

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

RICHARD RUSK: This is a continuation of the tape with Dean Rusk on the issue of intelligence and national security. I asked you this question in the car the other day, but why don't we do this one on tape. To what extent did you and your colleagues, or does government, classify material "top secret" to keep it out of the public domain when national security is not really involved? And to what extent does government abuse this classification procedure, perhaps for political reasons, or stuff like this?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I think there is some of that. Part of it is just human nature. For example, a staff officer--and perhaps I have done this myself when I was staff officer--would write a memorandum on a fairly important matter and be quite frank and candid about it. Then the next day they would look at it and say, "My God, did I write that?" And they would stamp a confidential stamp on it. A lot of these in-house memoranda perhaps are over-classified. But on the other hand, a Secretary of State and a President must be in a position of getting candid advice from his subordinates without any fear on their part that their advice is going to be made public or made a matter of political controversy. In testimony before congressional committees I tried to avoid answering questions about who had given me what kind of advice. And I always refused to discuss my conversations with President Kennedy and President Johnson before a congressional committee. But part of it, the confidentiality, does contribute toward candor and frankness because the alternative is public airing, and public charges, and political controversy, and things of that sort.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, that's a good point. This Freedom of Information Act, do you have any problems with it? The way it is used to today it has become a tool for scholars to get at material that has been classified and supposedly not available.

DEAN RUSK: Five or six years ago I visited with the American Historical Association, which was having its annual meeting in Atlanta. And they were all clapping hands over the Freedom of Information Act. And I suggested that they be careful about their enthusiasm because, human nature being what it is, one of the results of the Freedom of Information Act will be that more and more decisions will be made by fewer and fewer people, and orally rather than writing so as not to generate material for the Freedom of Information Act. And that one effect of this may well be the drying up of sources for future historians. And I am sure that that happens. So, I think it cuts both ways. You see, if you really want to be confidential and don't want to be exposed to the Freedom of Information Act, all you have to do is to deal with the matter orally and with a minimum number pieces of paper. It's simple.

RICHARD RUSK: And that's the way you played it with a lot of things?

DEAN RUSK: Well, some things were done that way. Of course, Lyndon Johnson--Well I know

there are times when Presidents have deferred making a decision until they were ready to execute it so there would be nothing to leak. Lyndon Johnson would make a decision in his own time; but when he made it, he wanted it executed directly, immediately. And then the execution would be public.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: But I know there are times when Presidents have kept their counsel so there would be nothing to leak to the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*.

RICHARD RUSK: What did you do with respect to leakers in the Department of State? What did you personally do about leaks or people who habitually would leak?

DEAN RUSK: Well [in the] first place, Secretaries of State are not as much concerned about leaks as Presidents are. Presidents are in a political position and are much more sensitive to leaks than are Secretaries of State. And some of these so-called leaks are simply highly intelligent reporters delving it out for themselves. Now they may, in order to add a little atmosphere to their story, refer to officials in the Department or things of that sort.

RICHARD RUSK: We've got a good deal of this at considerable length on this tape that we did on press and media.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

RICHARD RUSK: And these points came out quite clearly.

RICHARD RUSK: While we're on the subject of leaks, the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover tended to get involved with this to some extent. You have said that talking with J. Edgar Hoover was like "talking with Charles de Gaulle." That's a quote. Any anecdotes or observations about Hoover, his secret file materials about the relationship of both your Presidents to Mr. Hoover, and his secret file?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I've not known just what was in his most secret files. I expect he kept some of these in his own office. But he was there for many, many years and in the process gathered a lot of information on people, including people in government, and I have no doubt created nervousness, even fear, on the part of some people about what he might know about them. He would pass along a lot of gossip to his, to the Presidents he served about people in town. And that could not help, I think, but raise a question in the President's mind about what he knew about them. And that put him in a position of incipient blackmail, which was very unwholesome. And for that reason I've strongly urged that the director of the FBI be there for a set term of office and not be there year after year after year.

