

# FOREIGN POLICY

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## Foreign Policy

Number 8, Fall 1972

### The Tragedy of Dean Rusk

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*By John B. Henry II & William Espinoza*

As the previously secret details of the 1960s begin to emerge, so too, though gradually, does the figure of Dean Rusk. Still, no one has claimed to have understood this reticent and ambiguous man who came to be so closely identified with the Vietnam tragedy. Although we may never know the full extent of Rusk's influence on Lyndon Johnson, it is now clear that there were far more currents and crosscurrents in the President's wartime Secretary of State than the monolithic cast of public images allowed.

Thanks to the Pentagon Papers and Lyndon Johnson's memoirs, we know that the man who has for so long been thought the penultimate hawk was once, in fact, a private doubter. In the beginning at least, Rusk was the best of the worst, the least enthusiastic of the Kennedy-Johnson policy-makers. Yet he became one of the worst—the loyal minister who saw Benedict Arnolds in those who first supported the President's war policies but then changed their minds.

Throughout his career, Rusk had sought to avoid questionable foreign commitments and to minimize international conflict by exploring all the alternatives and pitfalls before any initiative was undertaken. Problems, for Rusk, were to be unraveled only by diligent and meticulous application of reason; feelings were never to be allowed to cloud one's judgment.

But, though tactically cautious, once committed, Rusk's evangelical and emotional side shaped his general outlook. At the time of the Tet offensive, Rusk exploded to a group of reporters, "Whose side are you on?" Nor was this an isolated incident, the mere product of a trying day. Yet only seven years earlier, Rusk himself had warned against harnessing "American prestige to a losing horse" in Vietnam.

Traditionally, such a turnabout would be explained as the outcome of institutional and situational pressures. Rusk, so explained, was cut from the Washington cloth—that is, like other Presidential councillors of that generation, he was paying customary respect to the President by going along with his decisions while, at the same time, conserving his influence lest he lose it. But such an explanation is both superficial (it focuses only on immediate considerations) and incomplete (it overlooks the degree of commitment to the President). The rites of passage to power do not sanitize the personalities of public officials; the stature of high office does not rid its holder of his past. With Rusk, policy and personality were intertwined -- the public man and the private man inseparable. What for another adviser might have been a matter of bureaucratic expediency or deference was for Rusk an obsession. He was to find in the policies chosen by the President something akin to divine sanction, and those who served that office, he felt, must be willing not only to live with the results but defend them to the bitter end.

Today Rusk seems more relaxed, though he persists in his loyalty to the Presidents he attended. In a series of interviews at his home and office at the University of Georgia where he now teaches international law, the former Secretary of State talked freely about Vietnam and his past but denied any connection between the two.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Rusk, a master of the polished coin of non-communication and guardian of Presidential secrets, skillfully downplayed much which was inconvenient and uncomfortable. Whereas Vietnam enthusiasts turned skeptics are inclined to paint their earlier actions with the colors of their present views, the same in reverse is true of Rusk, skeptic turned pugilist. It came as no surprise that he sought to obscure his own person, as if he would be mastered to the extent he was measured. Other interviews, however, provided material which offered insights into this man of

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<sup>1</sup> In the preparation of this article. John B. Henry spent over 35 hours talking with Dean Rusk, and conducted over 50 interviews with Rusk's friends, relatives, and associates.

strange and complex depth and from which inferences may be drawn concerning his migration to the forefront of the Vietnam crusade. Though these fragments of his past cannot describe the whole man, recurring themes and patterns do emerge. Perhaps most importantly, from his earliest years in Georgia, Rusk seemed to be searching for absolutes-first in the Presbyterian Church; then simultaneously in the military and in world order; in his patron saint George C. Marshall, and finally in the American Presidency.

*In the Beginning ...*

Dean's father, Rev. Hugh Rusk, the youngest son of 12, was born during Reconstruction in Cherokee County, Georgia. For the times, Hugh's family was moderately well-off and prominent-his father spent a term in the State Senate. The only child to go to college, Hugh graduated from Davidson in North Carolina and in 1897, after studying at Louisville Theological Seminary, was ordained a minister in the Presbyterian Church. Soon, however, his voice gave out and brought his professional career and life ambition to a painful end.

For the next eight years Rev. Rusk drifted from job to job. He tried some school teaching but was forced to give that up when chalk dust exacerbated his throat condition. He was fortunate, though, in marrying Frances Clotfelter, a native schoolteacher of Rockdale County, Georgia, whom friends remembered as a county belle with rosy cheeks and coal-black hair. Like her husband, she came from a devoutly Presbyterian family and was accustomed to adversity. Frances' father had suffered a partial stroke which made him a paralytic and forced the family to leave their farm.

