOLBROOKE: He talked, as he has so often, about how while we're asleep two-thirds of the world's awake able to make mischief, the number of coups, the flow of cables, that a great success for Secretary of State would be a foreign policy not on the front page of the newspapers. What I'm struck with, of course, about Dean Rusk is the continuity of his thinking. I don't think he's changed his views very much in the years I have known him. I've now known him for twenty-six years or more. Maybe I'm wrong. And one of the things I think you should ask him is not specific questions, but ask him where his views have changed over the issues--perhaps China--maybe China, but maybe not even there. I don't know.

RICHARD RUSK: Shall we interrupt the chronology for a sort of generalized critique of my dad as you see him?

HOLBROOKE: No, let's do the chronology. I then went off to Vietnam and I arrived there after studying Vietnamese--I saw him occasionally--studied Vietnamese, went off and got there in May of 1963. I returned to the United States from that assignment in, I guess, June of '66, and went to the White House staff. Occasionally I would see him when I came back. I remember coming back in May of '65 and staying with Dave Rusk and Delcia in their house on MacArthur Boulevard. And at that time I remember one Sunday he called David up and asked if I was there, and I was, and he said, "Come on into the Department." So here I was a junior officer being summoned out of channels to the Secretary of State. I went into his office and we talked. It was a very discouraging conversation for me because I felt now--

RICHARD RUSK: For you?

HOLBROOKE: Yes. I felt now that two years later I, having spent most of those two years on the ground in Indochina, I had learned something. And I also felt that some of the things in Vietnam were not being accurately reported in Washington. I can't reconstruct the whole conversation, but I know I disappointed Mr. Rusk very much because he asked me about the pacification program.

RICHARD RUSK: Strategic hamlets, that type of thing?

HOLBROOKE: Strategic hamlets, yeah. I had been working the strategic hamlet program in the Mekong Delta.

RICHARD RUSK: Stop for a minute and just briefly describe your duties in Vietnam '63-'65.

HOLBROOKE: '63-'65 I was assigned to A.I.D. [Agency for International Development] as a Vietnamese language officer working in the Mekong Delta as an officer in charge of the civilian part of the pacification program, or as you called it, the strategic hamlet program, which is an

earlier name for it. I had been there during the coup against [Ngo Dinh] Diem; and then after that I was reassigned as staff assistant to General [Maxwell D.] Taylor and Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.], who were the two ambassadors. Then I went into the Saigon staff.

RICHARD RUSK: So you did have plenty of field experience out there in the Delta?

HOLBROOKE: I had a lot of field experience. And by this time, although I was still only twenty-three or twenty-four years old, I felt that the reporting chain of command was distorting the information and I was full of passion about it: full of reckless passion.

RICHARD RUSK: How many of you could speak Vietnamese over there at that time?

HOLBROOKE: I don't know. Not too many. My Vietnamese wasn't very good. But I knew what was going on and I knew that the situation in the province I was responsible for was more serious than it was being reported to the White House and to the President. I tried to tell this to Mr. Rusk and I could see that he was very disappointed. I remember one part of the exchange vividly. I said to him--he talked about getting the infiltration from North Vietnam stopped, and I hazarded the opinion that even if the infiltration stopped we would not be able to successfully pacify South Vietnam. He was not happy with that. I remember vividly his response. He said to me, "Dick, the North Vietnamese are not ten feet tall. They are not men from Mars. They are not supermen." And I didn't know what to say. I didn't think I was saying they were supermen, I thought I was just saying that the situation on the ground was not favorable to us. I didn't have any solutions. I didn't know what we should do in Vietnam. That was his job. All I knew was things weren't going well. Policy wasn't working. I don't think he was at all happy with what I said and I--

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, let's differentiate between what you said and what that meant in terms of our policy as opposed to your telling him these things. Was he disappointed in you for saying this?

HOLBROOKE: To this day he's never said it and he probably doesn't remember the meeting, but I felt that he got cooler to me after that.

RICHARD RUSK: The relationship changed on the basis of--

HOLBROOKE: Well, no. I'll have to be clear on this. Once I entered the Foreign Service he never showed favoritism towards me. He didn't want people to know that I knew him. He did not want that kind of thing. Although everyone else who knows the Secretary of State who's in the government doesn't keep it a secret, as far as Mr. Rusk is concerned it was an accident. I had to make it on my own merits. And that was fine. Mr. Rusk never did me any favors in the government and I never asked for any. But I owe him a great deal. As I said earlier, I owe him the whole idea of going in the Foreign Service, and he gave me a lot of the principles by which I operate in foreign policy. But I think he was very disappointed in what I said.

