

Vain Hopes, False Dreams

Noam Chomsky

September 1992

Contents

Kennedy's War	4
JFK and Withdrawal: the Early Plans	5
JFK and Withdrawal: the Dénouement	8
LBJ and the Kennedy Doves	13
Interpretations: the Early Version	15
The Record Revised	16
The Hero-Villain Scenario	19

In the July/August issue of Z, several articles dealt with the deterioration of conditions of life in American society and the loss of hope, trust, or even expectations for the political system. Reviewing some of these all-too-obvious elements of the current scene, I wrote that “The public is not unaware of what is happening, though with the success of the policies of isolation and breakdown of organizational structure, the response is erratic and dangerous: faith in ridiculous billionaire saviors who are little more than ‘blank slates’ on which one can write one’s favorite dreams, myths of past innocence and noble leaders, conspiracy cults..., unfocused skepticism and disillusionment — a mixture that has not had happy consequences in the past.”

At times of general malaise and social breakdown, it is not uncommon for millenarian movements to arise to replace lost hopes by idle dreams: dreams of a savior who will lead us from bondage, or of the return of the great ships with their bounty, as in the cargo cults of South Sea islanders. Some may yearn for a lost golden age, or succumb to the blandishments of the new Messiahs who come to the fore at such moments. Those more cognizant of the institutional causes of discontent may be attracted to an image of hope destroyed by dark and powerful forces that stole from us the leader who sought a better future. The temptation to seek solace, or salvation, is particularly strong when the means to become engaged in a constructive way in determining one’s fate have largely dissolved and disappeared.

The billionaire savior has retreated from the scene. But it is surely striking that his challenge to the one-party, two-faction system of business rule, with its broad popular appeal, should have coincided so closely with the revival of fascination with tales of intrigue about Camelot lost. The audiences differ, but the JFK-Perot enthusiasms are similar enough to raise the question whether the imagery of the leader maliciously stolen from us has more of a claim to reality than the promise of the figure who suddenly appeared, quickly to fade away. The question is an important one, particularly to the left (broadly construed), which has devoted much of its valuable energy and resources to the Kennedy revival at a time when it has been successfully removed from the political arena, along with the large majority of the public that is its natural constituency.

The core issue in the current Kennedy revival is the claim that JFK intended to withdraw from Vietnam, a fact suppressed by the media; and was assassinated for that reason, it is prominently charged. Some allege further that Kennedy was intent on destroying the CIA, dismantling the military-industrial complex, ending the Cold War, and opening an era of development and freedom for Latin America, among other forms of class treachery that led to his downfall. This 1991–2 drama proceeded at several levels, from cinema to scholarship, engaging some of the best-known Kennedy intellectuals as well as substantial segments of the popular movements that in large part grew from opposition to the Vietnam war. Much as they differ on parts of the picture and other issues, there is a shared belief across this spectrum that history changed course dramatically when Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, an event that casts a grim shadow over all that followed.

It is also striking that the withdrawal thesis, which is at the heart of the Camelot revival of 1991–2, gained its prominence just on the 30th anniversary of Kennedy’s steps to escalate the Indochina conflict from international terrorism to outright aggression. The anniversary of Kennedy’s war against the rural society of South Vietnam passed virtually without notice, as the country mused over the evil nature of the Japanese, who had so signally failed to plead for forgiveness on the 50th anniversary of their attack on a military base in a US colony that had been stolen from its inhabitants, by force and guile, just 50 years earlier.

There are several sources of evidence that bear on the withdrawal thesis: (1) The historical facts; (2) the record of public statements; (3) the internal planning record; (4) the memoirs and other reports of Kennedy insiders. In each category, the material is substantial. The record of internal deliberations, in particular, has been available far beyond the norm since the release of two editions of the Pentagon Papers (PP). The recent publication of thousands of pages of documents in the official State Department history provides a wealth of additional material on the years of the presidential transition, 1963–4, which are of crucial significance for evaluating the thesis that many have found so compelling. What follows is an excerpt from a much longer review of the four categories of evidence in a broader context (Year 501, South End, forthcoming).

While history never permits anything like definitive conclusions, in this case, the richness of the record, and its consistency, permit some unusually confident judgments. In my opinion, the record is inconsistent with the withdrawal thesis throughout, and supports a different conclusion. In brief, basic policy towards Indochina developed within a framework of North-South/East-West relations that Kennedy did not challenge, and remained constant in essentials: disentanglement from an unpopular and costly venture as soon as possible, but *after* victory was assured (by the end, with increasing doubt that US client regimes could be sustained). Tactics were modified with changing circumstances and perceptions. Changes of Administration, including the Kennedy assassination, had no large-scale effect on policy, and not even any great effect on tactics, when account is taken of the objective situation and how it was perceived.

Kennedy's War

When JFK took over in 1961, the US client regimes faced collapse in both Laos and Vietnam, for the same reason in both countries: The US-imposed regimes could not compete politically with the well-organized popular opposition, a fact recognized on all sides. Kennedy accepted a diplomatic settlement in Laos (at least on paper), but chose to escalate in Vietnam, where he ordered the deployment of Air Force and Helicopter Units, along with napalm, defoliation, and crop destruction. US military personnel were sharply increased and deployed at battalion level, where they were “beginning to participate more directly in advising Vietnamese unit commanders in the planning and execution of military operations plans” (PP). Kennedy’s war far surpassed the French war at its peak in helicopters and aerial fire power. As for personnel, France had 20,000 nationals fighting in all of Indochina in 1949 (the US force level reached 16,700 under JFK), increasing to 57,000 at the peak.

As military operations intensified, concerns arose over the effects of “indiscriminate firepower” and reports “that indiscriminate bombing in the countryside is forcing innocent or wavering peasants toward the Viet Cong” (PP). Kennedy’s more dovish advisers, notably Roger Hilsman, preferred counterinsurgency operations. The favored method was to drive several million peasants into concentration camps where, surrounded by barbed wire and troops, they would have a “free choice” between the US client regime (GVN) and the Viet Cong. The effort failed, Hilsman later concluded, because it was never possible to eliminate the political opposition entirely. Other problems arose when the wrong village was bombed, or when bombing and defoliation alienated the peasants whose hearts and minds were to be won from the enemy whom they supported.

Kennedy's war was no secret. In March 1962, US officials announced that US pilots were engaged in combat missions (bombing and strafing). In October, a front-page story in the New York Times reported that "in 30 percent of all the combat missions flown in Vietnamese Air Force planes, Americans are at the controls," though "national insignia have been erased from many aircraft...to avoid the thorny international problems involved." The press reported further that US Army fliers and gunners were taking the military initiative against southern guerrillas, using helicopters with more firepower than any World War II fighter plane as an offensive weapon. Armed helicopters were regularly supporting operations of the Saigon army (ARVN). The brutal character of Kennedy's war was also no secret, from the outset.