In 1908, the year before Dean was born, Hugh and Frances moved with three children to Cherokee County where Hugh could be with his widowed mother during her last years and help her manage the farm. But in 1913, the year Dean's father decided to plant potatoes along the riverbank, the river overflowed and washed away his crop. Hugh's mother died shortly thereafter. Again

he moved his family, this time to Atlanta. On his 45th birthday, the last day he was eligible, Hugh obtained a job as a letter carrier. For the next decade, he would walk 16 miles every day, and Dean recalls, "For years my typical picture of him was coming home and putting his feet in a tub of water. He was a man of great faith." His work became less demanding, though little more rewarding, when he was promoted from a carrier to a clerk.

In Atlanta the Rusks endured humiliations. One minister who came to their home mortified Dean's father by commenting on the proximity of the house to the railroad tracks which divided "The Dip," the black shanty town, from the white community. At age 4 Dean also had an unpleasant experience when his parents took him to Sunday School. He impressed his teacher as a bright and likeable boy, but he did not come back. The teacher subsequently saw Dean's mother on the street and inquired about his absence. Mrs. Rusk replied that Dean was a very sensitive little boy who was embarrassed because he did not have clothes as nice as the other children's. He was taught Sunday School at home until the teacher passed on some of her own son's old clothes.

Hugh Rusk, though humorless, remained a mild-mannered and gentle man who kept his faith but did become embittered toward the Church which had been unable to find a place for him after his health failed. "His throat messed up his whole life," says his oldest daughter Margaret, a sweet and candid spinster. "It gave him an inferiority complex." So defective was his speech that in a group he would have to wait for a lull in the conversation in order to be heard. But his youngest son had no such affliction. Memorizing his Sunday School lessons while his father walked the streets, Dean would pace through the house with the Bible in his hands and would boom out the Scriptures in a shout.

Despite the constant struggle to make ends meet, Dean's mother, a sensitive and intelligent woman, maintained a sense of humor and became the mainstay of the family. Margaret recalls, "She was a great bulwark of strength to both our father and to

the children." She adds, "Father was not a weakling by any means, for he never gave up in any depressed moments." Nevertheless, during World War I, when times were particularly hard, Mrs. Rusk became intensely concerned with her husband's depressions and would sit next to him in the bedroom while he shaved with his straight razor.

In a home where privation compelled frugality (the children ran around in underwear made from flour sacks), Dean matured quickly and did his best to be a provider as well as a son. At age 14, he acquired a job as an office boy in the neighborhood electrical supply company where he was able to buy at a discount wire and fittings to provide lighting for the Rusk home. A teacher at Atlanta Boys' High, where Dean earned nearly all A's, remembered him as "one of the few students I came across in 45 years of teaching who seemed to be born mature and adequate to any situation."

Hugh and Frances had inculcated in their children a respect for education, which Dean used to escape from Georgia. At the age of 12 he wrote an ambitious document, "What I Plan to Do for the Next Twelve Years of My Life." His plan was to do well in high school, work for two years to earn enough money to pay his way through Davidson, and from there go on to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. In 1927, he entered his father's alma mater, which he calls "the poor man's Princeton."

At Davidson, he recalls, he "never stopped running." An ability to turn out quick, first-rate academic work enabled him to earn a Phi Beta Kappa key and a Rhodes Scholarship as well as find time for a bewildering variety of activities and part-time jobs. He rarely returned home, and classmates recall that, though friendly, he never talked about his family or personal life.

When Rusk left England, rather than return to the South, he joined the faculty of Mills, a women's college in Oakland, California, as an instructor in political science. Virginia Foisie, a bright junior and the campus' other expert on international relations, worked as his assistant, and when he asked her to go to Japan one summer to assist him in his research, she interpreted it as a proposal of marriage. They never made the

trip together but they did get married in 1937. Within two years he became Dean of the Faculty and "Dean Dean" to his students.

Rusk at Mills, and throughout his career, was an incredibly hard worker. In the 1960's the joke often heard in the halls of the State Department was that the Secretary's ideal vacation was to come to the Department on Sunday wearing his favorite sport shirt. Rusk (though not a praying man himself) never forgot the words told him as a child by a circuit-riding preacher, "Pray as if it were up to God; work as if it were up to you."

Hard work was always his hallmark. Prayer was a more complicated matter. Rusk's youth had abounded with prayer. God as well as Frances had given Hugh Rusk strength, and he made sure that his children attended Sunday School, church twice on Sunday, and mid-week prayer meetings as well. The enthusiasm that Dean showed as a child in memorizing his Sunday School lessons stayed with him through his formative years. As late as his second year in high school he intended to enter the ministry.

