

# We Shall Keep On Asking, “What If”: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Quagmire of Vietnam

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## I: Imagining Another World

### 1. The Shock Wave from Dallas

Half a century has already passed since the world witnessed one of the greatest tragedies in modern history. Many Americans still remember when and how they heard the news of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The Japanese people were enormously astonished to learn of his death through the first satellite TV broadcast program ever sent across the Pacific.

The shock the Americans suffered on November 22, 1963, has often been compared to such events as the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, or the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. Later, the explosion of space shuttle *Challenger* on January 28, 1986, and the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, were added to the series of such unforgettable national traumas.

Only a minority in the United States still believes that a young ex-Marine, Lee Harvey Oswald, sniped the president during the motorcade in Dallas, Texas, all by himself. In the opinion of others, Kennedy had apparently been hit from several different spots and hence more than a single person had to be involved in the murder. According to an American satire news magazine, the president was continuously shot for full thirteen minutes and as many as 129 wounds were inflicted on him, if all the accusations were taken for granted.<sup>1</sup>

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1. “Kennedy Slain By CIA, Mafia, Castro, LBJ, Teamsters, Freemasons: President Shot 129 Times from 43 Different Angles,” *The Onion* (date unknown), quoted in Okuna Hideji, *Netsuzo No Sekaishi: Hito Wa Naze Damasarerunoka* [Fabrications in World History: The Reason Why Men Are Cheated] (Tokyo: Syoden-sha Ogon Bunko, 2008), 123–26.

## 2. Motives Behind the Conspiracy

American political history offers various so-called conspiracy theories, such as the following examples: President Roosevelt sabotaged necessary actions to prevent the Japanese fleet from attacking Hawaii because he wanted a justification for the United States joining the war against Nazi Germany. The U.S. government has kept its encounters with unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and the aliens aboard a secret. American astronauts never went to the moon and the pictures of their activities shown to the audience were all shot at secret studios. The 9/11 disaster was prepared by a few top leaders of the George W. Bush administration in order to legitimize their armed attacks against anti-American regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, accusing them of assistance to terrorist groups.

President Kennedy's death in the Lone Star State more than 50 years ago was not exempt from such conspiracy theories. Among the suspects for Kennedy's killing were: the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and its head J. Edgar Hoover who had been disgusted by the president's immoral behavior within the White House; the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its former director Allen W. Dulles who had been fired after a failed attempt of a secret invasion of Cuba to oust the socialist regime in the spring of 1961; Mafia bosses who had been furious over the Kennedy brothers' fight against organized crime; Cuban exiles who had been indignant at Kennedy's inaction to revive an anti-communist government on the island; the military industry that had distrusted the policy of accommodation with the Russians; the Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev and the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, America's rivals in the Cold War confrontations; Lyndon B. Johnson, a Texan who would have possibly been replaced as Kennedy's Vice President in the upcoming presidential election; and Richard M. Nixon, loser in the race for the presidency in 1960.

Among those suspects, the main force behind the killing of Kennedy was supposedly the so-called military-industrial complex. They wished to continue and hopefully even expand the war in Vietnam, lest this vital area should be overrun by international communist forces. They also desired to keep the Cold War tensions high so that American military expenditure be maintained and enlarged, if possible. The assassination helped Kennedy's successors learn what would happen to their own lives if they pursued courses leading to truce in Vietnam or the promotion of world peace, resulting in unnecessary disarmament.

In a 1973 film, *Executive Action*, a rich Texan is the sponsor of the plot. He hesitates to give the order of execution, although he knows that any politician, even the president, can be dispensable for the sake of American national interests. He is determined to send a final positive signal to the sniper team after learning from a TV news program about the presidential announcement to pull 1,000 military men out of Vietnam and the anchorman's worrisome comment that the present administration is supposedly planning to withdraw completely from there

within two years.

Oliver Stone's controversial 1991 film, *JFK*, is another example. In this movie, a New Orleans attorney publicly accuses those who are suspected to have been involved in the assassination plot. He calls what happened in November 1963 a "coup d'état" by those who wished to have the war in Vietnam continued.

