1 Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been

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No aspect of John F. Kennedy's public image and record has been more controversial than his role in the Vietnam War. The disastrous results of that conflict for the United States, combined with the critical timing of Kennedy's death—shortly after a US-sponsored coup against South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem and not long before the crucial escalation decisions of late 1964/early 1965—guaranteed that his administration's policy on Vietnam would get close attention from those trying to understand what went wrong and why.\(^1\) The suddenness of Kennedy's death has added fuel to the debate. His admirers have asked us to judge him by his intentions rather than his accomplishments, for, they have argued, his good intentions would have reached fruition had he not been removed from his appointed journey so abruptly in November 1963. For Vietnam this would have meant a de-escalation of the American involvement in the war, not a massive expansion as occurred under Lyndon B. Johnson. There can be no doubting the main objective of these admirers: they want to insulate JFK from the subsequent American débâcle in Southeast Asia. But Kennedy's record in Vietnam was sufficiently ambiguous and complex to allow for such an interpretation, to convince even many independent observers that he would have acted differently than his successor did. JFK did dramatically increase the American presence in the war—the roughly 800 US military “advisers” to the Saigon government when he took office had become more than 16,000 when he died, and total American spending in Vietnam increased dramatically on his watch. But Kennedy also declined opportunities for a more radical escalation of the US commitment. Only later, under another president, would the decisions come that made Vietnam an American war, exacting such a bloody price from Americans and Vietnamese.

Though scholars who write on the Kennedy record in Vietnam invariably feel compelled to address the question of what he might have done had he lived, they tend to do so cursorily and, in many cases, with obvious reluctance.\(^2\) No doubt this reluctance stems at
least in part from the widespread animus among professional historians against “counterfactual” analysis. Historians, so the argument goes, should not concern themselves with hypothetical matters. That kind of thing is unscholarly, since it leads away from the actual and verifiable to the imaginary and unprovable; as such, it should be left to poets and science fiction writers. This critique is far from new. In his 1961 Trevelyan Lectures E. H. Carr dismissed counterfactual analysis as a “parlour game” which does not have “anything to do with history.” A century and a half before that, Herder warned: “History is the science of what is, not of that which, according to secret intentions of fate, might have been.”3

It is the contention here that these assertions are mistaken. Consideration of that which never happened is necessary for reaching historical understanding. True, in careless hands such speculation can range from fanciful flights of imagination all the way to flogging the dead for not having done what we would have done. But properly done, the investigation of unrealized possibilities, of roads not taken, provides critical insight into why things turned out the way they did. As such, thinking about alternatives is an indispensable part of the historian’s craft – we can judge the forces that prevailed only by comparing them with those that were defeated. All historians, whenever they make causal judgments, are engaging in speculation, are envisioning alternative developments, even when these alternatives are not stated explicitly.4 To vow to say nothing counterfactually thus can mean saying nothing at all, a point Alexander Demandt has made well. “Historians usually emphasize the inadmissibility of ‘what if?’ questions just as they themselves reach the point where they can no longer avoid them, where they have just given an answer or are about to give one,” Demandt has observed. “To this extent, the science of history must be protected against its own theory. . . . ‘Keep out’ signs on unavoidable paths are foolish. One should be satisfied with ‘Enter at your own risk.’”5

To be sure, travelers on the “unavoidable paths” of alternate history must take care to prepare adequately before departure, and to learn that some paths are more treacherous than others, lest they be accused of the fanciful speculation alluded to earlier. First and foremost, the different outcome they propose must be plausible, must lie within the domain of the conceivable. Not all counterfactual assumptions are equally valid. It is objectively possible, for example, that Stalin could have chosen not to purge the bulk of his officer corps in the 1930s, with all the consequences that this entailed. But it is inconceivable that he could have unilaterally disarmed the Soviet Union at the end of the Pacific War in 1945. Mussolini could have spared the Ethiopians, but he could not have changed Italy into the collection of small states that existed prior to unification in 1860–1. Historical “what ifs” increase exponentially in number with their distance from the conceivable, and those that are merely possible, regardless of their chance of realization, are of little value. How, then, to determine what is plausible? The only way is by close and rigorous examination of, first, the relevant pre-history – in our case American policy in Vietnam prior to 22 November 1963; and, second, the actual contemporary history – for us the decision-making in the critical months from the Dallas assassination to the Americanization of the war in 1965. In addition, counterfactual analysis should operate within the existing general rules of experience; that is to say, it should not invent new personalities, nations, or institutions, but should operate with the given actors according to the given rules on the given playing field. When the alternative history fails to adhere to these rules of experience – when it asks what would have happened at Waterloo if Napoleon had had an atomic bomb, for example – it loses legitimacy and becomes pointless.6

Moreover, counterfactual history should be regarded as an instrument for the elucidation of relatively short-term changes. That is, the hypothetical alternative should enjoy close temporal proximity to the point of departure from historical reality (the “branching point,” as Jon Elster calls it), for, once the period under review lengthens, the number of unconsidered and nonconsiderable factors that bear on the outcome increases fast and the significance of the results diminishes even faster. “When we draw the line of possible eventualities too far out of the immediate period,” Sidney Hook has aptly warned, “the mind staggers under the cumulative weight of the unforeseen.” Hence the problematic nature of Winston Churchill’s alternate history whereby a victory by Lee at Gettysburg would have prevented the outbreak of World War I.7

Fortunately, these various criteria for constructing plausible unrealized alternatives can be met in examining the subject of a surviving John F. Kennedy’s Vietnam policy. The period 1963–5 is recent by historians’ standards, but we already have a staggering amount of available documentary evidence on US decision-making on Vietnam, much of it in published form.8 It is therefore possible to engage in close examination of both the pre-history and the actual contemporary history, and to do so within the general rules of experience. In
addition, the short period in question—roughly eighteen months—allows us to assume a minimum number of concomitant changes in other variables.

More likely to spark disagreement is the question of whether a Kennedy-and-Vietnam alternate history meets another important prerequisite for meaningful counterfactual analysis: a great deal must hinge on the issue. Investigating the influence of chance is comparatively uninteresting when the subject is largely independent of individual decisions. Some Vietnam scholars see the Americanization of the war as overdetermined, as a result of powerful, structural forces largely immune to the whims of whoever might be occupying the White House. This essay argues otherwise. It maintains that, while the roots of the Vietnam intervention lay deep, the ultimate decision to launch a large-scale war in the jungles of Southeast Asia was highly dependent on individual decisions. The importance of human agency, of contingency, was paramount. Viable options existed for American policymakers, both before and after November 1963, options advocated contemporaneously by important voices at home and abroad.

With the legitimacy, indeed imperativeness, of counterfactual theorizing asserted, let us commence our examination of John F. Kennedy's Vietnam policy and what he might have done had he lived. The hypothetical antecedent, that Kennedy was not murdered, has thus been established at the outset. The hypothetical consequences could be numerous, but two broad possibilities seem most important: that the Americanization of the conflict, involving the dispatch of major US ground forces, did occur, much as it did in the actual history under Lyndon Johnson; or that the Americanization did not take place. Our knowledge of the pre-history and the actual contemporary history allows us to conclude that several more extreme hypothetical consequences fail to meet the plausibility test—that Kennedy would have ordered the dropping of a nuclear bomb on Hanoi in 1964, for example, or that he would have unilaterally and immediately withdrawn all American personnel from Vietnam upon his return from Dallas.

The argument that if Oswald had been a lesser marksman there would have been no American war in Indochina is far from new. Versions of this thesis have reached a wide audience since the the late 1960s, usually through books written by Kennedy associates. From the start the thesis contained two key assertions: not merely that Americanization would have been avoided under Kennedy, but that he had already decided in favor of an unrealized alternative—to withdraw from Vietnam, even without victory—prior to his assassination. Kennedy, so this argument goes, was determined not to let Vietnam become an American war. He understood that the conflict had become a quagmire. Therefore, he planned to extricate the United States after (or perhaps before) the 1964 election, regardless of the state of the war. As evidence, these authors typically cite Kennedy's continual refusal to commit American ground troops to the war, despite the urgings of top advisers; the October 1963 declaration that 1,000 US military advisers would be withdrawn by the end of 1963; his skepticism about a coup against South Vietnamese leader Diem; and his belief, stated most notably in his 2 September 1963 television interview with Walter Cronkite, that in the end this was a war that the South Vietnamese themselves would have to win. Some also refer to private comments made by Kennedy to the effect that he was determined to get out of Vietnam, come what may.

This claim that Kennedy had decided before his death to get out of the war obviously has hugely significant implications for our hypothetical exploration; as such, it requires early and close examination. It is an argument which won millions of new adherents in 1991, with the appearance of Oliver Stone's motion picture, JFK. Stone and his fellow screenwriters claimed to have authoritative scholarly support for their interpretation from a "ten year study" by John M. Newman, a work subsequently published in 1992, with Stone's help, as JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power. The movie and book do not advance identical views on the subject of Kennedy and Vietnam, particularly as to the war's relationship to the shooting in Dallas. Stone's film traced the assassination to a top-level conspiracy involving the Central Intelligence Agency, the American defense industry and the military, perhaps even Lyndon Johnson himself. The film, Stone subsequently told an audience at the National Press Club, posits that Kennedy was murdered "because he was determined to withdraw from and never send combat troops to Vietnam." It was an astonishing claim, but many were ready to believe. Norman Mailer, at a town hall forum in New York, told a large audience that "if Kennedy was going to end the war in Vietnam, he had to be replaced. Lyndon Johnson was the man to do it." Actor Kevin Costner, who played the film's hero, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, minced no words: "We have all become Hamlets in our country,
children of a slain father-leader whose killers still possess the throne."

