

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk XXX: Part 2 of 2
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk and Thomas J. Schoenbaum
1985 May

The complete interview also includes Rusk WWW: Part 1.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, go ahead.

DEAN RUSK: --allocate the old city of Jerusalem to the three religions with their shrines and hotel facilities and things of that sort. And then you'd have certain necessary facilities to be taken of [sic]. The police might be turned over to Israel, the public utilities might be turned over to Jordan, that sort of thing, but to have a situation so complicated that nobody could understand what to fight about. Leaving this concept of sovereignty--which is after all, only a necessary legal fiction--leave that just floating up in the clouds, don't try to deal with it. But the feelings were so strong, particularly on the Jewish and Muslim side, that nothing like that ever had a chance to swim.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you talk to both sides, Pop?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I've talked to some Arabs about it because they would be the least likely to agree to anything like that, but didn't get anywhere with it.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, what was your own intelligence seeing prior to the outbreak of the Six Day War and during this time of Arab mobilization?

DEAN RUSK: Well--

RICHARD RUSK: Did Israel--was Israel facing war? Was it clear to the Americans that this was a genuine war threat?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we thought that there was a fair prospect that the Arabs would, the Arab side would open up against Israel--given all of the things that they were saying and doing--until our talks with the Soviets seemed to indicate that they had assurances from the Arab side that the Arabs would not move at least during a period when we could have more time to try to find a solution. But, we also knew that the Israeli forces were in first-class shape over against the Arab forces. Our own Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated that in case of war, the Israelis would prevail within ten days. Well, they missed it by two days. The Israelis prevailed in eight days because the Israeli armed forces were well-trained, well-equipped, well-led, and had a high motivation. Their morale was extraordinarily high over against the Arab side which were not well-led, not well-trained, not well-equipped, and so we promptly estimated that in the event of war, the Israelis would prevail very quickly. I must say that the problems for us were somewhat easier with the Israeli victory than they would have been had there been an Arab victory and the Israelis driven onto the beaches. That's the nightmare which we and others in the West have to keep in

mind, because that's the thing that will be very difficult to take, to accept. Intervention will almost certainly be necessary. But, nevertheless, we were pretty close to being angry when the Israelis moved to launch those June '67 operations. You see, they moved on a Monday, knowing that on the following Wednesday the Vice President of Egypt was expected in Washington to talk about the reopening of the Strait of Tiran.

RICHARD RUSK: I'll be durned.

DEAN RUSK: And the Israelis knew that he was expected in Washington on the Wednesday and-- now, no one can predict what might have happened, whether or not we could have, would have succeeded in getting Egypt to reopen the Strait of Tiran, but there was a real possibility, and we didn't get a chance to try. Later in the summer, Nasser told one of our representatives informally that there'd be no problem about opening the Strait of Tiran. That wasn't a big deal. Had he told us that on June first, there would not have been a war.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: You see? But again, he needed a good lawyer. He needed advice to move in a timely fashion to take care of his own interests.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Do you remember what--did LBJ--do you remember anything LBJ said when he heard about the Israeli move? Was he--he must have been pleased.

DEAN RUSK: He didn't--he was upset. I don't remember his using dramatic four-letter words or anything like that, because when you have a serious problem, you don't fall into four-letter words very quickly. But--

RICHARD RUSK: That wasn't true during the Nixon years.

DEAN RUSK: But anyhow, that was--and that was the only time during my period--that is the June '67 war and Resolution 242 and the consequences of that war--that was the only period when the Middle East situation was really active. It had been relatively quiet from '61 to '67. Relatively quiet. Now, during that period, we tried to work out reasonable relations with various Arab countries. The Saudis probably feel the most strongly about the existence of the State of Israel. But even there we were able to, in effect, say to the Saudis, "We know that you and we disagree on this particular point. Well, let's recognize that and then put this problem over into a corner, and then work on the rest of our relationship." And we did pretty well with working out a relationship with the Saudis because they also needed us. They had some enemies in the Arab world. See, one thing that has complicated the movement toward peace out there is that the Arabs have enormous differences among themselves. The only thing they can agree on is Israel. They almost would have to create Israel to have some point at which there could be a common Arab concern, but the rivalries and the bitterness within the Arab world were always very striking. And yet, one interesting thing from the point of view of diplomacy, I never had an Arab leader speak to me ill about another Arab leader. In the presence of the foreigner, they would always refer to "my Arab brother" even though they knew "my Arab brother" was trying to assassinate them. They did not get into vitriolic rhetoric about fellow Arabs to me, with the

outsiders.

