

Dean Rusk Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 12/02/1969
Administrative Information

Creator: Dean Rusk

Interviewer: Dennis J. O'Brien

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Biographical Note

Dean Rusk (1909-1994) was the Secretary of State from 1961 to 1969. This interview focuses on the transition between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations and the Laotian crisis, in particular the Kennedy administration's decision on whether or not to send troops to Laos, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

DEAN RUSK

December 2, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, Mr. Secretary, I think the logical place to begin is with the question:
When did you first meet President Kennedy?

RUSK: I first met John F. Kennedy in December 1960. I'd not known him before. I'd taken no part in party politics up to that time because it would have been inconsistent with my job as president of the Rockefeller Foundation for me to do so. I had been a member of the Democratic club in the little village of Scarsdale, New York.

During the first part of December 1960 there was a good deal of press speculation about who might be Secretary of State, and gradually my name began to enter the speculation. I paid no attention to it because I thought it was most unlikely that I would be called upon to do that job. And so I went along not being an applicant for the job and not asking any friends to speak for me or doing anything about it and just assumed that this was speculation that would have no substance in it.

Then about the tenth of December President-elect Kennedy called me to come to see him. I went to see him at his Georgetown home, and in that first conversation there was no discussion whatever about my becoming Secretary of State. In fact, the principal subject of the conversation

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was Bill Fulbright [J. William Fulbright]. President Kennedy obviously was thinking about Senator Fulbright. He was concerned about what the effect would be of that Southern manifesto on civil rights that the Senator Fulbright had signed and whether it would be possible to take steps to overcome the effect of that as far as the liberals were concerned. I made some suggestions to Mr. Kennedy about what might be done. I pointed out that if Bill Fulbright were released from the responsibility of being a senator from Arkansas that his own native liberalism might assert itself and that this would be no problem. I also suggested that Mr. Kennedy could surround Senator Fulbright with liberals with impeccable credentials such as Adlai Stevenson and Chester Bowles. Then I would think that there would not be a problem. We talked about certain other candidates. I mentioned the name of Robert Lovett, who had been former Secretary of Defense and Under Secretary of State, but apparently his age and health were such that he was not looked upon as a live candidate.

Well, the conversation ended, and I went back to New York and told my colleagues at the Rockefeller Foundation that there was nothing in this press speculation, that I was going to remain at the Foundation, that they could just forget all the talk about my possibly being Secretary of State. The next day Senator Kennedy called me and told me he wanted me to be Secretary of State. I told him that he ought not to make such a decision until we'd had some further talk about it, and so he asked me to come on down to Palm Beach to see him down there the next morning. I wanted to have several things clarified before Senator Kennedy made his decision.

I went on down and had a long talk with him about the job and about my own personal situation. I pointed out to him that I was on very thin financial margins and that it would be difficult for me to support that job over any period of time. I made it very clear that under no circumstances could I accept such an appointment for more than one term because I simply couldn't swing it from a financial point of view and left to him the responsibility for making the judgment as to whether or not I was qualified for the job -- that's something that.... The job is such, it's so complex and so demanding, that I felt... [Interruption] I also pointed out to Mr. Kennedy that as late as the Convention is Los

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Angeles I had sent a telegram to Averell Harriman in the New York delegation urging him to support Adlai Stevenson, and I wanted Mr. Kennedy to hear that from me rather than from somebody else. He just laughed about that. So he announced that morning to the press that he was putting my name in as Secretary of State. That was the second meeting that I had had with him, and I had not known him before.

O'BRIEN: Well, we can pass into the question on Laos now if you'd like to.

RUSK: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Well, you were in the Department, of course, in the Truman [Harry S. Truman] Administration. After leaving the Department did you continue to

take a good deal of interest in events as they developed in Southeast Asia?

RUSK: Yes. When I left the Truman Administration, I was Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and it would have been normal for me to maintain a lively interest in what was going on in that part of the world. I did so largely through the press. I made some visits to Southeast Asia while I was at the Rockefeller Foundation. And Mr. Dulles [John F. Dulles] would call me in from time to time as an old friend to talk about various problems including the problems of Southeast Asia, but I did not have regular access to official sources of information. I was primarily an interested reader of what was reported on the subject, both in the written press and in radio and television. So I did maintain my interest in what was going on out there.

O'BRIEN: What were your impressions of the French withdrawal from Southeast Asia in those years? Did you see this as the United States having a role to play here?

RUSK: My mind went back to the agreement that had been reached by the British and the French and the Americans back in 1949 that the security of Southeast

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Asia was vital to the security of the free world and that the security of Southeast Asia depended crucially on the Red River Valley of North Vietnam. I regretted that it was not possible to find a better answer for Southeast Asia than the division of Vietnam as it occurred at the Geneva Conferences of '53 and '54 because I felt that with a communist North Vietnam that Laos and South Vietnam and Cambodia would be exposed to the kind of penetration that the Asian communists at that time were committed to. But it was clear that the French had had it, that they were not going to make further effort.

President Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] proposal for a grand coalition to defend Southeast Asia failed to get anywhere because by that time the French people in France itself had decided that they were not going to stay with the Vietnamese problem and were going to get out, and so there was no free world solution to Southeast Asia that would protect Southeast Asia from further penetrations. I don't know myself what I might have done had I been in office at that time or what I would have recommended, but I regretted this development because it seemed to lay seeds of trouble for the future.

When I was Assistant Secretary for Far East under the Truman Administration I opposed the idea that later came to be the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] Treaty. I felt that if the United States intruded into Southeast Asia and made an alliance with some of the countries of that area and not others that our very participation would be divisive among the countries of Southeast Asia, would split them up in to two camps, one allied with us and the other nonaligned or even hostile to us. My own thought was that we ought to wait until such a time as the nations of Southeast Asia could come together in their own security arrangements on a reasonable basis without the divisive participation of the United States. The United States could then give that regional arrangement powerful second line support if

it ever got in trouble, but that the primary responsibility ought to rest with the Southeast Asian countries themselves.

