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Into the Crucible: JFK and Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

John F. Kennedy had a gift, so rare among politicians, for inspiring his countrymen. Few elected officials have captured, to the degree Kennedy did, the imaginations of the masses and the elite alike. Kennedy was eloquent. He radiated confidence. He challenged his countrymen to soar to new heights. And he was cut down in his prime. It is a truism that assassination coats political careers with an otherwise unattainable luster.

The tumultuous 60's further enhanced the Kennedy legend. Might he have been able to steer America safely through the problems that wracked that decade? Many are inclined to believe so. "The heart of the Kennedy legend,' James Reston has noted, 'is what might have been'" (Paterson 6).

In particular, some Kennedy myth-makers argue that Kennedy would have avoided the slaughter in Vietnam that took place under Lyndon Johnson. (Some have even intimated that the US military had Kennedy assassinated because of his alleged plans to withdraw US forces from Vietnam.) They assert that Kennedy would have quickly surmised that the Vietnam was unwinnable and, consequently, would have withdrawn US forces from South Vietnam. Their arguments are based on Kennedy's supposed sagacity and on questionable interpretations of certain historical incidents.

My own view, reached after a dispassionate inspection of the evidence, fails to accommodate such interpretations. Kennedy appears to have been a president who never questioned the fundamental foreign policy assumptions of Truman and Eisenhower. Kennedy thought the preservation of a free South Vietnam important to the global balance of power, and

was willing to go to great lengths to insure the defeat of the Vietcong. There is no good reason to believe that Kennedy would have pulled US forces out of Vietnam without first defeating the insurrectionists.

Four categories of historical evidence need to be considered in any quest to determine what Kennedy would have actually done in Vietnam. The first (and by far the largest and most important) consists of the orders Kennedy actually gave concerning Vietnam and pertinent internal administration documents. From these some trends in administration activity and thinking become salient. Kennedy's world view is another weighty factor in this historical guessing game, inasmuch as it affected his approach to the Vietnam problem. The president's public statements about Vietnam can reasonably be assumed (despite the supposed disingenuousness of politicians) to paint an albeit imperfect picture of Kennedy's intended course in Vietnam. Finally, the recollections of former Kennedy aides are worth sifting through, the idea being that the men closest to the president ought to know what he planned to do.

OF DEEDS AND DOCUMENTS

The actual record of the Kennedy Administration's involvement in Vietnam makes the trend toward escalation clear and the notion that Kennedy intended to withdraw US forces dubious. The numbers tell the story. As erstwhile Kennedy advisor Henry Kissinger notes, at the time Kennedy took office "the number of American military personnel in Vietnam was close to 900. By the end of 1961, it had risen to 3,164; by the time Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, the figure was at 16,262 with more in the pipeline" (653).

Although there are incidents in the historical record revealing Kennedy's reluctance to introduce whole American armies into the conflict, there is little in that record capable of comforting those who indulge the fantasy that Kennedy would have ordered the withdrawal of US forces from South Vietnam without victory. There is much indicating the opposite. In this section we shall consider two things: what the US actually did in Vietnam during Kennedy's tenure, and the contents of the internal memoranda and studies that informed presidential decisions. By collating presidential actions with such documents, we should be able to divine some indication of why Kennedy did what he did, as well as what course he would have followed in Vietnam had he lived.

The seriousness of the Vietnam situation came as something of a surprise to the newly inaugurated president. "You know," Kennedy commented to Walt Rostow, "Ike never briefed me about Vietnam" (Schlesinger 320).

Rostow, a senior White House specialist on Southeast Asia, had given the president a memorandum on Vietnam that called for the "gearing up of the whole Vietnam operation." Rostow made a series of proposals in response to the memorandum, proposals that became "'pretty close to an agenda' for the Kennedy Administration's first high level review of Vietnam." Rostow suggested a visit to South Vietnam by Vice President Johnson, the raising of the MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] ceiling, and the formulating of some means of persuading Diem to decrease GVN (Government of Vietnam) centralization and increase GVN efficiency. Nearly all of Rostow's proposals later became policy (Pentagon Papers 88).

In April 1961 Kennedy created a task force charged with formulating "economic, social,

political, and military” programs designed to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam (Karnow 250). The group produced a working paper on Vietnam, composed primarily by Deputy Defense Secretary Roswell Gilpatric and General Edward Lansdale. It reported that a “state of guerrilla warfare” existed throughout South Vietnam and estimated Vietcong strength at around 12,000 men. The report also estimated that 58% of South Vietnam was under some form of communist control. The report characterized the situation as “critical” but not “hopeless.” The report advised Kennedy that the US needed “to impress on our friends ... and on our foes ... that ... the US intends to win this battle” (Reeves 117). Kennedy approved the group’s proposal to send an additional 100 US military advisors to South Vietnam, a move that raised the total number of US advisors in South Vietnam to about 800 in violation of the Geneva Accords America had pledged to observe (Karnow 250). The president thus embarked on a path of increased US involvement in Vietnam, a path from which he was not to deviate.

