

Dean Rusk on the Pentagon Papers

This article was excerpted from an hour-long interview last week on N.B.C. Television with the former Secretary of State, Dean Rusk.

Q. Do you regret the publication of this report?

Mr. Rusk: Well, I regret that the material got out of the hands of the Government almost solely, however, because of the great importance of protecting the ability of the United States to talk privately with other governments.

Now, there are a lot of things in the Government that are overclassified, and many of them remain classified far too long. One of the problems is if you declassify only a part of the story then you are putting out only a part of the story, and in these diplomatic transactions we usually wait for a period of about 20 years before we make all this correspondence public.

But I do not have any reason to regret those things which are a part of the internal domestic debate of the United States. That doesn't worry me at all. I am concerned about our ability to talk privately with other governments, because if we lose that chance then we are in great trouble....

Q. How do you think we can reconcile the public's right to know with the Government's desire for privacy under certain situations?

Mr. Rusk: Well, in a democratic society the public does have a right to know, but the public also has a right to have its public business transacted in a responsible fashion, and the problem is where do you draw the line?...

For example, the President and a Secretary of State must have an opportunity to hold private conversations with their principal advisers. Must have an opportunity to talk privately with other governments. Senators and Congressmen must have the right to talk things over privately with their own staff, or to talk with their friends about how to plan their campaigns....

Now, this does not mean that there is a great conspiracy. I mean, there are many things that are secret. The press has its own secrets....

Q. You said the people are entitled to responsible government. Now, the burden of the study at least as it has been reported is that perhaps the American people were not being given the benefit of responsible government during the period in particular of the escalation in Vietnam.

Mr. Rusk: Let me comment on two or three aspects of that. During the campaign of 1964, for example, I think if anyone looks at the full record of what President Johnson was saying during that period they would get a view of a balanced presentation. He said at Syracuse University in August that peace requires that we and all our friends stand firm against the present aggression of the Government of North Vietnam. Peace requires that the existing agreements in the area be honored.

He spoke to the American Bar Association a little later that month: "We shall engage our strength and our resources to whatever extent needed to help others repel aggression."

In September he spoke in Oklahoma: We are not about to start another war, and we are not about to run away from where we are.

In October he again reaffirmed our support for the SEATO treaty.

Now, if one looks at the total of what he said I think that he made a balanced presentation of what was then considered to be the moderate point of view; that is, that we are going to, as President Kennedy put it, do our duty, but that we were going to try to avoid a general spread of the war, or a wider war.

Now when he said in the course of that autumn that we don't want a wider war that was deeply true in terms of what he would like to see and what he hoped for. As a matter of fact, we didn't even want a war as wide as the one we had.

Another element runs into it, however, and that is that after the election, beginning in late December and early January, 1964 and '65, the North Vietnamese began the movement of the organized regiments and divisions of their regular army into the South on an all-out invasion of South Vietnam.

Now, that presented President Johnson with a new situation. A situation that President Kennedy had not had to face. And we tend to forget what the North Vietnamese were doing all this time, and one of the things that I seem to miss in what I have seen about this report so far is a kind of chronology of what North Vietnam was doing.

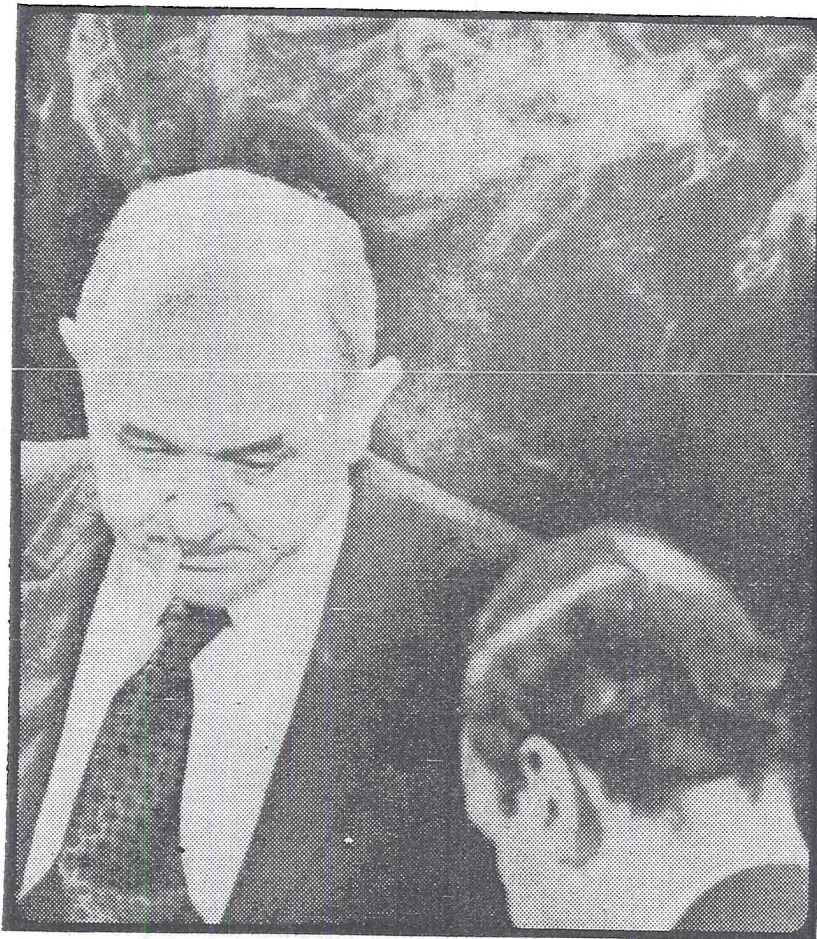
So that I don't believe that there was any deliberate attempt to deceive anybody during that period....