The scale of the presumed conspiracy should be understood: it would have had to involve many dozens of individuals, all of whom not only thought expanding the war was preferable to preserving Kennedy’s life but also managed to keep their knowledge of the plot quiet for the following three and a half decades. Perhaps sensing the problems here, Newman in his study avoids drawing close links between the assassination and the war, though, as the subtitle of his book indicates, he weaves his own web of dark deception. Deception, indeed, is at the center of the book. Newman argues that Kennedy’s military and civilian advisers, anxious to press ahead for victory in Vietnam whatever the cost, continually and consciously deceived him as to the military and political situation in South Vietnam and the long-term prospects. Kennedy, in turn, deceived the advisers and the public about his intentions in the war. Many of the key actors, excepting the president himself, also deceived themselves.

Deceptions can be difficult things to demonstrate, of course, especially on as many levels as presented here. Too often, Newman cites documentary proof for this-or-that argument even though a close reading of the documentation in question shows that it proves little or nothing at all; too frequently he sees clear-cut evidence where none exists. Nevertheless, *JFK and Vietnam* is a book that must be taken seriously. It is by far the most detailed, documents-based examination of Kennedy’s involvement in Vietnam yet published, and the fullest explication we have of the thesis that JFK had made up his mind to disengage the US from the conflict. Moreover, the book has received high praise not only from Stone but from former Kennedy officials such as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, who lauded Newman’s “exhaustive examination” of the sources, and William J. Colby, who called the study “brilliant” and “meticulously researched.” For these and other adherents of the “incipient-withdrawal” thesis, the book shows that counterfactual theorizing about what Kennedy would have done in Vietnam is anything but fanciful speculation, since even before he died he had made up his mind: he would get out of the war. Newman’s recounting of the pre-history all but proves it.

But does it? One of Newman’s key arguments is that Kennedy had a secret plan to withdraw from Vietnam, a plan to which he became more and more committed as he realized the depth of the military’s deception about the state of the war. (By March 1963, Newman states at one point, the president “had figured out... that the success story was a deception.”) The internal record does indeed reveal a withdrawal plan, but it was not particularly “secret,” either inside or outside the administration. More important, the plan was always contingent on battlefield success. Thus it is not surprising that the plan should originate in mid-1962, one of the few periods of genuine optimism in the entire quarter-century of American involvement in Vietnam. “The prospects looked bright,” the editors of the *Pentagon Papers* wrote of this period, “and to many the end of the insurgency seemed in sight.” In July of that year, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, after expressing satisfaction with the progress in the war effort, instructed military officials to lay plans to phase out “major US advisory and logistic support activities” by the end of 1965, *provided* the military situation was under control.

Newman and several Kennedy acolytes suggest that the president had begun this total phase-out of American personnel before his death, as evidenced by the October 1963 announcement that 1,000 US advisers would be withdrawn by the end of the year. Had he returned from Texas alive, they argue, he would have followed this withdrawal with others, and in 1965 would have ended the American presence completely. But the documentary record makes quite clear that the 1,000-man withdrawal came about only because of a desire to counter the growing impression that Washington might be taking over the fighting, and because of confidence that the war ultimately would be won. A year earlier, in September 1962, Brigadier Robert G. K. Thompson, the respected head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam (BRIAM) and an early proponent of a partial reduction in the American presence, left no doubt as to the rationale for such a withdrawal after meeting Kennedy’s top military adviser General Maxwell Taylor. “I also raised again [with Taylor] the possibility of a token American reduction, perhaps just as a result of house cleaning, some time next year at a suitable opportunity,” Thompson wrote to his superiors in London. The move would defuse Communist charges that the war was becoming an American affair, and would “keep the Communists in the dock with a finger clearly pointed at them.” Thompson emphasized that the reduction “should be entirely a unilateral move, well thought out and timed, so that it achieved the maximum effect without taking any of the pressure off here. We had to think of both winning political advantages as well as military ones.” In a meeting with Kennedy at the White House on 4 April 1963, Thompson repeated the suggestion, using similar language.
Nothing in the voluminous internal record for 1962 and 1963 suggests that any of the top American officials, including Kennedy, ever differed from Thompson in their rationale for a “token” withdrawal – the move would have political benefits, at home and abroad, and would be implemented in such a way as to have no deleterious impact on the war effort. Kennedy, indeed, in a conversation in the fall of 1963 not cited by Newman, indicated great personal skepticism about the whole notion of a limited withdrawal. Referring to the lengthy report filed by McNamara and Taylor upon their return from a fact-finding mission to Vietnam in early October, Kennedy objected to the phrase “by the end of the year” which preceded the assertion that “The U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam could be withdrawn.” Kennedy believed, wrote the notetaker for the meeting, “that if we were not able to take this action by the end of this year, we would be accused of being overoptimistic.” Battlefield realities, in other words, might make the withdrawal unfeasible. On Kennedy’s orders, the draft statement was changed to make the forecast part of the Taylor-McNamara report rather than a prediction by him.17

Newman’s failure to mention these Kennedy statements would be less important had he not made the 1,000-man withdrawal so central to his argument that Vietnam policy changed dramatically after the Kennedy murder. Specifically, he asserts that National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 263, the final policy directive of the Kennedy administration on Vietnam, differs in critical respects from NSAM 273, the first such directive of the administration of Lyndon Johnson. (Stone’s film makes the same claim: a six-second flash in JFK shows copies of the two NSAMs, as the soundtrack plays ominous music.)18 Kennedy’s obvious skepticism about even a small withdrawal makes this argument highly problematic, especially since the purpose of issuing NSAM 263 was to make the McNamara-Taylor report national policy – that is, the McNamara-Taylor report with the important Kennedy alteration noted above. When judged together, the McNamara-Taylor report, NSAM 263, and the accompanying cable to US Ambassador to Saigon Henry Cabot Lodge all demonstrate clearly that the 1,000-man withdrawal signaled no lessening of the American commitment to South Vietnam.

The cable to Lodge is especially instructive here. Read and approved by Kennedy, it noted that the NSAM sought to indicate to the Diem government the American displeasure at its policies and activities, and to make South Vietnamese leaders uncertain about Washington’s future intentions. “At the same time,” the cable continued, the “actions are designed to have at most a slight impact on the military and counterinsurgency effort against the Vietcong, at least in the short term,” and the president intended, at his next press conference, “to repeat his basic statement that what furthers the war effort we support, and what interferes with the war effort we oppose.” Kennedy did indeed make that point in a meeting with the press on 31 October. Tellingly, he also expressed caution on the issue of removing some US advisers. “If we are able to do that,” he said in reference to an end-of-the-year 1,000-man withdrawal, “that would be our schedule. I think the first unit or first contingent would be 250 men who are not involved in what might be called front-line operations. It would be our hope to lessen the number of Americans there by 1000, as the training intensifies and is carried on in Saigon.”19

In sum, NSAM 263 hardly represented the kind of far-reaching policy initiative that the incipient-withdrawal proponents suggest. It was but one part of a larger “selective pressures” policy designed to push the Diem regime into greater effectiveness in both governing and prosecuting the war against the Vietcong (VC) and its political arm, the National Liberation Front (NLF). No further withdrawals were envisioned; more advisers could be sent in the future, if the situation demanded. The “fundamental objective of victory,” as Kennedy told Lodge, remained paramount. As for NSAM 273, issued on 26 November 1963, four days after JFK’s death, it did not institute any kind of reversal of the 1,000-man reduction. The withdrawal, it read, would “remain as stated” in NSAM 263, and the 1,000 men in fact were removed at the end of the year. There were actually two drafts of NSAM 273, one penned on 20 November – two days before Kennedy’s death and intended for his signature – after a meeting among senior US officials in Honolulu, and the other the final version approved by Johnson six days later. The two were essentially identical, except for a paragraph pertaining to military action against North Vietnam (which had been going on covertly and under US direction, it should be noted, since 1962). Even here, the differences were not significant. More important, neither draft signaled a significant departure from NSAM 263, or from the various other high-level documents in October and November.20

These fundamental flaws in the assertions that the 1,000-man withdrawal plan represented a critical policy departure, and that NSAM 273 marked a sharp break from NSAM 263, would appear to drive a
stake through the heart of the incipient-withdrawal thesis. But Newman has an answer: these objections, he would say, miss the point that Kennedy's plan to get out was a secret plan. Just as JFK's hawkish advisers deceived him about the military progress in the war, so he deceived them—and the press—as to his intentions. Just because NSAM 273 was intended for Kennedy's signature, therefore, does not mean that he would have signed it had he lived; even if he had signed it, that would merely indicate that he had to maintain the deception while continuing to lay the groundwork for extrication. In considering Kennedy's secret plan, Newman asks his readers to differentiate between what the president proclaimed publicly and what he said privately, though by "private" Newman has something particular in mind: off-the-record, one-on-one conversations. Larger private meetings with key advisers (and a notetaker) are to his mind far less telling, again because of the two-way deception going on. As a result, even though JFK and Vietnam is in general a heavily documented work, Newman's argument concerning the withdrawal plan and its meaning rests almost exclusively on the published memoirs of a few senior Kennedy aides.