Eisenhower and Kennedy did talk about Laos, a nation contiguous with Vietnam and in danger of a communist takeover. By the end of April the Laotian crisis peaked. Gilpatric’s group altered their report, recommending a “quick expansion of the South Vietnamese Army by two divisions - 40,000 men -” ... along with “a 1,600-man [American] training team for each of the two new divisions.” The president proved unwilling to endorse these new recommendations (Pentagon Papers 89). Kennedy did everything he could to put a positive spin on the Laotian neutrality agreement he and Khrushchev subsequently agreed upon, but it was plain that he regarded the agreement as a loss for the US. In the aftermath of this, the Bay of Pigs debacle, and

the disastrous Vienna summit¹, Kennedy was not prepared to endure anything approaching a loss for the US in Vietnam. He feared that such an occurrence would prompt Khrushchev into making a move in Berlin, a move that could have resulted in nuclear war. Yet he also displayed a reluctance to follow the more extreme counsels of his most hawkish advisors. Kennedy was always very sensitive to the domestic political situation in the US; he was wary of making a major US commitment because of the potential political consequences that could arise from heavy American casualties in Vietnam. Kennedy the politician was hedging his bets.

Meanwhile, US relations with South Vietnam's intractable leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, grew increasingly strained. Diem looked upon himself as "indispensable" to America's position², a view solidified by Vice President Johnson's visit in May 1961 (Karnow 250). Determined to shore up US credibility in light of the task force's report, Kennedy had sent Johnson to Saigon to "persuade President Diem and the world that the Vietnamese leader had both the support and the respect of the Americans" (Reeves 119). Johnson, with regrettable hyperbole, dubbed Diem the

¹Kennedy met Khrushchev in Vienna on 3 June 1961. The president left the conference room "looking pale" (Reeves 162). He later told James Reston, "Worst thing in my life. He savaged me." Kennedy attributed Khrushchev's ferocious behavior to the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy thought that the premier "probably thinks I'm stupid" and, more importantly, he was afraid that the portly premier thought he "had no guts" (Reeves 172). This convinced Kennedy that the US had to do something to "restore a feeling in Moscow" that the US would protect its "national interests." Kennedy resolved to "increase the defense budget" and to find a place in which "to confront" the Soviets in order to persuade them of US seriousness. "The only place we can do that is in Vietnam" (Reeves 173).

²Diem attempted to exploit his so-called indispensability on several occasions. He first requested a bilateral defense treaty with the US, but US commitments to SEATO precluded this. Diem later made requests for increased US military support. The government of SV, according to a cablegram sent from the US Embassy in Saigon to the State Department, missed "no opportunity to ask for more support as a result of our greater interest and concern" (Pentagon Papers 141).

Churchill of Southeast Asia. A high level visit of this sort is indicative of the importance Kennedy attached to a 'free' South Vietnam and his desire to impress upon Moscow and Beijing that the US took its obligations to South Vietnam very seriously.

Johnson's report to Kennedy after the former's trip put the issue in stark terms. Johnson informed the president that the "fundamental decision required of the United States ... is whether we are to meet the challenge of Communist expansion now in Southeast Asia by a major effort in support of the forces of freedom in the area or throw in the towel." This decision "must be made in the knowledge that at some point we may be faced with the further decision of whether we commit major United States forces to the area or cut our losses and withdraw should our efforts fail." In words laced with ironic prescience, Johnson held that, regardless of the alternative chosen, the US "must remain master in this decision." Johnson made his own opinion quite clear: "I recommend we proceed with a clear-cut and strong program of action" (Pentagon Papers 130). Johnson outlined the stakes involved in typical Cold War fashion.

The battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination to achieve success there - or the United States, inevitably, must surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shores. Asian Communism is compromised and contained by the maintenance of free nations on the subcontinent. Without this inhibitory influence, the island outposts - Phillipines, Japan, Taiwan - have no security and the vast Pacific becomes a Red Sea (Pentagon Papers 128).

Moreover, "there is no alternative to United States leadership in Southeast Asia." Our allies in that region (especially South Vietnam) depended on "United States power, will and understanding" (Pentagon Papers 128).

While the public perception was one of harmony amongst allies, the allies experienced sharp disagreements in private. Johnson in his report characterized Diem as a "complex figure beset by many problems. He has admirable qualities, but he is remote from the people, is surrounded by persons less admirable and capable than he." Johnson noted that the US might eventually face a choice between "whether to support Diem - or let Vietnam fall" (Pentagon Papers 129). Diem had "responded unenthusiastically to the idea of US combat troops" in South Vietnam. He feared the injection of US forces would give the US "greater leverage over his government." This same issue "recurred throughout the year", and in October Kennedy sent Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor on a fact-finding mission to Saigon (Karnow 250).

The two men reported that Saigon "was suffering a crisis of confidence" brought on by Kennedy's earlier capitulation in Laos and by Diem's "corrupt, unpopular, and inefficient government" (Beschloss 338). Diem's exceedingly centralized government was "in near paralysis in some areas" (Reeves 256). Picayune decisions "handled by minor officials" in other governments were routinely "taken to the Presidency" in South Vietnam. Diem's regime engaged in widespread political and religious persecution. Even Diem loyalists came to believe "that South Vietnam can get out of the present morass only if there is early and drastic revision at the top" (Reeves 257). Kennedy, in a private conversation with Taylor soon after the general's return from Indochina, asked the general how long Diem could cling to power without US aid. "Three months," the general replied (Reeves 256).

Taylor and Rostow recommended introducing into South Vietnam 8,000 US troops “disguised as logistical legions to deal with a flood then ravaging the Mekong delta” (Karnow 252). Without such aid Taylor and Rostow did “Not believe our program to save SVN will succeed” (Pentagon Papers 143).

