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James Lloyd Greenfield interviewed Richard Rusk
1986 June 25

RICHARD RUSK: We are interviewing Mr. Jim Greenfield. This is Rich Rusk doing the interview, and the date is June 1986. Jim Greenfield was a *Time* magazine correspondent and bureau chief in the 1950s, *Time's* chief diplomatic correspondent in 1961 to 1962. From 1962 to '64 Jim Greenfield was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. From 1964 to 1966 he was the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. He is now a managing editor of *The New York Times*. This interview is not a verbatim transcript. I am paraphrasing Jim Greenfield's remarks based on notes. My tape recorder was not working for this interview.

RUSK: Jim, did you have any prior contacts with Dean Rusk before his appointment as Secretary of State in 1961?

GREENFIELD: Yes, I did. I was working for *Time* magazine at the time of his appointment as Secretary of State, and I was assigned to write the cover story on Dean Rusk. He was staying at Chester [Bliss] Bowles's house in Washington. And we decided to conduct the interview while riding the train between Washington and New York City. He had to return to New York. That was an ideal situation for me because we had four to five hours for this interview, and it was a marvelous experience for me. I really got a feeling of what Dean Rusk was all about. He talked about a great many things: about the background and underpinnings for his own views, what his views were, his thoughts about diplomacy, the importance of the World War II experience and Munich, his education abroad at Oxford, his youth and growing up in Georgia, his thoughts about the United Nations, etc. I had the feeling that he had really revealed himself and he surprised me to the extent that he opened himself up for this interview. Four years later I would have said that Dean Rusk is a man who keeps his own counsel. But for that interview and that cover story in *Time* magazine at the very start of his tenure as Secretary of State, he wanted the American people to know what kind of person he was, what he believed, and what he thought was important in foreign affairs.

RUSK: Jim, why do you think he opened himself up this way?

GREENFIELD: I think he realized the importance of building a consensus in foreign affairs and the important role that a Secretary of State plays in forming a consensus. He really wanted to have an understanding with the American people. This was not just a general conversation. He had taken a decision and he really threw himself into this story. Looking back upon that interview I had the impression then, as I do today, that Dean Rusk had a very strong moral center, he had a conception of goodness, that he really believed in these principles and this moral framework. And he stuck by that. I can remember when we got to New York City that we walked out of the train station. I believe he was wanting to catch a cab to go to the Rockefeller Foundation. And I was struck by the fact that he was carrying his own suitcases. And before climbing into his cab a gust of wind blew his hat off his head, and I was treated to the sight of an American Secretary of State running down a busy New York City street carrying his own

suitcases and chasing his hat. There was little pretense about Dean Rusk. And that incident is surely reflective of the man. He was a *very* simple man. I can remember Dean saying during the course of that interview that when he became President of the Rockefeller Foundation, he had left foreign policy as such. And he thought that many other people would be surprised by this other life, by his experiences and views about foreign policy that he had formed in earlier government service. I came to know Secretary Rusk quite well as his press secretary. Our relationship was close. We continued this degree of confidentiality that we were able to establish in that very first interview. The best time to talk with Dean Rusk was late in the evening over drinks. And it was at such times that he would talk about the things that were really in his mind. Very often those things, those concerns, were not at all what the American public knew about. He was looking ahead, trying to anticipate what his problems would be. To illustrate this, I remember that when we traveled to the Soviet Union to conclude the Test Ban Treaty, the rest of us were more or less having a good time, enjoying the sites as visitors to the Soviet Union. And your father spent his time thinking about and trying to prepare himself for the things that might go wrong. He was trying to anticipate everything that might be said or anything that might come up at the last moment to complicate these test ban negotiations.

RUSK: What kind of boss was he?

GREENFIELD: He was a good boss. His natural inclinations were not as open as mine. I noticed that he would get irritable about the, for want of a better word, nonsupport from reporters in the Washington press corps. He and I had both come through the World War II era when reporters in the media, and indeed, most of the American people did, in fact, take our side. As a reporter I knew that times had changed. And I knew about our divisions within the press and that we were no longer a team. Or rather, there was no longer a team feeling. And I warned Dean Rusk that he could not expect this in the 1960s. And that irked him. He would ask me in private in response to various critical stories, "Why do they do this?" And later after I left government service, in response to inquiries about the Vietnam War, he made the statement, "Whose team are you on?" That was an expression of his own private feelings. He really believed them. It was unfortunate that he expressed that opinion. And I warned him that he shouldn't do it. But nevertheless, that did represent his true feelings about what he thought to be excessively critical press reporting. Dean Rusk got along especially well with the press. He had his favorites. John [Murrmann] Hightower, for example, was one. Dean would tell him anything that we knew. And I would discuss individual reporters with him. And we both learned who we could trust and who we could not. I remember one experience when a reporter had discovered something important; the story may have been leaked to him. And I found out who it was. I don't recall now the name of the reporter or what the incident was about. But I let him know that I knew who was responsible. And he asked me who it was. And I said, "Mr. Secretary, I'd rather not say." And he said, "Jim, I'm the Secretary of State. You work for me. We don't have secrets like this. I'm going to ask you again." And this time I told him. I learned something from that experience. And that is, when the stakes are as high as they are in the issues that come before an American Secretary of State, I learned not to be coy or reluctant with him. I learned from him and from that experience to tell him everything that I knew. To give him my undivided loyalty. He never had to say that again in the future whenever something of that nature came up. As my boss, Dean Rusk gave me a great deal of loyalty. My job was to brief the Washington press corps on foreign policy. That is a very difficult thing to do. It was impossible not to make mistakes. We learned