But for reasons not entirely clear, Rusk turned away from the ministry. Gradually, a new faith-public service in the cause of world peace-replaced the old. As a student debater, Rusk championed the League of Nations; at Oxford he received the Cecil Peace Prize for an essay in 1933 on "The League of Nations and the British Empire." He taught international organization at Mills and simultaneously studied international law at Berkeley intending to teach it. While serving on the General Staff during World War II, Rusk had an important policy-making role in the dismantling of U.S. armed forces and establishing an international peace-keeping organization. He took off his uniform in February 1946 to continue working with U.N. issues, and three years later became the first Assistant Secretary of State for U.N. Affairs. He sought to find solutions to international problems through the United Nations, recognizing the need for a global institution which could resolve disputes among nations and spare future generations from the scourge of war.

He equated American diplomacy with the aims of the U.N. He would frequently read

the Preamble to the U.N. Charter and proclaim "I have also just read to you the essential foreign policy of the United States."

With Woodrow Wilson (also the son of a Southern Presbyterian minister and a student at Davidson), Rusk shared the conviction that it was America's and his mission to be an "international do-gooder." In early 1950, he told an audience:

"The United States has a record of humanitarian diplomacy... It should be recalled that the United States intervened in Cuba in 1898, in the cause of humanity and to put an end, to quote the joint resolution of April 20, 1898, to 'the abhorrent conditions which have existed for more than three years in the Island of Cuba... have shocked the moral sense of the people of the United States, have been a disgrace to Christian civilization ...' It is a familiar role, therefore, for the United States to take a lead in raising the moral standards of international society."

Rusk's idealized image of America was reflected again in a 1961 speech: "One thinks of Lord Acton's thought that 'Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.' It has been refuted by the course pursued by the United States in the last 16 years." As Vietnam would show, his outlook blinded him to the possibility that even American power could be abused. For him, the United States was waging war in Indochina in the cause of world peace.

For all his youthful idealism, Rusk had been no flower child in a hard-scrabble setting. He fused his love for peace with a personal dedication to military service. By his senior year at Davidson, he had already worn a uniform for eight years, but in applying for his Rhodes Scholarship, he wrote an essay declaring a desire to dedicate his life to world peace. To the selection committee, who were puzzled by this apparent inconsistency, Rusk explained that the eagle on the Great Seal clutches arrows in one claw and an olive branch in the other, and that it was a mistake to think that one was sufficient without the other.

For Rusk, who had inherited his father's sense of duty, the military provided a platform for service to a secular hierarchy and

promised a life of action rather than prayer. His predilection for and training in the Army would be reflected in his performance as a wartime Secretary of State. With Presidents Kennedy and Johnson at each step of escalation, he would have the cautious qualities of an experienced soldier as well as the loyal subordinate's concern for implementing rather than formulating policy.

Rusk's fondness for soldiering showed itself quite early. As backyard war-planners, Dean and his brother Roger dug an elaborate system of trenches and fortifications and staged massive military campaigns with their toy soldiers. As Roger wistfully recalls, "There wasn't a rich kid in town who had as many soldiers." In the tradition of his Confederate grandfathers who fought in the Civil War, Dean proved adept at marching his classmates and became R.O.T.C. commandant in both high school and college. He wanted to go to West Point but his father had no influence with Willie Upshaw, the local Congressman, who refused to support his application.

While a professor at Mills, Rusk retained his reserve commission, and in 1940, with war an imminent possibility, he was called to active duty. After a stint as an infantry captain in California and a tour with intelligence in Washington, he was transferred in 1943 to the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre, where he rose swiftly to the rank of colonel and became the theatre deputy chief of staff. Operating out of India, Rusk flew the Hump 14 times in the delicate mission of trying to the Chinese to increase their contribution to the war effort. As a CBI war-planner, in 1944, he drafted contingency plans, codenamed ALPHA, detailing General Joseph Stilwell's strategy for invading China through Burma and driving to the coast to open southern ports which would be used as stepping stones for an attack on Japan. Rusk also drafted the headquarters' cables to the War Department, where they came to the attention of one of General George Marshall's senior military planners. In the summer of 1945, Rusk joined the elite politico-military affairs branch of the Washington Command Post and had his first taste of geo-politics at a policy-making level.

At the end of World War II, Colonel Rusk was offered a regular Army commission. When Secretary of State George Marshall called him to the State Department in early 1947, Rusk's regular commission in the Army had already been approved by the Senate and he was within three days of accepting a military career.