The specialist literature, notably province studies, generally agrees that the US-imposed regime had no legitimacy in the countryside, where 80% of the population lived (and little enough in the urban areas), that only force could compensate for this lack, and that by 1965 the VC had won the war in much of the country, with little external support.

At first, JFK's 1961-2 aggression appeared to be a grand success: by July 1962, "the prospects looked bright" and "to many the end of the insurgency seemed in sight." The US leadership in Vietnam and Washington "was confident and cautiously optimistic," and "In some quarters, even a measure of euphoria obtained" (PP).

In his semi-official history of Kennedy's presidency, Arthur Schlesinger observes that by the end of 1961, "The President unquestionably felt that an American retreat in Asia might upset the whole world balance" (*A Thousand Days*, 1965). "The result in 1962 was to place the main emphasis on the military effort" in South Vietnam. The "encouraging effects" of the escalation enabled Kennedy to report in his January 1963 State of the Union message that "The spearpoint of aggression has been blunted in South Vietnam." In Schlesinger's own words: "1962 had not been a bad year: ...aggression checked in Vietnam."

Recall that Kennedy and his historian-associate are describing the year 1962, when Kennedy escalated from extreme terrorism to outright aggression.

Turning briefly to the second category of evidence, public statements, we find that Schlesinger's report of the President's feelings is well-confirmed. JFK regularly stressed the enormous stakes involved, which made any thought of withdrawal unacceptable. To the end, his public position was that we must "win the war" and not "just go home and leave the world to those who are our enemies." We must ensure that "the assault from the inside, and which is manipulated from the North, is ended" (Sept., Nov. 1963). Anything less would lead to the loss of Southeast Asia, with repercussions extending far beyond. As the "watchman on the walls of world freedom," he intended to tell his Dallas audience on Nov. 22, the US had to undertake tasks that were "painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task." The internal record, to which we turn next, shows that he adopted the same stance in his (limited) involvement in planning.

JFK and Withdrawal: the Early Plans

The optimistic mid-1962 assessment led Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the primary war manager for Kennedy and Johnson, to initiate planning for the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, leaving to the client regime the dirty work of cleaning up the remnants. Kennedy and McNamara recognized that domestic support for the war was thin, and that problems might arise

if it were to persist too long. Similarly, in November 1967, General Westmoreland announced that with victory imminent, US troops could begin to withdraw in 1969 (as happened, though under circumstances that he did not anticipate); that recommendation does not show that he was a secret dove. Advocacy of withdrawal after assurance of victory was not a controversial stand.

In contrast, withdrawal *without victory* would have been highly controversial. That position received scant support until well after the Tet offensive of January 1968, when corporate and political elites determined that the operation should be liquidated, in large part because of the social costs of protest.

The question to be considered, then, is whether JFK, despite his 1961–2 escalation and his militant public stand, planned to withdraw *without* victory, a plan aborted by the assassination, which cleared the way for Lyndon Johnson and his fellow-warmongers to bring on a major war. If so, one may inquire further into whether this was a factor in the assassination.

The withdrawal decisions were reported at once in the press with fair accuracy, and the basic facts about the internal deliberations lying behind them became known 20 years ago when the Pentagon Papers appeared. In July 1962, the analyst writes, “At the behest of the President, the Secretary of Defense undertook to reexamine the situation [in Vietnam] and address himself to its future — with a view to assuring that it be brought to a successful conclusion within a reasonable time.” McNamara declared himself impressed with the “tremendous progress” that had been made, and called for “phasing out major U.S. advisory and logistic support activities.” General Paul Harkins (commander of the US military mission) estimated that the VC should be “eliminated as a significant force” about a year after the Vietnamese forces then being trained and equipped “became fully operational.” McNamara, however, insisted upon “a conservative view”: planning should be based on the assumption that “it would take three years instead of one, that is, by the latter part of 1965.” He also “observed that it might be difficult to retain public support for U.S. operations in Vietnam indefinitely,” a constant concern. Therefore, it was necessary “to phase out U.S. military involvement.” The Joint Chiefs ordered preparation of a plan to implement these decisions. The operative assumption was that “The insurgency will be under control” by the end of 1965.

On January 25, 1963, General Harkins’ plan was presented to the Joint Chiefs, stating that “the phase-out of the US special military assistance is envisioned as generally occurring during the period July 1965-June 1966,” earlier where feasible. A few days later, the Chiefs were reassured that this was the right course by a report by a JCS investigative team headed by Army Chief of Staff Earle Wheeler that included leading military hawks. Its report was generally upbeat and optimistic. The anticipated success of current plans to intensify military operations would allow a “concurrent phase-out of United States support personnel, leaving a Military Assistance Advisory Group of about 1,600 personnel” by 1965. All of this was considered feasible and appropriate by the top military command.

Wheeler then reported directly to the President, informing him “that things were going well in Vietnam militarily, but that ‘Ho Chi Minh was fighting the war for peanuts and if we ever expected to win that affair out there, we had to make him bleed a little bit’.” The President “was quite interested in this,” General Wheeler recalled in oral history (July 1964). His dovish advisers were also impressed. In April 1963, Hilsman proposed to “continue the covert, or at least deniable, operations along the general lines we have been following for some months” against North Vietnam with the objective of “keeping the threat of eventual destruction alive in Hanoi’s mind.” But “significant action against North Vietnam” is unwise on tactical grounds: it should

be delayed until “we have demonstrated success in our counter-insurgency program.” Such “premature action” might also “so alarm our friends and allies and a significant segment of domestic opinion that the pressures for neutralization will become formidable”; as always, the dread threat of diplomacy must be deflected. With judicious planning, Hilsman said, “I believe we can win in Viet-Nam.”

Hilsman was not quite as optimistic as the military command. A few days before the President heard Wheeler’s upbeat report, he received a memorandum from Hilsman and Forrestal (Jan. 25) that was more qualified. They condemned the press for undue pessimism and underplaying US success, and agreed that “The war in South Vietnam is clearly going better than it was a year ago,” praising ARVN’s “increased aggressiveness” resulting from the US military escalation, and reporting that GVN control now extended to over half the rural population (the VC controlling 8%), a considerable gain through late 1962. But “the negative side of the ledger is still awesome.” The VC had increased their regular forces, recruiting locally and supplied locally, and are “extremely effective.” “Thus the conclusion seems inescapable that the Viet Cong could continue the war effort at the present level, or perhaps increase it, even if the infiltration routes were completely closed.” “Our overall judgment, in sum, is that we are probably winning, but certainly more slowly than we had hoped.” They made a variety of technical recommendations to implement the counterinsurgency program more efficiently, with more direct US involvement; and to improve the efficiency of the US mission to accelerate the “Progress toward winning the war.”