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Well, the events of 1954 changed that possibility considerably. There was the division of Vietnam into North and South; North Vietnam became communist; the SEATO Treaty was, in fact, put into effect for the purpose of halting the southern spread of communism in Southeast Asia. And by the time I became Secretary of State, the Southeast Asia Treaty was a part of the law of the land. So my reactions had been based on the view that every President has held since 1945, that the security of Southeast Asia is vital to the security of the United States.

O'BRIEN: As I understand it, in the 1950's in the development of policy in Southeast Asia and in Asia under Assistant Secretary Robertson [Walter S. Robertson] and also Secretary Dulles there was a view that events and developments in places like Hanoi were directly related to and connected to policy on the part of the Red Chinese, and, in a sense, this was a monolithic kind of movement. Did you agree with that, or did you follow that line of reasoning?

RUSK: Well, I think there's no question but that the Asian brand of communism was very militant in its approach. That has been true of the doctrine of the authorities in Peking all the way through. One of their big differences with the Soviet Union has been the differences in tactics by which one pursues the world revolution, and the Chinese have taken a much more militant line than have the Soviets. Now today, in 1969, the peace of Asia is being disturbed not only by the more than fifty regiments of North Vietnamese troops that are in South Vietnam, but by more than forty thousand troops that they have in Laos, by North Vietnamese-trained guerrillas operating in northeast Thailand. Prince Sihanouk [Norodom Sihanouk] of Cambodia has publicly complained about the assistance which Hanoi and Peking have been giving to guerillas in Cambodia, the most neutral of all neutralist countries. Arms and men are coming across the northeastern frontier of Burma out of China. And I just saw in the paper

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today a little note saying that the province of Yunnan in Red China is being made into a huge base for guerrilla operations against neighboring countries. The government of India some months ago revealed the extensive Chinese movement among the tribal people of eastern India. The North Koreans every week are sending guerillas across the 38th parallel in Korea. So one doesn't have to opt for a monolithic communist world because it is not monolithic. But it still remains that the Asian communists are pretty militant and that the peace of Asia is being disturbed by this militancy.

O'BRIEN: Would you say that this was the consensus of opinion in, let's say, the last of

the Eisenhower Administration among the Administration officials at that point?

RUSK: I think, in the broadest sense, yes, although Korea was rather quiet at that time. Just before Inauguration, the day before Inauguration, President-elect Kennedy met with President Eisenhower for a transfer briefing, a briefing connected with the transfer of power, and the principal preoccupation of that meeting was the situation in Laos. The only specific advice which President Eisenhower gave to President Kennedy was that he put troops in Southeast Asia, particularly in Laos, if necessary to stop what was going on in Laos at that time. President Eisenhower indicated that he had not done so himself because he thought this was a long term matter and that he should not do that with a new administration coming to power. But President Eisenhower felt very strongly about Laos and about Southeast Asia and made the specific recommendation to President-elect Kennedy that he put troops there if necessary.

O'BRIEN: Now, how does this differ with the incoming Administration? Did you see any real change in views among the people who were...

RUSK: Well, I think that it would be important for the historian to study very carefully the public record as to what President Kennedy said about

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Southeast Asia, Laos, and Vietnam. I say that because later speeches by Robert Kennedy and Edward Kennedy tend to confuse the issue as to what was the Kennedy view on Southeast Asia. Now President Kennedy is on the record fully on that subject and his actions are publicly known, and it would be very important for the historian to concentrate on the views of John F. Kennedy and not be diverted by the later views expressed by his two brothers and by some of those who call themselves Kennedy people. President Kennedy felt very strongly that we had commitments in Southeast Asia and that those commitments had to be supported and that it was necessary not to permit a gradual assumption of or overrunning of Southeast Asia by Hanoi or by Hanoi and Peking.

We had been briefed thoroughly on Laos before we took office. Beginning the first of January I had an office in the Department of State and had daily briefings from the intelligence people and saw all the telegrams and met frequently with Secretary Herter [Christian A. Herter], and we had some special briefings later on just Laos by the military as well as the State Department people.

We did not express any views ourselves because President Kennedy took very strongly the view that there should be no confusion of responsibilities between the two Administrations, and so he was unwilling for me to express any views to the outgoing Administration as to what should be done before Inauguration. But we were kept fully informed and had an opportunity to express any views if we wanted to do so.

Now when President Kennedy took office, we looked very hard at the Laos situation. We considered putting troops in there, but it was a landlocked country accessible only

through Thailand or South Vietnam with very poor routes of communication into Laos through those two countries. The military pointed out to us that this was not a job that could be done by just four or five battalions, that very substantial forces would be required if we were to intervene in Laos. To support a large force in Laos against that background of poor communications was a very unpromising prospect, and no one looked at it with any enthusiasm. Furthermore, we came to the conclusions that the Laotians themselves, the Laotian people, were a civilized and gentle group of people who have very little interest in killing each other. It was notable that in the

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fighting where only Laotians were present there were very few casualties -- a few large explosions made quite a battle. I remember one incident when the two sides left the battlefield to go to a water festival together for twelve days and then left the water festival to go back to the battlefield.

This sort of thing led us to the conclusion that the real answer for Laos ought to be that everyone leave the Laotians alone and let the Laotians in their landlocked situation work out their own problems by themselves without the intervention of anybody from the outside at all, including North Vietnam, and that if we could create a neutralized Laos as a kind of buffer between North Vietnam and Thailand -- and to a degree between North Vietnam and Cambodia and South Vietnam -- that it would be very much in our advantage to have that happen, and we could see why it might be of advantage to the other side. So we very early developed the thought of trying to create an isolated neutralist Laos which would not be a scene of conflict between the opposing forces in the world.

It was on that general basis that we went to the Laos conference of 1961 and '62, and that was the basis for President Kennedy's discussion with Chairman Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] at Vienna in June 1961 about Laos. President Kennedy put to the Chairman the idea that we ought all to get out of Laos and leave it alone, everybody ought to get out and let the Laotians live by themselves and in whatever way they could find a way to do.