RICHARD RUSK: And your relationship changed to some extent?

HOLBROOKE: I don't know if it changed. I think he was disappointed in me. I went back to

Vietnam. In '66 I came back and worked at the White House for Bob Carver on Vietnam. Then I saw him occasionally, but very infrequently.

RICHARD RUSK: When you guys had your conversation there at the Department on that Sunday--

HOLBROOKE: It was a Sunday. He was wearing one of those horrible Hawaii shirts that he wore on Sundays. Probably the Truman Wake Island shirt for all I know.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you really able to unload fully the depths of your discouragements: the depths of your insight?

HOLBROOKE: No. I wasn't that discouraged. This is '65 we're talking about. I wasn't saying the war was hopeless. I wasn't saying we should get out. I was telling him only that the assessment was inaccurate. If you'll read that essay in that book, *The Legacy of Vietnam*, you'll see that I make a distinction between assessments, tactics, strategy, and objectives. The point I'm talking about--I'm talking only about the assessment. I didn't tell him we should get out. I didn't tell him we should fight differently. I was just telling him it wasn't working. His official reporting from people like George Carver at the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], from the embassy, and from the military command was different. The reporters were saying it wasn't working and he didn't like to hear that: neither did [Robert Strange] McNamara; neither did [Lyndon Baines] Johnson.

RICHARD RUSK: Now, you're talking about the intelligence in general was poor?

HOLBROOKE: I'm talking about the assessment of how we were doing. Not the intelligence of the enemy.

RICHARD RUSK: All right. And are you referring specifically to this period when Diem was in power during the last part of his--

HOLBROOKE: No, this is post-Diem.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay. Because I know there was a great deal of concern about him cooking the books on various things. We were relying on Vietnamese intelligence for a while.

HOLBROOKE: Absolutely. But Diem's departure didn't change that. When I went to work at the White House we didn't have too much contact: occasionally, very rarely. He'd never see me in the office. In 1967 I left the White House and simultaneously began to have a two-hatted job. In the mornings I would spend in room 3E--let's see, what was it? I forget the exact number, but it was the room behind McNamara's office--working on the Pentagon Papers. I was part of the Pentagon Papers task force in '67. In the afternoons I would work for Nicholas Katzenbach as his special assistant on Vietnam. And then gradually I finished--

RICHARD RUSK: Over at State? You had an office up there right down the hall from my dad as I recall?

HOLBROOKE: Yeah. And at that point I would--and then I phased out of the Pentagon Papers and went to work full time for Katzenbach as his assistant on Vietnam. So after finishing my Pentagon Papers project I was full time at State. Now, Katzenbach knew I was working on the Pentagon Papers and Ben [Benjamin Huger] Read, whom I assume you're interviewing. He's very, very important for your story.

RICHARD RUSK: We've got a lot more to go.

HOLBROOKE: Ben Read knew I was working on the Pentagon Papers. I had never mentioned it to Mr. Rusk directly.

RICHARD RUSK: That you were working on the papers?

HOLBROOKE: That I was working on the Pentagon Papers. Now my relationship with Mr. Rusk at that point was interesting. He ran into me in the halls. I said, "Hello." I said, "I'm working for Mr. Katzenbach now." He seemed sort of both surprised and I don't know whether he was pleased or not. But we had very little contact even though I was just down the hall. He was Secretary of State; he was very busy. And he didn't use me much at this point: once in a while, once in a while.

RICHARD RUSK: This is late '67, '68?

HOLBROOKE: Early '68. Then in 1968 the Paris negotiations began. Wait, let me back up. On January 30, 1968 the Tet Offensive exploded. And at that point the government went into a real crisis. Now it was absolute. From the day of the Tet Offensive to the day Johnson decided not to run, those sixty days which have been described by several people in books, were really ones of unspeakable pressure: intense pressure. And in that period we used to have a group meeting in Katzenbach's office every Thursday afternoon called--

RICHARD RUSK: Stop for a minute Dick. We're covering a great deal of ground. Would you rather go ahead with the chronology and then I go back, or whenever something comes up, should I stop you?

HOLBROOKE: Let me give the chronology of that period and then you go back. Katzenbach used to have meetings called Non-group Meetings every Thursday afternoon including General [Earle Gilmore] Wheeler, Bill [William Putnam] Bundy, Walt [Whitman] Rostow, Dick [Richard McGarrath] Helms, and I used to sit in as the junior staff person. And then shortly after the Tet Offensive, about a week later, Mr. Rusk showed up in Katzenbach's office one day--first time I'd ever seen this happen--and just sat in on the meeting and listened to us talk.