We thus learn that in early 1963, in an atmosphere of considerable to great optimism, the military initiatives for withdrawal went hand-in-hand with plans for escalation of the war within South Vietnam and possibly intensified actions against North Vietnam. We learn further that such “intelligence and sabotage forays” into North Vietnam were already underway – since mid-1962 according to McGeorge Bundy. On December 11, 1963, as the new Administration took over, Michael Forrestal (another leading Kennedy dove) confirmed that “For some time the Central Intelligence Agency has been engaged in joint clandestine operations with ARVN against North Vietnam.” Journalist William Pfaff reports that in the summer of 1962, at a Special Forces encampment north of Saigon he observed a CIA “patrol loading up in an unmarked C-46 with a Chinese pilot in civilian clothes,” taking off for a mission in North Vietnam (“possibly into China itself”), with some “Asians, some Americans or Europeans.”

The connection between withdrawal and escalation is readily understandable: successful military actions would enable the GVN to take over the task from the Americans, who could then withdraw with victory secured, satisfying the common intent of the extreme hawks, war manager McNamara, and JFK.

In the following months, the withdrawal plans were carried forward under the same optimistic assumptions, with the agreement of the military, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and General Maxwell Taylor, JFK’s most trusted military adviser. The “fundamental objective” remained unchanged, Michael Forrestal advised the President on August 27: the US must “give wholehearted support to the prosecution of the war against the Viet Cong terrorists,” and “continue assistance to any government in South Vietnam which shows itself capable of sustaining this effort.”

The reference to “any government” relates to increasing Administration concerns over the Diem regime. One factor was that its repression was evoking internal resistance, which was interfering with the war effort. Another was that Diem and his brother Nhu were pressing their demands for US withdrawal with increasing urgency, sometimes in public, including a front-page interview in the Washington Post in May in which Nhu called for withdrawal of half the

American military. Administration planners feared that GVN pressures for withdrawal of US forces would become difficult to resist, a danger enhanced by exploratory GVN efforts to reach a diplomatic settlement with the North. The skimpy political base for Kennedy's war would then erode, and the US would be compelled to withdraw without victory. That option being unacceptable, the Saigon regime had to get on board, or be dismissed.

JFK and Withdrawal: the Dénouement

By the end of August, JFK and his most dovish advisers (Averell Harriman, Roger Hilsman, George Ball) agreed that the client government should be overthrown. On August 28, the President "asked the Defense Department to come up with ways of building up the anti-Diem forces in Saigon," and called on his advisers to devise actions in Washington or "in the field which would maximize the chances of the rebel generals." Harriman said that without a coup, "we cannot win the war" and "must withdraw." Hilsman "agreed that we cannot win the war unless Diem is removed," as did Ball, while Robert Kennedy also called for efforts to strengthen the rebel generals. Secretary Rusk warned JFK that "Nhu might call on the North Vietnamese to help him throw out the Americans."

Hilsman urged that if Diem and Nhu make any "Political move toward the DRV (such as opening of neutralization negotiations)," or even hint at such moves, we should "Encourage the generals to move promptly with a coup," and be prepared to "hit the DRV with all that is necessary" if they try to counter our actions, introducing US combat forces to ensure victory for the coup group if necessary. "The important thing is to win the war," Hilsman advised; and that meant getting rid of the Saigon regime, which was dragging its feet and looking for ways out. The President concurred that "our primary objective remains winning war," Rusk cabled to the Saigon Embassy.

The basic principle, unquestioned, is that we must "focus on winning the war" (Hilsman). On September 14, Harriman wrote to Lodge that: "from the President on down everybody is determined to support you and the country team in winning the war against the Viet Cong...there are no quitters here."

In particular, JFK is no quitter. There is not a phrase in the internal record to suggest that this judgment by a high-level Kennedy adviser, at the dovish extreme, should be qualified in any way.

On September 17, President Kennedy instructed Ambassador Lodge to pressure Diem to "get everyone back to work and get them to focus on winning the war," repeating his regular emphasis on victory. It was particularly important to show military progress because "of need to make effective case with Congress for continued prosecution of the effort," the President added, expressing his constant concern that domestic support for his commitment to military victory was weak. "To meet these needs," he informed Lodge, he was sending his top aides McNamara and Taylor to Vietnam. He emphasized to them that the goal remains "winning the war," adding that "The way to confound the press is to win the war." Like Congress, the press was an enemy because of its lack of enthusiasm for a war to victory and its occasional calls for diplomacy.

McNamara and Taylor were encouraged by what they found. On October 2, they informed the President that "The military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress." They presented a series of recommendations, three of which were later authorized (watered down a bit) in NSAM 263: (1) "An increase in the military tempo" throughout the country so that the military

campaign in the Northern and Central areas will be over by the end of 1964, and in the South (the Delta) by the end of 1965; (2) Vietnamese should be trained to take over “essential functions now performed by U.S. military personnel” by the end of 1965, so that “It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel by that time”; (3) “the Defense Department should announce in the very near future presently prepared plans to withdraw 1000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963” as “an initial step in a long-term program to replace U.S. personnel with trained Vietnamese without impairment of the war effort.”

Their report stressed again that the “overriding objective” is victory, a matter “vital to United States security,” but that withdrawal could not be too long delayed: “any significant slowing in the rate of progress would surely have a serious effect on U.S. popular support for the U.S. effort.” They anticipated victory by the end of 1965. The withdrawal plans were crucially qualified in the usual way: “No further reductions should be made until the requirements of the 1964 campaign become firm,” that is, until battlefield success is assured.

Note that lack of popular support for the war was not perceived by JFK and his advisers as providing an opportunity for withdrawal, but rather as a threat to victory.

The NSC met the same day to consider these proposals. The President’s role was, as usual, marginal. He repeated that “the major problem was with U.S. public opinion” and, as he had before, balked at the time scale. He opposed a commitment to withdraw some forces in 1963 because “if we were not able to take this action by the end of this year, we would be accused of being over optimistic.” McNamara, in contrast, “saw great value in this sentence in order to meet the view of Senator Fulbright and others that we are bogged down forever in Vietnam.” The phrase was left as “a part of the McNamara-Taylor report rather than as predictions of the President,” who thus remained uncommitted to withdrawal, at his insistence.

A public statement was released to the press, and prominently published, presenting the essence of the McNamara-Taylor recommendations. The statement repeated the standard position that the US will work with the GVN “to deny this country to Communism and to suppress the externally stimulated and supported insurgency of the Viet Cong as promptly as possible,” continuing with “Major U.S. assistance in support of this military effort,” which is needed only until the insurgency has been suppressed or until the national security forces of the Government of South Viet-Nam are capable of suppressing it.”

These decisions were encapsulated in NSAM 263 (Oct. 11), a brief statement in which “The President approved the military recommendations” 1–3 cited above, weakened by one change: that “no formal announcement be made of the implementation of plans to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963.” The final provision of NSAM 263 is JFK’s personal instruction to Ambassador Lodge to step up the military effort along with training and arming of new forces, so as to enhance the prospects for victory, on which withdrawal was conditioned.