SCHOENBAUM: Is that true? What about the Saudis, were--must have been very disappointed that we were supporting [Gamal Abdel] Nasser in the Yemen war. Was that true even there, even Yemen?

DEAN RUSK: Well, you see, we didn't support Nasser to that extent. I think that what we were trying to do was work privately with Nasser to get his forces out of Yemen. Because what we were trying to do there was simply to prevent a war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, yeah. Did you at all foresee or have even just a glimmer pass through your mind someday about the oil crisis and about the American dependency really, especially in early 1970s, on Saudi Arabian oil, and what that was going to mean politically?

DEAN RUSK: Well, that is a factor you have to take fully into account. To some people oil is simply greasy, dirty stuff. It's sort of unseemly to even talk about oil as an interest. That's particularly true among some of those who support Israel. But in fact, oil plays a major role in the economy of Western Europe and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the economy of the United States, so that oil was important. But we did have a year, I forget now the actual years, an oil embargo by the Arab oil-producing countries, and that caused some problems.

SCHOENBAUM: That was in '73, '74.

DEAN RUSK: That's right. The time of the Yom Kippur War.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, after '73. But in your years,--I remember [Martin Joseph] Marty Hillenbrand was the first person to tell me about that. He was Ambassador in Germany; I was a Fulbright Scholar; and I just put this--and he hit me like a ton of bricks when he told me in a group of about twenty people that he said--in early '72, he said, "You watch," he said. "The United States is running out of oil and pretty soon, and the only place in the world that has oil now is the Arab countries, and it's going to be a very difficult few years." And that just hit me like a ton of bricks. Did you realize that earlier in the--

DEAN RUSK: Well, you see, in the sixties we had a little bit of a problem the other way around. During the Eisenhower administration, in the name of national security, we put sharp restrictions on imported oil.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: The idea was that imported oil had to come across oceans, and oceans had submarines in them, and this was a fragile source of supply, and we ought to develop our own oil and make ourselves immune from that kind of damage.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: Well, that was one of those things where worries got out of hand, because if

you're thinking about national security, surely you'd use up other people's oil first and keep your own oil in the ground.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: But when I was--In the early sixties there, it was just like pulling teeth for me to get a little extra oil quota for Venezuela or Saudi Arabia or somebody like that, you see, because there was [sic] very sharp restrictions on it. And I had some difficulty with the Department of Interior in making a little more room for foreign oil. So that--

RICHARD RUSK: Oil, itself, is an issue of its own. I'm sure you have some stories about oil.

DEAN RUSK: So you see, foreign oil was sort of suspect in the early sixties, and the local oil people with powerful support in the Congress were keeping very close reins on the importation of oil. We had some problems with Saudi Arabia because they did not feel that we were giving ARAMCO [Arabian-American Oil Company] and other Saudi producers enough access to world markets in oil and we had to--that was always a source of friction. But most of those negotiations were handled directly by the oil companies with us in the background.

SCHOENBAUM: One more--getting near the end I'd like to ask about the mechanics of forming Resolution 242. Where was the cooperation, or how did the cooperation--where were the channels of cooperation between state and--

DEAN RUSK: We kept in very close touch with Arthur Goldberg up at the United Nations. He was the negotiator, and he was in direct touch with the various parties. But nevertheless, we followed those negotiations in great detail, and approved the actual formulation of the language of Resolution 242 and watched it.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you personally?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, yes. Now Resolution 242, at the time, was a resolution adopted under Chapter 6 of the U.N. Charter. It was not in itself legally binding. But then at the time of the Yom Kippur War, the Security Council passed a Chapter 7 resolution which transformed Resolution 242 into a binding resolution under Resolution, I think 353, isn't it?