RICHARD RUSK: Is this the ad hoc task group on Vietnam that formed in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive?

HOLBROOKE: No.

RICHARD RUSK: This is a separate group?

HOLBROOKE: This is completely separate. You're talking about the group [Clark McAdams] Clifford was chairman of at the--

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. That's right.

HOLBROOKE: No. Clifford's group was a short-lived, very important policy group. This was a continuing meeting that had gone on for a year or two, which was supposed to be an informal discussion of Vietnam.

RICHARD RUSK: What was the group called?

HOLBROOKE: Katzenbach called it the Non-group. The Non-group. In other words it would be the one group in Washington that would have no name. It was kind of a joke: The Non-group.

RICHARD RUSK: And you identified the participants.

HOLBROOKE: Yes. So Mr. Rusk came down and sat and listened very gravely to these conversations. And I think again he felt that a lot of people were losing heart, that they were switching sides too rapidly. And my impression then, and still today, is that Rusk's reaction to everything was that maybe it was a bad idea and maybe it wasn't, but once the flag and the boys were being shot at and we were beleaguered that the only honorable thing was to stick with it. It was a clear case of honor. And that's why I said earlier that he was a man of tremendous principle. His principle was loyalty to the President, loyalty to the country, loyalty to the flag. And that's why even today he is widely regarded by people as a very strong hawk on Vietnam, when in fact, I don't think that's really true. I think his position on Vietnam was much more complicated. But even today my view--and this may be a total minority view, but I might as well put it out. My view is that deep down inside Dean Rusk has doubts about the commitment and he always had some doubts about the commitment because he was a product of the CBI [China/Burma/India Theatre].

[break in recording]

HOLBROOKE: My instinct, and this may be dead wrong, it may be a wild thing, but I might as well put it out so you can test. My instinct is that he had far more doubts--in the early phases he probably had more doubts than McNamara would be my guess. But once it happened, once we were under pressure, he lived by his code and he will always live by his code. If other people wish to write whatever they want to write, fine, but he is not, even in 1985 he is not going to turn tail and try to curry favor with people by showing a break with the two Presidents whom he served, even though they are no longer alive.

RICHARD RUSK: Not only because of his code of loyalty and the way he views his relationship with his Presidents, because he still believes in the premises of that policy. He's come to doubt some of the tactical questions, the things--something like gradualism, for example. He thinks that perhaps in retrospect that was a mistake, and, you know, the bombing of

Vietnam: tactical questions. But he still believes in the underlying assumptions and premises that went into that policy.

HOLBROOKE: Have you ever asked him whether if today was 1965 would he repeat the process the way it was done?

RICHARD RUSK: I haven't asked him that question.

HOLBROOKE: You ought to ask him. I can't believe that answer is yes, but he may not want to answer. I want to make another point. In this period of time the leaders in the United States government had just come off the single most dangerous and successful piece of crisis management in their history--the Cuban Missile Crisis--which was the ultimate success of the application of what you call gradualism and which other people call graduated response or flexible response. They thought that if they kept applying pressure gradually to Hanoi eventually Hanoi, seeing that the United States could apply limitless pressure, would say, "uncle." This was the fundamental misjudgment of the North Vietnamese. And the mistake that was made by the senior policymakers in the United States was to misjudge Hanoi. Now Mr. Rusk said to me twenty years ago that the North Vietnamese are not ten feet tall. I never forgot it because I never believed they were. I believed that they were, however, more ready to pay the price than he realized or that McNamara realized. It didn't make sense to the Johnson Administration and the Kennedy Administration that anyone would pay the suicidal price that they were willing to pay in Hanoi to achieve their objectives. But the horrible, crazy fact was they were. They were awful; they were ruthless; but they were willing to pay the price.

RICHARD RUSK: Probably intensely patriotic to their own concept of fatherland, the mother country, or whatever.

HOLBROOKE: They were patriotic, but they were also ready to let a generation of young men--

END OF SIDE ONE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

HOLBROOKE: --Danger for anyone arguing the point about North Vietnamese tenacity was that they sounded pro-Hanoi in the eyes of certain people. It seemed unpatriotic. I think to a certain extent your father tended to regard people who talked about North Vietnamese tenacity as somehow being less enthusiastic about the war. I think that was a profound misjudgment, if it's true. And if it's not true, then I hope to be corrected on it. I do know that he wasn't pleased at the suggestion that the North Vietnamese might be able to accept these preposterously high casualty figures to pursue their objectives because it didn't make any sense to him. How could the will of the United States not prevail when we were engaged? After all, this wasn't China where we hadn't been militarily engaged. And it didn't look like such a big country anyway. And the purpose of our discussion today is not to discuss what went wrong in Vietnam, which is another--

-which we could take a month on just to get to the heart of--but to discuss his attitudes.