Well, we went to that Laos conference and made what we thought were some substantial concessions in order to get an agreement of the sort we had in mind. For example, we accepted the presence in the Laos delegation of three factions: the rightists, the neutralists, and the Pathet Lao, even though we ourselves recognized only the rightist government. We, in the course of the negotiations, accepted the Soviet Candidate to be the prime minister of a coalition government -- we were not recognizing Souvanna Phouma as prime minister; we were recognizing Prince Boun Oum as prime minister. We accepted the idea of a coalition government worked out among the three factions there with balanced portfolios and with balanced participation in the government itself. We accepted the international neutralization of Laos and the withdrawal of Laos from the protections of the SEATO Treaty. So we made some significant

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concessions in order to get the agreement of the sort that we had in mind.

The difficulty was that we never got performance on that agreement for a single day. The agreement specifically called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Laos: North Vietnamese forces were never withdrawn. The agreement specifically provided that Laos would not be used as a route of communication or a route of infiltration against any other country; the North Vietnamese never stopped using Laos as an infiltration route into South Vietnam. The coalition government was never allowed to function as a government in those areas of Laos held by the Pathet Lao, held by the communists, and the international control commission made up of India, Poland, and Canada was never allowed to function in those areas of Laos held by the Pathet Lao. So it was a very cynical operation, as I saw it, on the part of North Vietnam to come in there to that conference and sign it and then treat it with such contempt. In any event, the failure to get compliance with the Laos agreement of 1962 was a bitter disappointment to President Kennedy because he had hoped very much that a solution of the Laotian question would be a major step toward peace in Southeast Asia as a whole.

O'BRIEN: Before the Geneva convention was reconvened, you undertook a good many efforts to bring pressure not only on the communist forces in Laos but also on allies. Could you discuss or describe some of those efforts that were made to contact, let's say, other SEATO allies?

RUSK: Well, we were consulting regularly in SEATO and among SEATO members about what would happen in Laos. We took certain steps, such as moving some additional forces into Thailand, to induce a certain caution on the part of the North Vietnamese in Laos. We stepped up our support to the government forces in Laos, [REDACTED] as a part of the general attempt to reinforce the government's position there.

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But it soon became apparent that unless we could get an agreement of the sort that we'd been talking about that the so-called government forces and even the neutralist forces would be overrun by the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese furnished the shock troops for the Pathet Lao. They would make the initial attack and carry the day, and then the Pathet Lao would move in behind them to occupy the areas which had been overrun by the North Vietnamese. In the fighting where there were only Laotians present it was more or less a standoff; there was no significant military result from that fighting, as I've described earlier.

But we tried to enlist our allies in support for the kind of an arrangement that we had hoped to achieve in the Laos conference. We had no difficulty with Britain and France; they were ready for that kind of an agreement. We had some difficulty with Thailand because they looked upon this as too dovish from their point of view. They thought a coalition government

would be taken over by the communists soon and that the communist Laos then would be a direct threat to Thailand itself. So they were very reluctant participants in that conference and were in the position later of being able to say "I told you so," because the failure of the North Vietnamese to perform fitted almost exactly the fears of the Thais with respect to the agreement itself. But there was no systematic desire on the part of the SEATO allies to put substantial forces into Laos because of the special conditions of that landlocked country.

President Kennedy in deciding not to put forces into Laos said at the same time that if we had to fight for Southeast Asia, we ought to make our fight in South Vietnam where sea and air power could be brought to bear more readily and where the people themselves are more inclined to fight for their own independence than were the Laotians. So the decision not to put troops in Laos had along side of it a decision that we would do something about Vietnam, with additional forces if necessary, as a general effort to hold the line in Southeast Asia.

O'BRIEN: Did you make any efforts to contact the Soviet Union in February and March of 1961 in order to bring pressure?

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RUSK: I don't recall that we had much give and take with the Soviet Union during that period. The record may show otherwise, but I just don't recall it at the present time.

The principal exchange with the Soviet Union was in the June 1961 meeting between President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev in Vienna, and there Chairman Khrushchev appeared to agree with the general concept that we had in mind. The Russians at the Geneva conference on Laos proved to be reasonably cooperative in working out the agreement that eventually resulted.

Now one interesting point for the historian to speculate about is what the genuine attitude of the Soviet Union was in that conference, because I had the impression at the time that the Soviets were negotiating in reasonable good faith and yet they were not able to produce performance by the North Vietnamese when the agreement was signed. Now it may be that the divisions between China and the Soviet Union came along at just about the time that caused Moscow to lose its influence in Hanoi, and it may be that the Soviet Union was just not in position to require the North Vietnamese to comply with the agreement of 1962. If so, that was one of those bad breaks that we just have to live with. But we had the impression at the time that there was a genuine agreement between ourselves and the Soviet Union as far as the future of Laos was concerned.

O'BRIEN: Did you and the Department, as well as other people in the intelligence sections of the government, at this time have any insight into a possible split between the Russians and the Chinese over Laos and North Vietnam as well?

RUSK: We had very little specifically relating to Laos. We'd had a good deal of information about the gap that was developing between Peking and Moscow.

And it was more or less inevitable, I suppose, that if that hostility developed that there would be a contest in other capitals in the Far East between Moscow and Peking for influence. That would be true in North Vietnam; it would be

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true in North Korea; and it might be true in some of the neutral countries like Cambodia. But I think that in 1962 and '63 we went through a period where the influence of Peking in Hanoi was predominant, and it was only after a further period that the influence of Moscow began to catch up with the influence of Peking in Hanoi.

O'BRIEN: Let's talk about some policy divisions within the Government of the United States here, first of all in the State Department. Is there at this point any major division that you can see looking down into the Department and the people that are advising you on policy?

RUSK: I don't recall any knock down fights in the Department over policy on Laos. There were some who felt that we ought to put troops into Laos, but those were people who were not military experts and who thought that a few troops could do something that in fact they could not do and that the very gesture itself would cause the other side to hole up. But we were all pretty well together on the general plan that I outlined about the kind of Laos we were going to try to bring into existence. I don't recall that there were combative schools of thought in the Department at that time or even between the Department and the military. The military were cautious about Laos because of the very large military problems that would be involved in a military intervention in Laos, and so the military were ready for us to make a try at creating diplomacy the kind of independent, neutralized, peaceful Laos that would act as a buffer between North Vietnam and the other countries of Southeast Asia.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the support, now, for the eventual shift that we will make in the direction of Souvanna Phouma...

