

JFK's Battle for Peace

From His June 10 Speech to His Nov. 22, 1963 Assassination

by Harley Schlanger

June 16—It is an understatement to say that the June 10, 1963 “Peace Speech,” delivered by President John F. Kennedy (JFK) at the American University, created the potential to not only end the Cold War, but begin a new era of peaceful cooperation among nations. It came at a moment of profound transformation of JFK, shaped by his experience in facing two dangerous moments, which could have plunged the United States into nuclear war: the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 17, 1961, by some 1,500 Cuban exiles opposed to Fidel Castro, run by the CIA with backing of his military advisers, when he rejected their demand to send regular U.S. military forces into Cuba; and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, in which war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was avoided by an intense back channel discussion, which led to a *quid pro quo* deal, in which the Soviets removed the missiles from Cuba, and the U.S. reciprocated by withdrawing its Jupiter missiles from Italy and Turkey.

In both cases, Kennedy was not only engaged in a Cold War struggle with Communist adversaries, but with the hawkish Cold Warriors in his cabinet, who represented the “Military-Industrial Complex” (MIC) which his predecessor, President Dwight Eisenhower, had warned the nation about in his Farewell Address. JFK used the American University address to



White House/Cecil Stoughton

President John F. Kennedy calls for a new era of peaceful cooperation among nations in his commencement speech at The American University, June 10, 1963.

publicly express his commitment to avoid such confrontations in the future, appealing to Americans to recognize that despite significant differences with the Soviet Union and its communist system, the people of both nations shared basic common interests, which could serve as the foundation for peaceful coexistence.

His words on that day reflect both an optimism for achieving better relations in the future, and a determination to end the post-war division of the world into two hostile, competing blocs. In this passage from the speech, he was not just speaking of avoiding war, but of changing the course of history:

What kind of peace do I mean?

What kind of peace do we seek? Not a *Pax Americana* enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children—not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women—not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.



Elton Lord

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy's predecessor, warned the nation of the military-industrial complex in his farewell address, Jan. 17, 1961.

For the next five-and-a-half months, before his life was cut short by assassins' bullets, JFK grappled with two dynamics. First, was how to move beyond



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Just 57 days after the failed U.S. Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, U.S. President John Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev—pressured by their respective military-industrial complexes toward war—engage in personal diplomacy on the status of Berlin, and to avert the danger of war over Laos in Southeast Asia. U.S. Embassy residence in Vienna, June 3, 1961.

war-avoiding, frenzied back-channel negotiations, to building trust with the Soviet leaders. Premier Nikita Khrushchev was moved by the speech, calling it the “greatest speech by an American President since Franklin Roosevelt”; it was published in full in *Pravda*. It no doubt played a role in finalizing the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, signed on Aug. 5, 1963, which, after eight years of negotiations, was seen as a significant step toward cooperation.

But to fulfill the mission of lasting peace, he had to overcome both the intent of the MIC to maintain a confrontational posture toward the USSR, and the psychological effects of the Cold War on the U.S. electorate. Would pursuing peace allow his opponents to tar him with the label of being “soft on Communism,” of being an “appeaser” and a coward, as the War Hawks attempted to do after the Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis? According to personal accounts of his friends and allies, solving this was constantly on his mind, as he was facing an election in 1964.

JFK and Vietnam

One of the major problems confronting Kennedy was U.S. policy in Vietnam, where the U.S. had de-

ployed more than 15,000 military personnel to aid the government of South Vietnam in its war against the Communist insurgency there, backed by North Vietnam. This was especially acute, as the U.S. commitment to defend the Ngo Dinh Diem government of South Vietnam, without a more robust military deployment, was becoming increasingly difficult.

By the summer of 1963, JFK was convinced he was being lied to by military and CIA advisers about the prospect of military success in Vietnam. Under pressure from hard-line hawks to beef up U.S. forces, he was cautiously discussing with some close aides withdrawing U.S. military personnel from Vietnam. With the exception of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, his advisers believed that a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was “unthinkable,” both due to the “need for American leadership in the fight against communism,” and because, if he did

withdraw, it would become a major campaign issue in 1964, as his opponents would charge him with capitulating to the Soviets and communism.

Yet, he was convinced that peace with the USSR could not be achieved while a growing contingent of U.S. military power was being deployed into Vietnam. The question for him was no longer should the U.S. withdraw,” but “How do we get out?” The following chronology from 1963 provides a picture of his determination to resolve this, in the spirit of his June 10 speech.

October 2—JFK received a report from General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and McNamara on their findings during a trip to Vietnam. They recommended a “phased withdrawal,” to be completed by the end of 1965. This was announced that evening by Press Secretary Pierre Salinger.

October 5—The decision was made to approve National Security Action Memorandum 263 (NSAM 263), to remove 1,000 U.S. advisers by December at a meeting of national security advisers. JFK can be heard on an audiotape of that meeting saying, “Let’s go ahead and do it ... without making a public statement about it.”

Oct. 11—JFK signed NSAM 263. The final draft was done by Taylor and McNamara.