RICHARD RUSK: He has said--and I'll inject this Dick--he has said he made two mistakes with respect to that war. One is he overestimated the patience of the American people. The other is he underestimated the tenacity of the North Vietnamese. And I asked him one time, "Pop, why were those people so tenacious?" And he said he didn't know. And he really didn't have an answer for that. It was almost as if the true answer to that would totally have undermined those same premises with which they approached that policy.

HOLBROOKE: Well, that's fascinating. You see, because tenacity of the North Vietnamese is the issue. And I do understand the tenacity of the North Vietnamese. And I wish he had understood it because he was certainly the smartest of the members of the Johnson-Kennedy Administrations, and had he understood it our policy might have been fashioned differently. North Vietnamese tenacity was built out of a combination of genuine nationalistic fervor, which they captured during the fight against the French and maintained for themselves, plus the most ruthless and brutal internal control system which allowed them to make many people who weren't as committed as the inner core fight: a ruthlessness and readiness to sacrifice a generation of young men. These were revolutionary romantics living in a different world than we are living in. Our rational calculations--it didn't seem rational to Walt Rostow and Bob McNamara and Dean Rusk that any leadership would sacrifice an entire generation of men when all we wanted them to do was leave their neighbors alone or sit down and talk with us. That isn't how they saw it. They were deeply ideological, combining the ideologies of communism and nationalism and all the brutal skill of internal control. They had done nothing but fight all of their lives. Look what's happened to them since 1975. They haven't stopped fighting. They are still fighting. The most incredible thing of all, having fought the French, having fought the Americans, they're now ready to fight the Chinese. Now the Chinese are their neighbors and the Chinese have got twenty times their population and they're still sticking it to the Chinese. And the Chinese did very badly comparatively against them.

RICHARD RUSK: Let me ask you this. Warren [L.] Cohen wrote a book called Dean Rusk published in 1980. Have you read it?

HOLBROOKE: No.

RICHARD RUSK: He is not a fan of my father's. It is a critical book. He did study my dad's Vietnam decision-making as best as he could construct it. From 1961 through '64 he developed the case, based on documents and whatever access he could get to that period, that my father in fact had major doubts about the thing, that he consistently opposed the Americanization of the war, the bombing of North Vietnam, the commitment of land forces--ground forces--

[break in recording]

RICHARD RUSK: --That my dad had opposed a lot of the exploratory steps that were made in the early sixties; however he never gave the President the kind of advice that we should abandon our commitment. Yet when the President signed on or committed forces and introduced the bombing in the spring of 1965, my dad too signed on, and from that point on it was we had to

persevere and we had to prevail. And his effort from that time on was to try to cut back on some of the military escalatory steps.

HOLBROOKE: Has he confirmed that?

RICHARD RUSK: Not entirely. But that was Cohen's thesis and he spent two years studying the problem. That's the way he saw it.

HOLBROOKE: I can't comment on what happened between Mr. Rusk and the President. It seems to me it's possible. It certainly seems to me that in that critical spring of 1968 he and not Clark Clifford was the key person in convincing Lyndon Johnson to limit the bombing. I have no question about that. And I think Townsend [Walter] Hoopes' book. The Limits of Intervention, is just wrong.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you want to talk about that or should we finish the chronology that you started earlier.

HOLBROOKE: No, no. We're up to that period. That's exactly where we are.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, let's talk about it. I'm fascinated by that.

HOLBROOKE: I worked on the March 30, 1968 speech. I worked on the drafts. And I believe that at that point Dean Rusk was looking for ways to find a way to get the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. And a limited bombing halt would give you a chance of getting them to the bombing table and it would also, perhaps, buy you some public support. Now, I don't know whether your father knew that Johnson wasn't going to run again or not.

RICHARD RUSK: He did not.

HOLBROOKE: He did not?

RICHARD RUSK: He had some advance indication of it, but nothing concrete.

HOLBROOKE: It's a kind of critical error, because had we known that Johnson was not going to run again I think there would have been a strong argument for a different speech with a strong message in it to Hanoi. But that's ancient history now.

RICHARD RUSK: Now, were you involved with the policy review at an earlier time or--

HOLBROOKE: The Clifford review?

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah.

HOLBROOKE: Yeah, I was a very junior person involved in the peripheries of that, but not in a central way the way Clifford and Katzenbach and Phil [Philip C.] Habib and others were.

