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Controversy Stalks An Impassive Rusk

By Marquis Childs

JUST FIVE years ago a reserved, quiet mannered foundation president, whom not a single American in 10,000 had ever heard of, stepped from comfortable anonymity into the very eye of conflict and controversy. President-elect John F. Kennedy asked Dean Rusk to be Secretary of State in the Cabinet he was forming.

If Rusk ever regretted his decision he has given no sign of it. In the turmoil of an office that concentrates on the individual who occupies it and belted by the full force of every foreign policy crisis, he has continued to maintain a discreet personal reserve. Rusk, the man, is unfailingly subordinate to the dedicated public servant.

No office except the Presidency is subject to such a glare of public interest. And the President, by reason of the eminence of his office, is often sheltered from the slings and arrows of misfortune that assail the Secretary of State. As has happened to every Secretary of State almost without exception, going back even to the quiet era when America's place in the world was on the periphery of power, Rusk is a figure of controversy.

One of the reasons Kennedy chose him was because he meant to be his own Secretary of State and the President-elect knew this was Rusk's concept of the office. He was to be an instrument carrying out the policy of the chief executive. The president of the Rockefeller Foundation, as Rusk was, wrote in Foreign Affairs in 1960: "The President, with the aid of his Secretary of State and the support of the Congress, supplies the leadership in our foreign relations."

RUSK HAS been scrupulous in interpreting that definition and this is one reason for the criticism directed at him publicly by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and privately by others in the Kennedy wing of the Democratic establishment. He fails to come up with initiatives. He is too neutral. No one knows where he really stands. This is the main thrust of the discontent with the Secretary of State.

But a glance at presidential history shows that Rusk, with one conspicuous exception, is in the tradition of Secretaries of State. Presidents have almost invariably asserted their constitutional right to direct foreign policy. And if the Secretary didn't like the policy set by the President he could resign, as some have done, or he could adapt his views to those of his chief, as others have done.

The exception was John Foster Dulles. President Eisenhower, with his chain of command concept of the office, delegated to Dulles the initiative. And Dulles, with his long background in foreign affairs, his ambition, his aggressive self-confidence, was only too eager to take it.

The office as a consequence was inflated with Dulles, a resourceful phrase-maker, a news-maker, keeping himself in the public eye. At the same time, in the view of critics of the Dulles era, he inflated the aims of American policy far beyond the means and the will to carry out those aims. Rusk's defenders believe that it is against this distortion of the office that he is compared and found wanting.

ON VITAL foreign policy issues such as Vietnam, Rusk's almost invariable custom is to restate positions firmly marked out by the President. In his history of the JFK years Schlesinger quoted Kennedy as saying that he meant to drop Rusk after the 1964 election. This stirred indignant defense of the Secretary. Earlier while Kennedy was still in the White House a journalist with frequent access to the President quoted him as saying of Rusk:

"He's got guts. And his judgment is good. And in final analysis those are the qualities a Secretary of State needs. I wouldn't want to make a final decision on a vital matter involving our security until I'd heard his view . . . "

If President Johnson had thought of replacing Rusk the Schlesinger attack assured his tenure so long as he cares to stay. Only recently the President let it be known that he considered Rusk the greatest Secretary of State in this century. As he gave complete loyalty to Kennedy so Rusk gives unstinting loyalty to Johnson.

Secretary of State watchers over the years have said it's an office in which you can't win. All you can hope for in a time of revolutionary troubles is to hang on, hoping for a few breaks that will even up the score. The Congo, Rhodesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Germany, France —they are all on the Secretary's doorstep, each with a demand for first priority as he parcels out his 12-hour day in carefully measured half hours.

While he had served in the State Department, Rusk can hardly have foreseen what acceptance of the Kennedy offer meant.

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