

DEAN RUSK

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5, 1989

Edited May 23, 1989 with Rusk Letter of May 17, 1989

Travelled to Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia to interview Dean Rusk. The interview began at 1350 and ended at 1515.

Dean Rusk provided a resume which indicates as follows:

"RUSK, Dean

Former Secretary of State; born Cherokee County, Ga., Feb. 9, 1909; Davidson College, N. C., 1931; St. John's, Oxford (Rhodes Scholar), 1934; studied law at University of California at Berkeley, class of 1940;

Associate Professor and Dean of the Faculty, Mills College, 1934-40;

U. S. Army, 1940-46;

Department of State, 1947-52; Assistant Secretary of State for National Security Affairs and for Far Eastern Affairs;

President, The Rockefeller Foundation, 1952-60;

Secretary of State, U. S. Department of State, 1961-69;

Professor of International Law, School of Law, University of Georgia, 1970 - present."

He went on active duty as a Captain in the United States Army in 1940 and served six years until 1946. He was Chief of War Plans for General Vinegar Joe Stillwell and spent time in the War Department on Central Staff.

Secretary Rusk began the interview by suggesting he give me a thumb nail sketch of what he remembered about the Liberty events.

He said first notice of the attack was received at the White House while the attack was still in progress. (This needs some research as the attacks were over by 1337 about 0837 Washington, D. C. time).

Upon receipt of notice that the Liberty had been attacked/was under attack, President Lyndon B. Johnson called an immediate meeting in the Situation Room in the White House. Present at the meeting were:

President Lyndon B. Johnson
Secretary of State Dean Rusk
Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara
National Security Advisor Walt Rostow
Clark Clifford
Nicholas de Katzenbach
Louellen Thomson
McGeorge Bundy

At this stage, they did not know who the attacking force was. They considered alternatives and response based on an attack by the Egyptians or by the Russians.

As the meeting continued, a flash message was received from Israel advising of the attack and identifying the attackers as the Israeli Defense Forces.

Dean Rusk said that everyone at the meeting was greatly relieved because the problem now took on a different perspective and although it was a problem, it was a de-escalation from a possible World War III. They were also puzzled over how it could have occurred.

Dean Rusk said the meeting disbanded soon after they learned the identity of the attackers. The Secretary of Defense issued orders recalling the strike aircraft from the carriers and directed the Sixth Fleet to go to Liberty. "There was no need to launch a retaliatory strike - no need for further continuation of the Action Group."

The United States thereafter proceeded to investigate.

Rusk said "We were very incensed". In any event, it was a reckless thing to do - What if the ship were Russian or Egyptian?

AJC Note - (It would seem permissible to attack an Egyptian ship during a war with Egypt.)

Rusk said his conclusion was that he was wholly unsatisfied with the Israeli explanation.

He felt the attacks were combined (air and sea) and took place over a considerable period of time.

After determination of attackers identity, the matter did not represent a high priority item.

Rusk - "We closed the book on this very quickly".

Now, I began to question.

AJC - Prior to the attack, what intelligence were you getting on the Middle East situation?

Rusk - "We were getting pretty accurate information. We knew the Egyptian Air Force had been destroyed. We knew of the fast movement across the Sinai. We had tried to talk to King Hussein out of entering the war, we knew that was not successful and that Hussein had turned down a cease fire. We were getting good information."

Only on this point, did Mr. Rusk decline to go into sources of information as to specific identity of sources but he did confirm that we got substantially good information from Israel.

AJC - "How high a priority did the Middle East situation have with the President at this time in the May/June 1967 time frame?"

Rusk - "A pretty high priority". "The Russians had been playing a provocative game and encouraging the Arabs to attack Israel and to set up a unified command. Our intelligence indicated that Israel had superior forces. About two days before (3 June), the Russians received an estimate (from whom?) on Arab strength and began to cool it. The Vice President of Egypt was scheduled to come to Washington in three days to discuss opening the Straits of Tiran. Israel knew that, but attacked anyway."