RICHARD RUSK: Were you in on the meetings of that ad hoc--

HOLBROOKE: One or two. yeah. Now, let me tell one more story about the Pentagon Papers because I mentioned them briefly. In 1973, more or less, when I was back in Washington as editor of Foreign Policy, Mr. Rusk called me one day from Georgia. He said he was coming up to town and would I like to have dinner with him and Mrs. Rusk. We had a lovely dinner and Jane Thompson came along. This was after Llewellyn [E.] Thompson's [Jr.] death. And I think your father really had an incredibly strong feeling about Llewellyn Thompson. There are several things I remember. That night at dinner--now there's a possibility I'm getting two meetings combined in my mind in one. You have to check when Llewellyn Thompson died. But I remember first, in regard to Thompson, that at the end of the dinner, which we ate in the Mayflower Restaurant, you father raised a glass and toasted Tommy Thompson with such affection, saying, "This was the greatest civil servant--Foreign Service officer--I've ever met and we will miss him forever." I've never seen such strong emotion. Have you talked to him about Thompson?

RICHARD RUSK: No.

HOLBROOKE: Talk to him about Thompson. I think you'll find that he will rank Thompson at the top of the list. And why? Because of the great Foreign Service officers of that generation: George [Frost] Kennan, Charles [Eustis] Bohlen, Llewellyn Thompson. Thompson didn't write his memoirs; Thompson never spoke to the press at all; and Thompson was his most esteemed Soviet adviser. Llewellyn Thompson is a man whom history will forget, unlike George Kennan and Charles Bohlen. Kennan is a great author and historian and Bohlen wrote one very fine book. But I think that, in your father's mind, Thompson is the most important and most influential even though history will not be able to trace him. And I think your father loved him and respected him. But at the same time, either on this trip or another trip, he and I went out and had a meal together and he said to me, "I understand you worked on the Pentagon Papers." And I said, "That's right, Mr. Rusk."

RICHARD RUSK: That's '67 now?

HOLBROOKE: No, no. This is after the New York Times published them. This is at least four or five years later.

RICHARD RUSK: '72, around in there?

HOLBROOKE: Well, it can't even be '72 because I was in Morocco in '72. It has to be some time later. It can't be any earlier than the fall of '72. And it could be even later. But he said, "I understand you worked on the Pentagon Papers." I said, "That's right." He said, "While you were working for me?" I said, "That's right." He said, "I didn't know that." I said, "Well, I was instructed to do this by Ben Read and Nick Katzenbach." And he said, "They never told me anything about it." And I said, "Mr. Rusk, I can't believe that because I was assured that what I was doing was correct, and I was being instructed to do it by your deputy and by the executive secretary of the State Department." And he said, "Why do you think McNamara did this?" And I said, "I don't know. I was a very junior officer. But he always talked about the Sky Bolt study of

Richard [Elliot] Neustadt and he claimed he wanted something similar for decision-making and history books."

RICHARD RUSK: You're talking about McNamara now.

HOLBROOKE: This is my comment to Mr. Rusk about McNamara. And then, Mr. Rusk said, "I'll tell you why I think he did it. I think he did it because he was trying to set up Bobby Kennedy for a run at the Presidency in '68."

RICHARD RUSK: He said that of Bob McNamara?

HOLBROOKE: He said that to me of Bob McNamara, quote, unquote. Absolutely clear. My memory is not playing tricks here. And I said, "Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Rusk, it seems possible to me, but I have no way of knowing." But I think that Mr. Rusk was also very unhappy with me that I had been involved in this project and I have tried several times to make clear to him that I did it under instructions and orders from the State Department.

RICHARD RUSK: Nick Katzenbach and Ben Read?

HOLBROOKE: And I called up Ben afterwards and I went through this with him. And Ben told me that he went to Mr. Rusk and reminded Mr. Rusk that when McNamara started the project he had gotten Rusk's permission through Read. And what I think happened is that Mr. Rusk did not realize the magnitude of this project as McNamara intended it. And probably Ben Read wandered in in the morning with 15 items on a piece of paper and the eighth item was, by the way, Bob McNamara wants to pull together all the papers on Vietnam and he wants our cooperation and Mr. Rusk said, "Sure."

RICHARD RUSK: That's what he recalls. He recalls a request for access to the material.

HOLBROOKE: And I think that's what happened. I think McNamara was devious on this.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll say it because we've got our machine going, but Bob McNamara did tell me in an interview in March of 1985 that he had intended only to collect documents for future historians and what happened was after John [T.] McNaughton died the project more or less got away from him. Other people got involved and it became an ongoing, not only collection of material, but a policy analysis, and he hadn't intended anything like that and the whole thing was as much a surprise to him in the way it actually turned out as it was to my father.