RUSK: Right.

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O'BRIEN: ...I understand that there is some friction here with the military who have supported Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] to this point. And also, are there any remnants of people in the Department at that point that, in a sense, supported Phoumi and saw Phoumi as the answer?

RUSK: Well, I think that there were those who felt that Phoumi and Boun Oum would be the best team from the point of view of the United States. From the point of

view of the general approach of the Eisenhower administration, I think that would have been clear. But it's one thing to think that; it's another thing to bring it about. And there seemed to be no prospect that Phoumi and Boun Oum could prevail in Laos over against the systematic effort of the North Vietnamese to support the Pathet Lao. So we had no real opportunity to bring about our first choice without a massive military intervention. The second choice, the kind of Laos I've been describing, was something that was a matter of regret. I suppose, to some military people and some people in the State Department, but I think they accepted the fact that the alternatives were such that this was the best alternative among all those that were open to us.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any feedback from the White House on this? Is there any division between, let's say, the White House and the Defense Department and the State Department?

RUSK: I don't recall any, no. I don't recall any. The White House was well disciplined and followed President Kennedy's line on these matter without any difficulty.

O'BRIEN: And there was no real problem at that point?

RUSK: We had some problems about getting the rightists, Phoumi and Boun Oum, to cooperate in the formation of a coalition government. They looked upon that

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with great misgivings. And again, they're in the position of saying, "I told you so." When we got around to discussing the actual composition of a coalition government there were some very difficult negotiations on issue of portfolios and on the arrangements inside the government. Averell Harriman did a grand job in negotiating that out with Souvanna Phouma representing the neutralists and Phoumi and Boun Oum representing the rightists.

But the tragic part of the whole thing was that the Laos agreement of 1962 was a fine agreement from the point of view of the interests of the United States, but we got no performance on that agreement from the North Vietnamese -- not for a single day. The Vietnam problem would have been quite a different problem had Laos been free from infiltration routes, for example. You wouldn't have the same kind of problems in northeast Thailand had we had that kind of Laos brought into being. Now the unhappy thing is that North Vietnam probably also recognized this, and this didn't fit their book, and so they just paid no attention to their signature on the Laos agreement of 1962.

O'BRIEN: Were any attempts made to directly contact either the Chinese in the Warsaw talks or the North Vietnamese any time...

RUSK: Well, the Chinese were present at the Geneva conference on Laos. We were in

the position of not recognizing Peking, and our participation in the Laos conference did not affect that issue. But I shook hands with Chen Yi at the Geneva conference on Laos at a cocktail party and had a few words with him. And Peking also signed the Laos agreement of 1962, but I have no doubt that they supported Hanoi in treating it with contempt after it was signed.

O'BRIEN: Well, do you have any recollections of the question of Laos and the SEATO meeting in Bangkok in March of 1961 and your contacts with SEATO or representatives there?

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RUSK: Yes. We discussed Laos in some detail at that meeting, and there developed in the SEATO machinery various contingency plans based upon what might happen in Laos. Had any of the North Vietnamese, for example, moved into the cities along the Mekong, had they come all the way to the Mekong River, then at that time it was almost certain that the SEATO countries would react by putting some strong forces into Thailand, possibly even crossing the river and going into Laos at that time. But the North Vietnamese always held back from actually turning up on the Mekong River and precipitating that issue. And up to this point, 1969, they have not appeared on the banks of the Mekong. A number of contingencies were developed from a military point of view depending on what happened in Laos. [Interruption]

O'BRIEN: Well, we were discussing some of the things around the SEATO conference. At the same time, President Kennedy has a meeting with Prime Minister Macmillan [Harold Macmillan]. I understand you were not there at that, that you were in Bangkok?

RUSK: I think so, yes.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any feedback, in a sense, from that meeting in what the British intended...

RUSK: No. The British, as one of the two co-chairmen of the Geneva conferences, were very helpful in trying to work out the kind of agreement we had in mind about Laos, and they gave us strong support during that period and were helpful in trying to help negotiate the coalition government among the three factions in Laos. Now we and the British were working very closely together during this period, and I don't think that there were any particular problems that arose out of that meeting between the Prime Minister and the President.

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O'BRIEN: There were a couple solutions that were proposed by various people --

Sihanouk, for one -- a neutral nation's commission was one, and a commission of inquiry, the idea of Laos as a buffer state, and a fourth, I think , was the so-called panhandle strategy which, I guess, generated within the Defense Department.

RUSK: Right.

O'BRIEN: Can you recall the feelings of people in the Department and why these various solutions did not work?

RUSK: Well, Prince Sihanouk was responsible for the convening of the Geneva conference on Laos; it was his initiative that made it possible for the conference to be held. He was concerned about what would happen in Laos because he was afraid of the chain reaction that it might have in Cambodia, and he was very strongly of the view that a Laotian buffer state would be to the advantage of Cambodia. The idea of the panhandle strategy was to seal off the southern part of Laos so that at least that part of Laos would not be available to North Vietnam for further infiltration into Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. But all these proposals were absorbed into the overriding proposal that we achieve the kind of an agreement that we achieved in the conference on it of 1962.

The principal alternative to what we did would have been to put substantial forces into Laos. That was the only alternative that would shake the problem in a different way, and these other proposals you mentioned were just pinpricking at the problem. They would not have been decisive in any way in terms of the eventual results in Laos or in Southeast Asia.

O'BRIEN: Well, as I understand, the military has a change of mind in the commitment of troops in Southeast Asia at that very crucial time of, well, just after the Bay of Pigs and right around the first of May in which they shift from a rather divided opinion of whether to put troops into Laos and suddenly become almost unanimous -- in fact, I understand the Joint Chiefs of Staff became unanimous on the

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idea of putting troops into Laos. Did you get any insight into this?

RUSK: Well, they were prepared to put troops into Laos provided you put enough of them. What they objected to was putting in a handful of troops to Laos -- in other words, to send a boy to do a man's job. And the bill which they presented in terms of what would be required was a very large bill, and it was filled with qualifications. For example, the difficulties of communications was something that they pointed out themselves.