that if you made one it was best to admit it right away. We always tried our best but we couldn't do our best and honestly answer press inquiries. If we had feared the Secretary of State, if we had wondered whether or not he would back us up when mistakes were made--He gave me a great deal of loyalty and I had enormous respect for him as a result. Dean Rusk did remarkably well at press conferences. He always used his medicine which was a straight shot of scotch before a press conference. On some occasions I would try to schedule press conferences for ten o'clock in the mornings rather than at the end of the day. And Dean would say, "Well, Jim, I don't have my medicine." But he always did. Before the press corps he was articulate. He talked in complete sentences. He very carefully thought through his answers. And he was never thrown or caught off balance by any question that was asked.

RUSK: My dad has claimed that he never once lied to the press in his eight years as Secretary of State.

GREENFIELD: I believe him. I don't think he ever did. Your father had his problems with the Kennedys. I knew Robert [Francis] Kennedy. I had seen him socially on several occasions. And I think that Bobby Kennedy wanted a different Secretary of State. Dean Rusk wasn't an activist Secretary of State such as Robert Kennedy seemed to want. The Kennedys were funny people. They had a sense of humor. I can remember when Robert Kennedy would visit your father on Saturdays to talk privately, with just the two of them. Bobby Kennedy would walk into the Department of State, followed by that great big dog of his. And I remember once that that dog jumped all over Dean Rusk. Raised up on his hind legs. And your father has great presence and stature. And to me it was a demeaning experience. I believe it abused him. It may have been funny to Kennedy, but it wasn't funny to Rusk. Bobby Kennedy would occasionally ask me for information pertaining to the Secretary. And the type of things he asked encouraged me *to* think that he was looting around for some bad scoop. He was trying to build a negative case against the Secretary. And I told him at one point that I simply don't have conversations like that. I didn't know enough about his relationship with President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy to comment.

RUSK: What did the Washington press corps think of Dean Rusk?

GREENFIELD: They trusted him. They valued him highly. He was not as colorful a Secretary of State as they would have liked. He did not confide in them to the extent they wanted. He was not nearly as quotable as a man like Dean [Gooderham] Acheson, for example. There was no love affair between the press corps and Dean Rusk. But there were no real complaints with the exception of one or two individuals. Joe [Joseph Wright] Alsop was one of those who complained. And that, incidentally, ended a long relationship I had had with him. But the press corps tends to love a phrase-maker like Dean Acheson. Your father lacked that kind of flamboyance that made for truly good copy.

RUSK: Did you talk policy with Dean Rusk in a substantive way?

GREENFIELD: Yes. In the mid-1960s, over the Vietnam War, we could see the division of the American people forming. We talked about that a lot. He would listen to my views. But very often he would respond by telling me about the dark days of World War II, He would say that Munich was popular at the time. He lived by his precepts and his code. And he thought that if we

tried to change course it would end in disaster. At no time in our relationship did I hear him express real doubts about our Vietnam policy. I traveled with Secretary Rusk all over the country and he would be asked many questions. They were very similar in nature wherever we traveled. He was always honest and up front with his replies. He really didn't seem to have two views: his private or personal view and his official view. I became a--

RUSK: Were you involved in the *Time* cover story on Peggy [Margaret Elizabeth] Rusk's marriage to Guy Smith? That was an interracial marriage and a cover story in *Time* magazine in 1967.

GREENFIELD: No, I did not write that story. I was not working for *Time* then. But he called me and was very anguished. He was genuinely anguished over the fact that *Time* magazine was going to make this a cover story. He was concerned about this publicity for his daughter. He said they are giving her this exposure "Just because she is my daughter. And this is being done through no fault of hers. She is an innocent in all this. And this exposure will increase the burden on her." He seemed to be totally concerned of his daughter's welfare and not concerned about the publicity about this interracial marriage as far as he was concerned. I told him that *Time* would not stop that kind of story and that there was no way he could stop it. And they indeed went ahead with this cover story.

RUSK: *Time* magazine wrote a very excellent story. The entire family was delighted with it.