### 3. No War Envisioned in Vietnam

What would have happened in America and would it have changed the path toward the quagmire in Southeast Asia had Kennedy lived? According to his admirers, he would have withdrawn from Vietnam before the war became uncontrollable. Hence, the war as the world had experienced it in real life would not have taken place. Even if Kennedy could not pull out of Vietnam completely, he would have fought the war in a different way with less massive and more cautious military actions than Johnson took after 1964. Otherwise, he must have embarked on a more dynamic course of total involvement for victory, avoiding the folly of gradual and ineffective escalation based on so-called salami tactics that had been employed in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

In *Running Against Time*, a film made in 1990, a young college professor of history who lost his beloved brother in the war travels to the past with the help of a newly invented time machine. He arrives on the rooftop of the Texas School Book Depository Building, where Oswald had been waiting for the victim immediately before the motorcade reaches the street below. He tries to stop the sniper in order to save the lives of his brother and numerous other American soldiers who died in the jungles, mountains, and paddies in Vietnam.

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2. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 24; William J. Rust and the Editors of U.S. News Books, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 182; Ralph Bernard Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 2: 142; Bernard Brodie, "Accidents of History: JFK and LBJ Compared," in *To Reason Why: The Debate about the Causes of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War*, ed. Jeffrey P. Kimball (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 195-96; James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 254; Naka Akira, *Kennedy Wa Naze Ansatsu Saretaka* [Why Was Kennedy Assassinated?] (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Syuppan Kyokai, 1995), 35; James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 516; Larry Berman, "NSAM 263 and NSAM 273: Manipulating History," in *Vietnam: The Early Decisions*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 181; Francis X. Winters, *The Year of the Hare: America in Vietnam January 25, 1963-February 15, 1964* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 193.

#### 4. Possibility of a More Peaceful World

The entire course of the Cold War might have been altered drastically, as the argument goes, if Kennedy had not been killed. Khrushchev would not have been ousted from power in the fall of 1964. The partnership of Kennedy and Khrushchev would have promoted Détente long before it came into existence in real life in the 1970s. The two leaders would have concluded a more comprehensive treaty banning nuclear tests than what had been produced in August 1963.

American démarches with the People's Republic of China as well as Castro's Cuba might have had a certain plausibility. Mankind might have left their first footprint on the moon as a result of an epoch-making endeavor of U.S.-Soviet cooperation, not rivalry, in space achievements. Even the substantial end of the Cold War might have been in sight by the end of the 1960s. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara later expressed his firm belief that "the world would have been the better" had Kennedy lived.<sup>3</sup>

To accept or reject such theories, a re-evaluation of Kennedy as a president and an analysis of his foreign policies are needed. Was he an ardent Cold Warrior who would have pursued the course for glory both in Vietnam and in the global struggle against communism even after November 1963? Or was he, by contrast, determined to contribute to world peace and to limit American involvement in a futile war in Southeast Asia? In order to determine the realities of Kennedy's presidency, a look at what he actually thought, said, did, and tried until the day he visited Dallas is necessary, instead of just pondering over "what if" scenarios. Theodore C. Sorensen, Kennedy's speechwriter and a special assistant in the White House, insisted that it would be more important that John Kennedy should be remembered "not for how he died but for how he lived."<sup>4</sup>

## II: Vietnam Commitment Re-examined

### 1. Battleground Against Communism

Kennedy consistently escalated the American intervention in Vietnam for two years and ten months in office. He kept sending American military advisers totaling approximately 16,000, violating the limit of 685 defined by the Geneva Accords of 1954.<sup>5</sup> He ordered the spraying of herbicides in vast areas of South Vietnam to deny the insurgents food and hiding places, inflicting terrible damages on the Vietnamese people, land, and water. He organized the Montagnard

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3. Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 94.

4. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 7.

(mountain tribe) troops for operations across the borders with Laos and Cambodia to cut off communist infiltration of men and materials from North Vietnam to the guerrillas in the south.