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, 353, that's right.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, so I still believe that Resolution 242, as originally negotiated, provides the agenda for a possible peace in the Middle East, but both parties have tried to pull away from it, as I've indicated earlier, pull away from the Resolution. On the Arab side--by the way, I mentioned the Israeli problem as far as territory was concerned. On the Arab side, they are now calling for an Arab state in Palestine. Resolution 242 did not anticipate an Arab state. It anticipated that Jordan would return to the West Bank, for example. But it's ironic for the Arabs now to call for an Arab state in Palestine, because they could have had an Arab state in Palestine if they had accepted the partition plan in 1948. Instead they went to war to try to prevent it. So, it's full of lost opportunities, ironies.

SCHOENBAUM: Again, to repeat this, because the history books--I think this is a different view than is found in the history books. The history books portray the events leading up to the Six Day War--and this is just a couple of books that I read--and they portray the United States policy as being divided and uncertain. And you were talking to LBJ and at least in the top levels of government, it does not sound like the United States policy was divided. It sounds as if you were caught by, you were in the process of working things out as best you could and trying to prevent war, and that the Israeli attack was precipitous in--well, the Arabs, of course, did some foolish things as well. But, did you have a sense that our policy was at all frozen or divided or--

DEAN RUSK: I don't remember much in-house controversy at that time. See, we really were trying to get the Strait of Tiran reopened, because we thought that that would ease the problem considerably. And if that could be done, then maybe we could find ways to reduce this sense of confrontation. You see, on the-- this attitude of holy war on the Arab side is matched by a kind of apocalyptic view on the Israeli side, and so any spark could set off a conflagration. And so we were trying to reopen the Strait of Tiran as a first step toward defusing this situation. And LBJ was very clear in urging the Israelis to hold their hand. Any idea that somehow under the rug we connived or approved of a June attack is just not true.

SCHOENBAUM: Well, it's good to have that on the record.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

SCHOENBAUM: How would you assess the performance of the Middle East Bureau, Lucius [Durham] Battle, at that time?

DEAN RUSK: I think the Bureau at that time was working very effectively, and there was no confrontation between anybody at the White House and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

SCHOENBAUM: Was there any major confrontation between the Department of Defense or State or any other--

DEAN RUSK: No. We had a very painful incident with the--that ship that was attacked.

SCHOENBAUM: Right in the Mediterranean? Yeah, the--

DEAN RUSK: Yeah the--

RICHARD RUSK: American ship?

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, American ship.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, what's the name of it?

SCHOENBAUM: It wasn't the *Nirnitz*?

DEAN RUSK: No, the *Liberty*.

SCHOENBAUM: The *Liberty*, you're right. That's right.

DEAN RUSK: Well, there was an intelligence-type ship in the area, and we were appalled when we learned that it was under attack. We were meeting in the situation room in the White House [the president and several of us] to consider what this attack meant, because at that time we didn't know who had attacked it. It would have been a very serious problem if either the Egyptians or the Russians had attacked it. In the middle of our meeting came a flash in from the Israeli government that Israeli forces had attacked the ship. Well, that didn't please us very much, but on the other hand it was somewhat easier to deal with. But I was never satisfied with the Israeli explanations about that attack on the *Liberty*. Whether they--I mean, I just don't believe that it was an accident or trigger-happy local commanders. There was just too much of a sustained effort to disable and sink the *Liberty* to warrant that. And I don't think we've had full satisfaction on that from the Israelis to this day. I think they did pay some reparations to the families of the crew, but I don't think they've paid intergovernmental reparations on the *Liberty*. So, I didn't believe the Israelis at that time, and I still don't believe their explanation.

SCHOENBAUM: Would they have a motive for attacking the *Liberty*? Did they just want the United States not to know what's going on out there?