It was no accident that Dean Rusk left the Army and followed George Marshall to the State Department. Marshall, the first of Rusk's great patrons, personified the qualities that the Georgian esteemed. "It is not easy for me to speak in measured tones about George Catlett Marshall," Rusk has said, "a rigorous and accomplished soldier who was, at the same time, one of the greatest civilians of his day." That General Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, also earned the Nobel Peace Prize struck a personal note. Here was a man whose life embraced the olive branch and arrows of which he had spoken in college.

Marshall was a great teacher, Rusk recalls, "He left his associates a rich legacy of practical wisdom, not in polished essays but in the countless fleeting comments in the course of daily business."

Marshall had a disdain for emotion which he impressed upon Rusk. "I don't feel on matters of public policy," the General told him. "If I think something, I'll say so. But I don't feel it." Rusk sought to emulate Marshall and would later say as Secretary of State, "This is a job that requires ice water in your veins." When Rusk stepped down from being Secretary of State, he followed Marshall's example saying that he too would not consider writing memoirs.

### *Tempting Thieves*

In 1961 when the young Attorney General Bobby Kennedy tried to recruit the elder member of the cabinet for one of the much promoted physical fitness "walks," Secretary Rusk told him, "I was a commander of an infantry company, and I've done all of my walking."

Like his ideal soldier-statesman, Rusk had done his walking before becoming Secretary of State and had compiled, with a few exceptions, a commendable record. His

experiences and background set him apart from the young Kennedy team. His involvement in Vietnam policy decisions did not begin in 1961 but went back to his CBI days. In our conversations, Rusk disclosed that in mid-1944 he had sent the first of several inquiries to Washington, asking for policy guidance with respect to Indochina. A message finally arrived in early 1945, but as guidance it only said, "When asked by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a statement on Indochina policy, President Roosevelt replied: 'I don't want to hear any more about Indochina!'"

Colonel Rusk, though, saw to it that the nation would hear a lot more about Indochina by giving his approval to a secret OSS mission. In July 1945, a team of American and French Paratroopers jumped into Ho Chi Minh's hideaway in northern Indochina and prepared the way for an OSS airdrop of 5,000 weapons and ammunition to fight the Japanese. This American assistance transformed a band of peasant irregulars into organized units with standardized weapons, and it was no coincidence that Ho was to muster 5,000 armed men for his occupation of Indochina in August. The OSS support, sanctioned by Rusk, helped to entrench Ho as Vietnam's preeminent leader.

During his three years in the CBI theatre, Rusk came to share Stilwell's disillusionment with Chiang, who was conserving his forces to fight the Communists rather than the Japanese and who showed no inclination to reform his corrupt regime because he felt the United States would have to bail him out. Sensitive to the many colonial injustices around him (as he was to racial inequalities in the United States), the Georgian also developed a humanitarian Third World consciousness. He was later distressed by the patrician contemptuousness of an Acheson for the less developed nations. As president of the Rockefeller Foundation from 1952 to 1960, Rusk broadened its field of foreign activity, paying particular attention to projects in the developing countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

During the Truman years, against considerable opposition, Rusk persuasively and effectively pressed an anti-colonialist

policy in Indonesia, where, as in Indochina, Communists and nationalists were struggling against a European empire. He secured, among other things, the appointment of the pro-nationalist Frank Graham to a mediation mission, and in a rare show of emotion, when Indonesia gained its independence from the Dutch, he invited his colleagues to his office to toast the occasion.

At the outbreak of the Korean War, Rusk was instrumental in obtaining the U.N. sanction for a world-sponsored policing action. But when China intervened, Rusk exaggerated, as he would in the mid-1960's the militancy of the Chinese Communists. In May 1951, he declared in an inflammatory speech, "The Peiping regime may be a colonial Russian government -- a Slavic Manchukuo on a larger scale. It is not the government of China. It does not pass the first test. It is not Chinese."

Regrettably, the Korean experience reinforced in Rusk's mind the lessons learned from the Second World War, giving him the rationale that he would later use to justify the Vietnam war. In his view, these earlier wars could have been avoided had the democracies made their commitments and determination clear and precise. He had opposed the withdrawal of the last regimental combat team from Korea in 1949. That action coupled with the intimations in Dean Acheson's National Press Club speech (which did not include Korea within the U.S. defense perimeter) in February 1950 might well, in his view, have been responsible for encouraging the Soviet-inspired aggression. Rusk tells one of his favorite anecdotes in the context of Acheson's speech. While studying in Germany in the early 1930's, he went canoeing one day and left his craft unguarded on the shore. Upon returning he discovered that it had been stolen. The Water Patrol eventually found the canoe, but to his surprise he was fined five marks for the charge of "tempting thieves." Rusk also remembers the diplomatic dinner when an American businessman asked Soviet Ambassador Vyshinski why the Soviets, knowing that American intentions were peaceful, could not get together with the United States to minimize the risk of war. Vyshinski replied,

"How can I trust what you say when you attacked in Korea after saying that you were not interested in Korea?" To Rusk, it was preferable to be committed to a policy of clear-cut hostility than to countenance the possibility of miscalculation in foreign capitals.

As Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs during the Korean war, Rusk had gone along with the Truman Administration's support of the French in Indochina. Nevertheless, in defending the pro-French line, Rusk did acknowledge that he understood that foreigners were perceived as colonialists and that any Vietnamese factions which worked with them were seen as their puppets. Testifying before the Foreign Relations Committee on August 7, 1951, he responded to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge who asked whether the French "have not given the Indo-chinese what amounts to their independence now," by saying that while the French "have made up their minds that Indochina will be independent... it is quite fair to say that there are a great many people in Indochina who do not believe that is the case and who are suspicious of French long-range intentions." Lodge pressed again, "Regardless of what people may believe is the fact, is it not true that this is no longer a colonial war?" But Rusk reiterated his view: "I think it is one thing to say that this is not a colonial war because the governments concerned have made the necessary decisions to settle that problem. It is another thing to say that the people fighting in this war think it is not a colonial war."

In our conversations, Rusk claimed that his view towards Communist China during the 1950's was not dogmatic and that by the time of his appointment as Secretary of State his thinking had evolved to the point where he seriously considered the Chinese Communists for membership in the U.N. Rusk said that not long after taking office in 1961 he talked privately to President Kennedy, setting forth alternatives to U.S. China policy including U.N. membership, bilateral relations, and relaxation of trade and travel restrictions. The former Secretary refused to disclose which initiative, if any, he recommended ("that was between us"), but he

explained: "President Kennedy showed no enthusiasm for any of these alternatives. He apparently did not want to open up the China question to a potentially hostile public and a Congress which had passed a near unanimous resolution in 1956 opposing such steps." However, as the 1960's wore on, Rusk increasingly denounced China as an aggressive power whose behavior did not merit the bestowal of "diplomatic benediction."

*"We Have to Save This Man"*

As Secretary of State, Rusk seems to have invested in the Presidency, as in Marshall, the authority which his father had never enjoyed. However, the man of edge-of-poverty beginnings would never feel completely comfortable with the young jet set Bostonian; there was never the bond he had with Lyndon Johnson, a fellow Southerner who would enjoy arguing with the Secretary over who was born in the smaller farmhouse.

For an activist President who wanted to be his own Secretary of State, Rusk was the perfect Number Two man, skillful in dealing with Congress and foreign governments. Kennedy had not met Rusk before the election, but he was impressed by the reverential tone of the Rockefeller Foundation president's Foreign Affairs article on the American Presidency and by the recommendations of Eastern Establishmentarians such as Dean Acheson and Robert Lovett. However much he appreciated his Secretary's steadfast loyalty, the President is said to have thought him a weak advocate. A popular Washington story attributed by some to the President illustrates the point: Kennedy and Rusk are alone together in the President's office, and Kennedy asks, "Now that we are alone, Mr. Rusk, tell me what you really think." Rusk answers, "Don't you think that there are too many people in the room?"

As Secretary of State, Rusk, despite his admiration of Marshall, never achieved the General's stature and independence. Marshall had an ability to separate himself from small questions and concentrate his full attention on cardinal strategic issues; he liked making

decisions, enjoyed command, and would not hesitate to argue with the President if he thought him wrong. Rusk, on the other hand, was frequently a detail man. Rather than serve the President as an architect of policy, he was more inclined to give the President the details, let him make the decision, and then carry it out. He conceived of the Secretary of State as an adjutant to the President, and as a consequence, when making a judgment on a foreign policy issue, he was too influenced by his calibration of Presidential predisposition. He would raise questions and doubts but would not press them. On many issues, his loyalty was in effect abdication from substantive decision-making.