Former White House aide Kenneth O'Donnell's 1972 memoir occupies a particularly central place. In it O'Donnell recalled Kennedy telling Senator Mike Mansfield that he agreed with the senator "on the need for a complete military withdrawal" from Vietnam, though it would have to wait until after the 1964 election. According to Newman, O'Donnell's story "makes it abundantly clear that Kennedy knew the war was a lost cause, and that his problem was how to disguise his intentions until after the election." Later, Newman assures the reader that "there is no doubt that Kennedy made these confidential remarks" to Mansfield. Although the president may indeed have made the comments—the senator in several subsequent oral histories confirmed as much, though he disputed O'Donnell's contention that Kennedy had said he must wait to get out until after the election—it is not at all "clear" what this means. Kennedy, like most successful politicians (if success be defined by the ballot box), was adept at telling people what they wanted to hear, at voicing to doves that he would never Americanize the war and assuring hawks that he would never abandon the commitment. He may have meant what he told Mansfield, or maybe not. Recollections by underlings dedicated to affirming their boss's reputation, while not without value, are weak reeds upon which to build an argument.

The timing of these recollections is also important. O'Donnell's book appeared only after the war had turned incontrovertibly sour for the United States. So did the other books by Kennedy associates arguing the same line, among them volumes by White House aides Arthur Schlesinger (1978) and Theodore Sorensen (1969). In these books, as in Newman's, the argument is made that the president intended to withdraw from the war, come what may. Interestingly, however, in earlier books, published before the war became widely perceived as hopeless, neither Schlesinger nor Sorensen said anything about such a Kennedy decision. In Schlesinger's thousand-page history of Kennedy's thousand days, published in 1965 and largely drafted in 1964, the withdrawal plan gets one sentence, and that one attributes the plan to an initiative by McNamara. In Sorensen's account of the administration, which appeared about the same time, no withdrawal plan is mentioned. On Vietnam, Sorensen wrote, JFK's "essential contribution" was to avoid the extremes advocated "by those impatient to win or withdraw." Finally, administration aide Roger Hilsman, later a proponent of the view "that Kennedy, before his death, had begun to implement a plan to withdraw from Vietnam," emphasized in the mid-1960s the continuity between JFK and LBJ, insisting that Johnson sought to implement his predecessor's policies on Southeast Asia.

To further complicate the picture, several other top aides have dismissed the idea that Kennedy had decided to get out. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, for example, argued forcefully in the late 1980s that Kennedy had made no decision to disengage from the war after the 1964 election. "I talked with John Kennedy on hundreds of occasions about Southeast Asia," Rusk noted in his memoirs, "and not once did he suggest or even hint at withdrawal." In what appears to be a direct reference to the incipient-withdrawal school, Rusk pointed out that "Kennedy liked to bat the breeze and toss ideas around, and it is entirely possible that he left the impression with some that he planned on getting out of Vietnam after 1965." But that did not mean Kennedy had made any such decision. "Had he done so," Rusk asserted, "I think I would have known about it." Similar sentiments were voiced after the Stone movie appeared by mid-level officials Walt W. Rostow and William P. Bundy. To be sure, these men might have had ulterior motives of their own: as active participants in the escalation decisions under Johnson, they might have wished to emphasize the continuities between the two administrations, and indeed between all the post-1945 administrations. But consider
also the comments of Robert F. Kennedy, who would appear to have had no such agenda, and who presumably knew his brother better than anyone. In a 1964 oral history interview the younger Kennedy confirmed that the administration had not seriously considered a withdrawal. When asked what the president would have done if the South Vietnamese were on the brink of defeat, Robert replied: “We’d face that when we came to it.”

Quite apart from these problems in reading extrication intentions into the 1,000-man withdrawal plan and in drawing conclusions from private comments Kennedy may or may not have made prior to his murder, there is an additional reason to doubt that he had made any decision before Dallas to disengage from the war; namely, his administration’s unbending opposition to seeking a negotiated settlement to the conflict. From its earliest days, the administration signaled its intention to pursue the war effort against the Vietcong. Neither Kennedy nor his advisers assumed office with any intention of reviewing critically the policies they inherited from the Eisenhower team. Though they agreed that earlier perceptions of a Moscow-based monolith, which had helped create the initial opposition to Ho Chi Minh, had been inaccurate (Eisenhower officials had themselves come to this conclusion), they were convinced that repeated assertions of a US interest in Vietnam had made for a vital commitment which the new president could not ignore. Thus in May 1961 Kennedy put his signature to NSAM 52, which described the US objective as preventing Communist domination of South Vietnam; and thus in November of that year he endorsed NSAM 111, which changed the American commitment from a relatively limited and restrained one to a much larger one, thereby increasing the US stake in guaranteeing the preservation of a non-Communist South Vietnam.

In adopting NSAMs 52 and 111 Kennedy did reject calls from several senior aides for a more dramatic escalation of the American contribution to the war effort, and he frequently voiced a desire to keep Vietnam from becoming an American war. To journalist Arthur Krock in the fall of 1961 he expressed severe doubts about whether the United States should interfere in “civil disturbances caused by guerrillas,” adding that “it was hard to prove that this wasn’t largely the situation in Vietnam.” But JFK also ruled out a diplomatic settlement. Beginning in the spring of 1961, when he agreed to seek a conference-table solution in Laos, and extending right through to the end of his administration, Kennedy received frequent suggestions that he seek a political solution in Vietnam also; each time, he said no. During the deliberations in November 1961, for example, the president rejected arguments from Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, from Ambassador-at-Large and chief Laos negotiator W. Averell Harriman, and from US Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith, that the dismal picture in South Vietnam necessitated extending the Laos talks to cover Vietnam as well. Kennedy believed the domestic and international costs of such a “retreat” would be too high, and he opted instead for NSAM 111. Thus began the steady rise in the US contribution to the war effort. By the end of 1961 the number of American military advisers – who were now authorized to take part in combat operations – stood at 3,205 (more than four times the number allowed under the 1954 Geneva agreement); by the end of 1962 they had increased to almost 9,000; and by the middle of 1963 they reached their ultimate level under Kennedy’s leadership of roughly 16,000.

These measures, while helpful in stabilizing somewhat the military situation, failed to address what had always been the central problem in the anti-Communist effort in South Vietnam: the weakness of the Saigon government. Winning popular support had never been a high priority for Ngo Dinh Diem, and by 1963 his failure to enact political and economic reforms had caused widespread discontent throughout South Vietnam. In the spring of that year, the majority Buddhists staged mass demonstrations in major cities. The Catholic-dominated regime responded with a harsh crackdown orchestrated by Diem’s powerful brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and the result was a state of prolonged political crisis in South Vietnam which would persist through the regime’s collapse in November. To many the Buddhist uprisings were an unmistakable symptom of the unraveling of the South Vietnamese social fabric, and they gave JFK an avenue for disengagement that risked considerably less domestic political damage than ever before; he could have claimed that Diem and Nhu had flagrantly violated the stipulations for aid laid down by Dwight Eisenhower in 1954. But he chose not to do so. Despite the failure of repeated American attempts to get Diem to compromise with the Buddhists, and despite growing evidence of increased NLF/VC strength in the countryside. Instead, Kennedy chose to continue America’s involvement in the conflict. “We are not going to withdraw from [this] effort,” he vowed at a news conference on 17 July.
Four months passed between this pronouncement and Kennedy’s death, four months during which Vietnam for the first time became a top-priority, day-to-day foreign policy concern of the United States—it would remain such for the next ten years—and during which the Kennedy administration deepened US involvement in the affairs of South Vietnam. Devotees of the incipient-withdrawal thesis rightly see this period as important (Newman devotes almost a hundred pages to it), and they maintain that during it Kennedy cemented his decision to disengage from the struggle at the earliest opportunity. That the president was unhappy about the war at this time is clear, and it is not hard to imagine him telling Mansfield and others that he wanted out of the war. However, a close examination of the documentary evidence for these four months reveals little sign of an actual intention to withdraw. Two themes stand out in these months, which together are a powerful argument for a steadfast Kennedy still committed to staying in Vietnam.31

The first theme is the palpable fear among senior American officials, including Kennedy, of premature negotiations for an end to the war. When French President Charles de Gaulle publicly advocated such a solution in late August, US officials, far from being enticed and/or relieved, were acutely alarmed. Mindful of de Gaulle’s important place on the international stage, and of continuing French cultural influence in Vietnam, these men worried that de Gaulle’s comments, coming as they did at a time of growing chaos in the South, would find support in the world community and in Vietnam itself. Throughout the fall, representatives of the administration strove unsuccessfully to convince the French president to alter his stance or at least keep quiet about it. When the influential American columnist Walter Lippmann voiced support for de Gaulle’s desire to move the struggle from the military to the political sphere, as had been done in Laos, senior officials expressed displeasure. And when the New York Times began advocating neutralization for Vietnam in its editorials, administration spokesmen were sent to the paper to convey White House opposition.32

This American trepidation about premature negotiations—premature because the Saigon government could not possibly enter talks in an advantageous position, given the political instability in the South and the increasing NLF/VC strength—grew stronger when the CIA noted reports that Ngo Dinh Nhu had begun secret contacts with the NLF and Hanoi for a possible accommodation. The meaning and importance of these contacts remains a matter of dispute, but there can be no doubting the acute fear with which American officials greeted them. What is most striking here is not the Kennedy team’s rejection of de Gaulle’s vaguely worded negotiations proposal, even after elements on all sides in Vietnam appear to have uttered sympathetic noises about it; rather, it is that they refused even to consider resolving the conflict at the conference table. An administration genuinely interested in negotiations might have imaginatively exploited the very vagueness of de Gaulle’s plan; a president determined to withdraw from South Vietnam would at least have given the plan serious thought. Most telling of all, when Ngo Dinh Nhu began exploring a settlement on his own, the administration, far from being encouraged, was deeply worried. Nhu’s actions only made Washington more determined to overthrow him and his brother.