Indeed, Kennedy emphasized that this conflict was “their war” that should be won or lost by the Republic of Vietnam, not by the United States.<sup>6</sup> The president flatly denied in one of his press conferences that the United States had sent combat troops “in the generally understood sense of the word” to Vietnam, stressing that the American military personnel was nothing but a group of advisers and instructors.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to such statements, Kennedy changed the nature of U.S. commitment. American advisers were engaged in combat operations side by side with the South Vietnamese soldiers, suffering casualties, even though still low in number. American pilots flew fighters and bombers with their Vietnamese counterparts sitting in the backseat, in addition to their official duties of reconnaissance and transportation. Kennedy in essence started the massive American war in Vietnam, pretending or believing that it was still a low-level and manageable conflict. “The reality was,” recalled Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who was appointed ambassador to Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, in August 1963, “regardless of how they got there, Americans were in Vietnam and were in combat.”<sup>8</sup>

The president’s motive was simple. Washington regarded the rebellion by the National Liberation Front (NLF), or Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists), as having been triggered by the leaders in Hanoi, supported by Moscow and Beijing.

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5. The number of American military advisers was estimated at 15,400 in June 1963. In late October, the Kennedy administration leaked to the press that the total number was 16,500. According to the analysis of the so-called *Pentagon Papers*, a study of the Vietnam War history secretly conducted under the direction of Secretary of Defense McNamara in 1967 and revealed in 1971, the number was 16,201 by the end of August, 16,483 by the end of September, 16,732 by the end of October, and 16,456 by the end of November. Stanley I. Kutler, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1996), 413; Telegram, U.S. Department of State to U.S. Embassy in Saigon #607, October 19, 1963, *Declassified Documents Reference System* (Arlington: Carrollton Press, 1975–2014), Retrospective Series microfiche sheet no. 829, document C; U.S. Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945–1967: Study Prepared By the Department of Defense* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), Book 3, section IV. B. 4, 16.

6. Transcript of Broadcast With Walter Cronkite Inaugurating a CBS Television News Program, September 2, 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy 1963* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 652.

7. The President’s News Conference of January 15, 1962, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy 1962* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 17.

8. Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Storm Has Many Eyes: A Personal Narrative* (New York: Norton, 1973), 205.

The Americans were unwilling to accept any defeat on this essential battleground of the Cold War. Sorensen described Vietnam as a critical “cockpit” in the life-and-death struggle between the Russians and the Americans.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Unclear Intentions

Kennedy occasionally showed an intention to withdraw from Vietnam. He neither could nor would enact such plans, however, until he was re-elected in the fall of 1964. His prestige as a political leader would have suffered a terrible blow, making him a lame duck in his second term and one of the most unpopular presidents in American history, if Vietnam were lost to the communists. Yet after re-election he would have been on his second and final term as a president, since the present constitution would not have allowed him another term, giving him a chance to act more freely. Thus 1965 would certainly have been the year for disengagement with little political risk.

Kennedy's intentions were recorded by many: Mike Mansfield, Senate Majority Leader and later ambassador to Japan, who had been an old friend of Kennedy's<sup>10</sup>; Kenneth P. O'Donnell, a presidential aide and long time friend of both John and Robert F. Kennedy<sup>11</sup>; David M. Shoup, Commander of the U.S. Marine Corps whom Kennedy trusted<sup>12</sup>; Assistant Press Secretary Malcolm Kilduff<sup>13</sup>; Senator Wayne Morse, who was among the earliest proponents of American withdrawal<sup>14</sup>; one of Kennedy's neighbors at Hyannis Port.<sup>15</sup>

However, their stories should be examined carefully and not taken literally. They were first voiced in the late 1960s or in the early 1970s, when the American people already hated the Vietnam War. The witnesses might have intended to release their idol, Kennedy, from the responsibility for the escalation and possible defeat in Vietnam and instead place the responsibility on Johnson. Their memories might have been transformed by their own admiration of the late president. Nor can a political motivation behind their comments be ruled out, since Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the last of the brothers, was still considered to be a potential presidential candidate.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, nobody, however close his or her relations with the president might

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9. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 649.

10. Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers with Joe McCarthy, *“Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye”*: *Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972), 16.

11. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

12. James W. Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 305.

13. *Ibid.*, 304.

14. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), 779.

15. Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, 182.

have been, could judge him correctly based on the words that actually came out of his mouth. Kennedy was a successful and shrewd politician, moving into the White House as the youngest elected president at the age of 43. What he said often varied according to with whom he was speaking and what the listener apparently wanted to hear from him. Thus, Kennedy continued to make “many conflicting statements, both public and private” during his presidency, as Sorensen admitted.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Realities of the Phased Withdrawal Plan

Kennedy ordered Secretary of Defense McNamara to arrange a phased withdrawal program in May 1963. Before Christmas 1963, several weeks after the assassination, 1,000 men left Vietnam. The remaining military advisers, totaling 15,732, according to the so-called *Pentagon Papers*, were supposed to follow them, gradually completing the mission by the end of 1965.<sup>18</sup>

This plan in reality displayed a great deal of optimism and wishful thinking. It seemed to the Americans that their operations against the communists had been working quite well. Therefore, the insurgency was to be effectively suppressed by the South Vietnamese troops with American help and indoctrination, thus eliminating the need for U.S. military advisers to stay there any longer.

The deadline for disengagement was set based on McNamara’s assessment in the summer of 1962. At that time, General Paul D. Harkins of the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) had “no doubt” that the United States was “on the winning side.”<sup>19</sup> He anticipated it would “about one year” to eliminate the guerrilla forces after the South Vietnamese forces were sufficiently strengthened.<sup>20</sup> McNamara then concluded that the guerrillas could be neutralized within “approximately 3 years.”<sup>21</sup>

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16. William P. Bundy, “Kennedy and Vietnam,” in *The Kennedy Presidency: Seventeen Intimate Perspectives of John F. Kennedy*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), 255; Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1988), 34–41; Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1993), 105, 117–26; W.J. Rorabaugh, *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 64.

17. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 358.

18. *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945–1967*, Book 3, section IV. B. 4, 16.

19. Record of the Sixth Secretary of Defense Conference at Honolulu, July 23, 1962, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 2 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 546.

20. *Ibid.*, 548.

21. *Ibid.*, 549.



By the time the formulation of a phased withdrawal plan started, a spokesman in the Pentagon stated that the Americans and the South Vietnamese had “turned the corner” in the fighting in Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> Harkins’ conviction that the United States had been “certainly on the right track” toward an ultimate victory did not change.<sup>23</sup> He even portrayed the Viet Cong as “a rat caught in a trap with no place to go and being constantly annoyed.”<sup>24</sup>

The argument that Kennedy would have withdrawn the troops from Vietnam even at the cost of a humiliating defeat is unfounded. The United States would have left Vietnam only *after* winning the war. A withdrawal would have been possible only when many other conditions were completely satisfied: if the South Vietnamese had become a dependable political and military ally; if they had learned how to fight a guerrilla war and how to administer their own government in a proper way; if they had solved the crisis caused by the Buddhist anti-government movement; if the Viet Cong along with the leaders in Hanoi had refrained from an escalation for fear of risking a general war with the United States; if Khrushchev had been successful in persuading Ho Chi Minh or Mao Zedong to give up their hope of an early unification of Vietnam by force.

#### 4. Rejected Exits

Kennedy accepted the termination of the civil war in Laos in the summer of 1962. The formula was to neutralize this small country by establishing a coalition government consisting of communist, anti-communist, and neutral Laotians. The proposal made by French President Charles de Gaulle in August 1963 for a neutralized Vietnam might have enabled him to follow a similar path.

The Kennedy administration in fact gave no serious consideration to this option because of the unreliability of the communist promises, the disappointment at the start of the civil war in Laos soon after the ceasefire, disgust at the thought of sitting at a conference table with the communists, and fear that any negotiation could well lead to a possibly disastrous policy of appeasement similar to what the world had experienced at the Munich Conference of 1938.