Unlike many of Kennedy's braintrusts, the man from Cherokee County was neither aggressive nor intoxicated by the exercise of power. Following the Cuban missile crisis, when a triumphant euphoria captivated the Kennedy team and many saw themselves as big league operators come of age, Rusk went about his business as usual and thought little of the lesson which other participants drew from the incident -- that all one need do was show strength and the Communists would back down. "I've lived through a lot of these crises," Rusk told a reporter, "so I tend not to get as excited as a lot of people do. Most situations are not as bad as they've been before. My wife accuses me of having a capacity for accepting the inevitable. I've never quite known what the alternative is." Rather than become one of the team, he ritualized the exclusiveness of his counsel to the President and cultivated grayness to the point of denying the existence of the ego. In the Bay of Pigs episode at the beginning of the Kennedy Administration, Rusk demonstrated a peculiar loyalty to the President which he would later act out on a much larger scale in the Vietnam war. From the start, Rusk had private doubts. "It's thirty to one against us," he told a friend as they left a State Department meeting on the eve of the invasion. In spite of his skepticism, he confined himself during group meetings to mild disclaimers and questions. But he did make one enigmatic and naive proposal. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., tells it, under consideration was the possible diminution of

Kennedy's prestige that personal identification with an unsuccessful intervention would bring: "Dean Rusk was almost alone in recognizing this problem; but his solution was the curious one of suggesting that someone other than the President make the final decision and do so in his absence—someone who could be sacrificed if things went wrong." Rusk, not the sort of man to advance a proposal without personally accepting its consequences, almost certainly had himself in mind as the sacrificial lamb. And when the invasion failed, it was the unflappable Secretary, in one of those rare moments that reveal character, who declared with great emotion, "What matters now is this man. We have to save this man!"

When I recently asked him if he had tried to save the President before the invasion, Rusk reluctantly assented but would not elaborate, except to say, "Wait until 1990 when the Kennedy Library tapes are made available." In light of the outcome one suspects that in dealing with the President, Rusk was more concerned with service than self-assertion, and that upon discerning Kennedy's commitment to the adventure, he withheld from forcefully pressing his doubts. Unlike Dulles, he did not claim to speak for God ("I'm an old Calvinist who doesn't believe in mixing politics and religion"), but a hard look at this preacher's son performing the rites of his office suggests a priest in private communion with the secular idol he served—indeed, he appears almost eager to martyr himself on the altar of the American Presidency.

*"Whose Side Are You On?"*

Rusk's role in the Bay of Pigs debacle was only a mini-drama of what was to come in Indochina. In early 1961, Rusk resisted Eisenhower's last minute advice to send troops into Laos. "Laos," he would often say, "is not worth the life of one Kansas farm-boy." Later that year, when the Kennedy Administration first gave serious consideration to dispatching U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam, Secretary Rusk had private doubts about the commitment of American lives and prestige to a Vietnamese

war. On November 1, 1961, while attending a conference in Japan, he cabled President Kennedy, warning that the introduction of American forces in Vietnam carried with it very serious consequences. Rusk, the Pentagon Papers disclosed, insisted that sending up to 8,000 troops under the guise of flood relief, as was being recommended by General Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow, was not something to be done casually, for it meant a commitment to a guerrilla struggle that could become a full-blown war. He reasoned that the President could still walk away from Vietnam, but should he approve the recommendation, the United States would be forced to see its commitments through. Reflecting, among other things, his World War II experiences with the Kuomintang, he told Kennedy in the cable that unless President Ngo Dinh Diem undertook major political reforms and "[gives] us something worth supporting," it was "difficult to see how a handful of American troops can have a decisive influence." Rusk said that while he recognized U.S. policy attached the "greatest possible importance" to Southeast Asia, he for one was reluctant to harness "American prestige to a losing horse."

During the Gulf of Tonkin episode in August 1964, Rusk urged caution in the selection of bombing targets for reprisal against North Vietnam. "When we were going to take out those I'T boats that hit our ships in Tonkin" President Johnson told Max Frankel in 1965, "it was Dean Rusk who said: 'Now just a minute-one of those bases is oh-so-close to the Chinese and if one of our planes gets over there and they don't understand what we're trying to do, then what?' Oh, he wanted to get them all right, because they hit our ships. But then he asked how many boats they had in all and Bob (McNamara) says 47 and he asked how many at that target up there and Bob says 13 and Dean Rusk finally said: 'I'm for getting 34, just as hard as we can, and forgetting about those 13,' and that's what we did."

By early September 1964, when a consensus was being formed among civilian and military leaders that air attacks might soon have to be launched against the North, Rusk insisted that every means ought to be

exhausted before giving final consideration to such drastic measures. The advocates of escalation pressed their views again in late November, but Rusk remained unenthusiastic. The Pentagon Papers reveal that, at this time, John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, and William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, favored bombing, contending that even if it failed to save South Vietnam, "we would obtain international credit for trying." Rusk's view, the Pentagon analyst writes, was that "the harder we tried and then failed, the worse our situation would be."