Note that read literally, NSAM 263 says very little. It approves the McNamara-Taylor recommendations to intensify the war and military training so that “It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel” by the end of 1965, and includes JFK’s personal instructions to Lodge to intensify military action. It does not call for implementing a 1,000 man withdrawal, but rather endorses the third point of the McNamara-Taylor proposal concerning plans for such withdrawal “as an initial step in a long-term program” to be conducted “without impairment of the war effort,” deleting their call for formal announcement of these plans.

Presumably, the intent was to implement the withdrawal plans if military conditions allow, but that intent is unstated. The fact might be borne in mind in the light of elaborate later efforts

to read great significance into nuances of phrasing so as to demonstrate a dramatic change in policy with the Kennedy-Johnson transition. Adopting these interpretive techniques, we would conclude that NSAM 263 is almost vacuous. I stress that that is not my interpretation; I assume the obvious unstated intention, only suggesting that other documents be treated in the same reasonable manner — in which case, widely-held beliefs will quickly evaporate.

The picture presented in public at the time requires no significant modification in the light of the huge mass of documents now available, though these make much more clear the President's unwillingness to commit himself to the withdrawal advocated by his war managers for fear that the victory might not be achieved in time, his concerns that domestic opinion might not stay the course, his insistence that withdrawal be conditioned on military victory, and his orders to step up the military effort and to replace the Diem regime by one that will "focus on winning" and not entertain thoughts of US withdrawal and peaceful settlement.

Through October 1963, problems with the GVN continued to mount. Nhu called openly for the Americans to get out completely, only providing aid. Another problem was the lack of "effectiveness of GVN in its relation to its own people." Asked about this, Ambassador Lodge responded in an "Eyes only for the President" communication that "Viet-Nam is not a thoroughly strong police state...because, unlike Hitler's Germany, it is not efficient" and is thus unable to suppress the "large and well-organized underground opponent strongly and ever-freshly motivated by vigorous hatred." The Vietnamese "appear to be more than ever anxious to be left alone," and though they "are said to be capable of great violence on occasion," "there is no sight of it at the present time," another impediment to US efforts.

Small wonder that JFK was unwilling to commit himself to the McNamara-Taylor withdrawal proposal. Note that the same defects of the US clients underlie the critique of the strategic hamlet program by Kennedy doves.

Washington's coup plans continued, with Ambassador Lodge in operational command. The only hesitation was fear of failure. When the coup finally took place on November 1, replacing Diem and Nhu (who were killed) by a military regime, the President praised Lodge effusively for his "fine job" and "leadership," an "achievement...of the greatest importance." With the generals now in power, "our primary emphasis should be on effectiveness rather than upon external appearances," the President added. We must help the coup regime to confront "the real problems of winning the contest against the Communists and holding the confidence of its own people." The "ineffectiveness, loss of popular confidence, and the prospect of defeat that were decisive in shaping our relations to the Diem regime" are now a thing of the past, the President hoped, thanks to Lodge's inspired leadership and coup-management, with its gratifying outcome (Nov. 6).

Two weeks before Kennedy's assassination, there is not a phrase in the voluminous internal record that even hints at withdrawal without victory. JFK urges that everyone "focus on winning the war"; withdrawal is conditioned on victory, and motivated by domestic discontent with Kennedy's war. The stakes are considered enormous. Nothing substantial changes as the mantle passes to LBJ.

The post-coup situation had positive and negative aspects from the point of view of the President and his advisers. On the positive side, they hoped that the ruling generals would now at last focus on victory as the President had demanded, gain popular support, and end the irritating calls for US withdrawal and moves towards a peaceful settlement. On the other hand, there was disarray at all levels, while at home, advocacy of diplomacy was not stilled. Furthermore,

evidence that undermined the optimistic assessments was becoming harder to ignore. The new government confirmed that the GVN “had been losing the war against the VC in the Delta for some time because it had been losing the population.” A top-level meeting was planned for Honolulu on November 20 to consider the next steps. The US mission in Vietnam recommended that the withdrawal plans be maintained, the new government being “warmly disposed toward the U.S.” and offering “opportunities to exploit that we never had before.” Kennedy’s plans to escalate the assault against the southern resistance could now be implemented, with a stable regime finally in place. McNamara, ever cautious, was concerned by a sharp increase in VC incidents and urged that “We must be prepared to devote enough resources to this job of winning the war.”

At the Honolulu meeting, a draft was written by McGeorge Bundy for what became NSAM 273, adopted after the assassination but prepared for JFK with the expectation that he would approve it in essentials, as was the norm. Top advisers agreed; Hilsman made only “minor changes.” The State Department history states correctly that the draft “was almost identical to the final paper,” differing only in paragraph 7.

Both documents reiterate the basic wording of the early October documents. On withdrawal, the version approved by Johnson is identical with the draft prepared for Kennedy. It reads: “The objectives of the United States with respect to the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel remain as stated in the White House statement of October 2, 1963,” referring to the statement of US policy formalized without essential change as NSAM 263. As for paragraph 7, the draft and final version are, respectively, as follows:

Draft:

With respect to action against North Vietnam, there should be a detailed plan for the development of additional Government of Vietnam resources, especially for sea-going activity, and such planning should indicate the time and investment necessary to achieve a wholly new level of effectiveness in this field of action.

NSAM 273:

Planning should include different levels of possible increased activity, and in each instance there should be estimates of such factors as: A. Resulting damage to North Vietnam; B. The plausibility of denial; C. Possible North Vietnamese retaliation; D. Other international reaction.

Plans should be submitted promptly for approval by higher authority.

There is no relevant difference between the two documents, except that the LBJ version is weaker and more evasive, dropping the call for “a wholly new level of effectiveness in this field of action”; further actions are reduced to “possible.” The reason why paragraph 7 refers to “additional” or “possible increased” activity we have already seen: such operations had been underway since the Kennedy offensive of 1962, apparently with direct participation of US personnel and foreign mercenaries.

No direct US government involvement is proposed in NSAM 273 beyond what was already underway under JFK. The plans later developed by the DOD and CIA called for “Intensified sabotage operations in North Vietnam by Vietnamese personnel,” with the US involved only in intelligence collection (U-2, electronics) and “psychological operations” (leaflet drops, “phantom covert operations,” “black and white radio broadcasts”).