DEAN RUSK: I think that's it possibly, that they did not want us to monitor carefully what was being done on both sides, particularly on their side. But, they claimed that they could not identify the ship. Well, I have doubt about that. But for them to attack an unidentified ship, not knowing whether it might be Russian or something else was itself pretty reckless, you see. So, I was very unhappy about that whole episode.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you express this to--

DEAN RUSK: Oh yeah, sure. Matter of fact, I wrote--we sent a note to them in which we refused to accept their explanation.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, when I interviewed Arthur [Joseph] Goldberg in New York, he spoke in considerable length on his influence on American policy here. And he had more or less said that you and the Johnson administration delegated it happily to him. Is this more or less Arthur Goldberg and his--

DEAN RUSK: No, we did delegate very heavily to Arthur Goldberg in, for example, negotiating this Resolution 242. By the way, I just say in passing that there were some people on our own side who expressed some doubts about Arthur Goldberg's going to the U.N. as our representative.

RICHARD RUSK: As a Jewish--

DEAN RUSK: Fearful that he would not be able to establish good relations with the Arabs. But that turned out to be of no consequence. He did have good negotiating relationships with his

Arab counterparts at the U.N. and that never got to be a problem. But he was a very able negotiator. I don't know whether I've put this on tape or not, but there's a sharp contrast between an Adlai [Ewing] Stevenson at the U.N. and an Arthur Goldberg. Adlai Stevenson can make brilliant speeches, but he was a very poor negotiator. If you gave him a fallback position, he'd be at the fallback position in five minutes, so, you'd have to withhold your fallback position from Adlai. But in the case of Arthur Goldberg, he could make some pretty dull speeches compared to Adlai Stevenson, but he was a brilliant negotiator. He'd had all those years as a labor negotiator. You give him a position and a fallback position, he'd take the opening position and he'd gnaw and he'd struggle and he'd fuss and he'd do everything he could to get the maximum of his opening position before he'd begin to think about a fallback position. He was a very good negotiator.

SCHOENBAUM: Another question that--Maybe this is about the last question I have. This is again an historical history-book interpretation for you to comment on. These are important to get down. The historians, the experts, say they perceived a change in Middle Eastern policy just looking at the Kennedy-Johnson years. They say that there was a change with LBJ over Kennedy, and they say that change was that LBJ was less tolerant of nationals like Nasser than Kennedy was and that LBJ was more pro-Israel than--And LBJ personally identified with the Israelis because of his love of the Bible and because of his admiration for the Israelis as pioneers. And he also, LBJ, the historians say, was more cooperative with the royalists because they were more pro-American and that--One historian said that, speculates that, LBJ regarded the Israeli Arabs as kind of like the Texans against the Mexicans. Would you comment on this?

DEAN RUSK: I think that's all--There's a good deal of hogwash in that. LBJ had some very serious, tough negotiations with Israeli representatives. Golda Meir was a tough negotiator from the Israeli point of view and LBJ had to take her on a couple of times, Abba Eban, and people like that. No, LBJ's approach to this problem did not come out of the Bible.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you notice a shift in policy over the years?

DEAN RUSK: No, not really. Not really. Of course the June '67 war brought about some new situations that Kennedy had not had to wrestle with.

SCHOENBAUM: That's true.

RICHARD RUSK: So the policy stayed the same through the transition and into a new administration.

DEAN RUSK: Pretty much so.

SCHOENBAUM: It was more a change in circumstances.

DEAN RUSK: You see, it's important to bear in mind that the United States itself has never had a plan for the Middle East. Now when the British put the matter before the United Nations back in '46, they took the view then that they would accept any solution that was agreeable both to the Jews and to the Arabs. And so they sort of stood aside during all those U.N. discussions. Well, in

a sense, that is the American view. We don't have an American plan which we are trying to sell both sides or which we think is designed for our interests. We would accept any solution that Israel and the Arab side could agree on. We don't--we're not selling anything, we're just trying to prevent war out there and find a way, find a little peace in the area. I'm not sure you'll find in the record a something like an eight point program that I put through to the Egyptian Foreign Minister before the June '67 war. I think you may find it in a document.

RICHARD RUSK: Is this a written document?