I think I should add that President Kennedy consulted the leadership of the Congress on putting troops in Laos, and he had a full exposition -- I was out of the country at the time -- but he had a full exposition of the pros and cons, the leadership of the Congress was almost unanimous against putting troops in Laos. At that meeting President Kennedy told them that

he would hold open the possibility and that he also pointed to Vietnam as a situation which might require American troops. But there was a general view throughout the government before we were through that the alternative that we worked on in the Geneva conference on Laos was far preferable to putting in a massive U.S. troop commitment into that land-locked country so difficult to get to.

O'BRIEN: Did you sense at this time that the events in Cuba, the Bay of Pigs, had any effect on the way people were thinking about Southeast Asia?

RUSK: I don't think so. I think that those were two wholly separate matters and the two were really not related. We didn't ourselves connect the two in our own thinking. Whether the two were connected in the attitude of the other side, I just don't know. But we didn't combine the two ourselves, anyway. I'll be very much surprised to find that the Bay of Pigs had anything to do with the development of events in Southeast Asia.

O'BRIEN: Did it have any kind of an effect of installing caution on people who were in, let's say, on the task force on Laos?

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RUSK: If I had to make a guess, I would guess that the principal effect of the Bay of Pigs was on the thinking of President Kennedy and that he was more resolved after the Bay of Pigs than he was before about stemming from the movement of communism in Southeast Asia. But I think the historian, again, will want to look very carefully at the public record -- for example, in the Public Papers of President Kennedy -- and look at the actual statements that he made and the actual decisions he took to get the reflection of this deep concern about Southeast Asia, the sense of our commitment to Southeast Asia, and an indication that we were not going to let Southeast Asia, and an indication that we were not going to let Southeast Asia be overrun, because those were themes that ran all through President Kennedy's statements during the period when he was President. And he took the initial major decision to increase our forces in South Vietnam beyond the levels that were more or less permitted by the Geneva agreements of 1954 when he started moving in fifteen to twenty thousand advisors to give the South Vietnamese direct assistance on the battlefield.

O'BRIEN: How about the Secretary of State? Did it have any effect on him at all in the idea of committing troops?

RUSK: I think that my own view was similar to that that I ascribed to President Kennedy, that it would be very important for the communist world to understand that we would not back away from our commitments. Now this was reinforced by another aspect of the June 1961 meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Although they seemed to agree on Laos, at that same meeting Khrushchev

presented President Kennedy with an ultimatum on Berlin and created a first-class Berlin crisis. Khrushchev, in effect, said, "We're going to turn East Berlin and the access routes over to the East Germans, and you'll have to come to terms with the East Germans about access to Berlin. If there's any interference with the East Germans, this will mean war." And President Kennedy had to tell him that we were going to insist upon our own access to Berlin and our own presence in Berlin and that if it meant war, it would mean war. He

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told Chairman Khrushchev at one point, "It's going to be a very cold winter." Now, this sense that we were being pressed by the communists in Berlin, in Southeast Asia, was very deep with us, and President Kennedy's reaction was that we'd have to stand up to it as we did in Berlin, as we did in the Cuba Missile Crisis, as we did in Southeast Asia.

O'BRIEN: What were the intelligence people telling you at this point about the capabilities of the United States in a military sense to check and to operate in both these spheres?

RUSK: At the Vienna meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev again, although there appeared to be agreement on Laos, there appeared not to be any agreement on Vietnam. You could make a case for the idea that since there was not agreement on Vietnam, that would have been the time to put in a stack of blue chips into South Vietnam straightaway -- one hundred thousand troops, for example -- to make it quite clear at an early stage that we would do what was necessary to prevent South Vietnam's being overrun.

But the difficulty was that we had on our hands a first class Berlin crisis at the same time. We were calling up National Guard and Reserve units; we were adding several billion dollars to our defense budget. And we did not know at that time whether we would need our troops in Europe, so we did not give serious attention to the possibilities of putting in a stack of troops all of a sudden into South Vietnam.

I don't think that we ever had any doubt that the United States could stop the overrunning of South Vietnam, but the extent of the involvement would depend upon the extent of the effort made by North Vietnam to do so. Now it was not until late '64 and early '65 that the North Vietnamese began to move the regular units of their regular army into South Vietnam. Up until that point they had been infiltrating cadres and trained personnel and guerilla fighters and people of that sort and were using some of the South Vietnamese that had migrated to North Vietnam at the time of the divisions as infiltrators back into South Vietnam. But we never had any doubt that we could prevent militarily the overrunning of South Vietnam by U.S. forces.

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O'BRIEN: Then I take it that there's very much an awareness here of the importance in a strategic sense of Laos as a communications route into South Vietnam, in that

it is directly related with policy in South Vietnam in the minds of most of the people that are making the decisions. Or is that a fair assumption?

RUSK: Yes. One of the things we had very much in mind was that if we could create the kind of Laos that we tried to create in the Geneva agreements of 1962 it would greatly simplify the problem of Vietnam. It would restrict infiltration across the demilitarized zone, and it would make it easier to set up defensive positions that would prevent any large-scale infiltration from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. If Laos were not available to North Vietnam for infiltration purposes, then that would be a major step forward as far as Vietnam was concerned. So we had Vietnam very much in mind when we were working on this Geneva agreement on Laos.

O'BRIEN: When does the first real break take place that in a sense leads towards the reconvening of the Geneva conferences?

RUSK: I forget the details on that. I think it came about in April, because the conference met in May.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever effectively get the cease-fire that....

RUSK: We got a cease-fire that was reasonably adequate. It was never airtight, and in that sort of situation a cease-fire is a little

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difficult to manage anyhow, because troops on both sides will move around and try to change their positions and adjust their positions to their own advantage. Although there was relatively little shooting during the so-called cease-fire, there was a good deal of positioning of troops on both sides, so that it was a very inadequate kind of cease-fire, in fact. You see, there were no clear lines between the two sides. You had a semi-guerilla type of situation in which the forces were scattered in a very large countryside, and the traditional idea of a cease-fire just did not have complete application to a situation of that sort. But we got it into a situation where there was relatively little actual fighting -- enough, anyhow, to proceed with the conference.