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsed the steps recommended by Taylor and Rostow, but thought them inadequate. They proposed that the initial 8,000 troops be the first step in a larger deployment (some 200,000 US troops) to demonstrate the gravity of the US commitment to South Vietnam. Eight thousand troops “will not convince the other side (whether the shots are called from Moscow Peiping, or Hanoi) that we mean business.” The odds were unlikely that the US could prevent the fall of South Vietnam “by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale” (Pentagon Papers 149). However, McNamara and the JCS cautioned that such a substantial commitment should be made only after the US had clearly determined to prevent the fall of South Vietnam to communism. They were “inclined to recommend that we do commit the U.S. to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and that we support this commitment by the necessary military actions” (Pentagon Papers 150).

Kennedy balked, wary of the consequences such a prodigious commitment might entail. He convinced Secretary of State Dean Rusk and McNamara to draft a more moderate memorandum that he promptly approved. The memorandum called for “more aid to Diem, but deferred the combat option” (Karnow 253). In keeping with McNamara’s earlier report, the memorandum urged that the US “commit ourselves to the objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and that, in doing so, we recognize that the introduction of United

States and other SEATO forces may be necessary to achieve this objective” (Pentagon Papers 152). McNamara/Rusk distinguished between two types of military forces: “(A) Units of modest size required for the direct support of South Vietnamese military effort, such as communications, ... reconnaissance aircraft ... etc., and (B) larger organized units with actual or potential direct military mission.” McNamara/Rusk recommended that category (A) forces be introduced “*as speedily as possible*” (italics in original). Category (B) forces could wait (Pentagon Papers 151).

The memorandum stated that the “basic means” for preventing the fall of South Vietnam “must be to put the Government of South Vietnam into a position to win its own war against the Guerillas” (Pentagon Papers 150). It also made the somewhat contradictory assertion that the US “should be prepared to introduce ... combat forces [in Vietnam] if that should become necessary for success”, adding that the day might arrive when events would compel the US “to strike at the source of the aggression in North Vietnam” (Reeves 258). Kennedy’s approval of this memorandum provides further evidence of his dedication to safeguarding South Vietnam’s independence and his willingness to do anything short of making a major commitment of US combat troops in order to win the war.

The number of US advisors in Vietnam had jumped “to some three thousand” by the time Taylor and Rostow journeyed to Saigon (Karnow 253). On 11 October 1961 Kennedy authorized Operation Farm Gate. Farm Gate marked Kennedy’s “first orders to send Americans into battle in Vietnam” (Reeves 241). In mid-November he authorized Operation Ranch Hand, an operation employing herbicide defoliants in stage one to clear underbrush from “within 200 feet of roads through ambush country.” Stage two, “food denial”, used defoliants to “destroy fields” in “Viet Cong territory” (Reeves 259).

In 1962 Kennedy ordered the commencement of the "strategic hamlet" program. The idea was to "corral peasants into armed stockades, thereby depriving the Vietcong of their support" while simultaneously shielding the peasants from the Vietcong's perfidious doctrines (Karnow 255). More "than half of the Vietnamese peasants" lived in strategic hamlets by 1963 (Reeves 450). We see from this that the US under Kennedy heavily and intrusively influenced South Vietnam's military strategy, to the point of relocating South Vietnam's citizens.

The strategic hamlet program failed for several reasons, many traceable to the Diem regime. Diem and his detested brother Ngo Dinh Nhu regarded the strategic hamlet program as a "means to spread their influence" rather than as a counterinsurgency measure (Karnow 256). Their plan backfired. The peasants quite understandably resented "working without pay" to construct defenses against an enemy that, in the main, "directed its sights against government officials." The peasants were further "antagonized by corrupt officials" who embezzled funds allocated for improving living conditions in the hamlets (Karnow 257).

A State Department study conducted late in 1962 on prospects in South Vietnam indicates that some members of the Kennedy Administration realized the struggle in South Vietnam would be protracted. The study noted that the GVN and several US officials "apparently believe that the tide is now turning in the struggle against Vietnamese Communist ... insurgency." The study labeled such optimism "premature", holding that "[a]t best, the rate of deterioration has decelerated" (Pentagon Papers 155). The "Viet Cong is obviously prepared for a long struggle." The logical inference is that the US, if it intends to win, must also be prepared for a long struggle. The study's authors made just such an inference: "Elimination, even significant reduction, of the Communist insurgency will almost certainly require several years ... [A] considerably greater

effort by the GVN, as well as continuing U.S. assistance, is crucial" (Pentagon Papers 156). The US was in for the long haul.

The study was critical of Diem and doubtful about his ability to hold onto power. Despite some improvements, "there are still many indications of continuing serious concern" with Diem's rule, "particularly with Diem's direction of the counterinsurgency effort. There are also reports that important military and civilian officials continue to participate in coup plots." (Pentagon Papers 156).

The President received contradictory counsels from his advisors about Diem, something that helps accounts for his indecisive behavior towards the South Vietnamese leader. Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith, after a visit to Saigon, told Kennedy that Diem was "a losing horse in the long run." Although the US itself could not "replace Diem", US officials should be "clear" in their minds "that almost any non-Communist change would probably be beneficial." Galbraith advised making this the "guiding rule" of US foreign policy "in this area." Averell Harriman, contrariwise, backed Diem, ridiculing those who expected South Vietnam to be a "Jeffersonian democracy" (Reeves 311).

But uncertainty about Diem should not be construed as uncertainty about US support for South Vietnam. Continuing the pattern of escalation, Kennedy, late in 1962, ordered the introduction of US helicopters and other equipment. Temporarily at least, this move seemed "to make a difference" (Beschloss 658).