Which brings us to the second theme of this August-through-November 1963 period: Kennedy’s quiet but firm endorsement and encouragement of a showdown between Diem and dissident generals, which culminated in a coup d’état against Diem and Nhu on 1 November and their murder the next day. From late August onward, Kennedy’s actions indicate that he had resigned himself to the necessity of removing Diem (though it seems clear he never intended for Diem to be killed). When on occasion he expressed uncertainty about a coup it was only because of a fear that it might fail. An important question here is whether JFK understood that American complicity in a coup would increase US responsibility for subsequent developments in South Vietnam, thereby making withdrawal more difficult. The answer remains elusive, in part because neither he nor his advisers appear to have given the issue much thought. Before Diem’s ouster, Kennedy seems to have believed that a change in government could actually hasten an American withdrawal—the new leaders would implement needed reforms, win increased popular support at the expense of the Vietcong, and allow the US to reduce and eventually eliminate its presence in the South. After the coup he may have continued in this belief, but he also felt that this scenario would, even in the best of circumstances, take many months to materialize. In the short term, Kennedy understood, the US commitment was deeper than ever before, especially in view of the Ngos’ murder. In a cable to Lodge on 6 November, JFK acknowledged American complicity in the coup and spoke of US “responsibility” to help the new government succeed.33

The connection between these two dominant themes is close. The fear of early negotiations—in particular, the fear that Diem and Nhu
might be abandoning the war effort altogether, in favor of a negotiated settlement – contributed significantly to the decision to encourage the coup plotters. As former New York Times columnist Leslie H. Gelb, who as a Defense Department official in the 1960s played a key role in the Pentagon Papers project, has recently written: “The coup was fully supported, if not inspired, by the U.S. in good part because of the fear that Nhu was conspiring with North Vietnam to neutralize South Vietnam. In other words, the Kennedy team felt that Diem and Nhu might be selling out to the Communists.”

The great preponderance of the evidence, then, would appear to refute any notion that John Kennedy had decided to withdraw from Vietnam, win or lose, at the time he was gunned down. Were we in need of still more such evidence we might point to the administration’s repeated public affirmations, in the fall of 1963, of the importance of South Vietnam to US security and of the administration’s determination to stand firm. Time and again in these months senior officials struck a firm tone in their public pronouncements. Oliver Stone’s motion picture shows a clip of Kennedy telling Walter Cronkite on 9 September that, “In the final analysis, it is their [the South Vietnamese] war. They are the ones that are going to have to win it or lose it.” Roger Hilsman and others have also pointed to this statement as proof of the president’s intention to get out of the war. However, the preparatory memoranda for the Cronkite interview leave no doubt that the administration hoped to use it primarily to put pressure on the Diem regime, to bring Saigon officials into line by making them fear a drastic reduction in American assistance, a reduction never seriously contemplated.

Moreover, in the very same interview Kennedy also stated that it would be a mistake for the United States to withdraw. In subsequent weeks he continued publicly to vow steadfastness and to oppose withdrawal. His remarks set for delivery on 22 November at the Dallas Trade Mart, a destination he never reached, included the words: “We in this country in this generation are the watchmen on the walls of freedom....Our assistance to...nations can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task.” The point here is not to deny John Newman’s assertion that public comments may tell us very little about private planning and intentions; it is, rather, to suggest that the constant public affirmations by Kennedy and his associates of the Vietnam struggle’s importance to US security further reduced their room for maneuver. A Kennedy committed to disengaging from the conflict would surely want as much maneuverability as possible.

In all likelihood, John F. Kennedy on the day of his death had simply not decided what to do with his Vietnam problem. Like many politicians, he liked to put off difficult decisions for as long as possible (prudence calls, in the bureaucratic phrase, for “keeping options open”), and he no doubt hoped that the crisis in Indochina would somehow resolve itself, if not before the 1964 election, then after. His decisions on Vietnam since 1961 had led to a vastly expanded American presence in the war, but they had usually been compromise decisions, between the extremes of an Americanized war and an American withdrawal, both of which he seemed to fear in equal measure. “We’d cross that bridge when we came to it,” is how brother Robert described the administration’s thinking on the prospect of a complete deterioration in South Vietnam. It is an expression that effectively summarizes Kennedy’s whole approach to the war.

It would be Lyndon Johnson’s fate to come to that bridge about a year after Kennedy’s death, and the next question to be addressed is whether it can be assumed that Kennedy would have come to it also, at roughly the same time. The answer would appear to be yes, for several reasons. First, the deterioration in South Vietnam occurred more or less independently of decisions in Washington, which means we can assume a similar downturn under a Kennedy administration. Secondly, it seems likely that JFK would have faced Republican Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election, like LBJ did, and that he would have defeated him, though not perhaps by as large a margin as Johnson. Goldwater was far to the right of the mainstream of American voters in the mid-1960s, and it is hard to conceive of a scenario under which he could have defeated any major Democratic candidate, much less a reasonably popular incumbent.

Thirdly, the advisory system would probably have stayed the same under JFK as under LBJ, given that Johnson retained all of his predecessor’s senior foreign policy aides. There seems little reason to doubt that McNamara, Rusk, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy would have stayed on under Kennedy, at least through the 1964 election. Finally, it should be emphasized that Johnson made “continuity” the centerpiece of his Vietnam policy, at least in the early months; time and again he told aides he wanted to
follow closely the dead man’s general approach to the war. (Here, indeed, is another reason to doubt the incipient-withdrawal thesis: JFK’s own vice-president believed he was firmly opposed to withdrawal.) And so he did. In his early months Johnson made no significant departure from Kennedy’s broad policy of aid and advisers to the Saigon regime. Given the trend of Kennedy’s almost three years in office, and his actions in the key months of mid-to-late 1963, it seems safe to surmise that he would have continued this policy as well, for the first several months of 1964 at least. Like Johnson, he would have wanted to avoid dramatic policy departures in an election year if at all possible. As we turn to our main task of investigating the probability that Kennedy would have undertaken a different course than the one adopted by his successor, we can thus feel reasonably confident in assuming a minimum number of accompanying changes in other variables.

How would a surviving Kennedy have reacted to a South Vietnam on the brink of collapse in late 1964–early 1965? Which of the two hypothetical consequences noted at the outset – the first that he too would probably have Americanized the war; the second that he would most likely not have done so – is most plausible? The dominant themes elucidated thus far – in particular the steady expansion of the American presence in Vietnam in 1961–3, the fear of negotiations, and the decision to help overthrow Diem – would appear to bolster the argument that Kennedy would have done more or less exactly what Johnson did. It is not the only good argument that can be made, as we shall see, or necessarily even the best, but it is one that warrants serious consideration.

The powerful legacy of the Diem coup and murder deserves special emphasis here. The coup was followed by almost perpetual political instability in Saigon – another coup followed in January 1964, and there would be a whole series of different governments between that point and the American escalation the following summer. This instability only served to reinforce the belief among some senior US officials, in both Washington and Saigon, that complicity in the Diem overthrow deepened the American commitment to war. By interfering in internal Vietnamese affairs, these officials maintained, the United States had become responsible for the fate of any and all subsequent regimes. Lyndon Johnson himself believed this, at least to some degree. He opposed the Diem coup from the start, and many associates recall him saying that the US involvement in it had been the worst error ever made by the United States in Vietnam. General William Westmoreland, commander of American forces at the height of the war, argued likewise. “Were it not for our interference [in the coup],” he later said, “we could in my opinion have justifiably withdrawn our support at that time in view of a demonstrated lack of leadership and unity in Vietnam.”38 We have already seen that Kennedy, too, felt some of this added responsibility in the three weeks that elapsed between Diem’s death and his own.

The fact that the senior advisers who urged Johnson to expand the war in 1964–5 were the same men who had counseled Kennedy also deserves underlining. Johnson did not bring in a new foreign policy team; as part of his emphasis on continuity he kept McNamara, Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy, indeed kept virtually the entire Kennedy policymaking team. By the late autumn of 1963 McNamara and his fellow senior aides had a large personal stake in the commitment they had trumpeted for so long, a vested interest in its success. That stake would only increase as subsequent months came and went, as the war effort deteriorated and as American boys began coming home in body bags in ever greater numbers.

This brings us to an important difference between a hypothetical post-Dallas Kennedy administration and the actual Johnson one, a difference which appears to reinforce the argument that JFK would have opted for full-scale war. For if Kennedy’s senior advisers had a personal stake in the outcome of the conflict in Vietnam, it follows that their boss did also. In this way, it could be argued that Kennedy’s “commitment” would have been even more binding than Johnson’s. It was Kennedy, more than predecessor Dwight Eisenhower, who developed the policy and the process that LBJ inherited. It was Kennedy who formulated that policy in terms of the “flexible response” by which he hoped to justify his entire approach to world affairs. Time and again his administration declared Vietnam to be the “test case” for counterrinsurgency, for the ability of the United States to respond flexibly to unconventional wars in unconventional places. “Was [Kennedy] going to let Green Berets, too, learn ‘that Superman is a fairy’?” Garry Wills has asked. “Any withdrawal would have been a confession that his overarching strategy . . . was feckless: it could not deal with precisely the kind of problem it was framed for.”39

Long before coming to the White House, in fact, Kennedy had trumpeted Vietnam as a kind of test case in the global confrontation with Communism. As a senator in the 1950s, he spoke firmly about the need to defend South Vietnam and check Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. When Ngo Dinh Diem refused to follow through
on the 1956 all-Vietnam elections called for in the 1954 Geneva Agreements, Kennedy applauded him. "Neither the United States nor Free Vietnam is ever going to be a party to an election obviously stacked and subverted in advance, urged upon us by those who have already broken their own pledges under the agreement they now seek to enforce," the senator proclaimed. Also in 1956, JFK told the American Friends of Vietnam, an organization to which he belonged, that South Vietnam "is our offspring - we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs. And if it falls victim to any of the perils that threaten its existence...then the United States, with some justification, will be held responsible; and our prestige in Asia will sink to a new low." These comments suggest both the long-term (and quite particular) interest that John Kennedy had in Vietnam, and the difficulties he might have experienced had he opted to withdraw from there in 1964 or 1965 - he would have had to disavow strong, on-the-record statements dating back close to a decade.