These two NSAMs (263 in October, 273 on Nov. 26 with a Nov. 20 draft written for Kennedy) are the centerpiece of the thesis that Kennedy planned to withdraw without victory, a decision at once reversed by LBJ (and perhaps the cause of the assassination). They have been the subject of many claims and charges. Typical is Oliver Stone's Address to the National Press Club alleging that a "ten-year study" by John Newman (JFK and Vietnam) "makes it very clear President Kennedy signaled his intention to withdraw from Vietnam in a variety of ways and put that intention firmly on the record with National Security Action Memorandum 263 in October of 1963," while LBJ "reverse[d] the NSAM" with NSAM 273; Kennedy was assassinated for that reason, Stone suggests. Zachary Sklar, the co-author (with Stone) of the screenplay JFK, also citing Newman's book, claims further that the draft prepared for Kennedy "says that the U.S. will *train South Vietnamese* to carry out covert military operations against North Vietnam" while "In the final document, signed by Johnson, it states that *U.S. forces* themselves will carry out these covert military operations," leading to the Tonkin Gulf incident, which "was an example of precisely that kind of covert operation carried out by U.S. forces" (his emphasis). Arthur Schlesinger claims that after the assassination, "President Johnson, listening to President Kennedy's more hawkish advisers..., issued National Security Action Memorandum 273 calling for the maintenance of American military programs in Vietnam 'at levels as high' as before — reversing the Kennedy withdrawal policy." As further proof he cites a paragraph from NSAM 273: "It *remains* the *central objective* of the United States in South Vietnam to *win* their contest against the *externally directed* and supported communist conspiracy." He highlights these words to show that LBJ was undertaking "both the total commitment Kennedy had always refused and the diagnosis of the conflict" that Kennedy had "never quite accepted."

These alleged facts are held to establish the historic change at the assassination.

The claims, however, have no known basis in fact, indeed are refuted by the internal record, which gives no hint of any intention by JFK to withdraw without victory — quite the contrary — and reveals no "reversal" in NSAM 273. Newman's book adds nothing relevant. The call for maintenance of aid is in the draft of NSAM 273 prepared for Kennedy, and was also at the core of his tentative withdrawal plans, conditioned on victory and "Major U.S. assistance" to assure it. Furthermore, Kennedy's more dovish advisers approved and continued to urge LBJ to follow what they understood to be JFK's policy, rejecting any thought of withdrawal without victory. The final version of NSAM 273 does not state that US forces would carry out covert operations in any new way; nor did they, in the following months. There were covert attacks on North Vietnamese installations just prior to the Tonkin Gulf incident, but they were carried out by South Vietnamese forces, according to the internal record. Schlesinger's highlighted words appear regularly in both the public and private Kennedy record, as does the diagnosis, along with JFK's insistent demand that everyone must "focus on winning the war." The hidden meanings are in the eye of the beholder.

The two versions of NSAM 273 differ in no relevant way, apart from the weakening of paragraph 7 in the final version. Furthermore, the departure from NSAM 263 is slight, and readily explained in terms of changing assessments. Efforts to detect nuances and devious implications have no basis in fact, and if pursued, could easily be turned into a (meaningless) "proof" that LBJ toned down Kennedy aggressiveness.

The call in NSAM 273 (both the draft and the weakened LBJ version) for consideration of further ARVN operations against the North is readily explained in terms of the two basic features of the post-coup situation: the feeling among Kennedy's war planners that with the Diem regime

gone, the US at last had a stable base for Kennedy's war in the South, with new "opportunities to exploit"; and the increasing concern about the military situation in the South, undermining earlier optimism. The former factor made it possible to consider extension of ARVN operations; the latter made it more important to extend them. In subsequent months, Kennedy's planners (now directing Johnson's war) increasingly inclined towards operations against the North as a way to overcome their inability to win the war in the South, leading finally to the escalation of 1965, undertaken largely to "drive the DRV out of its reinforcing role and obtain its cooperation in bringing an end to the Viet Cong insurgency," using "its directive powers to make the Viet Cong desist" (Taylor, Nov. 27, 1964).

LBJ and the Kennedy Doves

Kennedy's more dovish advisers recommended the policies that Johnson pursued, and generally approved of them until the 1965 escalation, often beyond. They lost no time in making clear that JFK's commitment to victory would not be abandoned. On December 10, Forrestal, Ball, Harriman and Hilsman, reiterating JFK's consistent stand, assured Lodge that "we are against neutralism and want to win the war." The same unwavering commitment was reiterated by Ball, who informed Lodge on Dec. 16 that "Nothing is further from USG mind than 'neutral solution for Vietnam.' We intend to win." A year later (Nov. 1964), Ball held that the Saigon regime must continue to receive US aid until the Viet Cong is defeated and that "the struggle would be a long one, even with the DRV out of it." Ball and other doves continued to support Johnson's policies, which they regarded as a continuation of Kennedy's. On May 31, 1964, Ball praised "the President's wise caution" and refusal to "act hastily."

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, later portrayed as an advocate of withdrawal, had raised only tactical objections to JFK's escalation. He advised JFK to abandon "rhetorical flourishes" about the great stakes (advice that the President rejected, as noted). And recognizing that Diem was not fighting the war effectively, he advised withdrawal of some advisors "as a symbolic gesture, to make clear that we mean business when we say that there are some circumstances in which this commitment will be discontinued." Mansfield generally supported Johnson's policies. At an NSC meeting on April 3, 1964, LBJ rejected Senator Morse's proposal for "using SEATO and the UN to achieve a peaceful settlement" in favor of McNamara's view that withdrawal or neutralization would lead to a Communist takeover and therefore remain unacceptable options. Mansfield agreed, urging "that the President's policy toward Vietnam was the only one we could follow." He firmly rejected the withdrawal option and the diplomatic moves counselled by Morse. In January 1965, Mansfield publicly supported "the President's desire neither to withdraw nor carry the war to North Vietnam" (PP). Later, he bitterly condemned critics of Johnson's escalation.

Quite generally, Kennedy's most dovish advisers sensed no change at the transition and lent their support to Johnson. Some praised his "wise caution," while others called for more aggressive action. By mid-1964, Forrestal was coming to support escalation of actions against the North. Hilsman's position was similar. In a March 14 memorandum he stressed the need "to take whatever measures are necessary in Southeast Asia to protect those who oppose the Communists and to maintain our power and influence in the area," including "whatever military steps may be necessary to halt Communist aggression in the area" (crucially, VC "aggression"). We should station

a Marine battalion in Saigon on the pretext of protecting American dependents. Attacks against the North might be “a useful *supplement* to an effective counterinsurgency program,” but not “an effective *substitute*” for it. We must “continue the covert, or at least deniable, operations” against the North in order to keep “the threat of eventual destruction alive in Hanoi’s mind.” Recall that he had made the same recommendations in April 1963, in virtually the same words, including the advice to “continue” the ongoing covert operations against the North with their implicit threat of destruction.

The support for LBJ among the Kennedy doves comes as no surprise, given their familiarity with the internal record, which shows no deviation on the President’s part from Harriman’s judgment that “there are no quitters here.” As the optimistic predictions of 1962–3 collapsed after the coup that overthrew Diem, undermining the precondition for withdrawal, they advocated a change of tactics to achieve the “fundamental objective” always sought.