US forces in South Vietnam had swollen to some 16,700 by 1963 (Patterson and Clifford 167). The Vietcong fought on, redoubtable as ever, drawing on an apparently endless flow of volunteers to replenish their harassed ranks. Soon the continued and malignant malfeasance of

the Diem regime brought matters to a head. South Vietnam, predominately Buddhist, chafed under the Catholic supremacy imposed by Diem (Diem's other brother, Thuc, was a Catholic archbishop).

On 8 May 1963 the Hue massacre occurred. Diem's government troops fired on a peaceful assembly of Buddhists. This enormity sparked multitudinous protests throughout South Vietnam, protests punctuated by a series of self-immolations on the part of a few overly zealous monks. The Buddhists "demanded ... that the officials responsible for the killings be punished. Diem ignored them" (Karnow 279). Diem's hold on power became increasingly tenuous. The State Department cabled the US embassy: unless Diem took "prompt and effective steps to re-establish Buddhist confidence" in his government, the US would have "to re-examine" its "entire relationship" with his regime. The State Department demanded that Diem "meet Buddhist demands ... in a ... dramatic fashion" (Reeves 519). US Ambassador Nolting "urged Diem to conciliate", but the incorrigible premier refused. To make matters worse, Madame Nhu, Ngo Dinh Nhu's wife, publicly alleged (Diem knew the announcement was coming) that the Buddhists "were being manipulated by the Americans". President Kennedy, in turn, publicly chastised Diem and reduced US aid (Karnow 280). This move was an attempt to influence Diem's behavior, not a sign that Kennedy's fundamental conceptions had changed. If anything, Diem's recalcitrance led Kennedy to plunge the US even deeper into South Vietnam's woes.

By now events had persuaded Kennedy and most of his senior advisors that Nhu was the source of most of the South Vietnamese government's problems and, as a result, must go. For the first time "in Kennedy's hearing" his advisors discussed the possibility of Diem's overthrow (Karnow 282). Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, informed the

president that the “chances of chaos” after a coup were “considerably less than they were a year ago.” A National Intelligence Estimate convinced Kennedy “there was a real possibility that Diem and Nhu were considering asking the United States to remove its troops” from the country (Reeves 541). The NIE said, in part, that the “Diem regime’s underlying uneasiness about the extent of the US involvement in South Vietnam has been sharpened by the Buddhist affair and the firm line taken by the U.S.” This attitude was likely to persist, and “further pressure to reduce the U.S. presence in the country is likely” (Pentagon Papers 193). Believers in the withdrawal-without-victory hypothesis should be disturbed upon reflecting that one of the reasons Kennedy contemplated Diem’s ouster was his belief that Diem would request the removal of US forces from South Vietnam.

On 6 June 1963 Kennedy appointed old political rival Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. as Nolting’s successor (Kennedy defeated Lodge’s bid for reelection to the US Senate in 1952). Lodge carried with him a report (the president personally handed it to him) written by Assistant Secretary of State Robert Manning. It argued that US “Vietnam policy cannot succeed unless the Diem regime (cum family) is replaced” (Reeves 556). Once in South Vietnam, Lodge was greeted by some of Diem’s disgruntled generals seeking “American support for a coup” toppling Diem and Nhu. Lodge, new to the situation, “counseled prudence” (Karnow 286).

Meanwhile, Diem and Nhu launched a last-ditch campaign to stifle the opposition. The CIA trained Vietnamese Special Forces, on August 21, “raided Buddhist pagodas in Saigon and Hue and a half dozen other cities” and arrested 1,400 people, “most of them monks and nun” (Reeves 557).

Back in Washington (with a great many key figures including the president out of town)

some shifty policy making occurred. Hilsman, Harriman, and Michael Forrestal drafted a memorandum to Lodge stipulating that Diem should be given a chance to “jettison his brother”, but if he refused the US “must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved.” In that event, Lodge should assure dissident general of US support against Diem” (Karnow 287). Kennedy endorsed the memorandum on the condition that Rusk and Roswell Gilpatric (deputy secretary of defense; McNamara was on vacation) also found it appropriate. When the trio called Rusk, he gave his assent thinking Kennedy had approved it, a notion the disingenuous group did not discourage. Gilpatric likewise assented, believing that Kennedy and Rusk were in agreement on it. At the next senior advisors’ meeting an argument broke out over who did what, when, and under what impression. Taylor, McNamara, and Johnson argued against a coup. The president hesitated.

Lodge, at this point firmly convinced that the war could not be won under Diem’s auspices, “now pleaded for giving the rebel generals the green light”. He found Diem obdurate, unwilling to discuss removing Nhu, refusing to “discuss any of the topics that President Kennedy had instructed me to raise” (Karnow 288). Lodge poured on the pressure, lobbying hard for conclusive action. He suggested halting aid to Diem, a sure signal to the generals of US backing for their coup.

In what amounted to a remarkable delegation of power, Kennedy turned over to Lodge “complete discretion” in halting aid to Diem. Again, this action must be taken in context. It in no way represented any decisive change in Kennedy’s thinking. It was intended, if executed, to effect a change in the GVN. It was not a step in a larger plan for disengagement

Kennedy remained skeptical about a coup’s chances for success. In September 1963 he

dispatched McNamara and Taylor to Vietnam for yet another fact-finding mission (Karnow 294). The McNamara/Taylor expedition “seemed to be President Kennedy’s last best show at constructing a consensus among his closest advisors” Kennedy thought “they were the smartest men he had” and he was “quietly desperate about the contradictions and misinformation swirling around him ... [h]e trusted McNamara to figure it out” (Reeves 603). This dissension prevalent among Kennedy’s advisors reflected his own misgivings. Kennedy deemed the mission essential “to make sure that my senior military advisors are equipped with a solid on-the-spot understanding of the situation” (Reeves 605).

