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OBITUARIES : Dean Rusk

Godfrey Hodgson | Thursday 22 December 1994 01:02 |

Dean Rusk was American Secretary of State in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. A liberal in his private life, he was a strong anti-Communist and was best known for his staunch commitment to the American war in Vietnam. He was one of the last surviving paladins of the Cold War.

In 1950, as Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs, Rusk played an important part in the American decision to defend South Korea against invasion by North Korea. By a curious irony, as a young colonel at the Pentagon in 1945 he had selected the 38th parallel of latitude as the dividing line between the area where the United States would accept the Japanese surrender, and the area where the surrender would be accepted by the Russians. That line hardened into the frontier which the North Koreans crossed in the summer of 1950, so that arguably Rusk was the godfather of the South Korean republic he helped to preserve.

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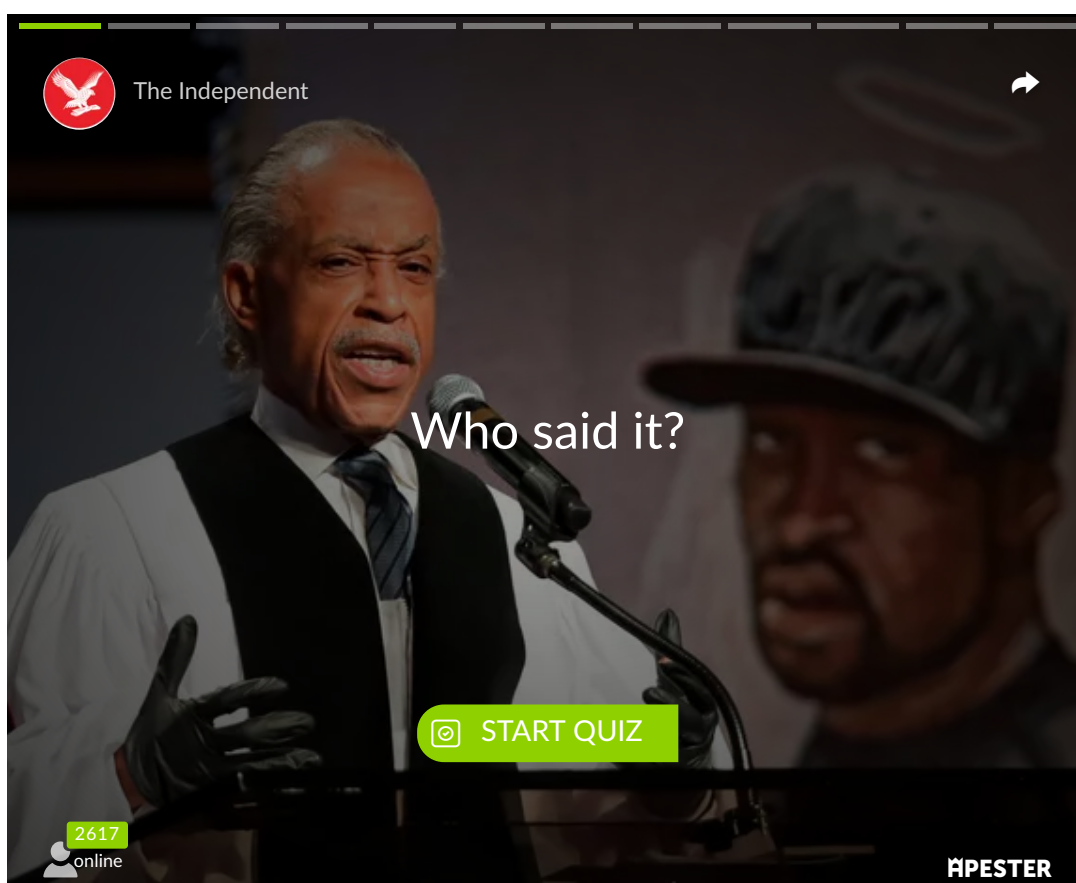
In the late 1960s Rusk became the target of anti-war protesters and when he retired to teach at the University of Georgia in 1969 he was a highly unpopular figure to those Americans - a majority at the time - who thought the war had been a costly mistake, if not an immoral one. But with quiet stoicism Rusk ignored the controversy and seemed always to believe that he had done the right thing.

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Shortly after leaving office, he was asked to assess his own achievement. He answered, "I added eight years to the period in which no nuclear weapon was fired in anger." With regard to the Vietnam war specifically, he said he believed it had contributed to world peace. "If we can deal successfully with this type of aggression - wars of liberation - I think we may well look forward to a considerable period of peace in the years ahead." A few years later he would concede only that he had made two errors of judgement: "to underestimate the tenacity of the North Vietnamese and to overestimate the patience of the American people".