DEAN RUSK: I think it's in a reporting cable from New York. I was up there at the U.N. and put to him an eight point program, and the Egyptians turned it down. But later on they would have looked upon my eight point program with considerable favor. I mean, I don't really know why they turned these eight points down. But you'll find that somewhere. I don't have the eight points exactly in mind at the moment, but--

RICHARD RUSK: Who is it, just the ambassador?

DEAN RUSK: This was pretty much on my own. This was not on the basis of instructions from President Johnson, but it was simply an effort of my own to find some sort of basis for further negotiation. And I took the initiative on that personally hoping to stir up some real basis for negotiation for a peace out there, but the Egyptians turned it down.

SCHOENBAUM: Do you know when--when was that, May of '67?

DEAN RUSK: Oh I would think it might be maybe even '66.

SCHOENBAUM: Sixty-six, oh, okay.

DEAN RUSK: It was--but--

RICHARD RUSK: Who was the Egyptian Ambassador at that time? It would be nice to read that cable.

DEAN RUSK: The Egyptian Foreign Minister, I think I was talking to. Oh, I forget now. I'm sorry. These names tend to elude me.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, this has been a good interview. You want to finish up with any particular war stories about any Egyptian, Israeli, Arab leaders?

DEAN RUSK: No. To me, one of the sad things was that we were not able to keep Jordan out of that war, because it certainly was not in the interest of Hussein to get involved. And yet, he felt that as an Arab he had a commitment of honor, particularly since the Israelis had launched the attack against Egypt. And so he would not accept an immediate cease-fire, and lost the West Bank in the old city of Jerusalem as a result.

SCHOENBAUM: Did we make some special approaches to him personally?

DEAN RUSK: Oh yeah, immediately. We talked to him immediately after the out break of the June'67 war, trying to keep Jordan out of it. And I think we could have succeeded on the Israeli side to stay their hand had Jordan stayed out of it, but he insisted on getting into it.

RICHARD RUSK: The whole map sure got rewritten over that.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. You know, I'm not sure that I've put on tape when I was at the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1950's, we talked to Jewish and Arab scholars about establishing a joint institute of Semitic studies [because, after all, both were Semites; both were interested in Semitic studies] maybe located on Mount Scopus, which was a point of controversy at that time, and the Rockefeller Foundation would put up the money for it. And among the scholars we found very considerable enthusiasm for it on the Arab side as well as on the Israeli side, on the Jewish side. And it was our impression at the time that the Israeli government would have accepted it. But when we got up to the political level on the Arab side, it was just turned down flat as not being acceptable. But you see, this Arab-Israeli problem has been the most stubborn, intractable, unyielding problem that we've had in this postwar period, and part of it is the depth and strength of the emotions on both sides.

RICHARD RUSK: As difficult today as 1949?

DEAN RUSK: Yeah. Just about, except for the Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt; that helped a good deal in a major aspect of it. So, it's still a part of the unfinished business. I think it's somewhat less likely that another major round of fighting will occur, but if the Arabs ever get themselves a military leader of the quality of a General [Yitzhak] Rabin and they ever develop a well-trained, well-led fighting force, then Israel could be in great trouble because of the sheer numbers of the situation.

RICHARD RUSK: Don't forget the nukes.

DEAN RUSK: And then in the Yom Kippur war of 1973, in relation to population, Israel's casualties were greater than ours in Vietnam, in relation to population. So Israel simply cannot stand war every ten years on a major scale.

RICHARD RUSK: It's been a good interview, Pop.

SCHOENBAUM: Well, thank you very much, it certainly has.

DEAN RUSK: Good to talk to you. I bear many scars from this Middle Eastern question.

RICHARD RUSK: Got anything further on your page, there?

SCHOENBAUM: No, I think we've covered my questions. So, you turn it off and--

DEAN RUSK: --And you'll find different ones writing quite different things about these things. I read, for example, that the Israelis had some undercover encouragement from Washington to

launch their war in June '67. Well, that just isn't true, just isn't true.

SCHOENBAUM: It's good to have these things. It's good to have a public record of these things. It's very, very valuable. This is something for future, but this is an article from the *New York Times* about the--

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