O'BRIEN: When did the Secretary of State first meet Souvanna Phouma? Do you recall your impressions of him?

RUSK: I think I first met him at the Geneva conference -- I can't be absolutely sure of that. Ambassador Harriman handled our discussions with Souvanna Phouma almost entirely. I must say that I was reasonably well impressed with him. Although he had appeared to be an ally of the Pathet Lao when we first took office, his attachment to the king and his general worldly-wise attitude suggested to me that it had been a mistake for the Eisenhower Administration not to support Souvanna Phouma when he had

been Prime Minister in the fifties and that it was too bad that the Phoumi and Boun Oum group moved in to oust Souvanna Phouma during the Eisenhower days. Had it been possible for the Eisenhower Administration to support a neutral Laos rather than overreaching to try to convert it into a right-wing Laos, a pro-Western Laos, I think the Laotian situation might have developed on different lines.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have the chance to meet Phoumi?

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RUSK: Yes, I met Phoumi on some occasions. He came to Washington on one or two occasions, as I recall

O'BRIEN: Did Governor Harriman share these views of major figures here, of Boun Oum and Phoumi?

RUSK: I think so; I think so.

O'BRIEN: What kind of pressures were applied to these people in order to bring about a neutralist regime under Souvanna Phouma?

RUSK: Well, the principal pressure that we applied to the rightists was a clear indication that the United States would not be able to back them in any all-out way if they, in fact, refused to take part in a coalition government. And we also tried to persuade them that their own position was reasonably well safeguarded in the coalition government -- for example, the rightists were to have the defense ministry. But the principal pressure we applied to them was that if you want the United States to be interested in Laos, you've got to cooperate here or we'll just have to pull out and then forget about it. And the fact of that, I think these right-wing fellows came to the conclusion they had no real option, that they would be overrun if they didn't accept the coalition government.

O'BRIEN: Well, how much of a free hand was Governor Harriman given in working out the details of the Laotian settlement?

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RUSK: He was given rather broad instructions as far as the coalition government was concerned and had quite a free hand in developing possibilities and in negotiating the actual assignment of various portfolios to different figures in the three factions. And I must say he handled the negotiations very well indeed. It was a difficult negotiation; it took several months. But he succeeded in developing the kind of an

agreement that we were hoping for and with which we were prepared to live. Again, the great tragedy is that North Vietnam didn't comply with it.

O'BRIEN: How about the performance of your ambassadors at this point, not only to Laos but some of the other nations of Southeast Asia? I'm thinking, perhaps, first of all, of Ambassador Brown [Winthrop G. Brown].

RUSK: I think Ambassador Brown was fully in accord with what we were trying to accomplish. Our Ambassador to Thailand was partly upset in the same way that the Thais were partly upset. But we had no particular problem with our ambassadors at that time.

O'BRIEN: They were generally in support of the settlement and the way that...

RUSK: That's right. They, of course, pointed out some of the disadvantages, and they warned about some of the possible developments and things of that sort, but that was normal under the circumstances.

O'BRIEN: In 1962 the military situation in Laos deteriorates rather badly. Did this force any rethinking at that point of the original direction followed?

RUSK: It didn't bring about any rethinking as far as the United States was concerned. I think it might have had some influence on the right-wing

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elements in terms of whether or not they were willing to participate in a coalition government because they could see the handwriting on the wall if they didn't.

O'BRIEN: Troops are put in in, I believe, May of 1962. Did this cause any.... Was there any division at this point between the State Department and the Defense Department on...

RUSK: The troops were put into Thailand.

O'BRIEN: Right, into Thailand.

RUSK: Into Thailand, not into Laos, No, there was agreement on that, the thought that we ought to move some troops in to make a gesture of the sort that might give the North Vietnamese some pause. And there was no difference on that.

[BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I]

O'BRIEN: Well, during the development of the Laotian crisis in the first years, or in the

years of the Kennedy administration, what was the Secretary of State advising the President?

RUSK: My general attitude was that Southeast Asia was vital to the security of the free world and that if the communists continued to press, they would press just as far as they could until they were stopped. I also took seriously the commitments of the SEATO Treaty. After World War II we came up with the notion of collective security as the principal means for preventing World War III. We wrote it into Article I of the United Nations Charter, and when Soviet vetoes made it clear that the Security Council of the United Nations was not going to be able to take on the responsibility for collective security, we reinforced the Article I of the Charter by collective security agreements to supplement those we had in our own hemisphere. We made the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] commitment. We made commitments on the other side of the Pacific.

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I was concerned that these commitments not be looked upon by the other side as a bluff. Nothing is more dangerous than a security commitment that you don't mean. Now the standard of the SEATO Treaty was to take steps to meet the common danger. It did not specify what steps were to be taken, but whatever those steps were to be they were supposed to be steps to meet the common danger. And I have felt all along that if the SEATO Treaty should turn out to be a bluff that the judgment might be made by Moscow or Peking that other security treaties might be bluffs. For example, if at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis... Well, at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis President Kennedy told Chairman Khrushchev, "Those missiles must go, Mr. Chairman. We prefer that they go by peaceful means, but they must go." Now suppose Chairman Khrushchev had said to President Kennedy or had thought in his own mind, "Don't kid me, Mr. President. I know that the *New York Times* and Bill Fulbright will collapse when I put on the pressure." That would have been a very good way to have war.

Now the chief rationale for a security treaty is deterrence. The main purpose of a security treaty is to maintain the peace by making it clear in advance that if it is challenged by military means that there will be a response. If judgments are made that no such response will be forthcoming, then very great dangers appear everywhere where we have security treaties, or might appear. So I found myself fully in accord with the kind of thinking that President Kennedy had, which he made so clear in his public statements on Southeast Asia during the time that he was President.

