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INTERVIEW IV

INTERVIEWEE: DEAN RUSK

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

DATE: March 8, 1970

Tape 1 of 1

M: This is March 8, 1970--a continuation with Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

The subjects, as I said, sir, are the Middle East, Europe, and Africa; and then perhaps some generalizations on such things as foreign aid, and so on. Taking the Middle East first, that's a crisis that arises in a very short time frame. I've heard people say that the government, under any Administration perhaps, can't really deal effectively with two crises at the same time like the Middle East and Viet Nam. Was that a distinct distraction from government action?

R: That's just not true. Viet Nam was never such a problem as to cause us to neglect other areas. There were times when for weeks on end President Johnson would give more time to Europe or to the Middle East or to Latin America than he did to Viet Nam. I once met with a group of European correspondents who complained that Viet Nam was diverting us from interest in Europe; and I asked them to name one subject of interest to the Europeans in which we were not taking a full part. And they looked at each other and couldn't find a single subject. So it was just not true that Viet Nam was such a total preoccupation that we neglected other areas.

M: Is that also true of the President? Was he able to master the details of a problem like the Middle East?

R: Oh, yes. He worked intensely on the Middle East. The general background of Middle Eastern policy is a declaration made by several Presidents that the United States supports the territorial integrity and political independence

of all the states of the Middle East. Now at one time or another the United States has acted in support of that policy, in support of Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, as well as Israel. The general attitude of the United States is that the Middle East ought to be stabilized on the basis of the existing states in the area, and that the United States ought to try to make friends with all of those states.

You had a three-cornered rivalry in the Middle East. You had on the one hand a contest between the so-called progressive Arab States--the extreme Arab States--and the moderate and conservative Arab states such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia; the more progressive or more extreme Arab states being primarily Egypt, Syria, and Algeria.

So we were interested in peace in the Middle East. In 1967 we became disturbed because we found that the Soviets were circulating rumors of Israeli mobilization against Syria, which did not check out as being factually true when we looked at the situation on the ground. But those rumors excited the Arabs and probably had something to do with the formation of the alliance between Syria and Egypt, and later Jordan and Egypt. The Soviets played a considerable role in stirring up the sense of hostility and crisis in the Middle East just prior to the June war.

Then when President Nasser closed the Strait of Tiran and insisted on the departure of the U.N. forces, I think the Soviets became concerned that the situation was moving too far and too fast. So they then tried to work with the United States to cool off the situation. We and they were in touch with each other, and we tried to get commitments from both sides that hostilities would not begin. They got such commitments from the

the Egyptians, for example; we got such a commitment from the Israelis. And when the Israelis then launched their attack in June 1967, it was in the face of a commitment to us that they would not do so, so we were very disappointed. The views in the Israeli Cabinet were closely divided--there was almost a tie vote on most of these issues. But the so-called hawks in the Israli Cabinet carried the day and precipitated the hostilities there, which caused the crisis of '67.

M: When something like that breaks out suddenly, does it immediately get kicked over to the White House and become Presidential as opposed to the Department's handling it?

R: Well, on a continuous basis we had furnished information to the President on the development of the crisis in the Middle East, so that he was in no sense caught by surprise. And then he was involved in some of the negotiations prior to the outbreak of hostilities. For example, he had a long talk with Aba Eban, the Foreign Minister of Israel. And it had been arranged that the Vice President of Egypt was coming to Washington on the Wednesday after the war actually broke out for the purpose of talking over the Strait of Tiran situation, and the President was going to take part in those conversations himself. So the President took a very active part in the consideration of the Middle Eastern crisis, both before it broke out and of course when the fighting actually started.

M: How far did the plans actually get for some kind of joint action to open up the Straits of Tiran, either by American action or by joint international action?