GREENFIELD: In thinking about his mannerisms, I noticed he loved to read mystery books. That was a form of relaxation for him. Although he really didn't relax at all as Secretary of State, I would see him work on a speech and then pick up a mystery book and begin reading it before he had finished his speech. His idea of relaxation was to wear one of those Hawaiian shirts to the office. But he was all business as Secretary, extremely hardworking. I liked him enormously. He would introduce me as "my friend, Jim Greenfield," rather than "my press secretary." And it seemed that all of us around him liked him a great deal. He was good with the "little people" in the Department of State: the secretaries, the security men, people of that nature. I can remember a trip to New York City in which he met with Andrei [Andreevich] Gromyko. He had a large suite in the Waldorf Astoria. There were no other hotel rooms available.

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My mother-in-law had come to visit me and could not find any lodging, and he gave her a room in his own suite. She spent all day talking with his security men and had a fascinating experience. I think your father has a good sense of history. I can recall a trip back to Cherokee County, Georgia where he grew up as a boy. He took me over to the family cemetery and told me that four generations, of Rusks have spanned the entire history of the United States. I think he was a historian at heart. When the Cuban Missile Crisis began he said, "Jim, be sure the historians are recording all this." He understood clearly that this was a historic event,

RUSK: What about his relationships with his two Presidents?

GREENFIELD: He seemed to have an exceptionally good relationship with Lyndon [Baines] Johnson. I was always glad that he had as good a run with LBJ as he did. It helped compensate somewhat for the JFK years. Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk understood each other very well. I can remember once when Dean visited the LBJ ranch and the two men went by the scene of LBJ's birthplace: an old cabin. And I can remember the President saying, in effect, "Dean, you know all about this kind of thing." They were looking at a potty that was kept under the bed. They had common roots, common experience, and that meant a great deal to them both.

RUSK: What about your travel experiences with my father? Do you recall any special anecdotes while traveling?

GREENFIELD: I remember when we went to the Soviet Union to sign the Test Ban Treaty your father made a very interesting remark. And that was he had noticed that in the time that Nikita [Sergeevich] Khrushchev talked with us that he never received a note or a phone call during that entire period. He met with us literally for hours on end without interruption. And your father found it very interesting that a man at the very top of their system, who was responsible for running the Soviet Union, the entire state, could give us that kind of time without interruption. An American President would be besieged with messages, phone calls. But this was not the case in the Soviet Union. And I remember when your dad went to Sochi with Nikita Khrushchev. They played badminton together. And I remember that Khrushchev had a swimming pool there, and he couldn't swim. He spent his time paddling around the pool with a set of water wings.

RUSK: Do you recall any of the press controversies involving you and Dean Rusk?

GREENFIELD: Many of the letters from constituents, from American citizens, would come to my office to be answered. And frequently this would be done by my secretary. She would draft these letters on my behalf and sign them in my name. He had a machine to duplicate my signature. One young man from Mississippi wrote and asked how he could become a Christian missionary in Russia? And the woman processing this mail wrote back and asked him, "If you really want to become a Christian missionary, why don't you start in Mississippi?" This man was very much offended by this reply, got hold of his senator, and it blew up into quite an incident. Dean Rusk had to go up on the Hill to defend me. They wanted to fire me. Your father explained the situation the best he could. And it caused Dean Rusk a lot of trouble. They demanded that they get a letter stating that this woman could never work for the government again. It was a somewhat nasty incident. We had a far more serious controversy in the spring of 1965 when, at the beginning of the American buildup in South Vietnam and the introduction of combat troops fighting in a combat role, for whatever reason, President Johnson decided not to admit to this and announce it. Bob [Robert James] McCloskey and I both argued strenuously about this policy of not informing the American public of what was going on. We said that there was no way we could get away with this. Our troops were in contact with the enemy. Our press people knew about it in their own coverage in Vietnam. And Bob and I both decided that we had reached a point where we could no longer deny what was happening on the ground in South Vietnam regarding these American troops. And that blew up into quite an incident. Lyndon Johnson was very irked by our responses. Nevertheless, we believed that in the conduct of our jobs as press Secretaries, that we could not deliberately lie about policy. We had the feeling that this was Dean

Rusk's wishes that we tell the truth, or at least not deliberately deceive or send people in the wrong direction. I don't remember him ever saying explicitly, "Do not lie." Nevertheless, it was clearly his intention that we speak as truthfully as possible. We were never under pressure to lie. If he had said, in response to some controversial issue or question "Why don't you lie about it?", I would have been absolutely bowled over, flabbergasted. Bob and I both had plenty of experience with the press. And we had good insight as to the kinds of issues that were going to cause trouble for the administration. We would warn Dean Rusk ahead of time about these. Oftentimes, we would say to him, "If it is important for the United States that we present an issue in this manner, just say so. Just tell us if that's what, in fact, you want us to do. We will handle it and somehow stem the tide of press criticism." We learned to meet press controversies head-on and to respond right away if we had a problem. Because, in fact, if it was a problem it would become an even larger problem the longer we waited with our response. Rich, I'm going to have to sign off at this point. If you want to continue this interview we can schedule this for another time.

RUSK: Mr. Greenfield, I would like to thank you for an excellent interview. I'll send a transcript to you. And we'll go from there. Thank you very much for your time.

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