Another chance for withdrawal appeared in the spring of 1963. The South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, a substantial backbone of the regime, demanded a sharp reduction of the number of American personnel, both military and civilian. They had been frustrated with

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22. William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 250.

23. Memorandum of the Secretary of Defense Conference at Honolulu, May 6, 1963, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 3 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 265.

24. Letter, Harkins to Ngo Dinh Diem, May 15, 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 3, 299.



the rapid increase of American military advisers and resented the American infringe on South Vietnam's national sovereignty. This could have been a golden opportunity for Kennedy. He was once asked how he planned to manage the withdrawal from Vietnam without America losing its prestige. "Easy," he replied. "Put a government in there that will ask us to leave."<sup>25</sup>

Kennedy was, however, embarrassed and refused to withdraw. He was afraid that the American public would conclude that the U.S. had no obligation to defend a country that does not want to be defended. He persuaded the Diem regime of the necessity of maintaining and even enlarging the American advisory group to defend South Vietnam against communist aggressions and to rule the South Vietnamese in an effective and democratic way. For Kennedy, withdrawing from Vietnam was one thing, but being sent away was quite another.

One more opportunity for Kennedy to quit the fighting before it was too late was wasted. Nhu, possibly with the acquiescence of his brother, the president, had been secretly in touch with the cadre of the NLF and the agents of the government in Hanoi, mainly for the purpose of retaining the power even after a defeat. Roger Lalouette, French Ambassador to Saigon, and Mieczyslaw Maneli, chief of the Polish delegation to the International Control Commission (ICC) established in 1954, were willing to be mediators between the communist and non-communist Vietnamese.

Washington tried its best to prevent a successful conclusion of the negotiations. The Kennedy administration's fear of being sold out by Diem and Nhu was shared by the South Vietnamese generals who removed Diem three weeks prior to Kennedy's assassination.

Thus, it becomes evident that Kennedy refused almost every potentially honorable way out of the Vietnam War.

### **III: Cold War Diplomacy in Foreign and Domestic Contexts**

#### **1. Holding the Truce Line**

Kennedy has been highly regarded for his successful solution of crises such as those in Berlin, Laos, Cuba, and the Congo, the installation of the so-called hot line between Moscow and Washington, the conclusion of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), and the export of wheat to the Russians. He also called for a peaceful coexistence with the communist bloc in his historic speech at the American University in June 1963. He even advocated a joint U.S.-Soviet flight to the moon instead of continuing a useless space race between the two countries.

However, the philosophy dominating Kennedy's diplomacy did not essentially deviate from those of his predecessors, Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight

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25. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, 18.

D. Eisenhower. All trouble spots in the world were regarded as crucial testing grounds of will and power between the two superpowers and, especially, the two leaders engaged in a diplomatic duel. Kennedy had to avoid being or appearing soft on communism.

The president believed in the principle of falling dominoes, fearing that one local setback would be followed by another, with its chain reaction causing irreversible effects for the American posture all around the globe. He admitted to the possibility of “a collapse” not only of South Vietnam but also of Southeast Asia as a whole.<sup>26</sup> Even the Middle East would be in jeopardy, if Vietnam was lost to communist forces.<sup>27</sup> In a TV interview in early September 1963, he repeated his strong belief in the so-called domino theory because of the large influence of Communist China.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1960 presidential election, Kennedy and the Democratic Party had attacked the foreign policy of the Republican administration for allowing for the expansion of communist influence in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Kennedy was set not to repeat the same mistakes. According to Walt W. Rostow, an economist who joined the administration as a national security adviser, the United States had to hold the “truce lines of the Cold War” dividing the planet into two parts.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. Search for the Status Quo

When the communist bloc suddenly began building the wall separating East and West Berlin in the summer of 1961, Kennedy refrained from any action except for a show of strength and determination to defend West Berlin by dispatching U.S. troops, his vice president, and General Lucius D. Clay who had been the commander in Berlin during the Soviet blockade of the western part of the city in the late 1940s. That spot, as well as Germany and Europe as a whole, had already been divided into communist and non-communist areas. Red bricks and barbed wires did not alter the political reality already existing for more than a

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26. The President’s News Conference of July 19, 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy 1963*, 569.