HOLBROOKE: May I recommend to you that you interview Les [Leslie Howard] Gelb at the New York Times who headed the project. I will call Gelb and tell him, because this is not Gelb's story. Gelb has a different understanding of what happened and Gelb ran the project. Since this is not an unimportant incident anymore. It involves [Daniel] Ellsberg and it lead to Watergate, you might as well get to the bottom of it.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. Okay. In any case, my dad was not aware at the time that he was in office that the Pentagon Papers did, in fact, exist, at least in the form that it eventually

emerged. Was he aware of the fact that he knew in '68 that--weren't you introduced or described to him as being involved in that?

HOLBROOKE: No.

RICHARD RUSK: That came later?

HOLBROOKE: In the time that I saw him, we never discussed the Pentagon Papers because I rarely saw him. If we saw each other we chatted about other things and it was not a big deal. I didn't think anything of it. I was carrying out the instructions of my immediate bosses. Have you talked to Katzenbach about this?

RICHARD RUSK: Not the Pentagon Papers. I did about your involvement: your role in this post-Tet Offensive policy review, but not the Pentagon Papers.

HOLBROOKE: And what did he say about my role?

RICHARD RUSK: That he reported directly to you. No, that you reported directly to him and very little to my dad. That your contact--

HOLBROOKE: That was exactly correct.

RICHARD RUSK: And that he used you a great deal and that you were very helpful.

HOLBROOKE: That is exactly correct. Oh, one more thing. Now let me give you the Paris 1968 and that will finish the chronology of the period he was Secretary. In May of '68 the negotiations began in Paris. [William Averell] Harriman asked Katzenbach and Mr. Rusk if I could go over there with them as a part of their team, and they agreed. That was sort of my final and most intense, in a way, insight into the whole situation. Harriman and Rusk had a very odd relationship. Harriman did not like Rusk. He wanted Mr. Rusk's job. He always thought he should be Secretary of State. Mr. Rusk was my oldest mentor in the world as I have made clear already. Harriman was my new boss and another legendary figure for obvious reasons. Harriman was very good to me. They are very different kinds of people. There was tremendous friction between them, with Katzenbach and [Cyrus Roberts] Vance trying to be the interlocutors.

RICHARD RUSK: While you're on it, can you elaborate on the degree of friction: anecdotes?

HOLBROOKE: Harriman was a much more political animal than Mr. Rusk who wanted to get this war over with because he was desperate to elect Hubert [Horatio] Humphrey: desperate. And Mr. Rusk was loyal to the President in office. At times they came into conflict. There was a personality conflict. You're dealing here with one of the richest men in the United States, whose father had built the Union Pacific Railroad, who had been a dilettante and a playboy until he was over fifty years old, who had then had a very spectacular career as a special envoy to [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt--for Roosevelt to [Iosif "Joseph" Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili] Stalin and [Winston Leonard Spencer] Churchill: who was already a legendary figure. And you had a poor, up from the wrong side of the tracks, Cherokee County Secretary of State who had achieved the

job that Harriman wanted more than any other, except the Presidency, in his career. They had known each other and circled around each other, along with Clark Clifford, since the 1940s and here they were in the late 1960s, twenty years later, at the top of the government: Rusk in the State Department, and Harriman in Paris negotiating with Hanoi. It was an extraordinary moment. And Vance was sent to Paris, obviously to kind of keep an eye on Harriman. I remember before we left for Paris, Mr. Rusk said to me that in the next generation of the establishment--the people who would run American foreign policy, the next generation to replace him and [John J.] McCloy and [Robert Abercrombie] Lovett, and [Dean Gooderham] Acheson--that Cy Vance was the man he thought was the most outstanding.

RICHARD RUSK: My dad said this?

HOLBROOKE: Your father said that, many times. If you haven't interviewed Vance, you surely should. Have you--

RICHARD RUSK: I'll get him next time.

HOLBROOKE: He's right next door. So here I was, the very junior officer, but I watched all this. I liked both men. I learned a great deal from Harriman. There are some wonderful things about Harriman. Their styles were too different. Their wealth, their personal background was too different.

RICHARD RUSK: Any anecdotes on the degree of friction that may have existed during those negotiations? Anything along those lines?