The McNamara/Taylor report, while extolling the “great progress” of the military campaign, lamented Diem’s “intransigence” and advised “taking limited sanctions against him” (Karnow 294). The report cited “serious political tensions in Saigon ... where the Diem-Nhu government is becoming increasingly unpopular” and warned that “[f]urther repressive actions by Diem and Nhu could change ... favorable military trends.” McNamara/Taylor recommended a “consolidation of the strategic hamlet program ... and action to insure that future strategic hamlets are not built until they can be protected” (Pentagon Papers 211).

Regarding Diem, the report suggested that the US “work with the Diem government but not support it.” McNamara/Taylor stopped short of endorsing a coup. “At this time no initiative should be taken to encourage actively a change in government. Our policy should be to seek urgently to identify and build contacts with an alternative leadership if and when it appears” (Pentagon Papers 212).

The report also made a recommendation that is often cited by those who contend that Kennedy would have withdrawn US forces from Vietnam. McNamara/Taylor advocated

instituting a program “to train Vietnamese so that the essential functions now performed by U.S. military personnel can be carried out by Vietnamese by the end of 1965. It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel by that time.” McNamara/Taylor, in accordance with this goal, suggested withdrawing 1000 US troops by the end of 1963 (Pentagon Papers 211).

Noam Chomsky cautions us not to make too much of these plans for withdrawal. He points out that at the National Security Council meeting which considered the McNamara/Taylor report Kennedy “opposed a commitment to withdraw some forces in 1963 because ‘if we were not able to take this action by the end of the year, we would be accused of being over optimistic.’” McNamara wanted to leave the recommendation in the public version of his report in order to pacify senators like J. William Fulbright (77). The President approved the document except for stipulating that “no formal announcement be made of the implementation of plans to withdraw 1000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963.” The recommendation was presented as just that (i.e., a recommendation made by McNamara and Taylor, not an official policy). Chomsky reminds us that Kennedy always conditioned withdrawal on victory (78).

On 28 October 1963 Lodge cabled Washington that a coup was “imminent” (Karnow 299). The next day a cautious National Security Council convened. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, following the president’s orders, instructed Lodge to inform the conspirators “that the United States favored postponement, if not cancellation, of the coup.” Kennedy was not convinced that the coup forces would triumph and thought a failure “could be serious or even disastrous for US interests” (Pentagon Papers 225).

Lodge parried that the only way to halt the coup was to expose the generals involved. He dismissed the notion that “we have the power to delay or discourage a coup”, saying that a coup

“is essentially a Vietnamese affair.” Moreover, “[a]fter our efforts not to discourage a coup and this change of heart, we would foreclose any possibility of change of the GVN for the better” (Pentagon Papers 226).

Under presidential instructions, Bundy modified his previous instructions to Lodge. Bundy rejected Lodge’s assertion that the US could exercise only minimal influence over the forces plotting the Diem regime’s overthrow, but his new instructions were more equivocal and left more to Lodge’s judgment. Bundy cabled Lodge that “if you should conclude that there is not clearly a high prospect of success, you should communicate this doubt to generals in a way calculated to persuade them to desist at least until chances are better” (Pentagon Papers 230). But, Lodge was informed, “once a coup under responsible leadership has begun ... it is in the interest of the U.S. Government that it should succeed” (Pentagon Papers 231). Why? Because Kennedy and his advisors thought it likely that a new regime would be more susceptible to US influence in the direction of the war effort.

Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu were seized and murdered by their perfidious generals on 1 November 1963. Three weeks later John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

Several things suggest themselves in the preceeding historical review. One is that Kennedy’s approach to the Vietnam problem was permeated with uncertainty. The president vacillated on crucial matters like the coup. He always seemed to be searching for more information. Hence the endless studies, the numerous missions.

What is also apparent is that Kennedy steadily increased the level of US involvement in

Vietnam, although never to the levels advocated by his more bellicose advisors. Kennedy never gave any indication that he planned to end the US commitment to Vietnam in the absence of a decisive victory. Nor did any of Kennedy's advisors, not even the most dovish of them, counsel withdrawal without victory. Although Kennedy was unsure about Diem, he never expressed (during his presidential tenure) any uncertainty about the US's fundamental mission to South Vietnam. He questioned the means, not the end. As he often did on other issues, Kennedy chose the least politically expensive option capable of achieving his objectives.

If Kennedy had wanted to withdraw US forces from South Vietnam without victory, the overthrow of Diem afforded him a propitious opportunity. The overthrow of the Diem regime "was a watershed ... [I]t was a time when Washington - with the Diem regime gone - could have reconsidered its entire commitment to South Vietnam and decided to disengage." This idea was abandoned "because of the assumption that an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam was too important a strategic interest to abandon" (Pentagon Papers 158).

After the coup the US learned "that the war against the Vietcong had been going much worse than officials previously thought." This discovery, rather than prompting the US to reevaluate its relations with South Vietnam, instead made US officials feel "compelled to do more - rather than less - for Saigon. By supporting the anti-Diem coup ... 'the U.S. inadvertently deepened its involvement'" in South Vietnam (Pentagon Papers 158, 159).

This is a telling point. Given the aforementioned mind set, it is unlikely that Kennedy would have suddenly switched his position on US involvement in Vietnam in the wake of Diem's overthrow. The coup threw the country into chaos. Moreover, once one takes into account the importance Kennedy attached to Vietnam due to what he considered its pivotal position in

Southeast Asia, the odds are that he would have only deepened the US commitment to that fractured nation.