In a 1990 book, *As I Saw It*, told to his son Richard, he said that he felt "I had a duty to perform: to try to prevent North Vietnam from overrunning South Vietnam by force. That was my job and I tried to do it." Even his son conceded, though, that his father was one of the architects of a war that killed 58,000 Americans and nearly a million Vietnamese.

Dean Rusk was born in 1909 in Cherokee County, Georgia, the son of a Presbyterian minister who was obliged by a throat ailment to give up preaching, and who then supported himself by farming and schoolteaching before he got a job as a postman in Atlanta. Dean went to

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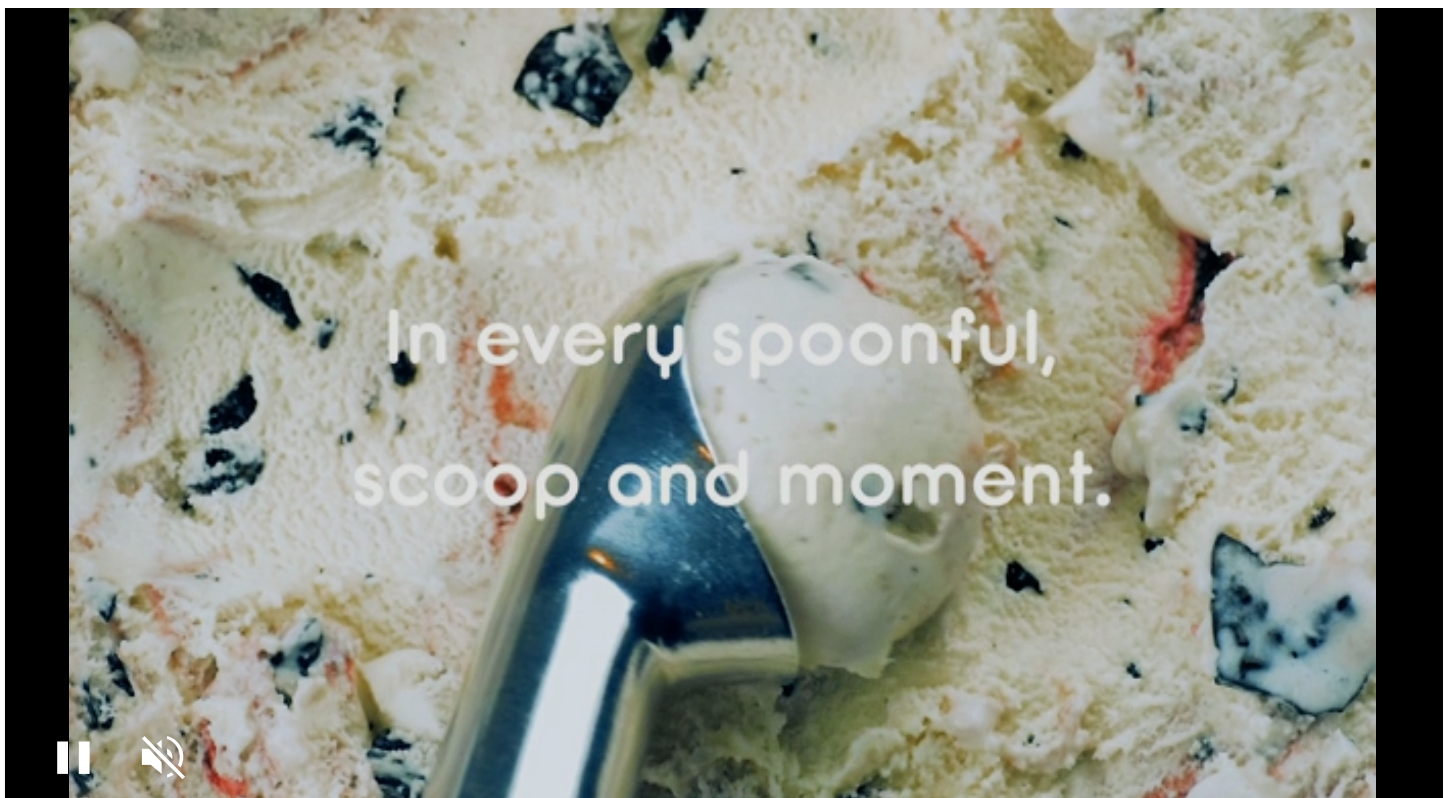
On his return to the United States he taught political science before enlisting in the US Army. He served in the China-Burma-India theatre, and was involved in guerrilla operations in Burma. Later he served as a staff officer at the Pentagon and rose to the rank of colonel aged 34.

After the war Rusk joined the State Department and by 1949, after an astonishingly rapid rise, he was Deputy Under-Secretary of State, one of the four officials in a service he had joined

Korea, Rusk found himself at Acheson's side with responsibility for the burning foreign policy issue of the day. And 10 years later, when President-elect Kennedy consulted Acheson about possible Secretaries of State, Acheson praised Rusk's self-sacrifice. Acheson's advice seems to have tipped Kennedy's judgement in favour of appointing Rusk Secretary of State.