Nor was it merely the personal reputations of Kennedy and his lieutenants that were perceived to be at stake here; no less important was the reputation of the Democratic Party and indeed that of the United States. Democrats in the 1950s and early 1960s felt vulnerable to Republican charges of being "soft on Communism," of failing to learn what Munich had taught about the dangers of "appeasement"; they feared the prospect of being tagged with the "loss of Vietnam" just as Truman had been blamed for "losing" China only a few years earlier. In addition, as Kennedy told the American Friends of Vietnam, US national prestige was deemed to be at stake in Vietnam already in the 1950s. As the American commitment deepened in the early 1960s, this emphasis on prestige, on credibility, grew stronger. From the first day of the administration to the last, the Kennedy team deemed it essential to demonstrate the credibility of America's commitments; to convince adversaries and allies alike of American firmness, determination, and dependability. As a Rusk–McNamara report in November 1961 warned, "the loss of South Viet-Nam would...undermine the credibility of American commitments elsewhere."

These assumptions suggest that the key to the "doctrine of credibility" was its indivisibility, which meant, as Jonathan Schell has noted, that a collapse in credibility in the sphere of limited conflict would cast doubt on the credibility of American power in other spheres of competition as well, including even the all-important nuclear sphere." It represented a kind of psychological domino theory, in which a reverse for the United States "in any part of the world, no matter how small, could undermine the whole structure of American power." Even allowing for some exaggeration in Schell's formulation, there can be no denying the importance of the credibility imperative in the Kennedy team's thinking on Vietnam, from January 1961 onward. If anything, US credibility and the need to affirm it loomed even larger at the end, since the American presence by that point had grown larger - as the US commitment of men and resources to the conflict grew, so did the stakes for the United States, and so did the costs of retreat. It follows that credibility concerns came to seem even more important in Vietnam decisionmaking under Johnson, and to figure prominently in the proposals - by Kennedy appointees - for massive escalation in 1964-5. And it follows that they would have helped shape policy formulation under a post-Dallas Kennedy administration as well.

A powerful argument could be made, then, that the best counterefactual history on Kennedy and Vietnam in 1964-5 would find him taking the fateful step of introducing major American ground forces rather than accepting defeat, even defeat disguised under the cloak of some kind of political settlement. This argument has won many adherents, most recently Robert Dallek in his 1996 presidential address to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAHR). It is an argument which suggests that the tragedy in Texas was not critical to the later tragedy in Indochina, since Kennedy in 1965 surely would have done what his successor did and Americanize the war. It further maintains that there was no viable fork in the road, no "branching point," between 22 November 1963 and July 1965, when disengagement realistically could have occurred; such a "branching point" would have had to come earlier - certainly prior to the Diem coup, perhaps prior to November 1961 and NSAM 111, maybe even prior to the Eisenhower administration's initial commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem in the mid-1950s. It is an argument, therefore, which sees Vietnam as being as much "Kennedy's War" as "Johnson's War," since the latter merely followed the course laid down by his predecessor.

But is it the best argument? Is it in fact the most plausible unrealized history we can construct of a surviving Kennedy's Vietnam decisions? Notwithstanding the compelling nature of the claims just outlined, there are several reasons to withhold judgment on the
“escalate-like-Johnson” thesis. Nagging questions remain. Other possibilities linger. Indeed, for every arrow pointing in the direction of large-scale escalation under a surviving Kennedy, there is at least one pointing away from that result. Standing alone, none of the claims outlined below holds sufficient persuasive power; for full effect, they need to be considered systematically and in terms of their cumulative impact.

Consider, first, the point with which this essay began: that running through John F. Kennedy’s whole approach to Vietnam was a fundamental ambivalence about the conflict and about what to do there. It may seem contradictory to speak of such ambivalence after suggesting that JFK remained committed to the war effort at the time of his death, but it need not be. There are commitments and there are commitments. The Kennedy record reveals a man who sought victory in Vietnam from day one to the end, who opposed negotiations and who helped overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem, but it also reveals a man who always had deep doubts about the enterprise, and deep determination to keep it from becoming an American war. He may have vastly expanded the Eisenhower administration’s assistance to the Saigon regime, but it would still fit under the rubric of assistance; as such, it was a long way from the Johnson team’s decision in 1964–5 to Americanize the war, essentially to take over the fighting from the South Vietnamese. Columnist Walter Lippmann, a prominent opponent of the Americanization (and, earlier, of Kennedy’s commitment), sensed this fundamental difference already in April 1965. “It used to be a war of the South Vietnamese assisted by the Americans,” Lippmann wrote. “It is now becoming an American war very inefficiently assisted by the South Vietnamese.”

Skeptics will be quick to point out that Kennedy never had to face the critical choices that his successor faced; the key decisions were still a year or more into the future when he died. True enough, but the skeptics will also have to consider the unbending aversion that JFK consistently showed to committing American ground forces to the conflict. Even in the 1950s, while he advocated strong support for the Diem regime and warned of dire consequences should South Vietnam fall, Kennedy stated publicly that the disastrous French experience in Indochina showed that Americans should never fight there. Likewise, the Korean War experience taught Kennedy that public opinion in the United States would quickly sour on a similar commitment in that part of the world. Perhaps most important, already in the 1950s he insisted that no American-backed government in Southeast Asia could survive without broad-based popular support. Once he reached the White House, Kennedy proved much less willing to use American fighting troops than virtually all of his senior foreign policy aides, and he frequently invoked General Douglas MacArthur’s admonition against the US fighting another land war in Asia. Already in the spring of 1961, he faulted what he saw as the undue military emphasis of an interagency task force report on Vietnam, and deleted those passages that discussed the insertion of US ground forces.45

Kennedy stuck to this line in the important deliberations that autumn. Though the November NSAM 111 marked, as we have seen, an important expansion of the US commitment, it bears repeating that it was a much smaller expansion than JFK’s top advisers wanted—several told him the war would be lost without a massive infusion of US troops. Kennedy said he was instinctively against the use of American forces, and he pointedly cut the section in the memorandum committing the administration to preventing South Vietnam’s fall. John Newman certainly goes too far in contending that these November 1961 decisions “more than resolve” the question of whether JFK would have Americanized the war, but he is right to call them significant.46 The situation that month was not as serious as in late 1964–early 1965, but it was serious enough, with much talk in American official circles about political chaos and impending defeat.

Kennedy’s decision to pursue a negotiated settlement in Laos further demonstrated his disinclination to use American ground troops in Indochina. The post-1954 infusion of American aid and advisory personnel had not solidified pro-Western rule in Laos, and by January 1961 the US-sponsored government faced imminent defeat at the hands of the Communist-backed Pathet Lao. At a meeting the day before Kennedy’s inauguration in January, Eisenhower had stressed the strategic importance of Laos, calling it the key to all of Southeast Asia and warning JFK that if it fell the United States would have to “write off the whole area.” Eisenhower appears to have told Kennedy that he might have to put US troops in Laos, even if leading allies refused to follow suit.47 But though senior advisers, at various times in the months that followed, recommended military intervention, Kennedy never authorized it. He quickly came to doubt the intrinsic importance of Laos to US security. He worried about its difficult geography; about the likely lack of public support for a long-term commitment; about the lack (to use the current phrase) of an
Lyndon Johnson, it is true, had his own doubts about the war. He did not come into office spoiling for a fight. He was no war-monger. Like Kennedy he would have liked nothing more than to flick a switch and make the whole mess in Indochina go away. He regularly expressed skepticism about the prospects for success in the war, even after the escalation-decisions, and he worried about the impact of the war on his cherished domestic programs. But he also made clear that he would not accept defeat in Vietnam. From the start, Johnson insisted that he would not be the first American president to lose a war, and he instructed aides to commit themselves each day to doing all they could to bring success to the war effort. Notwithstanding LBJ's emphasis on "continuity" in his Vietnam policy, one detects a subtle but real deepening in presidential determination after the tragedy in Dallas, a greater insistence on Johnson's part that victory must come in the war, or at least that defeat must be avoided. LBJ hoped to avoid using US troops to achieve that objective, and he ruled out major escalation before the November 1964 election. But he never possessed his predecessor's fundamental aversion to the notion of Americans taking over the fighting from the South Vietnamese. Even senior advisers to LBJ were struck by how easily he made the ground-troop decision in late 1964. early 1965.

We have noted that a surviving Kennedy would have faced a significant disadvantage vis-à-vis Johnson, in terms of a greater stake in the war and a vested interest in seeing the administration's "flexible response" policy succeed. Overall, however, the greater disadvantages belonged to Johnson, and each of them served to reduce his freedom of action (real and imagined) on the war. First and most obvious, he was a new president in late November 1963, new and untested. Many in the foreign policy establishment mistrusted him; many others questioned his qualifications. Just a few months hence Democrats would accept or reject him at the national convention, and not long after that the American public would pass judgment on him. Johnson believed, no doubt accurately, that adversaries at home and abroad were watching him closely, watching his responses to problems and probing for signs of weakness. Little wonder that he perceived the need not only for "continuity" in his foreign policy but also for firmness.