R: We looked upon it as involving two stages: One, a declaration by the Maritime powers--by a considerable number of Maritime powers, maybe a dozen--

that the Strait of Tiran was an international waterway, and that innocent passage through the Strait of Tiran was available for all nations, and for ships carrying all flags. The second stage was the possibility of forcing ships through the Strait of Tiran even against Egyptian opposition. Now there, there were very few volunteers. Our own Senate and members of Congress were very anxious that we not do anything unilaterally in that situation; that whatever we did would be done as a group, preferably through the United Nations; to make it clear that we were not just pursuing a unilateral policy out there. When you looked around to find out who else would be with you in forcing the Strait of Tiran, volunteers were very few--possibly Britain, possibly the Netherlands, but beyond that there were very few good prospects. It would have been a difficult military operation anyhow, because it was in a relatively remote part of the world; it would mean that the vessels that would be engaged would have to be supported around the Cape because the Suez Canal of course was not available; it would mean that the vessels that were going through there would be subject to Egyptian air power, and that was a very tricky situation. The Israelis are good diplomats, and they knew as well as we did that the number of volunteers to send ships through the Strait of Tiran would be very few; and this undoubtedly had some influence on their decision to start hostilities.

M: Is that actually what happened? We didn't ever have to decide either to do so or not to do so because hostilities came along?

R: That's right. The plan was overtaken by events. When the Israelis made their decision to launch hostilities, then everything started over again.

M: But we <u>had</u> gone so far as to seek some international volunteers? You mentioned England and the Netherlands had agreed?

R: That's right. We were talking about that with other governments.

M: When hostilities did break out, the earliest press sensation was the Departmental spokesman's, "neutral in thought, word, and deed" statement that Mr. Johnson apparently reacted strongly against. Was that accurate--he did react strongly against that slip?

R: Yes, he did. That was an inadvertence on the part of the press spokesman who simply picked up a phrase that had been used in a staff conversation--the phrase came from Woodrow Wilson. And he used it publicly without really giving it enough thought. I tried myself to correct that phrase during the course of the day by a rephrasing of our attitude. But actually it was not as bad a statement as that--it just excited some of the Jews in our own country.

M: How much of a problem is that? Domestic politics apparently are a greater importance in diplomacy in that area than almost anywhere in the world. Do you really have to keep a large eye on the domestic Jewish community, particularly since they're Democrats, when the Middle East is involved?

R: I think that tends to be truer of the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. The Democratic Party has strong ties with the Jewish community in this country, and traditionally the Democratic Party has been a lot more vigorous in support of Israel than the Republican Party. Anyhow, that was an increment in foreign policy which had to be taken into account.

M: And you had some high ranking officials dealing with the problem who were Jewish themselves. Was that any problem?

R: Yes, but they weren't so biased that they weren't able to pursue the President's policy with integrity.

M: Had a decision been made upon a contingency plan if the Israelis had lost?

R: No. We did not anticipate that the Israelis would lose such a battle.

Our own military estimate was that the Israelis would succeed in defeating their immediate Arab neighbors in the course of about ten days. Well, we were just two or three days off.

M: We were pessimistic; we thought it would take four more days than it did.

R: That's right.

M: What about the Russians after the hostilities started? You said they had decided that maybe they'd gone too far. Is that the circumstance that led to the Glassboro meeting, was that primarily a Middle Eastern summit affair?

R: Well, the Middle East was the occasion for Mr. Kosygin's coming to the United States for a special meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations, so that the answer is yes in the sense that the Middle East was the reason for his being here. And of course if Mr. Kosygin and President Johnson got together while he was here, it was inevitable that the Middle East would play a large part in the talks.

M: Were the Russians helpful then at that stage, or were they still meddlesome in the sense of stirring things up?

R: Mr. Kosygin came to the general assembly of the United Nations dedicated to the point that Israel would first have to withdraw from all Arab territories, and then other elements in the peace conference would have to be discussed. We felt that it was impossible to get Israel to withdraw before the shape of a peace element was apparent, and it was necessary to talk about such things as passage through the Strait of Tiran and passage through the Suez Canal and guaranteed borders and the settlement of the refugees and things of that sort so that you'd have a complete package within which the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Arab territories would be one of the items. Mr. Kosygin stuck with his attitude in his talks with

President Johnson, and it was not until some time later that they began to talk about the various elements in the peace package.