We might note, at this point, that the military leadership was divided over the war. General Douglas MacArthur and his successor as Army Chief of Staff, Matthew Ridgway, were strongly opposed to the use of combat troops. The top US military commander in Vietnam, MAAG Chief General Lionel McGarr, informed JFK on February 22, 1962 that “in providing the GVN the tools to do the job,” the US “must not offer so much that they forget that the job of saving the country is theirs — only they can do it.” General Taylor and Pacific Commander Admiral Henry Felt shared these qualms about combat troops. As plans to overthrow the Diem-Nhu regime were underway in September 1963, Taylor expressed his “reluctance to contemplate the use of U.S. troops in combat in Vietnam,” while agreeing with the President and his other top advisers that “our sole objective was to win the war.” A year after the assassination, agreeing with McGarr, Taylor continued to urge that the US keep to the “principle that the Vietnamese fight their own war in SVN” (Nov. 3, 1964). He therefore opposed sending logistical forces for flood relief because that would require dispatch of “US combat troops in some numbers to provide close protection.” Two weeks later, he informed President Johnson directly that he was now “quite certain [US combat troops] were not needed...as the estimates of the flood damage diminish.” In September 1964, Taylor had explained that the military command “did not contemplate” committing combat forces because Commanding General Westmoreland, also echoing McGarr, felt that use of American troops “would be a mistake, that it is the Vietnamese’ war.”

In later years, great import has been attributed to JFK’s public reiteration of the McGarr-Westmoreland-Taylor “principle” in his Sept. 1963 statement that “In the final analysis it is their war. They have to win it or lose it.” It is, therefore, worth stressing that the “principle” was standard throughout in internal and public discussion, through 1964, including LBJ’s public statements.

General David Shoup, Marine Commandant through the Kennedy years, reports that when the Joint Chiefs considered troop deployment, “in every case...every senior officer that I knew...said we should never send ground combat forces into Southeast Asia.” Shoup’s public opposition to the war from 1966 was particularly strong, far beyond anything said by the civilian leadership, media doves, or others who later presented themselves as war critics.

These observations add further weight to the conclusion based on the record of internal deliberations, in which JFK insists upon victory and considers withdrawal only on this condition. Had he intended to withdraw, he would have been able to enlist respected military commanders to back him, so it appears, including the most revered figures of the right. He made no effort

to do so, preferring instead to whip up pro-war sentiment with inflammatory rhetoric about the awesome consequences of withdrawal.

Interpretations: the Early Version

The final source of evidence on JFK's plans is the memoirs and other comments of his advisers. These come in two versions: before and after the Tet offensive. We review these in the next two sections, then turning to the 1991–2 revival and revisions. This survey only adds conviction to what we have already found.

Kennedy's commitment to stay the course was clear to those closest to him. As noted, Arthur Schlesinger shared JFK's perception of the enormous stakes and his optimism that the military escalation had reversed the "aggression" of the indigenous guerrillas in 1962. There is not a word in Schlesinger's chronicle of the Kennedy years (1965, reprinted 1967) that hints of any intention to withdraw without victory. In fact, Schlesinger gives no indication that JFK thought about withdrawal at all. The withdrawal plans receive one sentence in his voluminous text, attributed to McNamara in the context of the debate over pressuring the Diem regime. There is nothing else in this 940-page virtual day-by-day record of the Kennedy Administration by its quasi-official historian. Far more detail had appeared in the press in October–December 1963.

These facts leave only three possible conclusions: (1) the historian was keeping the President's intentions secret; (2) this close JFK confidant had no inkling of his intentions; (3) there were no such intentions.

By 1966, it was becoming clear that things were not going well in Vietnam. In his *Bitter Heritage* (1966), Arthur Schlesinger expressed concern that the US military effort had dubious prospects, though "we may all be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government" if it succeeds. Referring to Joseph Alsop's predictions of victory, Schlesinger writes that "we all pray that Mr. Alsop will be right," though he doubts it. The only qualms are tactical: what will be the cost to us? Schlesinger describes himself as holding high the spirit of JFK. He flatly opposes withdrawal, which "would have ominous reverberations throughout Asia," and again gives no hint that Kennedy ever considered such a possibility.

Another close associate, Theodore Sorenson, also published a history of the Administration in 1965. Sorenson was Kennedy's first appointed official, served as his special counsel and attended all NSC meetings. He makes no mention of withdrawal plans. Quite the contrary. Kennedy's "essential contribution," he writes, was to avoid the extremes advocated "by those impatient to win or withdraw. His strategy essentially was to avoid escalation, retreat or a choice limited to these two, while seeking to buy time...." He opposed withdrawal or "bargain[ing] away Vietnam's security at the conference table." Sorenson's conclusion is that JFK "was simply going to weather it out, a nasty, untidy mess to which there was no other acceptable solution. Talk of abandoning so unstable an ally and so costly a commitment 'only makes it easy for the Communists,' said the President. 'I think we should stay.'" So his account ends. Again, we may choose among the same three conclusions.

No one was closer to JFK than his brother Robert. He had expressed his position in 1962: "The solution lies in our winning it. This is what the President intends to do.... We will remain here [in Saigon] until we do." In 1964 oral history, RFK said that the Administration had never faced the possibilities of either withdrawal or escalation. Asked what JFK would have done if

the South Vietnamese appeared doomed, he said: “We’d face that when we came to it.” “Robert’s own understanding of his brother’s position,” his biographer Arthur Schlesinger reports, was that “we should win the war” because of the domino effect. The problem with Diem, RFK added, was that we need “somebody that can win the war,” and he wasn’t the man for it. Accordingly, it is no surprise that RFK fully supported Johnson’s continuation of what he understood to be his brother’s policies through the 1965 escalation.

The last of the early accounts of the Kennedy Administration was written by Roger Hilsman in late 1967, shortly before the Tet offensive and well after severe doubts about the war were raised at the highest levels. He takes it for granted that the goal throughout was “to defeat the Communist guerrillas.” He writes that had JFK lived, “he might well have introduced United States ground forces into South Vietnam — though I believe he would not have ordered them to take over the war effort from the Vietnamese but would have limited their mission to the task of occupying ports, airfields, and military bases to demonstrate to the North Vietnamese that *they* could not win the struggle by escalation either” — the enclave strategy that had been advocated by Ball and Taylor in early 1965, then by others. The question of how to respond to a collapse of the Saigon regime was delayed, he writes, in the hope that it would not arise. Hilsman feels that LBJ “sincerely even desperately wanted to make the existing policy work,” without US combat forces, citing his statement of Sept. 25, 1964 that “We don’t want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys.” He cites the White House statement announcing the adoption of the McNamara-Taylor October 1963 recommendations, adding nothing of substance to what was published in the press at the time. His only comment is that the optimistic predictions on which withdrawal was predicated would come “to haunt Secretary McNamara and the whole history of American involvement in Vietnam.”