Kennedy, by contrast, could in no way be considered untried in the fall of 1963. He had faced an uncommon number of foreign policy crises in his tenure; to some of these he responded well, to others not, but all made him more battle-tested. A little over a year before his
death, Kennedy had showed strength and gained prestige in forcing
Khrushchev to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba; regardless of
whether JFK’s tough stance was wise or necessary, few could question
his steadfastness after that. Then in mid-1963 he signed the limited
nuclear test ban treaty with Moscow, which he could cite as his
commitment to peace. At the time of his death, therefore, he had a
sizeable fund of political credibility as a foreign policy leader, some-
thing LBJ never possessed.

The timing of the assassination, occurring as it did only about a
year before the 1964 election, also may have served to limit Johnson’s
freedom of action. Whereas Kennedy would have faced the critical
Vietnam decisions in his second (and final) term, when the domestic
political implications of those decisions would be at least somewhat
less pressing, Johnson faced them in what amounted to his first term –
for him the eleven months between his taking office and the 1964
election were but a prelude, a kind of preliminary campaign for who
would succeed the martyred leader. The relative freedom of maneuver
that might have led a second-term Kennedy to re-evaluate fundamen-
tally Vietnam policy in, say, December 1964 (when the war’s prospects
looked grimmer than ever) thus did not exist to the same degree for
LBJ, or at least so he believed. Nor was it merely electoral considera-
tions which kept Johnson focused on the domestic political costs of his
Vietnam decisions; no less important was the ambitious legislative
agenda alluded to earlier. Much more than his predecessor, Johnson
dreamed big dreams about improving American society, about tack-
ling poverty, illiteracy, homelessness – it is one of the things that
make his Vietnam fall so tragic. Larry Berman and others have argued
persuasively that this commitment to constructing a “Great Society”
powerfully impacted on LBJ’s decision to escalate the war, because he
feared, rightly or wrongly, that Republicans and conservative Demo-
crats would scuttle his programs if he did not. He decided to pursue
both guns and butter.\textsuperscript{35} It stands to reason that here, too, a post-
Dallas Kennedy, possessing no real Great Society equivalent, would
have been less constrained.

More elusive personality differences between the two men may also
have put Johnson at a comparative disadvantage when the difficult
choices came. Though historians have rightly been skeptical of
attempts to link deep and largely unverifiable character traits with
decision-making, it can be fruitful to study observable personal char-
acteristics.\textsuperscript{36} Whatever Lyndon Johnson’s underlying personal insecur-
rityes may have been, there can be no doubt that he worried about
whether he measured up to the demands of the presidency, particu-
larly in terms of foreign affairs, in a way that Kennedy never did.
Johnson never shook the suspicion that American elites doubted his
capacities, and he made frequent and bitter comparisons between his
own San Marcos State Teachers College education and the Ivy Lea-
gue degrees and Rhodes scholarships of his advisers. Much more so
than JFK, he was reluctant to challenge the foreign policy advice of
these men (“my Harvards,” he called them), even when his instincts
told him to, because they seemed so much more comfortable with the
intricacies of diplomacy and statecraft than he was himself.\textsuperscript{37} It
proved a lethal combination: a president lacking confidence in foreign
affairs but vowing that he would not tolerate a loss in Vietnam,
relying on advisers who by 1964–5 had a large personal stake in the
success of the war.

Johnson’s dependence on Dean Rusk, which grew stronger as his
administration progressed, was particularly important here. Rusk,
who had been of declining influence under Kennedy, was a hawk on
Vietnam, a hardliner among hardliners; he never wavered in his belief
that the United States must do the utmost to stop Asian Communism
in its tracks. Moreover, he and Johnson shared a strong bond. Both
had been relative outcasts in the Kennedy administration. Both were
southerners, who had been born less than six months apart. Both had
come of political age in the 1930s and 1940s and been profoundly
shaped by the developments of those years. The same could certainly
be said of most senior American policymakers, but few spoke as
obessively as Rusk and Johnson about the “lessons of history,”
about the danger of appeasement, about the reality of falling
dominoes. Though intelligent men both, they shared an inflexibility
of mind on foreign policy problems which grew stronger with the
passage of time. Perhaps partly because he was a decade younger,
Kennedy, though very much a Cold Warrior, was more flexible,
more subtle, more capable of seeing the nuances of international
problems, less Manichean in his vision. He possessed the capability,
in other words, of entertaining two contrasting historical analogies
simultaneously: not merely the Munich analogy but also the French-
in-Indochina analogy.

It is hard to imagine Kennedy exhibiting the pigheadedness and
truculence with respect to Vietnam that Johnson so frequently showed
in 1965 (and in the years that followed). It is hard to imagine him
telling pro-negotiation British and French officials that the only alter-
atives to current policy were to “bomb the hell out of China” or to
retreat to Hawaii and San Francisco, or telling them it was insulting to have foreign politicians “chasing over” to see him, or reading to them a letter from a supportive American soldier in Vietnam to his “Mom,” all of which LBJ did. It is hard to imagine Kennedy doing what Johnson did and canceling imminent visits by important world leaders merely because they opposed the US bombing of North Vietnam, or telling a top aide that he would rather “get sick and leave town” than hear the peace proposals of United Nations Secretary General U Thant and British Prime Minister Harold Wilson.58

Most of all, it is hard to imagine JFK personalizing the war and seeing it as a test of his own manliness in the way that Johnson did. Many have commented on the powerful element of machismo in Johnson’s world view, rooted in his upbringing and fueled by his haunting fear that he would be judged insufficiently manly for the job, that he would lack courage when the chips were down.59 In his world there were weak and strong men; the weak men were the skeptics, who sat around contemplating, talking, criticizing; the strong men were the doers, the activists, the ones who were always tough and always refused to back down. Doubt itself, indeed, was an almost feminine quality. (Upon hearing that one of his aides was becoming a dove on the war, Johnson barked, “Hell, he has to squat to piss.”) His macho ethos extended to relations among states. “If you let a bully come into your front yard one day,” he liked to say, in reference to the lesson of Munich, “the next day he will be up on your porch and the day after that he will rape your wife in your own bed.” In such a situation, retreat was impossible, retreat was cowardly. Johnson’s approach did not make him reckless on Vietnam – he was, in fact, exceedingly cautious – but it made him quite unable to contemplate extrication as anything but the equivalent of “tucking tail and running.” Kennedy, while himself imbued with a good dose of machismo, was less prone to extending it to the nation, to the complex world of foreign policy. Perhaps because he had proven himself in war – Johnson had not – he never personalized the Vietnam issue like his successor did, never viewed attacks on the policy as attacks on himself to the degree LBJ did.60

Kennedy was no expert on Southeast Asia, but he possessed a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of the region than his successor. As president he privately doubted the validity of a crude domino theory, whereby a defeat in Vietnam would lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia, and he perceived from early on that there were limits to what the United States could accomplish in that part of the world. His 1961 “civil disturbances” comment to Arthur Krock was one of several which suggested that he understood, well before many of his aides, the civil-war dimension of the Vietnam conflict and the problems this might cause for American intervention. Perhaps most important, Kennedy was more cognizant than Johnson of the need for genuine political reforms in South Vietnam if there were to be long-term success in the war effort. LBJ, in one of his first comments on Vietnam upon becoming president, said there had been too much emphasis on reforms and not enough on fighting the war; although he and his top advisers would spend much time in subsequent months fretting about the absence of governmental stability in Saigon, they did not let that dissuade them from Americanizing the war.61

Johnson’s lack of confidence when playing in the foreign policy arena no doubt reinforced his well-documented intolerance of dissent. All politicians like consensus, but LBJ craved it more than most. Even in the early months of his presidency he was incredulous to learn that some Americans might be opposed to his policy of fully supporting South Vietnam; it was un-American, he believed, to make an issue during the Cold War of national security matters. Throughout his career Johnson had made his way in politics by intimidation, by dominating those around him, and he did not change this modus operandi once he got into the White House. “I’m the only president you have,” he told those who opposed his policies. His demand for consensus extended to his inner circle of advisers, a reality which, when combined with his powerful personality, must have had a chilling effect on anyone inclined to offer a contrary view.62 (Undersecretary of State George W. Ball did warn against escalation, but he had been assigned the role of in-house devil’s advocate by LBJ, which meant that his exhortations carried little weight.) As McGeorge Bundy has put it in dismissing the idea of an internal movement for disengagement from Vietnam: “You can’t organize against Lyndon Johnson without getting bombed before breakfast, because in his view that’s the final and ultimate conspiracy.” When Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey (one of the “weak” men in LBJ’s lexicon) in early 1965 warned of the domestic political costs of a major war in the jungles of Southeast Asia – and, importantly, noted the opportunities for disengagement opened up by the president’s landslide election victory – Johnson banned him from Vietnam policy discussions for a year.63

Here again, the difference with Kennedy was both stark – the cloistered decision-making environment under Johnson compared
with the much more open atmosphere under JFK – and potentially critical: a less constrained, more Kennedy-like environment would have made the Johnson team more inclined after November 1964 to ask the really fundamental questions about the war, to listen to – not just to hear – the many independent voices predicting giant, perhaps insurmountable obstacles ahead. By the end of 1964 those voices included virtually all of America's allies, who saw an Americanized war as both unwinnable and unnecessary. (BRIAM head Robert Thompson, whose opinion JFK had always respected, had by then concluded that the Saigon regime's weakness made a negotiated withdrawal Washington's only real option.64) They included the US intelligence community, which said the enemy would be likely to persist even in the face of major escalation and which warned of political chaos in Saigon and widespread anti-Americanism in South Vietnam. And they included a group of leading Democrats in the US Senate, who warned of both the international and the domestic perils of escalation, and whose membership included one Robert Francis Kennedy, newly sworn-in as the junior senator from New York.65 Several major American newspapers, including the New York Times, the Chicago Daily News, and the St Louis Post-Dispatch, argued against escalation and for a negotiated withdrawal in their editorials. Even the American military leadership, while supportive of a larger war, warned of a long and very arduous road ahead.66

The foregoing discussion suggests that there is no easy answer to the question of what John F. Kennedy would have done in Vietnam if he had returned from Dallas alive. Good arguments can be made in both directions, that he would have acted much as Johnson did and Americanized the war, and that he would have vetoed any such recommendation. For some this lack of closure will only serve to underscore the inherent limitations of counterfactual analysis, but they would do well to remember that the same kinds of interpretive conundrums can, and frequently do, complicate the reconstruction of actual history. History is ambiguous, whether real or hypothetical. More than that, this essay contends that careful speculation about what might have happened in Vietnam in 1964–5 had Kennedy lived is essential to reaching the fullest understanding of what did occur during that time under Johnson. It aids our understanding of the choices that LBJ did or did not face, of the roads he could or could not have taken. No less important, such speculation also helps clarify the meaning of what Kennedy himself did in the period 1961–3.