M: After Glassboro?

R: After Glassboro.

M: Actually we never have talked about Glassboro. If the Middle East was inevitable, I suppose Viet Nam was too. Did the Russians come forward with a Viet Nam proposal at Glassboro as well as on the Middle East?

R: President Johnson and Mr. Kosygin talked about Viet Nam at some length at Glassboro; and President Johnson gave Chairman Kosygin a formulation of bombing policy and talks which he thought Mr. Kosygin might transmit to Hanoi to see if Hanoi would find it acceptable. Mr. Kosygin accepted this formulation from President Johnson, and presumably transmitted it to Hanoi, but we never heard anything from it. So presumably Hanoi turned it down.

M: Did he indicate that he could deal for the North Vietnamese at that point?

R: He more or less indicated that he would transmit it to Hanoi to see what they thought about it.

M: But that was the end of it as far as any developments were concerned.

R: That's right. I think some more detail on this can be found in President Johnson's book.

M: On this particular subject--Viet Nam at Glassboro?

R: Right.

M: What about the "hot line" communiques? There is apparently disagreement as to how threatening the Russians were in their hot line messages. Did you think that they were particularly threatening during the course of the hostilities, or not so threatening?

R: They were not particularly threatening as far as themselves taking

action is concerned. They were very outraged and very sober about the fact that hostilities had broken out because we had told the Russians that we had assurances from the Israelis that they would not initiate hostilities, and so one of our problems was to assure the Russians that the Israeli attack surprised us as much as it did the Russians. And I think the Russians came to believe us on that point. But the Soviets must have known that in the event of fighting that the Arab side would suffer a stinging defeat. They have good professional military men who must have made some estimates themselves, and I'd be surprised if the Russian professional military estimate was much different than our own.

We tried to arrange a ceasefire on the first day. Had we been able to do so, there would not have been any fighting between Israel and Jordan and Israel and Syria. And Israeli forces would only have been maybe thirty miles or so into the Sinai Desert as far as Egypt was concerned. Had we been able to get a ceasefire on that first day, the situation would have been much more easy to solve than it is today. But the Russians and the Arabs delayed in the Security Council in moves toward a ceasefire; they tried to link it with withdrawal of forces, and they tried to inject other elements into the situation.

M: We were trying this at the United Nations?

R: That's right. It was not until about a week had passed that an actual ceasfire resolution succeeded in passing the Security Council. By that time the Israelis were already well established in Jordan-Syria, as well as Egypt.

M: Had the United Nations consulted the United States, or had the Secretary General consulted the United States before he withdrew the U.N. forces in the area--?

R: No, there was no consultation. We were very upset by the action taken by the Secretary General to withdraw U.N. forces from that part of the world on Nasser's request. In a purely technical sense of international law, it is perhaps true that U.N. forces cannot stay anywhere where the government itself does not wish them to stay. But on the other hand those forces were put there by the action of the General Assembly and of the Security Council. We felt that the Secretary General ought not to have made that judgment himself, but ought to have referred the matter to the Security Council or the General Assembly for instructions, during which referral there would have been some time given to negotiate out a different solution than the one that was finally reached.

M: And had the forces stayed, we think that perhaps the hostilities could have been avoided?

R: For example, President Nasser did not ask for the forces to be removed from Sharmal-Shaykh at the mouth of the Gulf of Tiran. It was U Thant who took the attitude that removal of some of the forces meant removal of all the forces. And so when the U.N. forces pulled away from the Sharmal-Shaykh and Egyptian forces went there, Nasser felt it was impossible for him to allow Israeli shipping to go through the Gulf; and that precipitated the casus belli for Israel, namely the closing of the Gulf of Tiran.

M: Once the situation had stabilized after the armistice, our Administration presumably did not look with too much favor on four-power talks regarding a settlement--is that accurate?