Under great pressure, Lyndon Johnson, in early February 1965, finally chose the course of action advocated by his more aggressive advisers. In his memoirs, *The Vantage Point*, Johnson recounts that on January 27 McGeorge Bundy wrote him a memorandum saying that he (Bundy) and McNamara were "pretty well convinced that our current policy can lead only to a disastrous defeat." The President comments, "They argued that the time had come to use more power than we had thus far employed... the January 27 memo concluded by pointing out that Dean Rusk did not agree with the McNamara-Bundy assessment. Rusk knew things were going badly, and he did not claim that the deterioration could be stopped." Bundy's memo explained their differences with the Secretary of State. "What he [Rusk] does say is that the consequences of both escalation and withdrawal are so bad that we simply must find a way of making our present policy work. This would be good if it was possible. Bob and I do not think it is."

Unwilling to fight for his position or to question a policy which made a large military commitment inevitable, Rusk, like a good soldier, fell in line. Rusk now claims that his thinking was greatly influenced in March when evidence of infiltration by regular North Vietnamese Army units reached Washington. He then proceeded to conduct an extensive propaganda campaign for the recently inaugurated Rolling Thunder air war with a zeal which harked back to his response of June 25, 1950, when North Korean armies

marched in the bright of day carrying with them all the implications of naked aggression.

A penny became a pound. In March, when the enemy threatened U.S. airfields at Danang, Marines were dispatched to protect the base. During this period Lyndon Johnson, though not always following Rusk's advice, became increasingly dependent upon his Secretary's low-key pugnacity: "When you're going in with the Marines. [Rusk is] the kind you want at your side... And he's also the man you look to, when you're all set on something to speak up calm and say, 'Now just a minute.' He's the just-a-minute man around here, not feisty like McNamara and Bundy."

At strategy meetings in early April, when others were eager to raise the ante by deploying additional combat units for an offensive role, Rusk said that he wanted to maintain the ability to describe the Marines' mission as defensive and that any change in tactics should be conditioned by this stipulation. When he no, instead of offering an instant olive branch, blasted the President's April 7 Johns Hopkins peace speech, the Pentagon did not let the opportunity pass. On April 15 McNamara's aide, John McNaughton, rather than the State Department, cabled Ambassador Taylor in Saigon that "highest authorities" felt that something new must be added in the South; multi-battalion forces could be deployed not only to provide security for installations but "also to participate in counterinsurgency operations."

In early June, Rusk gave public support to the decisions which expanded the mission of the security forces and marked the beginning of another American land war on the Asian continent. In a TV interview on June 9, he said, "...obviously we don't expect these men to sit there like hypnotized rabbits waiting for the Vietcong to strike... We are not going to be chased out of there..." Secretary Rusk saw Vietnam in the context of his days at Davidson, Oxford and Mills when he had watched "peace-loving governments stand there like hypnotized rabbits while the Japanese, Italian and German aggressors took us down the chute-the-chute into World War II."

When the air war failed to live up to earlier expectations, Rusk was in step with those who urged a vigorous prosecution of the ground war. However, in a recent conversation, Rusk claimed that though he endorsed the decision of late July to raise American troops to almost 200,000, he was skeptical about the proposals for still more increases in ground forces during 1966 and thereafter. McGeorge Bundy has said that Rusk recently wrote him a letter describing what Bundy calls "very moderate views" about projected force levels in 1965. Apparently, so circumscribed did Rusk see his role that he did not communicate his views to Bundy at the time.

When the generals requested some 200,000 additional troops in 1967 and early 1968, Rusk remembers, he viewed them as General Marshall would: "Marshall always used to say, 'Give the generals one-half of the troops they' ask for, then double their mission, and that will be about right.'" The former Secretary went on to observe: "We used more men in South Vietnam than we needed to meet defense requirements. I ran a check every so often and found that the average G.I. was in combat only 4 days out of 30 in Vietnam. This had not been the case in Korea. For example, if you have 10 divisions with only 4 days in combat a month, and you double your combat days, then you have doubled your fighting force in effect." Rusk came to see Vietnam in terms of his World War II and Korean experience when there were set-piece battles, "linear warfare" against a highly visible enemy, rather than the peculiar challenges of revolutionary struggle. It was his later insensitivity to the complex interrelationship between political and military aspects of the war, moreover, that allowed him to take the simplistic view that the Defense Department should be left alone to run the war and he the diplomacy.

Nevertheless, recalling that Korean troops had been incorporated into U.S. divisions during the preceding Asian war, Rusk now claims that he advocated using similar joint forces in Vietnam. "We had an enormous tail behind our fighting men in South Vietnam," he recalls. "This could have been significantly reduced." Rusk believed that once the United

States had established a presence that could not be overrun, then the Commander in Chief should draw the line, and he privately thought the President not tough enough in bargaining with his generals. LBJ, in his view, was not as experienced as George Marshall in these matters. But Rusk insists that his differences did not concern the policy but what the policy required. "I think the difference between 200,000 and 500,000 is not a difference in policy but in strategy. Would it have been 3 different policy if Eisenhower had had 50 percent more forces when going into Normandy?"

