
Book Reviews

Proof of Kennedy's 'no' to Vietnam

by Linda de Hoyos

JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power

by John M. Newman

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A TV retrospective of President John F. Kennedy, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of his murder, raised the question whether the United States would have engaged in the Vietnam War had JFK lived. "We might not have gone into the Vietnam the way we did," the shaky voice of William Bundy, Kennedy's assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs and defense's representative on the Southeast Asia task force, was heard to say.

John Newman's book *JFK and Vietnam* removes all conjecture from the matter: The United States would not have gone into Vietnam—as Bundy himself well knows. Newman proves the case conclusively, basing his book on newly declassified documents, memoranda, and minutes of meetings, from which he quotes liberally. Newman's book is a highly useful blow-by-blow account of the debates within the Kennedy administration on Vietnam. At each point that the debate reached a moment of critical decision, Kennedy did not budge from his position that American troops would not be sent to Vietnam to fight the Vietcong and North Vietnam directly. In this stance, the President was nearly alone within his cabinet and among his top advisers.

As early as May 11, 1961, Kennedy issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 52, which rejected an appeal of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a total commitment to South Vietnam and a deployment of U.S. ground troops. The chiefs were clear that a total commitment would mean that the United States must be prepared to use the atomic bomb, if that meant the difference between victory and defeat.

National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk argued for intervention. But, Kennedy maintained this position up to the point that he was murdered.

On July 28, 1961, Kennedy again rejected the plan of Walt Rostow of the National Security Council, to begin U.S. military operations against North Vietnam. In the meeting

rejecting the plan, Kennedy "emphasized that the American people and many distinguished military leaders [Gen. Douglas MacArthur among them] were reluctant to see U.S. troops in that part of the world."

On Nov. 22, 1961, Kennedy issued NSAM 111, in opposition to his advisers and the Joint Chiefs. Although the memo approved a significant increase in U.S. advisers and equipment to South Vietnam, it would not approve deployment of U.S. ground troops, nor would it give absolute guarantees to save Vietnam from communism. Arguing against his defense secretary, Robert "Body Count" McNamara, according to the notes of the NSC meeting, Kennedy said he could make a "rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions had been spent for years with no success." In fact, as Neil Sheehan's biography of John Paul Vann, *Bright Shining Lie*, showed, by the end of 1960, the U.S. military had already faced the fact that the South Vietnamese military could not win the war.

For the Joint Chiefs, this meant that the United States must itself make a total war-winning commitment to Vietnam. For many of Kennedy's civilian advisers, however, Vietnam was meant to be—and became—the arena for British-style cabinet warfare, in which American soldiers were to fight and die as pawns of a diplomatic game.

Kennedy rejected both options. In the strategic war against communism, he was committed to defeating the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China on a policy of peace through strength, in which U.S. military strength and successes in technology, science, and space gave the United States total strategic superiority over communism. The same policy advisers who argued for cabinet warfare-style intervention into Vietnam opposed Kennedy's strategic designs also, favoring Yalta's "balance of power"—a term much used by Henry A. Kissinger.

By April 1962, Kennedy was already hinting to some of his advisers that he wanted to "seize upon any favorable moment to reduce our commitment" to Vietnam. On Nov. 21, 1963, the day before he was killed, he had drafted NSAM 273, which again rejected use of U.S. combat troops and direct U.S. military operations against North Vietnam. Kennedy never signed NSAM 273. When it was signed, on Nov. 26, 1963, by President Johnson, it had been revised to authorize U.S. military operations against North Vietnam. U.S. military intervention proceeded to escalate, largely based on memoranda written by William Bundy.

Fortunately, Newman's book does not draw the conclusion that the sole motivation for Kennedy's murder was to remove the major obstacle to U.S. direct intervention into Vietnam; but his book paints a stark picture of a President who, like Lincoln, stood at odds with his advisers.

And what happened to those advisers? McGeorge Bundy, for one, after contributing to architecting the war, moved over to head up the Ford Foundation, from where he deployed anti-war students such as Weatherman founder Mark Rudd.