Rusk belonged to the generation who believed that the democracies had made a tragic mistake in appeasing Nazi Germany and Japan in the 1930s, and he argued powerfully against repeating the "Munich mistake". But his experience as the assistant secretary responsible for the day-to-day management of the diplomatic side of the Korean war probably reinforced this predilection for using American military power to resist aggression.

After General Eisenhower was elected President, Rusk retired to a well-paid job in the heart of the New York business and internationalist Establishment as the President of the Rockefeller Foundation. It was here that he made the contacts that commended him to President Kennedy, who would have preferred to appoint Senator William Fulbright but felt he could not do so because the senator, to safeguard his base in his home state of Arkansas, had signed the declaration opposing desegregation. When Kennedy offered him the job, however, he said he could not afford to take it. He had no more than a few thousand dollars in the bank, and the Secretary of State's salary, then \$25,000, was less than half the \$60,000 he had earned at the Rockefeller Foundation. With a couple of swift phone calls, Kennedy was able to persuade the Rockefeller family to arrange a financial package to enable their man to go to Washington.



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Rusk was always something of an outsider in the Camelot atmosphere of the New Frontier. He and his wife, of White Russian descent but from Shanghai, lived quietly in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, in an atmosphere very different from the smart, fastworld of the Kennedys. Rusk was very shocked, for example, when (according to Kennedy's biographer Richard Reeves) Kennedy asked him to arrange for the Villa Serbelloni on Lake Como, which was owned by the Rockefeller Foundation, to be made available to him, empty, for a tryst with a well-known European woman.

Rusk also disapproved of the chaotic way the Kennedys took decisions. He privately warned Kennedy, on the basis of his experience of guerrilla operations, that the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba would not work, and he sulked when Kennedy went ahead. When Averell Harriman and other gung-ho types were plotting a coup to overthrow the Diem family in Vietnam in 1963, they simply worked behind Rusk's back, and in fact when Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963 he was seriously thinking of getting rid of his Secretary of State. Rusk found Lyndon Johnson, at least at first, more congenial. He supported Johnson's attempt to negotiate a peace agreement after his decision not to run for re-election in 1968. Rusk's attitude to the bitter, sometimes vituperative, criticism he was subjected to was stoical. He believed he was fighting to help fight the spread of Communist tyranny, and to preserve world peace. He found it hard to believe that any American could disagree with the war, but, unlike the President and many others, he did not rail at its opponents, still less question their motives.

Standing over six foot and weighing nearly 15 stone, Rusk wore horn-rimmed reading glasses and spoke in a soft Georgia accent, his manners courtly and his analysis, if sometimes long-winded, always penetrating. Those who worked closely with him always respected his integrity, even when they disagreed with his policy.

In spite of his long years as a diplomat and functionary of the philanthropocracy, Rusk was neither dry nor dull. He liked a drink (Scotch was his choice) and he possessed a notably strong head. Like many southerners, he had a liking and a gift for a phrase. It was he who enlivened the debate in President Kennedy's executive committee during the Cuban missile crisis with the phrase "We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked." He was a cautious man, with an instinctive liking for order, hierarchy and properly demarcated authority: but he was an orderly patriot, a prudent hawk, but a hawk none the less when it came to containing Communism.

When he retired to teach at the University of Georgia, Rusk was embarrassed by attacks from the governor of the state, Lester Maddox, because two years previously his daughter had married a black man. The controversy faded, however, and Rusk taught international law happily at the university for the next 15 years. He used to tell friends that the only thing he missed about Washington was his friends. Privately he may perhaps have come to understand that he had been too rigid in his unswerving support for the Vietnam war, but he would never say so publicly.

In one of his rare interviews he said of the two Presidents he served, "Kennedy and Johnson are not here to defend themselves. I won't draw away from my share in the decisions they made, because I agreed at the time."

Godfrey Hodgson David Dean Rusk, politician, diplomat: born Cherokee County, Georgia 9 February 1909; Associate Professor of Government, Mills College, California 1934-38, Dean of Faculty 1938-40; Assistant Chief, Division of International Security Affairs, US Department of State 1946; Special Assistant to the Secretary of War 1946-47; Director of Office of UN Affairs 1947-49; Assistant Secretary of State 1949; Deputy Under-Secretary of State 1949-50; Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs 1950-52; President, Rockefeller Foundation 1952-61; Secretary of State 1961-69; Sibley Professor of International Law, University of Georgia 1970-94; **Hon KBE 1976**; married 1937 Virginia Foisie (two sons, one daughter); died Athens, Georgia 20 December 1994.

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