The internal record of 1964 shows that Kennedy doves saw matters much as described in the 1964–67 memoirs, and therefore continued to support Johnson’s policies, some pressing for further escalation, others (Ball, Mansfield) praising Johnson for choosing the middle course between escalation and withdrawal.

We have now reviewed all the crucial evidence: the events themselves, the public statements, the record of internal deliberations and planning, the opinions of the military, the attitudes of the Kennedy doves, and the pre-Tet memoirs and commentary. The conclusions are unambiguous, surprisingly so on a matter of current history: President Kennedy was firmly committed to the policy of victory that he inherited and transmitted to his successor, and to the doctrinal framework that assigned enormous significance to that outcome; he had no plan or intention to withdraw without victory; he had apparently given little thought to the matter altogether, and it was regarded as of marginal interest by those closest to him. Furthermore, the basic facts were prominently published at the time, with more detail than is provided by the early memoirs.

The Record Revised

After the Tet Offensive, major domestic power sectors concluded that the enterprise was becoming too costly to them and called for it to be terminated. President Johnson was, in effect, dismissed from office, and policy was set towards disengagement. The effect on the ideological system was dramatic. The liberal intelligentsia felt the “need to insulate JFK from the disastrous consequences of the American venture in Southeast Asia,” Thomas Brown observes in his study of

Camelot imagery. “Kennedy’s role in the Vietnam war is unsurprisingly...the aspect [of his public image and record] that has been subjected to the greatest number of revisions by Kennedy’s admirers.... The important thing was that JFK be absolved of responsibility for the Vietnam debacle; when the need for exculpation is so urgent, no obstacles — including morality and the truth — should stand in the way” (JFK: History of an Image, 1988).

The latter comment relates specifically to one of the earliest post-Tet efforts to revise the image, the 1972 memoir by White House aide Kenneth O’Donnell, whose stories have assumed center stage in the post-Tet reconstruction. He writes that Kennedy had informed Senator Mansfield that he agreed with him “on the need for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam,” adding that he had to delay announcement of “a withdrawal of American military personnel” until after the November 1964 election to avoid “another Joe McCarthy scare.” In 1975, Mansfield told columnist Jack Anderson that Kennedy “was going to order a gradual withdrawal” but “never had the chance to put the plan into effect,” though he had “definitely and unequivocally” made that decision; in 1978, Mansfield said further that Kennedy had informed him that troop withdrawal would begin in January 1964 (which does not fit smoothly with the O’Donnell story).

Noting Mansfield’s (partial) confirmation of O’Donnell’s report, Brown points out that “one need not reject this story out of hand...to doubt that it was a firm statement of Kennedy’s intentions in Vietnam. Like many politicians, JFK was inclined to tell people what they wanted to hear.” Every authentic historian discounts such reports for the same reason: “Kennedy probably told [Mansfield] what he wanted to hear,” Thomas Paterson observes. The same holds for other recollections, authentic or not, by political figures and journalists.

Whatever else he may have been, Kennedy was a political animal, and knew enough to tell the Senate Majority Leader and other influential people what they wanted to hear. He was also keenly sensitive to the opposition to his policies among powerful Senators, who saw them as harmful to US interests. He also was aware that public support for the war was thin, as was McNamara and others. But JFK never saw the general discontent among the public, press, and Congress as an opportunity to construct a popular base for withdrawal; rather, he sought to counter it with extremist rhetoric about the grand stakes. He hoped to bring the war to a successful end before discontent interfered with this plan. Had he intended to withdraw, he would also have leaped at the opportunity provided by the GVN call for reduction of forces (even outright withdrawal), and its moves toward political settlement. As for the right-wing, a President intent on withdrawal would have called upon the most highly-respected military figures for support, as already noted. There is no indication that this reasonable course was ever considered, again confirming that withdrawal was never an option.

The O’Donnell-Mansfield story is hardly credible on other grounds. Nothing would have been better calculated to fan right-wing hysteria than inflammatory rhetoric about the cosmic issues at stake, public commitment to stay the course, election on the solemn promise to stand firm come what may, and then withdrawal and betrayal. Furthermore, Mansfield’s actual positions differed from the retrospective version, as noted. Far more credible, if one takes such reconstructions seriously, is General Wheeler’s recollection in 1964 (not years later) that Kennedy was interested in extending the war to North Vietnam.

Despite such obvious flaws as these, the O’Donnell-Mansfield stories are taken very seriously by Kennedy hagiographers.

The Camelot memoirists proceeded to revise their earlier versions after Tet, separating JFK (and by implication, themselves) from what had happened. Sorenson was the first. In the earlier

version, Kennedy was preparing for the introduction of combat troops if necessary and intended to “weather it out” come what may, not abandoning his ally, who would have collapsed without large-scale US intervention. Withdrawal is not discussed. Diplomacy is considered a threat, successfully overcome by the overthrow of the Diem government. But post-Tet, Sorenson is “convinced” that JFK would have sought diplomatic alternatives in 1965 – with the client regime in still worse straits, as he notes. The October 1963 withdrawal plan, unmentioned in the old version, assumes great significance in the post-Tet revision, with significant omissions: notably, the precondition of military success.

Arthur Schlesinger entered the lists in 1978 with his biography of Robert Kennedy. Unlike Sorenson, he does not confine himself to speculation about JFK’s intent. Rather, he constructs a new history, radically revising his earlier account. Thus, while the pre-Tet versions gave no hint of any intent to withdraw without victory, in the post-Tet biography of Robert Kennedy, JFK’s alleged withdrawal plans merit a full chapter, though RFK’s “involvement in Vietnam had been strictly limited before Dallas,” Schlesinger observes. This startling difference between the pre- and Post-Tet versions is not attributed to any significant new information, indeed is not mentioned at all. In 1992, in a review of Newman’s book, Schlesinger went a step further, claiming that he had put forth the JFK withdrawal thesis all along.

Post-Tet, the October 1963 decisions, emerging from their earlier obscurity, become “the first application of Kennedy’s phased withdrawal plan.” Unmentioned before, this plan now serves as prime evidence that Kennedy had separated himself from the two main “schools”: the advocates of counterinsurgency and of military victory. The plan shows that JFK was opposed to “both win-the-war factions, ...vaguely searching for a nonmilitary solution.” His public call for winning the war is apparently to be understood as a ploy to deflect the right-wing.