Now I was enthusiastically in favor of the solution that we wrote into the Geneva agreement of 1962 on Laos. I was impressed with the fact that the Laotians were people who would not cause a threat to anybody and would themselves not have much fighting among themselves if they could be left to themselves. And although they might mismanage their own affairs, if they could be isolated there as a neutralized country that it would be a very important buffer area between the communists and Hanoi and other countries in Southeast

Asia. So my advice was always along the lines of the actual policy that we pursued, and I had no differences with President Kennedy on Southeast Asian policy.

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O'BRIEN: Well, originally in the development of the Laotian crisis a task force is established of people in the Department as well as other areas of government. Does this task force continue on with the problem? Originally, as I understand, later Ambassador Steeves [John M. Steeves] is a part of that original task force, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, Special Assistant to the President Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], as well as a number of other people. Is there a continuity of personnel over 1961 and '62 and '63?

RUSK: Yes, in general there was a fair amount of continuity there. The task force was simply a drawing together of those who carried responsibility for Southeast Asian questions in the different departments. My appointment book shows that I met with that group quite frequently. But it was almost a self-appointed task force in the sense that its members were made up of those who were normally carrying the responsibility for Southeast Asian questions in the State Department, in the Defense Department, and in the White House and in CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. It was a normal procedure for having regular consultations among those in the different departments who were concerned with the same question. The task force technique is a very convenient way to work it out, but it's almost a natural consequence of the responsibilities carried by different people in different departments. Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and I kept in close touch on Southeast Asian questions during that period. My appointment book shows that I met with him quite frequently, and then the two of us met with the President from time to time.

O'BRIEN: Who are some of the people in the State Department that were working closely with you?

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RUSK: Well, there was Mr. Steeves, of course; Mr. Sullivan [William H. Sullivan]; there was the Under Secretary, Mr. Bowles; there was the head of the intelligence unit, first Mr. Hugh Cumming and then his successors; Mr. Averell Harriman was a kind of a roving man for all Southeast Asian questions; then there were other professionals who were involved in it in one way or another. But those were the principal ones.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember some of the people who were directly involved with Secretary McNamara on that side?

RUSK: Mr. Nitze [Paul H. Nitze] was very active during this period, and I saw him

frequently, as I look at my appointment book. He was head of ISA [International Security Affairs], the international affairs section of the Defense Department staff. General Tick Bonesteel [Charles H. Bonesteel, III], representing the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was very active during this period. I forget after so many years the individuals who were concerned.

O'BRIEN: Well, in these meetings did the President meet with you very often, I mean, in the task force on Laos?

RUSK: We would meet frequently, but we had informal conversations much more frequently than formal meetings. I would see the President several times a week, and we'd be on the phone together. McNamara and I would see the President from time to time, we'd usually have a session with him before or after a National Security Council meeting or a Cabinet meeting; we'd meet with him before he would meet with congressional leaders. We'd meet with him before a press conference, and there was a good deal of discussion of policy matters preceding press conferences because we'd go over all the possible questions that might come up and talk about the kinds of answers that might be given to the questions.

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President Kennedy had a much more systematic briefing session before a press conference than President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] came to have. President Kennedy would go into the Cabinet Room and have around him all those who might be involved in questions that might occur at a press conference. McNamara and I were almost always present at those meetings in preparation for press conferences. So there were many opportunities for keeping in touch with the President.

Then the President himself, President Kennedy, would not hesitate to call anybody who was involved in a question of this sort on the phone. He didn't go through channels in any meticulous kind of way. He would pick up the phone and call John Steeves; he'd pick up the phone and call Tick Bonesteel; he'd pick up the phone and call anybody who was involved on particular questions that happened to be on the President's mind at the time. So I think it would be fair to say that President Kennedy put in a great deal of personal time on the Laos question. It was looked upon as one of the major questions he had in front of him when he took office.

O'BRIEN: How about the group around McGeorge Bundy, now? Did they do the same thing?

RUSK: I don't recall much participation by people in that group other than McGeorge Bundy himself. He undoubtedly had a staff officer or two who was following Laos and Southeast Asia in great detail, but my principal recollection is that McGeorge Bundy was the representative of the National Security Council staff on Southeast Asian questions.

O'BRIEN: I understand some of these meetings, not only the task force but some of the Cabinet meetings became very freewheeling things in which a lot of people got involved. What were your impressions of those?

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RUSK: President Kennedy usually liked to have discussions that were more or less like seminars where various people around the table would be invited to speak up and present their views and discuss the issues that were on the table. My own feeling was that the Secretary of State should not take much part in such discussions, that it would be wrong for the Secretary of State, for example, to debate the President in front of witnesses, that the Secretary of State's views ought to be known to the President in private. When Arthur Schlesinger later wrote that I used to sit there like a Buddha in silence, he was accurate to that extent because what usually would happen would be that I would see the President before such a meeting and give him my views or I would see him after the meeting and give him my views. McNamara and I used to meet with him either before or after such meetings. But we did not take much part in the seminar type of discussion which the President enjoyed having where the junior members could sit around and get into such questions and put in their views. [Interruption]

O'BRIEN: Well, getting back to Thailand for a moment, in those years you worked out an agreement with Thailand, the so-called Rusk-Thanant [Khoman] Agreement?

RUSK: Yes.

O'BRIEN: How did this, in a sense, relate with events in Laos?

RUSK: The so-called Rusk-Thanat Agreement was merely a commentary on the actual text of the Southeast Asia Treaty. It came about because of the defection of France from SEATO. President DeGaulle [Charles DeGaulle] told President Kennedy very early that there would never be another French soldier in Southeast Asia, and it was clear in the SEATO capitals that France could not be relied upon to take any active part in the work of SEATO if, in fact, Southeast Asia were challenged by communist forces.

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France had had it. They had gone through a very traumatic experience in Southeast Asia.

Well, now this disturbed the Thais because the Thais felt that that meant that SEATO as a corporate body would not be able to act because of the unwillingness of France to go along and that as a corporate body SEATO might be confronted with a French veto. Well, when one looks at the Southeast Asian Treaty, particularly Article IV, paragraph 1, the SEATO Treaty says that in the event of an armed attack, in the event of an aggression by

armed attack, each party shall take steps to meet the common danger. In other words, the commitments to SEATO ran not just to the collective body as a whole subject to veto but were individual commitments by individual members.