RICHARD RUSK: One of the TV dramatizations of John Kennedy's years brought this out and made the allegation that he had heard Kennedy talk about possibly getting rid of J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover suspected that this might happen, and he went to Kennedy and threatened him with disclosure.

DEAN RUSK: Oh, I doubt he threatened him directly. There are many more subtle, indirect ways to doing that. When I was at the Rockefeller Foundation during the fifties a young FBI agent came in to see me to talk about someone who was being considered for a position in government. The more he talked, the more it was apparent that he was preoccupied with the fact that this man was around forty-five years old and was a bachelor, and that this raised, in this agent's mind, the possibility of homosexuality. So finally I said to this agent, "Are you asking me whether this man is a bachelor like J. Edgar Hoover?" And he straightened up in his chair. And I said, "Now look, you asked the question. You put my answer in your report." Well my answer turned up in my own FBI file. I had "insulted" the old man.

RICHARD RUSK: When did you see your FBI file?

DEAN RUSK: I won't get into that.

RICHARD RUSK: There's another story, oh yeah, about the FBI investigating our apartment back in Park Fairfax, looking through our pile of books. Do you recall that one? I just vaguely recall it and recall that they noted that I had there on my shelves a copy of [Karl] Marx's *Das Kapital*, and a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and a few things like that. It's ridiculous.

RICHARD RUSK: This is an agent that came into our apartment and into our living room and looked through the pile of books on the shelves.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, but he did that simply casually in relation to an interview he was doing with me. He didn't come in just to do that.

RICHARD RUSK: I see. There's another story--

DEAN RUSK: A Secretary of State goes into several classifications higher than "Top Secret" and each one of these requires a full FBI investigation. And I had four or five of these special appearances. And one of my neighbors there on Quebec Street remarked to me one day that if the FBI doesn't stop coming around asking questions about me they would think that something was wrong with me. I mean their very repetitious questioning raises some doubts.

RICHARD RUSK: And apparently the comment that the way you fellows used to answer your telephones in the Department of State during the early fifties, during the [Joseph Raymond] McCarthy period, was "Hello, you all."

DEAN RUSK: That's right. That was a gag going around the Department during the McCarthy period.

RICHARD RUSK: That's funny. Oh, heck. Any other--

DEAN RUSK: I never wiretapped or bugged a newsman to try and run down leaks. I never bugged or taped an officer of the Department of State trying to run down leaks.

RICHARD RUSK: Had you been-- well, that's useless speculation. What did you say to John Kennedy in the presence of J. Edgar Hoover one time? Is that worth putting on tape?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I was there in the Cabinet Room with J. Edgar Hoover, and Kennedy and four or five others. We were listening to a report from J. Edgar Hoover on something, and I turned to Kennedy and said, "If I ever catch anyone in our own government bugging me, I will resign and make a public issue of it." Indeed, I had my own office screened for possible bugs periodically by different agencies, so that no single agency would have a monopoly of that process and could tap me with without my knowledge.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall Kennedy's response, or Hoover's?

DEAN RUSK: No. There was no response.

RICHARD RUSK: And you had our house swept from time to time.

DEAN RUSK: That's right.

RICHARD RUSK: And the only instance of bugging involved--

DEAN RUSK: Well, I thought once that our telephone was being tapped because there were little clicks on the line. I had some people come out and they searched and searched and couldn't find anything. So finally they discovered that the squirrels seemed to like the taste of the insulation of wires coming into the house and were biting through it. And when their teeth would hit the wire we'd get these clicks. So we put some squirrel-proof insulation on the wires.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, I'll be darned. I got one more question. The question is, did you ever have the feeling that you and your colleagues in government were moving ahead on a problem or taking actions based on intelligence that was clearly insufficient?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, yes, very often you have to act without having absolutely complete information on a matter. You can't pause to commission a bunch of Ph.D. theses every time a problem arises, partly because of the pace of the flow of events. The problem changes day by day, week by week. And, so very often you know that there is information you don't have. And very often you realize that that information simply does not exist in the real world and can't be gotten. And then one must always be careful about trying to predict what any living human being would do in a circumstance in which he finds himself.