AJC - "After the attack, what data did you receive? Did you receive the U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry Report by Admiral Kidd?"

Rusk - "I did not read it."

AJC - "Did you read the Findings and Conclusions?"

Rusk - "I did not make a career of reading all the evidence."

AJC - "Did you see the CIA report?"

Rusk - "Yes, I believe I saw that."

AJC - "What do you know of a report by Clark Clifford?"

Rusk - "I know nothing of any written report by Clark Clifford. LBJ had a habit of talking directly to Clark Clifford."

I told Dean Rusk of my interview with Clark Clifford and his conclusions and report to the president based on listening to recorded electronic data.

Rusk - "That does not surprise me. Clifford had a personal

history of relations with the Zionists beginning with Truman. I would expect him to find favorably for the Israelis."

AJC - "I read that Clifford was assigned the task because Walt Rostow was Jewish and Johnson pulled him off the investigation so the results would not be challenged because of Rostow being Jewish."

Rusk - "I have no recollection of the President pulling Rostow off."

AJC - "Did you get the Israeli investigation by Colonel Ron and Judge Yeshayahu Yerushalmi?"

Rusk - "No."

AJC - "Did you see the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee Report on communications which was published May 10, 1971?"

Rusk - "I knew of it."

Rusk - "I was also aware that Liberty had not received her message traffic and was out of touch but did not remember the details."

AJC - "Do you recall a State Cable to Israel demanding punishment?"

Rusk - "Yes, I remember that."

AJC - "Do you believe the theory, advanced by some, that since Israel did not punish anyone, that it appeared they were covering up for persons on higher authority and if Israel had punished someone, it might have been better for Israeli - U. S. relations?"

Rusk - "I Allow as how I can see the logic in that."

AJC - "What law applies?"

Rusk - "International Law."

AJC - "Who has burden of proof?"

Rusk - "The original burden is on Israel because Israel (took the action) made the attack."

AJC - "What standard of proof should apply?"

Preponderance
Clear and convincing
Beyond a reasonable doubt

Rusk - "These are not distinctions that are made in international law."

Question - Do you have any specific evidence - a smoking gun?

Rusk - "No, I have no evidence other than the facts of the attack."

AJC - "Admiral Moorer says you may not have it both ways, either you reject the Israeli explanation and take further action or you accept it and take no further action. You can not reject it and take no further action."

Rusk - (with a smile) "The event is a scar on the relationship between the U.S. and Israel."

Rusk - "It was not our only problem." Israel has been most uncooperative on nuclear matters. There have been other bumpy events but.."

Rusk - "The U.S. played an important role in the creation of the State of Israel and has a compulsion to be supportive."

Rusk - "If U.S. support weakens, the Arabs would be encouraged about dismantling the state."

Rusk - "On the first day of the '67 war, Eshkol said on radio that Israel had no territorial ambitions."

"A few months later I saw Abba Eban and reminded him of this. Eban said: "We changed our minds."

"Thus, Israel made a liar out of the U.S. because we had been telling the Arabs for years that Israel had no territorial ambitions."

AJC - "Mr. Rusk, What motive could Israel have had to attack the Liberty?"

Rusk - "I have no idea."

AJC - "A major theory, Mr. Rusk is that Israel attacked to prevent the Liberty from learning of the plan to attack Syria."

Rusk - "The position of the Liberty did not tally with that theory."

Footnote - (Mr. Rusk is absolutely correct about this. The Liberty was far south of Tel Aviv and could not possibly monitor message traffic between Tel Aviv and the Golan Heights.)

AJC - "Was the intelligence you were receiving from our own sources being passed to the top?"

Rusk - "Yes."

In Conclusion Dean Rusk stated: - "I know I am in the minority with my opinion."

Mr. Rusk also stated: - "This is a previously unexpressed view. I did not want the U.S. to have a spy ship in that vicinity."