HOLBROOKE: I think that there was a lot of friction. And there were also tremendous difficulties. Mr. Rusk's final instructions to the delegation were that he would not discuss any fall-back positions with us before we left. At the time I couldn't understand his position. But I now understand it completely. He was absolutely afraid of leaks. It's my view that Mr. Rusk wanted a settlement in Vietnam along honorable lines as much as any other person in the government. But unlike Harriman, or McNamara, or Clifford, he never would say so because he wanted to be the President's last line of defense. And you can ask him if I'm right or wrong on this. In fact, you can show him everything in this interview as far as I'm concerned.

RICHARD RUSK: You went to that peace conference without really knowing what was in the mind of the Secretary of State with respect to those negotiations. And this whole problem of reticence that people constantly refer to with my dad was very much something you had to confront, contend with.

HOLBROOKE: Reticence?

RICHARD RUSK: Reticence, not knowing exactly what was in his mind on major issues.

HOLBROOKE: While everyone else would have private discussions about fall-back positions on the bombing, he would refuse to have them. He felt that he was the Secretary of State and if he indicated which way things were going early, he was compromising the President's position.

Now, remember what the issue was. We had stopped bombing north of the twentieth parallel, so there were three degrees of latitude from the seventeenth parallel, which was the DMZ [demilitarized zone], up to the twentieth parallel, and then where the neck of North Vietnam spreads out in the river of the delta, where we were still bombing the smithereens out of North Vietnam. That was an option. And the issue was whether we'd stop that unilaterally or whether we'd bargain for it. There were some people who wanted to bargain for it, some who wanted to stop unilaterally. Mr. Rusk wouldn't commit himself. At the time he wouldn't let us discuss it. At the time I thought, "This is a bit odd." Now I understand fully. I suspect that if I were in his job I would have done just what he did. I would have kept my counsel. Now, during the summer there were a lot of emissaries traveling back and forth across the Atlantic. Some were from Hubert Humphrey; some were from George [Wildman] Ball, who had left the government but was the most active supporter of the Humphrey campaign. Ball was desperately trying to get Humphrey to make a public break with Johnson over the war. So here you had Dean Rusk's closest associate, his former Deputy, doing something that Rusk would have totally opposed. Tom Ehrlich carried papers back and forth at one point. And at one point Mr. Rusk called me back to personally carry a message to Harriman and Vance. I came into his office. He and Katzenbach saw me along and he said to me, "I want you to go back to Paris and I want you to tell Cy and Averell that if they have any recommendations to make about a change in position they are not to put them in telegrams. They are to get them to me through the secure telephone line to Ben Read. Nothing in the telegrams." Now you'll have to ask your father what background in Washington brought him to this position.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that not regarded traditionally a privileged, confidential, secure source of communications.

HOLBROOKE: I think the reason for it was that he wanted to be able to--my view is that he was trying to be helpful to the negotiators in Paris, and that by telling them not to send in cable suggestions for change he was being helpful. But there was a lot of friction and some of the people in Paris thought he was trying to shut off dissent. Remember, I'm giving you interpretations that are fifteen years later. At the time, Richie, I was twenty-seven years old. I'd never been in anything like this before in my life. It was very dramatic stuff. And I didn't know the background or history of politics that were going on.

RICHARD RUSK: Was it clear that my dad wanted to negotiate a settlement in Vietnam?

HOLBROOKE: I think it was. That's my view. You'll have to ask him. Nothing was clear, but that was my view now and then. I don't think he and Harriman were as far apart as it appeared at the time.

RICHARD RUSK: Was the major issue in the contention between them whether or not we would sort of force South Vietnam to go to the negotiating table and to take part in this? That's really where the whole thing fell apart, isn't it?

HOLBROOKE: That's where it fell apart. That was October. That's the saddest moment of all negotiation. What happened there was that Ellsworth Bunker mishandled, in my view, the negotiations with the South Vietnamese. Now, I know that your father has the highest regard for

Ellsworth Bunker. But, in my view. Bunker did not keep the South Vietnamese ready for what was happening in Paris. And at the last minute, [Nguyen Van] Thieu objected. Bunker sent in cables to Washington saying, "Let's not push the South Vietnamese. It's not right to do it." And Bunker and Harriman got into the most god-awful disagreement imaginable over this situation.

RICHARD RUSK: Impasse.

HOLBROOKE: Bunker in Saigon; Harriman in Paris. They got in the most god-awful disagreement over whether to push Saigon hard or not. This was five or six days before the Presidential election of '68. The deal had been announced and the polls were very close between Humphrey and [Richard Milhous] Nixon. And everything--history hung in the balance at this point. The Presidential election could be determined by this event and Lyndon Johnson was torn between the Harriman-Vance position, which Clifford was supporting, and the Bunker position, which I believe Mr. Rusk was supporting.