A more detailed analysis of Kennedy's world view will bear this out.

KENNEDY'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

On 31 May 1961, en route to his upcoming summit with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, President Kennedy landed in Paris for a meeting with French President Charles de Gaulle. Over the course of their conversations de Gaulle told the president that "communism, ideology are frauds ... Nationalism ... is the problem." De Gaulle advised an incredulous Kennedy to avoid intervening in Vietnam, saying, "You will find that intervention in this area will be an endless entanglement ... Once a nation has been aroused, no foreign power, however strong, can impose its will upon it" (Reeves 149).

That Kennedy did not heed de Gaulle's advice (and indeed found it absurd) reflects the fact that he, as well as his advisors, failed to question the fundamental assumptions of the Cold War. The Kennedy men were committed to continuing the Global Containment policies of Truman and Eisenhower. Left-wing insurrections were understood to be part of a monolithic communist plot to take over the world; they had to be opposed. Or, to put it another way, the "Kennedy planners adopted doctrines already established. Too much independence ('radical nationalism') is not acceptable; the 'rotten apple' effect of possible success enhances the need to eliminate the 'infection' before it spreads" (Chomsky 39).

Not that there was no justification for believing that Moscow was behind left-wing

insurrections. Khrushchev, on 1 January 1961, called "wars of national liberation" sacred and pledged Soviet support for them. Khrushchev's promise confirmed Kennedy in the pursuit of one of his central goals as president: Kennedy wanted to focus more attention on the Third World in an effort to regain the momentum against communism. Henry Kissinger wrote that the administration looked on Khrushchev's pledge "as a declaration of war against [their] hope of giving new emphasis to America's relations with the developing world" (644).

Kennedy subscribed to the domino theory, and "considered Vietnam a crucial link in America's overall geopolitical position." Like Harry Truman and Eisenhower before him, Kennedy thought "that preventing a communist victory in Vietnam was a vital American interest." Vietnam was the linchpin of Southeast Asia. A communist victory there would occasion a radical shift in the global balance of power (Kissinger 643). The United States was particularly worried about Japan, the "superdomino." Eisenhower had warned that "Japan would have to turn 'toward the Communist areas in order to live' if Communist success in Indochina 'takes away, in its economic aspects, that region that Japan must have as a trading area.'" No less a man than George Kennan (the architect of Global Containment) contended that the only hope of keeping Japan among the company of free nations "lay in restoring for Japan 'some sort of Empire toward the South'" (Chomsky 40).

Kennedy not only accepted fully the containment and domino theories, he also thought of the Cold War as having a "zero-sum" nature ... He thought that the containment doctrine should be applied universally because Communism, masterminded and directed from Moscow, loomed as a universal threat" (Paterson 11). A victory for any Third World left-wing insurrectionary group amounted to a win for Moscow and a loss for the US. A communist victory in Vietnam might,

the Kennedy team reasoned, prompt a heady Khrushchev to challenge American prerogatives in Berlin (Kissinger 643).

In line with his suspicion of Soviet culpability in all leftist insurrections, Kennedy regarded “the communist leadership in Hanoi as a surrogate of the Kremlin” (Kissinger 643). Here again, he lined up squarely with his predecessors. That an insurrection could be indigenous, stimulated by a repressive right-wing dictatorship, was to Kennedy and his predecessors but an idle, if not pernicious, fancy unsubstantiated by any reliable data.

Kennedy’s perception of the conflict in South Vietnam differed from that of Truman and Eisenhower in at least one prominent way. Eisenhower, the former Supreme Allied Commander during World War II, “viewed the conflict the way a soldier would - as a conflict between two distinct entities, North and South Vietnam.” To Kennedy, the Vietnam struggle “did not represent a traditional war so much as a quasi-civil conflict characterized by the relatively new phenomenon of guerilla warfare.” As such, Kennedy wanted to look beyond the usual strategies of warfare. The guerillas were doing so well because they succeeded in winning the populace to their cause. South Vietnam, composed of a contentious citizenry made all the more volatile by their poverty, barely warranted the appellation ‘nation.’ The preferred Kennedy solution required that the US “build South Vietnam into a nation socially, politically, economically, and militarily - so that it could defeat the guerillas without risking American lives” (Kissinger 644). It proved to be a solution without success. The Government of South Vietnam was never able to maintain itself without generous backing in personnel and materiel from the US. Kennedy’s public presidential statements demonstrate that he understood this and further undermine the notion that he would have withdrawn without victory.

JFK's PUBLIC PRONOUNCEMENTS

There are some noticeable consistencies and inconsistencies between the rhetoric of Kennedy the congressman and senator and Kennedy the president. Congressman Kennedy toured Asia in 1951. Upon returning, he criticized US support for French rule in Vietnam, contending that "in Indochina we have allied ourselves with a colonial regime that has no support from the people" (Walton 162). Three years later during the Dienbienphu crisis, Senator Kennedy declared that "pouring" US resources "into the jungles of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerously futile and self-destructive." (Eisenhower was contemplating US intervention to aid France's besieged forces.) Those who "assume the inevitability" of a US triumph in Vietnam, Kennedy continued, make assumptions "not unlike similar predictions of confidence which have lulled the American people" in the past (Walton 162). Kennedy elected not to specify what previous altercations he had in mind. In that same speech, he undercut his sagacious pronouncements against US involvement by conceding that checking "the southern drive of communism" in Southeast Asia "makes sense." Kennedy's strategy was to check that drive "not only through reliance on the force of arms", but also by building "strong native anti-communist sentiment within these areas" (Walton 163). This philosophy colored his course in Vietnam once he ascended to the White House.