RICHARD RUSK: Ever suspect the existence of a Soviet mole in the highest levels of government? Well, did you, McGeorge Bundy, and Robert McNamara ever look at each other one day, or perhaps in a meeting of the National Security Council?

DEAN RUSK: No, I never bothered about that very much because I basically assumed that we were penetrated, in one way or another, by the Soviets.

RICHARD RUSK: Is that one reason why you were as tight-lipped as you were?

DEAN RUSK: And, so I think it's not too bad to simply to proceed on that assumption. For example, I am quite sure that the private meetings of the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] foreign ministers, where each foreign minister could have only one person with him at the discussion, that the contents of those discussion were known to the Soviet Union. Indeed, and I won't specify the occasion, I used a private meeting of NATO to send a message to the Soviet Union, thinking that they would pay more attention if they got it that way than if I had sent it to them directly.

RICHARD RUSK: You can't specify this?

DEAN RUSK: No, I won't specify it.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you ever get any affirmation of a signal like this from the other side? Or did you ever try--

DEAN RUSK: No, this is not the kind of thing you would expect a reply from.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah.

DEAN RUSK: But, there are so many ways. The United States is a country in which espionage is relatively easy to conduct.

RICHARD RUSK: Yeah, right.

DEAN RUSK: And, so you just have to assume that they are conducting it and that they have varying degrees of success with it. And we have tried to block some of this, sometimes by ridiculous moves. For example, you and I as private citizens can go down and get detailed maps of the United States from the geodetic survey: buy them. Well, the Soviets were sending some of their people from their embassy down to the geodetic survey office to buy these things and some of our people wanted to stop it. Well, it's ridiculous, because any private citizen can walk in there and buy them. And, so if the Soviets didn't get it from people in their own embassy, there are thousands of people in this country who would go in there and buy them for them. So, that it's, just frivolous.

RICHARD RUSK: Loch [Kingsford Johnson] asked you about polygraphs. Related to briefly here, Pop, how helpful is the academic community and that pool of expertise, with respect to intelligence gathering, policy advice, policy formulation?

DEAN RUSK: Well, we draw a great many of our analysts into CIA and into the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and the Defense Intelligence Agency from academia. And they are very capable people. The normal process of scholarship is very useful in terms of general background. But it is not particularly useful with regard to specific decisions which have to be made on particular points. In the first place, there is a time lag. By the time the scholar has gotten through with all his research and it has taken a year to get his article or book published, the problem has already run out from under him. And, further, this scholar does not have the same

kind of responsibility that an officer in government has. And that element of responsibility makes a big difference in the way exchanges take place. And then a scholar can pick out one particular aspect of a problem and concentrate on it, whereas, a decision maker has to be sure that he has encompassed every aspect that will have an influence on that problem. And so, I think these two worlds do not understand each other very well. And if they understood each other better, they could communicate more effectively. I always enjoyed some of these advisory groups that we have pulled in from time to time from academia: not with respect to tomorrow morning's decisions, but with respect to the general situation, the general background, the way problems appear to be to intelligent people who are trying to follow it. But, I think on the whole academia makes a very important contribution. But not at the point of making specific decisions on specific questions.

RICHARD RUSK: Do you recall anyone in the academic community that you really thought was good and really may have helped on a specific problem? Or someone that you turned to on a fairly regular basis?

DEAN RUSK: There were a number of those, but I will try to give you some names later.

RICHARD RUSK: Well, it's not important. I just thought maybe someone might have stuck out. Okay. I think that winds it up on intelligence.

END OF SIDE 1

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