27. The President’s News Conference of March 6, 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy 1963*, 244.

28. Transcript of Broadcast on NBC’s “Huntley-Brinkley Report,” September 9, 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy 1963*, 659.

29. Memorandum, Rostow to Kennedy, November 11, 1961, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 1 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 574. Rostow also called the lines separating the eastern and the western blocs the “post-war truce lines” or the “cold war truce lines.” Memorandum, Rostow to Kennedy, November 14, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 1, 602; W.W. Rostow, *View from the Seventh Floor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 112.

decade.

A neutralized Laos was a better option for Kennedy than giving up the country's northern part by demarcation or losing the whole country to the communist Pathet Lao movement, considering the weakness of the right-wing forces the Americans had supported since the mid-1950s. In Vietnam, the most important goal was to protect the anti-communist regime south of the 17th parallel against aggression by the guerrillas supported by North Vietnam. Kennedy told Indian Minister of Defense V.K. Krishna Menon that he "would like to see the United States out of that area, but would not want its withdrawal to leave control to the North." He even admitted that "the best thing is for Vietnam to remain divided" and he wanted to "avoid an unfavorable shift of power in Vietnam."<sup>30</sup>

Kennedy hated Castro's regime in Cuba because the socialist island in the Caribbean Sea had been a symbol of communist infringement on the line separating the two spheres of influence. He did not hesitate to step up American covert operations there, including sabotages, subversions, and even the assassination attempts of Castro. Massive economic and military aid were poured into the Latin American countries in the name of the Alliance for Progress to prevent any unfavorable change and the spread of communist revolution in the Western Hemisphere.

### 3. Limits of the Pax Russo-Americana

Kennedy's quest for peace depended on at least tacit consent by the Soviet leader. However, Khrushchev declared his support of every national liberation war in the developing world two weeks before Kennedy's inauguration. The new U.S. president regarded it as a grave affront to the United States and to himself, although this statement was in essence a response to the Chinese communists' attack on the Kremlin for sacrificing revolutionary movements to accommodate the Americans and buy safety in the nuclear age.

Kennedy's answer to the Soviet leader was a newly formulated doctrine of counterinsurgency and his willingness to demonstrate in Vietnam that it would work effectively in an unconventional war. This small country thus became an arena of collision between the strategies for maintaining the status quo and for the communist-led revolutionary uprisings.

An agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union maintaining two Vietnamese states could secure no approval by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. History showed that Hanoi's desire for reunification transcended any

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30. Memorandum of Conversation at Washington, November 21, 1961, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 19 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), 141.

directive from Moscow or Beijing. Even if the North Vietnamese had accepted Russian or Chinese demands for restraint, the NLF leaders in the south, with their own power base and objectives, probably would not listen to orders coming from the north to lower the level of attacks against the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem.

In April 1963, when the crisis in Laos had almost reached its peak, Khrushchev admitted to W. Averell Harriman who had been in charge of the peace talks at Geneva that the Soviets had “very limited information” on the events in Laos and a “very limited ability” to influence the situation there.<sup>31</sup> Leonard S. Unger, American Ambassador to Vientiane, also observed that the Russians could in fact exert “very little” influence over the behavior of the communist Laotians or Vietnamese, as he explained to President Kennedy several months later.<sup>32</sup>

Not only Berlin but also Cuba remained points of possible U.S.-Soviet confrontation even at the time of Kennedy’s death. Neither a comprehensive test ban treaty nor an agreement preventing nuclear proliferation was in sight. Cooperation in space explorations was still a distant dream. A long way remained on the road toward the establishment of what is called the Pax Russo-Americana, an international order maintained through cooperation between the two giants in world politics. In addition, Red China rather than the Soviet Union had become the most formidable enemy of the Americans by 1963, with its influence upon small nations in Asia growing and with the Sino-Soviet disputes becoming increasingly heated.