Q. Later on after the war, after the Gulf of Tonkin and after the war had escalated, you were quoted as having said that you would use nuclear attack against China if necessary.

Mr. Rusk: I think under the circumstances at the time what was really intended and what I really meant was that you should try to handle this affair in such a way as not to convert it into a war among the major powers. And indeed you recall we were very strongly criticized all along during this affair for not taking some of the actions that some of us felt would have increased the possibilities of war with China or with the Soviet Union....

Q. What many people think happened in Vietnam [is] that we started out with something and it grew and it grew.

Mr. Rusk: Well, in the first place, I personally, I think, underestimated the resistance and the determination of the North Vietnamese. They have taken over 700,000 killed which in re-



lation to population is almost the equivalent of what? ten million Americans, and they are continuing to come. I thought that when we had established a position in Vietnam which would be clearly impossible for them to overrun militarily that then the chances were very high that they would pull back, maybe only for a time, but pull back; or take part in some serious negotiation. Unhappily, I think beginning about 1967 Hanoi has had no incentive to negotiate because they've seen the divisions here at home and apparently elected just to wait it out and see what would happen.

Q. One of the points that is frequently made [is] that you and your colleagues led this country into what became an enormous commitment as a result of colossal miscalculations.

Mr. Rusk: Well, I just said that I personally underestimated the resistance of the North Vietnamese, but there were some other considerations that were very much in our minds, and it's almost become unfashionable to talk about any more.

How much is it worth to prevent World War III? How much is it worth to try to guarantee the reputation of the United States for fidelity to our security commitments? How much is it worth to try to avoid a basic miscalculation in places like Moscow or Peking about what the United States might do in situations which we con-

sidered vital to our own national security or national interests, or to world peace?

One of the severe prices we may be paying for Vietnam is that it may have stimulated, assisted a trend toward isolationism in this country. . . .

Q. How much do we put the American global interests ahead of the death of thousands of noncombat Vietnamese?

Mr. Rusk: Well, on the moral issues I'm not one of those who believe that what we call the state is some sort of mystical, amoral business that is not governed by ordinary or moral concerns. On the other hand, I've never claimed that God was on my side. I thought that judgment was up to somebody else. But moral considerations do play a part. I have been concerned that the discussion of morals has not taken into account the total moral context. Surely there's a moral issue if the North Vietnamese invade these gentle, peace-loving people of Laos, or if they invade South Vietnam, or if they, contrary to Prince Sihanouk's earnest hope that Cambodia could remain neutral, invaded Cambodia and established sanctuaries there. Is there a moral issue in our making a pledge which we do not honor? The overriding moral question is how do you avoid World War III.

I can't emphasize the importance of this question, although not many peo-

ple seem to be worrying about it these days. We had a chance to pick ourselves up out of the destruction of World War II and start over. We're not going to have that chance after World War III. Now, how do you do it? We came out of World War II with the notion that collective security was the key to the preservation of peace. We wrote it into Article I of the United Nations Charter, and we reinforced it by these so-called security treaties. Now that idea is eroding. My generation has become old and tired, and it doesn't grip us in the way it used to when I was young. Half of our people are so young they've had no chance to live through or to remember these experiences, so it's understandable that it doesn't grip them in the same way. Now, if we are to cast aside the notion of collective security what are we going to put in its place? I don't know, and I can't tell these young people what it will be because each generation must find its own answers to that question. But we've got somehow to find an answer because unless we can organize world peace there literally is no human survival.

Q. Is it possible for such a country [as the U.S.] to go into a country like Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos in the way in which we have to go in because of the kind of country we are, and accomplish anything?

Mr. Rusk: I think that's something that we'll have to think a great deal about, not only people in Government but the scholars in the field have to think about. It makes a big difference as to whether you create the feeling that aggression can succeed because there's no one to stop it. Now we haven't become the world's policeman. Hundreds of situations of violence have developed since World War II and I think we've been involved in about six or seven of them. We don't go around looking for business, places to intervene. But in those areas which we by formal constitutional arrangement have decided, or did decide were vital to our own interests and to the possibilities of peace—that means basically in Western Europe, this hemisphere and certain spots on the other side of the Pacific—then it is not only the immediate situation that is involved, it is the reliability and the status of your other security agreements and the judgments that might be made in the minds of some other capitals as to what might happen if they take one or another move.

Now it's unfashionable these days to talk about such things but I myself believe that one of the principal pillars of peace in the world is the feeling on the part of certain capitals that we better be just a little careful because those crazy Americans just might do something about it. And if that question is ever transformed into a certainty that we will not do something about it then I think we're headed for periods of very great danger.