As president, Kennedy manifested a much enhanced view of the efficacy and importance of American involvement in Indochina. At a news conference shortly after the Hue massacre, Kennedy, while expressing concern over the Buddhist crisis and uttering palpable warnings to the Diem regime, nevertheless said that "[we] are not going to withdraw from that effort ... for us to

withdraw ... would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia" (Reeves 543).

Kennedy's 1963 interview with Walter Cronkite might seem at first glance to lend credence to the claims made by some that Kennedy would have withdrawn US forces from Vietnam without victory. Kennedy called the conflict "their [the Vietnamese people's] war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it." The US could assist them, could "give them equipment ... send our men out there as advisors", but it was for the Vietnamese themselves to battle "against the communists" (Reeves 587). These statements might have laid the public groundwork for American extrication from Vietnam, if not for the president's next few sentences. Kennedy went on to say, "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a mistake" (Walton 162).³

A few days after the Cronkite interview, Kennedy reaffirmed his faith in the domino theory in an interview with David Brinkley.

No I believe it [the domino theory] ... China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for guerilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists. So I believe it (McNamara 64).

³Theodore Sorenson deceptively edits this interview in his anthology of Kennedy's speeches and public statements, Let the Word go Forth: He omits Kennedy's strictures against withdrawal.

Following Diem's overthrow, Kennedy told the press that "there was a 'new situation there' ... and 'we hope an increased effort in the war.'" He added that US policy should now be to "intensify the struggle' so that 'we can bring Americans out of there'" (Chomsky 47). The context of Kennedy's desire to withdraw American forces is clear. Kennedy conditioned such plans on victory; there is no reference to withdrawal without victory.

Kennedy's last public statement about Vietnam was made in Fort Worth, Texas shortly before his assassination: "Without the United States, South Vietnam would collapse overnight." In Dallas, Kennedy intended to say that "[a]s the 'watchman on the walls of world freedom' the US had to undertake tasks that were 'painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task'" (Chomsky 47).

To the last, Kennedy held that the freedom of South Vietnam was vital to US security and that US assistance was necessary for the success of South Vietnam.

SOME OF THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

Opinions among former Kennedy Administration officials about what Kennedy would have done had he lived evince keen divisions. The president's men have staked out two distinct positions. Some have argued Kennedy would have pulled US forces out altogether once he realized that the situation in South Vietnam would only deteriorate. Others have declaimed that Kennedy would have maintained a limited US commitment (i.e., anything short of sending combat troops) to Vietnam throughout the duration of his presidency.

This division of opinion, on the surface anyway, might not seem to offer us any insight into what Kennedy would have actually done. What is interesting, though, is how the opinions of some of these advisors seem to have changed over the years. Those who recorded their impressions of presidential intentions just after Kennedy's assassination are nearly unanimous in their view that Kennedy did not plan to withdraw without victory. As the war worsened and Kennedy's legacy appeared to be in danger of besmirchment, some of these advisors altered their predictions accordingly. Prominent among this group are Theodore Sorenson and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Sorenson, in the first edition of his book Kennedy (published in 1965), states that, although Kennedy had no plans to increase the US commitment to South Vietnam, neither did the president intend to withdraw US forces. Kennedy could not have abandoned "so unstable an ally and so costly a commitment." (One is reminded of the aforementioned influence Diem's ouster had on the thinking of US policy makers.) Kennedy "was simply going to weather it out" (661). Kennedy realized the Vietcong "would have no difficulty recruiting enough guerillas to prolong the fighting for many years." He hoped to win out in the end through patient application of counterinsurgency methods and nation building strategies. Kennedy thought Vietnam might well turn out to be "this nation's severest test of endurance and patience" (660).

But the Kennedy presented by Sorenson in his post-Tet accounts took a very different view of the Vietnam situation. In particular, the McNamara/Taylor withdrawal plan, "unmentioned in the old version, assumes great significance in Sorenson's post-Tet revision" (Chomsky 118). Sorenson cites Kennedy's authorization of the release of the McNamara/Taylor report as evidence of Kennedy's goal of withdrawal; Sorenson neglects to mention "that Kennedy

refused to commit himself to the plan, that withdrawal was explicitly contingent on military success, and that the plan called for intensification of the war and stood alongside the effort to replace Diem if he would not 'focus on winning the war' as JFK demanded" (Chomsky 119).

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s pre- and post Tet accounts prove likewise variable. In the 1965 edition of Schlesinger's A Thousand Days, General MacArthur's opinion that it would be a mistake to fight in Southeast Asia is mentioned with no indication that it accords with Kennedy's own views. Subsequent editions of the book, however, record that Kennedy was delighted by "General MacArthur's opposition to a land war in Asia" and that Kennedy considered MacArthur an "unexpected ally" (Chomsky 119). Schlesinger's post-Tet accounts presents a Kennedy attempting to pursue "moderate policies" in the face of "extremists" like McNamara and the JCS

(Chomsky 120). "In Schlesinger's pre-Tet book ... there was only a bare mention of withdrawal plans, with no indication that JFK ever considered the matter ... There is no hint anyone considered withdrawal without victory," Post-Tet Schlesinger portrays a president bent on withdrawal and "masterfully" withstanding "efforts by his aides to deepen the US commitment, to limit his flexibility, and to delete any references to troop withdrawal." The last point is contradicted by the documentary record and is perhaps explained by the fact that Schlesinger's sources for his post-Tet revisions are merely "oral reports" (Chomsky 121).