The Rusk-Thanat Communique simply affirmed the point that these commitments were individual as well as collective. There was no difficulty about that at the time. We consulted with the Foreign Relations Committee about communique before we issued it, and we looked upon it simply as a clarification of the language of the treaty. And it was not an advance on the treaty; it was simply an explanation of the terms of the treaty as the treaty was written, so that we looked upon it at the time as not changing anything but simply explaining. But it gave some assurance to Thailand because it, in effect, meant that we would not consider that the French had a veto on action taken under the SEATO Treaty in the event of an aggression by armed attack.

O'BRIEN: Another question, which is sort of going afield here: Did you make an effort to get at the Congress or to keep the Congress in the United States well-informed about what the United States was doing? Was that done through congressional relations or....

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RUSK: While I was Secretary of State I met with committees or subcommittees of the Congress in executive session hundreds of times. We kept in touch with the Congress through personal visits by me to the committees in closed session and in conversations which we had individually with members of the Senate and House of Representatives. The congressional Liaison man would keep pretty well briefed and could talk to people informally about it. President Kennedy himself talked to congressional leaders from time to time about the developing situation.

I had the impression that during those years before there was any major troop commitment in Southeast Asia that the Congress accepted what we were doing and more or less took it for granted that we would be doing what we were doing. There was no outcry from the Congress crying for congressional participation in these decisions about which they were kept informed. As a matter of fact, congressional participation came about through the initiative of President Johnson in 1964 in August with the so-called Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Even at that time there was no demand on the part of Congress that they be consulted officially by resolution or otherwise, so that I think the general answer to your question is that the appropriate committees of Congress, particularly the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate and the House Foreign Affairs Committees and the two Armed Services Committees, were kept informed in considerable detail by testimony given in closed session.

O'BRIEN: In 1963 when there was a deterioration of Laotian problems and the general situation in Laos, was there ever any real consideration at that point of committing the United States beyond the legal limits of the Geneva Agreement in bringing about a stopping of the use of Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail?

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RUSK: During 1963 the focus began to shift from Laos to South Vietnam because the infiltration to South Vietnam began to build up and the South Vietnamese armed forces were finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the situation in South Vietnam. We began to build up our support to South Vietnam by putting in substantial numbers of advisors and by beefing up the South Vietnamese armed forces. And we supported the various increases in South Vietnamese forces -- not only their regular army but their popular forces and their police forces -- so that during 1963, faced with the disappointment over the agreement on Laos and with the situation in Laos more or less stable from a military point of view, attention began to shift to South Vietnam where the action was.

Now, it's also true that North Vietnamese interest seemed to shift from Laos to South Vietnam. Had the North Vietnamese made one-fourth of the effort against Laos which they made against South Vietnam they probably could have overrun Laos. But they concentrated on their infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam, and they themselves seemed to look upon the South Vietnamese struggle as the number one struggle. In 1969 the situation again is somewhat precarious in Laos, and the historian will have to see what happens in the intervening years in that situation. But '63 was the year in which the main burden shifted from Laos to South Vietnam.

O'BRIEN: Well, I understand the Russians have this great deal of interest in Laos in 1961, by 1963 are disinterested. Is that a fair assumption? And if it is, any insight as to why that?

RUSK: The historian will want to look into that question because it's an interesting and important question. And it turns on how much influence the Russians had in Hanoi, say, in 1963. If they had significant influence in Hanoi in 1963, then they're guilty of bad faith because they did not use it in support of the Geneva Accords of 1962 on Laos. If, in fact, they lost their influence in Hanoi, then it's one of those situations where the Russians might have been acting in good faith but were unable to do anything about it.

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Now, it's always hazardous to make a judgment on these things, but my own personal opinion was and is that the Russians were in fact moving in reasonable good faith in the Geneva Accords of 1962 on Laos, that they would have been prepared to see the Laos agreements compiled with by all sides. But they were not prepared to press Hanoi at the expense of Moscow's own relations with Hanoi in the face of the competition with Peking for influence in Hanoi. And so I had the impression that we got no help from the Russians after the Geneva Accords of 1962 were signed, and that for whatever reason, Russia did not throw its weight into full support for those Accords.

O'BRIEN: How did the rest of the SEATO allies feel toward the Accords of 1963? Start

with Thailand, for example.

RUSK: Well, Thailand was very disturbed that the Geneva Accords of 1962 went so far, in a way, that Thailand looked upon it as disadvantageous to Thailand -- a coalition government in Laos for example. And even then there was no compliance by North Vietnam. Thailand had predicted this at the very beginning, and they were very reluctant participants in the Geneva conference -- as a matter of fact, they arrived late. We had to exercise considerable persuasion on Thailand to get them to come to the Geneva conference at all. The same was true of the South Vietnamese, who also arrived late. I think the general attitude of the Southeast Asian countries -- I'm not now referring to Australia and New Zealand -- but the Southeast Asian countries was, "Well, we told you so, that you'd get nothing out of this approach."

O'BRIEN: What are the Australians and New Zealanders thinking at this point?

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RUSK: They were not members of the Geneva conference on Laos, but they were prepared to go along with us and with Britain in the effort to create a neutralized Laos. But they were as disappointed as we were that we got no performance out of North Vietnam. See, I would emphasize, if I may, the fact that had the Geneva Accords of 1962 on Laos been complied with, this would have been a major step of the greatest importance in bring peace to Southeast Asia. It would have meant peace as far as Thailand is concerned, as far as Laos is concerned; it would have limited infiltration from North Vietnam into South Vietnam; it would have made that infiltration across the demilitarized zone a much more manageable problem; it could have been a major step toward peace had we gotten performance on it. I don't fault the agreement itself -- I think the agreement was a good agreement. The treaty was that North Vietnam treated it with contempt.

O'BRIEN: Well, that pretty much sums up what I came with in the way of questions. Is there anything in the way of further reflections that you'd like to add on? I'm sure there are many things, many aspects that....

RUSK: I think probably we ought not to try to open up Vietnam today. We can do that again. We can have another session a week from today if you want.

O'BRIEN: Fine.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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