As the President's just-a-minute man, Rusk would often caution against bombing targets provocative to Peking and Moscow and oppose recommendations for invading the Laotian and Cambodian sanctuaries-much as he had opposed proposals for air and ground attack<sup>5</sup> against Chinese territory during the Korean war. As late as March 1968 he would still be a tactician recommending a partial bombing cutback, knowing that it had little chance of succeeding as a peace overture but calculating that the bombing could be resumed and more time bought for the war.

### *The Tragic Intersection*

Between 1965 and 1968 Rusk became increasingly committed to the Vietnam effort and in the end was the Administration's strongest apologist. Conditioning all of his behavior was the deep-seated belief that loyalty to the President was as sacred as a marriage vow -- sanctioned by the Constitution if not by God. Johnson liked to quote the words of Sam Houston to his son at President Andrew Jackson's deathbed: "Look long and hard at Andy's face, because it will give you inspiration all your life." The President said he felt the same way about Rusk--Dean Rusk gave him inspiration and strength. Day after day, a beleaguered Johnson would call upon his more eloquent Secretary of State to present his case before an ever skeptical American people.

And in the process of defending the President's policy Rusk acquired an unwavering conviction that the President

could not err, that there was an almost Papal infallibility shrouding that office. He adopted the Biblical view, "He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God." When the casualties and sacrifices mounted, he came to see Vietnam as a war to end all wars. He could declare in late 1967: "Within the next decade or two, there will be a billion Chinese on the mainland, armed with nuclear weapons, with no certainty about what their attitude toward the rest of Asia will be." It was America's responsibility to stop international thievery, he told the American Legion National Convention: "There are those who object to analogies--that Mao Tse-tung is not a Hitler, that Ho Chi Minh is not a Mussolini. Of course, no one supposes they are. But one robber may be named John Doe, another robber may be named Richard Roe --there may be infinite differences between the two, but what they have in common, namely robbery, is what sends them both to prison..."

And so at the end of the day, I am on our side."

As criticism of the Vietnam war intensified, Rusk dug deep into the Georgia clay, into that Southern Protestant upbringing which left a profoundly engraved conviction of the polarity of right and wrong. It was the same moralist who, like an international school master, had declared during the Korean war, "We are saying to the aggressors, 'You will not be allowed to get away with your crime; you must stop it.'" It was the same Southerner whose childhood hero had been Robert E. Lee, another soldier whose honor was bridled to a lost cause. The charge that Vietnam had become a Southerner's war had more than a grain of truth.

Central to the Rusk creed was General Marshall's dictum, "Soldiers have morale problems. Officers don't." The officer-enlisted man theme enabled the Secretary to discount those whom he regarded as derelict in their duty, for in his heart he knew he was right in not abandoning the President he served. What mattered now was that he save this man.

In the end, Rusk, in attempting to protect the President, failed to save Johnson from

himself. Rusk fulfilled his destiny as a priest in quiet service and as a true believer. Whatever doubts he had about the tactics used in the conduct of the war, his ultimate allegiance was to his idealized image of America, the institution of the Presidency and the men who held that office. His steadfast public defense of the Commander in Chief's war reinforced Lyndon Johnson at each stage of escalation. Perhaps, as he says, he saw no alternative to accepting the inevitable but what he did was accept the inevitable it was, in fact, inevitable. So at the end of the day, Rusk's stubborn support of Johnson, the Commander in Chief, contributed Johnson's failure as a President and to The continuing slaughter of Americans and Vietnamese.

Shortly after Richard Nixon's election, Rusk commented to a friend, Lucius Battle, "Isn't it remarkable that this has happened to me! I leave office seen as a hawk. And basically I am an idealist and a man of peace." Rusk, as he says, has no trouble in going to sleep at night.

In our last conversation, when Rusk had exhausted all of his justifications for his role in the Vietnam war, he paused and then invoked the trinitarian image: "I don't want to be one of those rats that are slithering off the decks. I want to be standing on the bridge with Kennedy and Johnson."

At another time, in a better cause, Rusk's qualities of idealism, intellect, and unswerving loyalty might have made him a great Secretary of State, even a moral giant. But in Vietnam, the intersection of historical and personal circumstances brought out rigid aspects of Dean Rusk's character in a fateful and tragic irony.