RICHARD RUSK: I think you're right on that.

HOLBROOKE: And Rostow certainly was supporting Bunker. And I think it came down in that last week before the election to one of these great psychological dramas which it's hard for history to fully record. I was in Paris. I only know that we were desperate. Vance was sleeping on the floor of his office at nights because his back was giving way, the tension was so enormous. Vance had been the most loyal of all of that generation of people. He and your father were now completely in disagreement: totally on opposite sides on the issue. Harriman, Vance, and Clifford on one side; Rusk, Rostow, and Bunker on the other; and the president of the United States with five days to go before his successor is chosen. And the polls showing Humphrey ahead by about a point or two. In other words it was a dead heat. And we all know what happened. Thieu publicly said he wouldn't go to the talks. Nixon then charged that the deal was a phony deal: political. And Nixon won by less than one percent.

RICHARD RUSK: Thieu evidently had thought he could get a better deal out of Richard Nixon and that was--

HOLBROOKE: Absolutely.

RICHARD RUSK: Could we have had peace in 1968, at least under terms as good as what Henry [Alfred] Kissinger five, six years later--

HOLBROOKE: Absolutely. No conceivable doubt in my mind but that what Harriman and Vance wanted to do with the Vietnamese was a better deal for us. Look, let's start with the simplest of premises: nothing could have been worse than what actually happened, which was that we withdrew almost five hundred of our five hundred and fifty thousand men, we withdrew unilaterally. Then when we were down to about seventy thousand men, we start a negotiation with no leverage. We pull out the rest of the troops solely in exchange for five hundred POWs [prisoners of war] and we explicitly acknowledge in 1973 that the North Vietnamese can stay in the South, which was the death warrant of Saigon.

RICHARD RUSK: That would not have been part of the deal in 1968?

HOLBROOKE: Well, Harriman and Vance were talking about a ceasefire in place. That would have permitted North Vietnamese troops to stay, but they were a handful in '68. They were 135,000 in '72. Secondly, we just pulled up completely under the worst possible circumstances. Now the Kissinger-Nixon defense is Watergate. Nixon is now saying in his newest book that if it hadn't been for Watergate he would have resumed bombing. We'll never know. The fact is that the Harriman-Vance position was negotiate when you have 550,000 men, and negotiate for their withdrawal. The Nixon position was withdraw almost 500,000 men to stretch out the war and then negotiate. It was a tragic set of circumstances. In my view, the last twenty thousand that died under Nixon died in vain. They didn't have to die. Even if you accept the premises of the war, we could have gotten a decent deal in '68 or '69. Now I don't want to leave you with the impression that I'm holding Dean Rusk accountable for this. This was Lyndon Johnson's decision, and, furthermore, the first thing that happened when Nixon was President was that he was presented with this situation. And Nixon chose not to negotiate. Remember that we didn't get the real talks going until January 27, 1969, Nixon's first week in office. Up until that point the talks were limited to discussions of the bombing.

RICHARD RUSK: Nixon clearly had to option to continue these talks?

HOLBROOKE: It was Nixon's--this happened on Nixon's watch, not the Johnson-Rusk era.

RICHARD RUSK: Who has written best about these Paris Peace Talks in 1968? I definitely have to read up on them.

HOLBROOKE: There are a lot of books. Allen [E.] Goodman wrote one. '68-'69?

RICHARD RUSK: That's right.

HOLBROOKE: I'm not sure, Richie, let me check.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay.

HOLBROOKE: Okay, now let me tell you a couple of other stories and then I'm going to give you some pre-questions, and then we're going to schedule the second part.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay.

HOLBROOKE: I've seen very little of Mr. Rusk since 1970, but I have seen him occasionally. One of my most memorable things was that in 1980 President Carter, at my suggestion, asked Dean Rusk to lead a Presidential Delegation to Hawaii to greet President [Ferdinand Edralin] Marcos. And your mother and father and I traveled out on a Presidential plane to Hawaii. And he represented Carter and Hawaii to greet Marcos and to talk to Marcos seriously about some political issues. So we had a nice trip. And what was interesting to me there was to watch how little he'd changed.

RICHARD RUSK: How little he had changed?

HOLBROOKE: Yeah. How precise he was, how specific, how wonderfully he conducted himself. You understand, in my view, that the principles he stood for were the correct principles. And the fact that they didn't work out in Vietnam does not in any way, shape or form reduce their validity. If we question the principles, we question the roots of our democracy. You father's a man without prejudice and without bias and who's lived by his principles in personal relations, in the explosive domestic issue of civil rights where he's been a symbol of what is right or--

END OF SIDE 2

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