A direct response to this memo was a shift in the CIA's analysis of the progress of the war in Vietnam, from a positive view—which would have allowed JFK to present his decision for U.S. forces to leave as one based on the success of the U.S. deployment—to negative, which would make it seem that he was capitulating to the communists.

Nov. 1—A coup, organized by the CIA with support from U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, senior adviser Averell Harriman, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, was carried out against President Diem, who was arrested and murdered. This event, together with the CIA shift to a negative outlook on the war, were part of an operation to undermine JFK's plan to withdraw.

Nov. 22—JFK was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

Nov. 26—With JFK's assassination, NSAM 263's withdrawal order was shelved. It was replaced by NSAM 273, which was signed by Lyndon Johnson (LBJ). Vice President LBJ had become President four days earlier, when JFK was killed. While NSAM 273 was claimed to be a continuation of JFK's intent, the withdrawal of troops did not take place. Instead, it included a commitment for covert action against North Vietnam by CIA-backed South Vietnam forces.

This was put into action with seaborne raids in 1964, which allegedly provoked an attack on two U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. This served as the basis for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed on August 5, 1964, which led to an escalation of the U.S. force deployment. From a total of 15,894 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam while JFK was still alive, the numbers swelled. At the time of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, there were 23,000 troops. By 1968, the total jumped to 536,000 U.S. troops.

Would JFK Have Ended the War?

There are many establishment historians who claim that JFK would not have followed through with his commitment to withdraw all U.S. troops by 1965, as well as some "leftists," such as Noam Chomsky, who

dismiss the idea that he had changed from a Cold Warrior to a man of peace.

Such cynicism serves today's MIC well, as U.S. "leadership" has committed the nation to permanent war. But there is no doubt that Kennedy was grappling with whether or not he could be re-elected if he followed through with his commitment to peace.

He began discussing how to disengage in Vietnam with friends and potential allies in late September-October. Some examples:

- In early October, JFK told Charles Bartlett, a Washington correspondent and old friend: "We don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. We don't have a prayer of prevailing there. Those people hate us. They are going to throw our tails out of there at almost any point. But I can't give up a piece of territory like that to the Communists and then get the American people to reelect me."

- Tip O'Neill, Congressman, later Speaker of the House: told a biographer that JFK vowed he would pull American troops out of Vietnam "once the 1964 election was over."

- On Oct. 20, JFK spoke to Larry Newman, a neighbor and old friend in Hyannis Port: "The first thing I'm

going to do when I'm re-elected, I'm going to get the Americans out of Vietnam.... I don't know how I'm going to do it ... but that is my number one priority—get out of Southeast Asia. I should have listened to [Gen. Douglas] MacArthur. I should have listened to [Charles] de Gaulle."

- On Oct. 21, JFK asked Gen. David Shoup, Commandant of the Marine Corps and member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for advice. Shoup told him: "Unless we are prepared to use a million men in a major drive, we should pull out before the war expands beyond control."

- On Nov. 11, Armistice Day, JFK confirmed to Shoup during a walk through Arlington cemetery, where U.S. war dead are buried, that he would remove U.S. troops.

- On Nov. 12, JFK spoke to Sen. Wayne Morse, an anti-war activist and one of two Senators who later voted against the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. "Wayne,



Embassy of the Republic of Vietnam in Washington
*Ngo Dinh Diem, President of the
Republic of Vietnam, 1955-63.*

I've decided to get out. Definitely." Morse later said JFK told him this in the Rose Garden, so as to avoid being overheard, or bugged by the CIA.

The Lesson for the 2024 Election

On Nov. 22, during a trip to Dallas, Texas, President Kennedy was murdered, and the course of history was changed. While many believe that the order for his murder came from the networks behind the War Hawks he fought during his whole presidency, a coverup has remained in place to this day, with many documents related to the assassination still "classified."

In a private conversation with associates, on July 27, 2004, during the Democratic Party convention in Boston, Lyndon LaRouche was asked about what is required from a statesman to defeat those committed to war. He said that the mistake of JFK was to fight this as "cabinet warfare," in the belief that he could either "win over" the War Hawks to his plan, or hold them off until after the 1964 election, and then get out. This was a trap, LaRouche said, and it made both the war, and his demise, inevitable. Instead, he should have used his

position as President, to shift public opinion away from blind loyalty to the Cold War, to correct the blunder committed when Harry Truman deserted FDR's war-time alliance with the USSR and stumbled foolishly into Churchill's division of the world into two antagonistic blocs.

By "cabinet warfare," LaRouche was referring to the failure of JFK to take the fight he was waging against the Cold Warriors into the public arena. During the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and again during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he demonstrated great courage in standing up against the majority of his advisers advocating escalation, against Castro in 1961, and against the Soviets in 1962. And in his June 10 speech, he provided inspiration for those who yearned for peace. But by not putting before the public the battles he was waging, he allowed cover for his enemies to counter his intent, which turned out to be a fatal mistake.

For those who wish to be elected President of the U.S. in 2024, for the sake of peace "for all men and women," a peace "for all time," it is urgent to take LaRouche's advice to heart.

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