#### 4. Re-election by Landslide Wanted

Kennedy’s fateful trip to Dallas was an early move in his campaign for a targeted re-election in 1964. This time, a landslide victory was badly needed to enable more achievements in his second term. He could neither afford to replace his running mate Johnson with a more preferable candidate nor refuse to go to Texas, which possessed as many as 25 electoral votes, constituting more than 9 percent of the required votes. Worse, his support of the civil rights movement had cost him a share of his political backing in the southern states.

It was therefore a reasonable decision for him to postpone the withdrawal from Vietnam until after November 1964. Kennedy, as a junior senator from Massachusetts, portrayed eight American Senators’ courageous behavior in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, in 1956. Less than a decade

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31. Memorandum of Conversation at Moscow, April 26, 1963, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 24 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 1001.

32. Memorandum of Conversation at Washington, July 18, 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 24, 1035.

later, he revealed his indecision and lack of political courage in his dealings with the Vietnam issue as a president.

There were, however, some occasions when he showed political courage. He was willing to risk his re-election if the success of the Civil Rights Bill or the Partial Test Ban Treaty could be secured. He was determined to carry on the moral fighting against racial discrimination in America. He sincerely wished to ensure better lives for his and others' children all over the world by relieving them of the fear of nuclear holocaust.

However, he conducted no campaign to convince the American public or the Congress of his withdrawal plan even at the risk of losing South Vietnam to the communists. He found it extremely difficult to overcome the hard-line anti-communism within the American society. It would have been a task next to impossible for any president during the Cold War.

Furthermore, Kennedy had a responsibility to his own family. What would have happened to the political careers of his two younger brothers, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Senator Edward Kennedy, if he really had retreated from one of the most important battlefields of the Cold War and suffered a great loss in his prestige as a statesman? Could John F. Kennedy afford to sacrifice the dream of the dynasty dominating American politics? There is a high probability that he chose to reject such a road because it would lead to the deep disappointment of his family members.

#### **IV: The Myth Still Lives On**

##### **1. Wishing to Pull Out and Stay**

In sum, there is serious doubt about Kennedy's intention to disengage from Vietnam by 1965 at any cost. Instead, he was trying to increase, not decrease, the intervention in Vietnam until the time of his unexpected death. Similarly, his disengagement policy would not have worked well in the context of the American commitment in Southeast Asia, the requirements of the Cold War diplomacy, election politics within the United States, and the ambitions of the Kennedys.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a historian and Kennedy's special assistant, observed that the president was certainly "looking for the way out."<sup>33</sup> However, Kennedy confessed to one of his aides that he was willing to get the Americans out of Vietnam but added: "Exactly how I'm going to do it, right now, I don't know."<sup>34</sup> In May 1963, Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson advised Kennedy that the United States should "get out" of Vietnam as soon as possible.

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33. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 774.

34. Ralph G. Martin, *A Hero for Our Time: An Intimate Story of the Kennedy Years* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1983), 465.

The latter replied: “That’s a stupid answer. Everybody knows that. The question is: How do we get out?”<sup>35</sup>

Few advocates of the sincerity of Kennedy’s withdrawal plan can deny the ambiguity of his Vietnam policy. He was neither ready to surrender the country to the communists nor prepared to dispatch large American forces to defend it. He wanted to minimize the conflict and let the Vietnamese fight on behalf of the Americans and, simultaneously, to expand the activities of the U.S. military personnel to assure victory in this counter-guerrilla warfare.

The president told Ambassador Lodge at the end of August 1963, while he was pondering if the United States should promote a coup d’état to oust the Diem government, that failure would be “more destructive than an appearance of indecision” as demonstrated by his own failure in the so-called Bay of Pigs invasion to overthrow Castro’s regime in Cuba more than two years earlier.<sup>36</sup> Kennedy’s course of action was focused on what he believed to be the least required in maintaining South Vietnam and buying time as long as he could. As Sorensen later admitted, Kennedy had “left the United States neither fully in nor fully out.”<sup>37</sup>

## 2. Never-Ending Dreams

Many people have sketched out ideal scenarios regarding Kennedy’s possible actions on Vietnam, despite the huge difficulties he would certainly have faced in the process of evacuation. Several factors contributing to the magic surrounding the idea of what might have been can be identified.