Dean Rusk laconically dismissed the withdrawal hypothesis. The former Secretary of State remarked that in "hundreds of talks" with Kennedy, the president "never said anything of [the] sort" about withdrawing US troops from Vietnam (Paterson and Clifford 168).

The Pentagon analysts who began compiling the Pentagon Papers in 1967 concluded that

Kennedy “took a series of actions that significantly expanded the American military and political role in Vietnam”, although Kennedy did resist “pressures for putting American ground-combat units in South Vietnam.” In the end, Kennedy “left President Lyndon B. Johnson with as bad a situation as [he] inherited (79). Kennedy (in a move that has led many to conclude that he would have continued to expand the US presence in Vietnam) “for the first time ... put American servicemen in combat-support roles that involved them increasingly in actual fighting” (83).

Robert McNamara, of course, kept quiet about his views on Vietnam until the 1995 publication of his book, In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. After citing what he refers to as Kennedy’s “wisdom”, McNamara states his opinion that it is “highly probable that ... President Kennedy ... would have pulled us out of Vietnam (96). McNamara makes special mention of Kennedy’s affinity for Barbara Tuchman’s The Guns of August. Kennedy said it “graphically portrayed how European leaders had bungled” into World War I. He declared, “I don’t ever want to be in that position” (97).

Stumbling into war, especially nuclear war, was Kennedy’s greatest fear. To McNamara, Kennedy “seemed to keep [the] lessons [from The Guns of August] in mind.” McNamara mentions several conspicuous examples of Kennedy’s wisdom at work, the kind of wisdom that presumably would have permitted him to see the Vietnam war for what it was, viz., an unwinnable catastrophe. During the Bay of Pigs the president, “against intense pressure from the CIA and military chiefs”, adhered to his earlier decision not to support the ill-fated invasion with American troops. At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a “majority of the president’s military and civilian advisors were prepared to recommend that ... the US should attack the island”, a move that almost certainly would have precipitated a nuclear exchange with the USSR (US intelligence

was not aware at the time of exactly how many nuclear weapons were on the island). Kennedy kept reiterating the necessity of avoiding “an unpredictable war” (97).

What is perhaps most intriguing about McNamara’s opinion that Kennedy would have withdrawn US forces is that it is primarily based on wishful thinking and irrelevant examples. McNamara’s examples of Kennedy’s wisdom are all unrelated to Vietnam. Indeed, McNamara’s history offers much that seems to undermine his ardently held belief. McNamara fails to deal adequately with such important details as the president’s refusal to formally announce the administration’s intention to follow the withdrawal plans in the McNamara/Taylor report. McNamara includes several Vietnam-related anecdotes illustrating the president’s lack of wisdom (e.g., the previously cited interview with David Brinkley).

There appears to be no evidence in the pre-Tet recollections of former Kennedy advisors indicating any intention on Kennedy’s part to withdraw US forces from Vietnam without victory. Indeed, one could be forgiven for concluding that the post-Tet accounts are, for the most part, efforts to protect Kennedy’s reputation at the expense of the historical record.

The pre-Tet record, on the other hand, confirms that “President Kennedy was firmly committed to the policy of victory that he inherited and transmitted to his successor, and to the doctrinal framework that assigned enormous significance to that outcome; he had no plan or intention to withdraw without victory” (Chomsky 110).

CONCLUSION

An examination of the available historical evidence leads to the conclusion that Kennedy

had no intention of withdrawing US forces from Vietnam without victory. Kennedy expected the contest to be protracted and knew that South Vietnam was utterly dependent on US assistance.

The Kennedy Administration's record in Vietnam is marked by a continuing increase in US forces and a deepening involvement in South Vietnam's politics. While Kennedy, on more than one occasion, rejected the appeal of some of his advisors to inject massive US combat forces into South Vietnam, he nonetheless increased the number of US personnel in South Vietnam from just under 700 to nearly 17,000 between the time of his inauguration and his assassination. Internal administration documents disclose that victory was the overriding objective of the Kennedy Administration. Kennedy's advisors at no time counseled the president to withdraw without victory. Diem's ouster offered the president an opportunity to end the US commitment to Vietnam with minimal damage to his political standing at home. That Kennedy and his men failed to even consider this option illustrates the intensity of their resolution to maintain a noncommunist South Vietnam.

Kennedy's adherence to the containment and domino theories entertained by his predecessors makes it all the more unlikely that he would have withdrawn from South Vietnam without victory. Kennedy thought left-wing insurrections like that in Vietnam were masterminded by Moscow. A victory for the insurrectionists equaled a triumph for the USSR and a loss for the US. In the case of South Vietnam, proponents of the domino theory postulated that the fall of that country would trigger the collapse of Southeast Asia to communism and endanger the freedom of Japan, America's most valuable Asian ally.

President Kennedy's public statements record his constant insistence that South Vietnam was an essential element in the US's geopolitical position. Kennedy repeatedly took issue with

administration critics who advocated withdrawal without victory. And he said numerous times that US support was an integral part of the GVN's ability to withstand the Vietcong onslaught.

It is true that some former Kennedy aides hold that the president would have withdrawn without victory. However, no high ranking Kennedy aide made such a contention prior to the Tet offensive. The opinions of former Kennedy aides registered before the Tet offensive unanimously agree that the president did not plan to withdraw without victory. Over the years, some aides have altered their pre-Tet recollections, putting Kennedy in a more favorable light.

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