Ultimately, it is easier to see Kennedy rejecting massive escalation in the spring and summer of 1965 than to imagine him opting for such a course. He saw the war, saw the world, differently than his successor, and he would have faced the monumental decisions of 1964–5 with significant advantages over Johnson. Even the best arguments for the escalate-like-Johnson hypothesis – the demands of “credibility” and the complicity in the Diem coup – are open to question. On credibility, Kennedy might well have accepted the argument put forth in late 1964 by key US allies, by senior Senate Democrats, and by Undersecretary of State George Ball, that American credibility and the Democratic Party's credibility would be harmed much more by getting drawn into a messy and probably unwinnable war than by securing a judicious withdrawal, even if that withdrawal eventually resulted in an all-Communist Vietnam. The Diem coup's legacy was important, no doubt, but the arguments about American “responsibility” for all subsequent regimes lose some of their luster when one considers the chronic apathy and ineptness with which those regimes pursued the twin tasks of fighting the war and governing effectively.67

It is this dismal South Vietnamese politico-military situation in late 1964–early 1965, more than any personal attributes of Kennedy, that stands as the single most important reason to suppose that he would have opted against a large-scale American war in Vietnam. It is easy today to forget the despair which this situation generated in a broad cross-section of informed observers, both American and foreign, who saw first-hand the political in-fighting in Saigon and the pervasive war weariness and burgeoning anti-Americanism throughout the South. Many who had always enthusiastically supported the US commitment to South Vietnam, and who would do so again a few months later after the commitment of American troops (Vietnam 1965 provides a textbook example of the rally-around-the-flag effect), in these months freely stated that America had no obligation to persevere under such circumstances and that there might be no option but to withdraw. A good example is the Washington Post, later a staunchly hawkish voice on the war. Said the paper in a December 1964 editorial: “[I]t is becoming increasingly clear that, without an effective government, backed by a loyal military and some kind of national consensus in support of independence, we cannot do anything for South Vietnam…. The economic and military power of the United States….must not be wasted in a futile attempt to save those who
do not wish to be saved.” Wise words then as now, and ones that Kennedy, for all the reasons outlined above, would have been more likely than his successor to heed.68

If not Americanization in 1965 under a surviving Kennedy, then what? Several plausible possibilities present themselves. First, he might have looked at the realities on the ground and concluded that a negotiated withdrawal, perhaps by way of a reconvened Geneva conference, was the only viable solution. Opting for negotiations from a less-than-dominant military position would have exacted a considerable political price at home, with Republican Party charges that he had already “lost” Laos and now seemed bent on losing Vietnam, that he had abandoned an ally and allowed some two dozen American servicemen to die in vain. But the price need not have been crippling. He had just won re-election to a second term and could begin to look less at the polls and more to his place in history. Moreover, he (almost certainly) had comfortable majorities in both houses of Congress, and he could have convinced most party members to go along with his policies after telling them that the situation was irretrievable, that the allies were not on board, that the CIA was pessimistic. To the American people he could have made a convincing case that the South Vietnamese were not living up to their end of the bargain, and that the place to make a stand in East Asia was in the critical countries such as Thailand and Japan.

No doubt, the long-term result of any such settlement would have been a reunified Vietnam under Communist rule – the Hanoi leadership in this period was in no mood to compromise, and would have made no fundamental concessions. But North Vietnamese officials also hoped to avoid a large-scale American intervention, and thus it is likely they would have agreed to a Kennedy demand for a face-saving “decent interval” before they proceeded to try to claim the South – several times in the autumn of 1964 Hanoi indicated a willingness to enter talks. The Communist Chinese, allied with Hanoi and delighted to see Washington bogged down in the war, could hardly have objected to such a deal. And the Soviet Union, also an ally of the North Vietnamese but fearful of a larger war and of rising Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, would probably have pressed Ho Chi Minh and his lieutenants to agree to a settlement.69

Kennedy might also have pursued a more unconventional diplomatic plan, arising out of the continual political instability in Saigon and the marked increase in war weariness among the South Vietnamese in late 1964. He might have agreed with Senator Richard B. Russell, who told LBJ that these realities made victory impossible, and that the United States should therefore bring a man to the top of the South Vietnamese government who would demand that the US withdraw its forces from the country. Johnson and his aides rejected this idea, but what is interesting is that among themselves they agreed that the “loss” of Vietnam would be much less harmful to American prestige if it occurred because of a decision by the South Vietnamese themselves than if it happened after an American intervention that failed. Also significant is that elements in the Saigon leadership appeared sympathetic at the end of 1964 to an American withdrawal. Prime Minister Tran Van Huong and Chief of State Phan Khac Suu, both of them appointed without American consultation, were very cognizant of the growing Buddhist demands for peace and were themselves unenthusiastic about a larger US presence in the war. On at least one occasion in November Suu spoke in support of an early peace settlement. In December, ex-premier General Nguyen Khanh, who remained a powerful figure in the government despite falling out with US Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, publicly called for a reduced American involvement in South Vietnamese affairs. The Russell plan was thus anything but far-fetched, and it is not hard to imagine Kennedy – who would have shared the senator’s basic concerns – viewing it sympathetically. Indeed, in the months before his death he reportedly saw this as the best means of eventual disengagement. When an aide asked how extrication might be brought about, JFK is said to have responded: “Easy. Put a government in there that will ask us to leave.”70

Also possible, given Kennedy’s previous opposition both to an Americanized war and to withdrawal, would have been a program of continued support for South Vietnam, though on a much smaller scale than actually occurred under Johnson. Kennedy might have accepted the proposal to limit American military involvement to holding enclaves around urban areas in contact with the sea. Or he might have opted for a plan to expand the American advisory presence in the South and to use air power to reduce infiltration from the North via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The problem with both of these options was that, in the eyes of many civilian and military officials, time was running out on all such limited measures. But not everyone thought so. Ambassador Taylor, who had been among Kennedy’s most trusted foreign policy advisers, argued into the spring of 1965 against the use of US ground forces, not because he was a dove – he was not – but because he thought (accurately, as it turned out) these
troops would harm the war effort by alienating many Vietnamese and making the rest apathetic. Former and future ambassador to Saigon Henry Cabot Lodge argued likewise.

Still, any such limited approach would only have postponed the fundamental decision – Americanize or withdraw – and the question remains how JFK would have acted when he could temporize no longer. Here one can imagine a conversation between him and Robert McNamara in late 1965 similar to the one McNamara actually had with Johnson. After McNamara expressed grave doubts about the chances for success in the war, LBJ asked him, “Then, no matter what we do in the military field, there is no sure victory?” McNamara responded, “That’s right. We have been too optimistic.” Johnson kept escalating. It is hard to see Kennedy doing the same, especially given the continued absence of anything resembling a popularly-based Saigon government. More likely, he would have opted for a withdrawal.72

Throughout his almost three years in office, John F. Kennedy in his Vietnam policy sought out that favored place among politicians: the middle of the road. He worked hard to avoid the extremes of unilateral withdrawal, on the one hand, and Americanization of the war, on the other. He wanted, in short, to have his cake and eat it too, to preserve an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam without incurring the expense of a large-scale war. It seems certain that Kennedy had not decided to withdraw from Vietnam, as some claim, by the time of his death; in late November 1963 he still sought victory in the war. It does not therefore necessarily follow, however, that he would have Americanized the war when collapse threatened in South Vietnam in 1965; the best evidence, indeed, suggests otherwise. It is a point of view that allows one to reconcile the views of Dean Rusk and Robert Kennedy (JFK had made no decision to withdraw in late 1963) with those of Arthur Schlesinger, Theodore Sorensen, and, most recently, McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara (JFK would not have ordered full-scale war in 1965).73 This may amount to having one’s cake and eating it too. But it may also suggest that we have arrived at the most plausible alternate history.

The middle of the road can be a dangerous place, of course. Our speculations about what a surviving Kennedy would have done in Vietnam should not obscure the fact that his actions while in office reduced his options and those of his successor, and made the later escalation more likely. The key decisions came under Lyndon Johnson, but they were decisions that followed – not inevitably, but certainly logically – those made by Kennedy. At the end of Kennedy’s presidency, victory in Southeast Asia was no closer than it had been at the beginning, despite the fact he had dramatically expanded the US presence in Vietnam and publicly vowed to see the conflict through to the end. Regardless of what he might have done had he lived beyond 22 November 1963, the Vietnam problem he left behind that day was much larger than the one he inherited.