The image of Kennedy as a great leader with noble ideals was produced intentionally by his widow Jacqueline, the Kennedy family, and his sympathizers. According to this image, the glorious days of Kennedy’s White House were suddenly and regrettably ended by several bullets in Dallas. Kennedy then became “a man who flashed across the sky for a brief moment,” according to Schlesinger’s recollection.<sup>38</sup>

The powerful illusion created by the Kennedy assassination has also been a reflection of the American people’s feeling that everything had gone wrong since that sunny day in November 1963: a raging war in Vietnam; racial riots in cities

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35. Chalmers M. Roberts, *First Rough Draft: A Journalist’s Journal of Our Times* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 195–6.

36. Message from Kennedy to Lodge, August 29, 1963, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 4 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 35.

37. Sorensen, *Counselor*, 359.

38. Gerald S. Strober and Deborah H. Strober, *“Let Us Begin Anew”*: *An Oral History of the Kennedy Presidency* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 498.

and towns across the United States; a worsening public safety situation; the collapse of the U.S. economy; repeated lies told and crimes committed by presidents; a sharp decline of American influence in international politics. The death of Kennedy was regarded as the beginning of these days full of nightmares.

Portraying Kennedy as a highly respected statesman trying hard to withdraw from Vietnam and to establish world peace has been based on the complete separation of his character from every misperception and mistake made by the United States government. In this version of history, it were his successor Johnson, military leaders, hawkish politicians, the military-industrial complex, and an anti-communist public opinion that led the country to the great tragedy of Vietnam.

### 3. After the Shining Moment

Such an argument has derived from the more or less subconscious belief in the omnipotence of the United States as a superpower and its president as a superman in the world arena. When Kennedy wanted a war, he could have started one. If he really wished peace, he should have implemented it. In reality, even a great power led by a respected and influential leader can never be relieved of the many constraints of every nation or human being. Neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev could escape from this trap. An agreement between the two leaders could have changed the world possibly to a great extent, but only with the assistance of many factors surrounding them.

Pondering what might have been and blaming outside forces without facing the harsh reality and admitting responsibility for actual events and actions might make life easier. However, the majority of Americans did support Johnson, enabling him to beat Republican Senator Barry M. Goldwater with a landslide victory in November 1964. They also endorsed Johnson's decision to start bombing North Vietnam as retaliation for torpedo attacks on American destroyers. Johnson was fearful of becoming the first president ever to lose a war because of strong anti-communist feeling within the United States. The American public generally supported the war in Vietnam until the mid-1960s.

### 4. Kennedy as a Political Leader

Kennedy was at least potentially a great leader, besides the criticism of his Vietnam and Cold War policies noted above. Kennedy had grown to be a full-fledged president during his 1,037 days in the White House. He had increasingly been accepted and admired as a true world leader. Many would agree that five more years of his presidency would have produced a different history.

He was also a politician well suited for the atmosphere of the 1960s, when people believed that the political situation was headed in a happier and more



peaceful direction and that they could and would overcome the difficulties in their society. Problems of peace and war, disarmament, poverty and hunger, diseases, racial discrimination, ignorance and prejudice had been, as Kennedy said, “manmade” without exception. Therefore, all of them could and should be solved by man’s “reason and spirit.”<sup>39</sup> Thus he led the United States and the world into an era full of changes, hopes, and possibilities. Many people, young and old, could not escape the feeling that they had been deprived of their own hopes of a better future when Kennedy was killed.

Only a few months after Kennedy’s unexpected death four young musicians from England attracted American boys and girls. Some insist that the Beatles immediately won their hearts by filling the psychological vacuum of the teenagers. The “Fabulous Four” provided the whole country with an upswing in their morale.<sup>40</sup> The sense of loss had been providing the fuel for enduring dreams of “what if” scenarios and it will remain that way at least in the near future.

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