R: We were for a long time reluctant to take this up as a four-power matter, because we felt that it would be an uneven discussion; that the United

States would be cast in the role of the lawyer for Israel--

M: In the four-power--

R: In the four-power talks. And the Soviet Union might well be cast in the role of the lawyer for Cairo; and that this was not the best way to get a solution. We much preferred the use of Ambassador [Gunnar] Jarring from Sweden to try to make contact with the two sides and try to find out on the basis of private exploration what basis for peace might exist. Now later four-power talks did develop.

M: Later in the Johnson Administration?

R: No, just in--

M: Just after the other one began.

R: But had the Johnson Administration have continued, we would have gone into four-power talks. Because we drew a distinction between four-power talks inside the frame work of the Security Council and four-power talks outside the Security Council. We took the view that it would be all right for the four permanent members of the United Nations to talk about these matters, looking toward Security Council action, but not to convene a big conference outside the framework of the U.N. for the purpose of dealing with the Middle East.

M: Some of the statements by the current Administration seem to me at least to give the implication that the Johnson Administration's policy was dangerously pro-Israeli in the sense that it perhaps drove the Arab States more closely to Russia or some non-Western alliance. Do you think that's an unfair charge against the Johnson Administration?

R: Well, the Johnson Administration was friendly to Israel, and President Johnson had made a decision to supply some additional planes to Israel,

for example, when the French decided not to supply their Mirages. And of course the extreme Arab groups--Egypt, Syria, Algeria--did their best to link the United States directly with Israel when Israel launched its attack. And they tried to hold us responsible for Israel's action. You see, some of these capitals credit us with unlimited influences in Israel.

M: And everywhere else.

R: We don't have it. We just don't have it. And we're not the supervisors--the tutors--of Israel. They're a very independent little nation. But some of the Arabs tried to hold us directly responsible for whatever it was that Israel did.

M: Were there any other elements of the Middle Eastern problem there in the summer of '67 that are important to go into or are there any vignettes of the President during that time that occur to you?

R: Well, I think the historian will want to look at the five points which President Johnson announced as a basis for our policy toward the Middle East. Those five points were pretty well inscribed in the Security Council Resolution of November 1967. And we looked upon that November resolution as providing the basis for peace in the Middle East by giving each side assurances on those things which are most important to it. It basically meant that the Arabs would have to acknowledge that Israel was there to stay; that Israel was not to be driven into the sea; that it was a member of the international community of nations, and had a right to all the privileges and rights and obligations of any member of the international community; that it was not to be discriminated against in the middle East as it had been up to that point; and that Israel would basically have to withdraw from most of the territories that it had

occupied in the June fighting.

M: What was the reaction of the Israelis, or the Israeli supporters in the United States, to that statement of policy? Did they think that was going too far to be even-handed?

R: No, I think not. There were some groups here who thought that we were being too even-handed, but in general it was acceptable as a basis. Israel has never been enthusiastic about that November 1967 resolution. But we did not run into undue trouble in our own Jewish community here on the subject.

M: And we didn't consult Israel about it--it was our own unilateral--is that right--unilateral statement of American policy?

R: That's right.

M: If nothing else occurs to you on the Middle East, let's shift north, I suppose, to the European sphere; and there one of the problems is that there are so many topics that we can't go into any of them perhaps with the depth that some of them might deserve.

The first one that got a lot of public comment after Mr. Johnson assumed the President was the multilateral force notion. Did Mr. Johnson ever have, to your knowledge, a strong view regarding the utility of that idea or that concept?

R: I don't think that as Vice President he took much part in the discussions of the multilateral force. The multilateral force idea developed out of a request by the Europeans themselves to play a greater part in nuclear strategy and nuclear affairs. In the summer of 1960 Mr. [Paul-Henri] Spaak, who was then Secretary General of NATO, and General [Lauris] Norstad, who was then the NATO commander, came to our representatives at