NOTES

For helpful comments and suggestions on this essay I am grateful to a number of kind souls (not all of whom are prepared to embrace my ultimate argument): Laura Kalman, Edwin Moise, Kenneth Moulé, John Mueller, Timothy Naftali, Andrew Rotter, Steven Schwartzberg, Louis Warren, Mark White, and the members of the Cold War History Group at the University of California at Santa Barbara.


2. Rare examples of more detailed treatments of the question include Morton Borden and Otis L. Graham, Speculations on American History (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1977), pp. 163–82; and Tom Wicker, JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality upon History, 2nd edn (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), pp. 183–208. Borden and Graham conclude that it is likely Kennedy would have escalated the war like Johnson; Wicker that it is likely he would not have. See also Wicker, "Committed to a Quagmire," Diplomatic History, 19 (Winter 1995), pp. 167–71. Thoughtful speculation on the issue can also be found in Daniel Ellsberg, Papers on the War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), pp. 47–135; and in Bernard Brodie, War and Politics (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 131–43.


4. Those historians who claim to be "explaining" rather than investigating causality are, as H. Stuart Hughes has noted, engaging in semantic obfuscation. In Hughes's words, "The very employment of the word 'because' immediately gives warning that causal explanation is at hand." H. S. Hughes, "The Historian and the Social Scientist," American Historical Review, 66 (October 1960), p. 28.


8. The key published collections are the so-called Pentagon Papers, which include voluminous and highly important material on the Kennedy years, and the Vietnam volumes in the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States series, now available through 1965. There are numerous memoirs of leading Kennedy associates, some of them quite detailed on the issue of American involvement in Indochina. In addition to these published sources, there is an abundance of declassified material at the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries and other archives in the United States.
think this will be of great value to us in meeting the very strong views of [Sen. J. William] Fulbright and others that we’re boggling down in Asia and will be there for decades" (emphasis in original). Cited in Robert S. McNamara, In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam (New York: Times Books, 1994), p. 80.


27. Herring, America’s Longest War, p. 88. During the early stages of the Johnson administration’s escalation of the war, Krock reprinted these Kennedy remarks to suggest that JFK understood what LBJ evidently did not: that the conflict in South Vietnam was a civil war. New York Times, 14 Feb. 1965.

28. On 11 November JFK received a personal memorandum from Harriman, in which the veteran diplomat urged a diplomatic settlement for Vietnam based on the 1954 Geneva Agreements, arguing that the Diem regime was “repressive, dictatorial, and unpopular.” The Soviet Union was interested in stabilizing the Southeast Asian situation, he went on, and thus it could be possible for the United States to agree to reduce its military presence in South Vietnam as peace was restored in the area. For their part, the North Vietnamese and the NLF would agree to a cease-fire, accept a strong United Nations Control Commission, and achieve eventual reunification, possibly through elections. The United States should not, Harriman concluded, “stake its prestige w[ith] Viet- nam.” Harriman to Kennedy, 11 Nov. 1961, National Security File, Country File, box 195, JFKL; Galbraith to Kennedy, n.d., National Security File, Country File, box 128, JFKL; Lord Home to London, 13 Nov. 1961, PREM 11/4166, PRO; Chester Bowles, Promises to Keep (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 407–9; Bassett and Pelz, “Kennedy’s Failed Search,” pp. 236–7.

29. American aid, Eisenhower wrote to Diem in October of that year, depended on Diem’s “assurances as to the standards of performance...in undertaking needed reforms.” US assistance was to be “combined with” Diem’s own efforts to “contribute effectively toward an independent Vietnam endowed with a strong government.” This government should be “so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people” as to attract domestic and international respect. US Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–54, vol. xiii, pp. 2166–7 (hereafter FRUS, followed by volume and year).


32. On the administration’s pressuring of the New York Times, see Forrestal to Bundy, 13 Nov. 1963, National Security File, Country File, box 202, JFKL.


ground forces would be disastrous, RFK said. See also Duiker, US Containment Policy, p. 260.
48. According to Kennedy aide Michael Forrestal, JFK told him that US interests in Laos were minimal. “We couldn’t care less, actually,” Forrestal quoted him as saying. Forrestal oral history, JFKL. A good, succinct examination of the Laos deliberations in this period is Duiker, US Containment Policy, pp. 253–63.
49. For JFK’s comment to Taylor in 1961, see Hammer, Death in November, pp. 35–6.
51. For Kennedy’s thinking on this issue, see, for example, NSC Meeting Notes, 15 Nov. 1961, Vice Presidential Security File, box 3, LBJL. A study of the Johnson administration’s efforts to get allied military involvement is Robert M. Blackburn, Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson’s “More Flags”: The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994).


58. Memcon, LBJ and Michael Stewart, 23 March 1965, National Security File, Country File, box 207, LBJL; memcon, LBJ and Maurice Couve de Murville, 19 Feb. 1965, National Security File, Country File, box 171, LBJL; telcon, LBJ and Ball, 6 March 1965, Ball Papers, box 6, LBJL. The leaders whose visits were abruptly canceled, much to their dismay and to the embarrassment of LBJ’s aides, were India’s Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistan’s Mohammad Ayub Khan, in April 1965. Johnson ordered the action during a fit of rage over a speech by Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson at Temple University in Philadelphia, in which Pearson gingerly advocated a pause in the bombing against the North.


60. “Squat” and “bully” quotes are from Halberstam, Best and Brightest, pp. 531–2. See also Bluma Steinberg, Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), pp. 78–9. Bernard Brodie has suggested another quality that only JFK of the two possessed: the ability to admit a mistake. He cites Kennedy’s reported comment after the Bay of Pigs débâcle – “Not only were our facts in error, but our policy was wrong because the premises on which it was built were wrong” – and then declares “One cannot remotely imagine President Johnson saying any such thing, publicly or privately” (Brodie, War and Politics, p. 132).


64. BRIAM (Thompson) to London, 13 Sept. 1964, FO 371/175501, PRO.

65. RFK entered the Senate in January 1965, by which time over a dozen Senate Democrats had already expressed opposition to a larger war. By the spring of that year, he had voiced opposition to the administration’s escalatory policies. See Brodie, War and Politics, p. 134; Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy, pp. 762–3; New York Times, 7 May 1965; Congressional Record, 6 May 1965, pp. 9760–1.

66. On the widespread opposition to escalation in this period, among both allied governments and important voices in the US, see Logevall, Choosing War, chs 8 and 9.

67. We have proceeded in this essay on the assumption that JFK would have followed essentially the same “back-burner” strategy on Vietnam in 1964 that LBJ followed. It is possible to contemplate a more complex scenario, however, in which Kennedy would have avoided the 1964 actions that later proved to reduce Johnson’s freedom of action and make escalation more likely. To begin with, Kennedy, given his previous opposition to full-fledged declarations of US commitment to the South Vietnamese government, might have ruled out anything like NSAM 288, adopted in April 1964 and committing the United States to preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. In addition, under Kennedy the US might not have engaged in the provocations that led to the Gulf of Tonkin incidents that August, which means there would have been either no Congressional Resolution, or a resolution passed under some significantly different circumstances with different political reverberations. I am grateful to Edwin Moise for a highly useful discussion along these lines.


69. On the question of negotiations in late 1964, early 1965, see Logevall, Choosing War, chs 8–10. On the Soviet position, see Ilya Gaiduk, The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), pp. 18–21, 26–7. British officials in late 1964 thought a face-saving retreat for the US could be arranged. See, for example, London to Saigon Embassy, 25 Nov. 1964, FO 371/175503. See also Thomas L. Hughes to Rusk, 20 Nov. 1964, National Security File, Vietnam, box 10, LBJL. Hughes, who headed the Intelligence and Research desk at the State Department, wrote that Hanoi remained firmly committed to reunification under Communist control but was flexible as to the timing.

70. Russell’s suggestion is noted by Herbert R. McMaster, Jr, “Distrust, Deceit, and Disaster: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Americanization of the Vietnam War,
2 The Cuban Imbroglio:  
From the Bay of Pigs to the Missile Crisis and Beyond  
Mark J. White

On no topic is the polarization of views that generally characterizes historical writing on the Kennedy presidency more evident than on the Cuban missile crisis. To his detractors John F. Kennedy did much to bring on the October 1962 nuclear stand-off over Cuba and in deepening that crisis once it began. Other scholars, by contrast, find little fault in JFK's record on Cuba. Their interpretations are either complimentary or uncritical.1

In attempting to evaluate and perhaps integrate these arguments, this essay will compartmentalize the subject into five areas by asking the following questions: First, did Kennedy play a major role in bringing about the missile crisis? Second, how did he respond to the Soviet military buildup in Cuba in the fall of 1962? Third, how wisely did he react to the news about missiles in Cuba, or, put another way, how does his performance during the first week of the missile crisis rate? Fourth, how adroitly did Kennedy manage the crisis in its second week? Fifth, how did the president shape policy toward Cuba after October 1962?

The domestic and international settings against which these events unfolded were important, for they both provided promising opportunities for JFK and restricted his maneuverability. There was some domestic pressure on Kennedy at the start of his presidency to overthrow Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Republicans were ready to assail him if Castro remained in power – and proceeded to do just that. To an extent, this political reality was of Kennedy's own making. During the 1960 campaign against Vice President Richard M. Nixon, JFK had stressed the Eisenhower-Nixon administration's failure to prevent Castro's rise, and promised if elected to take bolder action to oust the Cuban leader. In this way, Kennedy generated the