Pre-Tet, it was JFK and Arthur Schlesinger who rejoiced over the defeat of “aggression” in Vietnam in 1962. Post-Tet, it is the New York Times that absurdly denounces “Communist ‘aggression’ in Vietnam,” while “Kennedy was determined to stall.” And though RFK did call for victory over the aggressors in 1962, he was deluded by “the party line as imparted to him by McNamara and Taylor,” failing to understand the huge gap between the President’s views and the McNamara-Taylor party line – which Schlesinger had attributed to the President, with his own endorsement, in the pre-Tet version. In the post-Tet version, the Joint Chiefs join the New York Times, McNamara, and Taylor as extremists undermining the President’s moderate policies. Commenting on JCS Chairman General Lyman Lemnitzer’s invocation of the “well-known commitment to take a forthright stand against Communism in Southeast Asia,” Schlesinger writes sardonically that it may have been “well-known” to the Chiefs, but they “failed in their effort to force it on the President” – who regularly voiced it in still more strident terms, including several cases that Schlesinger had cited, pre-Tet: e.g., JFK’s fears of upsetting “the whole world balance” if the US were to retreat in Vietnam. Or, we may add his summer 1963 statement that “for us to withdraw from that effort [to secure the GVN] would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam but Southeast Asia,” which Schlesinger quoted and praised as “temperate,” pre-Tet (902–3).

This book and later Schlesinger efforts are so replete with misrepresentation and error as to defy brief comment. I will return to them elsewhere. They illustrate the seriousness of the post-Tet endeavor, and its dim prospects.

The third early Kennedy memoirist, Roger Hilsman, has written letters to the press responding to critics of the withdrawal thesis in which he takes a stronger stand on JFK’s intent to withdraw than in his highly qualified 1967 comments. His factual references are misleading, but a close

reading shows that Hilsman is careful to evade the crucial questions: in particular, the precondition of victory. He cites Kennedy's statement that "it is their war" to win or lose as proof of his plan to withdraw, claiming without evidence that Johnson at once reversed that intent. He had said nothing of the sort pre-Tet; quite the contrary, as we have seen (including the internal record). Furthermore, if JFK's statement demonstrates his intent to withdraw, we would have to draw the same conclusions about McGarr, Taylor, Westmoreland, and LBJ. That, of course, is precisely why Hilsman makes no such claim in his 1967 memoir, in which he emphasizes LBJ's statement that "We don't want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys" to show his "sincere" and "desperate" effort to carry out JFK's plans. The same holds of efforts by Schlesinger and others to read great significance into JFK statements that were conventional and mean little.

However informative they may be with regard to the duties and responsibilities of cultural management, the post-Tet revisions by leading Kennedy intellectuals have no value as history. Rather, they *constitute* a chapter of cultural history, one that is of no slight interest, I believe.

The Hero-Villain Scenario

The withdrawal-without-victory thesis is typically understood to subsume a second one: that LBJ was responsible for an immediate reversal of policy from withdrawal to escalation. The major effort to establish the dual thesis is Newman's book, which has received much attention and praise over a broad spectrum. It was the basis for the influential Oliver Stone film JFK, and is taken by much of the left to be a definitive demonstration of the twin theses. The book was strongly endorsed by Arthur Schlesinger, who describes it as a "solid contribution," with its "straightforward and workmanlike, rather military...organization, tone and style" and "meticulous and exhaustive examination of documents." Former CIA Director William Colby, who headed the Far East division of the CIA in 1963-64, hailed Newman's study of these years as a "brilliant, meticulously researched and fascinating account of the decision-making which led to America's long agony in Vietnam"; *America's* agony, in accordance with approved doctrine.

The book is not without interest. It contains some new documentary evidence, which further undermines the Newman-Schlesinger thesis when extricated from the chaotic jumble of materials interlarded with highlighted phrases that demonstrate nothing, confident interpretations of private intentions and beliefs, tales of intrigue and deception of extraordinary scale and complexity, so well-concealed as to leave no trace in the record, and conclusions that become more strident as the case collapses before the author's eyes. By the end, he claims that the National Security Council meetings of 1961 "more than resolve the question" of whether Kennedy would have sent combat troops under the radically different circumstances faced by his advisers in 1965, a conclusion that captures accurately the level of argument.

Newman's basic contention seems to be that JFK was surrounded by evil advisers who were trying to thwart his secret plan to withdraw without victory, though unaccountably, he kept giving them more authority and promoting them to higher positions, perhaps because he didn't understand them. Thus JFK thought that Taylor was "the one general who shared his own views and that he could, therefore, trust to carry out his bidding." Shamelessly deceived, JFK therefore promoted him to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and relied on him until the end, though Taylor was undermining him at every turn; Taylor became "the second most powerful person in the White House," Newman observes (180), with no attempt to resolve the paradox. There are a few

“good guys,” but in the chaos, it is hard to be sure who they are: perhaps Harriman, Forrestal, Hilsman, and McNamara, though even they joined the malefactors who beset our hero on every side (Harriman and Hilsman “mired Kennedy in a plot to overthrow Diem,” etc.).

The withdrawal-without-victory thesis rests on the assumption that Kennedy realized that the optimistic military reports were incorrect. Newman agrees that through 1962 JFK accepted the optimistic reports, but asserts that by March 1963, he had “figured out...that the success story was a deception.” There is “hard evidence” for this, he claims, referring to an NBC documentary on the Diem assassination in November 1963 that questioned the optimistic intelligence reports. The remainder of the evidence is that “in his heart he must have known” that the military program was a failure. Unlike his advisers (at least, those not in on the various “deceptions”), he “had to notice when the military myth was shaken by Bowles and Mendenhall in late 1962,” and by Mansfield’s pessimism. “When the drama of the Wheeler versus Hilsman-Forrestal match ended up in his office in February 1963, the implication that the story of success was untrue could no longer be overlooked” (by Kennedy, uniquely); the “drama” is the difference of judgment as to the time scale for victory, already reviewed.

Not a trace of supporting evidence appears in the internal record, or is suggested here. Furthermore, the reports by Bowles and Mendenhall date from *before* the time when JFK was still deceived, according to Newman’s account, and Mendenhall’s at least never even reached him, he notes. As for Bowles, who had been cut out of policymaking sectors much earlier, Newman does not mention that after visiting Vietnam in July 1963, he sent a highly confidential report to McGeorge Bundy (which, in this case, the President may have seen), in which he wrote that “the military situation is steadily improving” although “the political situation is rapidly deteriorating,” repeating the standard view of military success, political failure, recommending various escalatory steps, and expressing his hope that with “a bit of luck,” we may “turn the tide” and “lay the basis for a far more favorable situation in Southeast Asia.”

On this basis, we are to believe that JFK alone understood that official optimism was unwarranted.

Curiously, there is one bit of evidence that does support the conclusion, but Newman and other advocates of the thesis do not make use of it. Recall that at the NSC meeting considering the McNamara-Taylor recommendations that were partially endorsed in NSAM 263, Kennedy insisted on dissociating himself even from the plan to withdraw 1000 personnel because he did not want to be “accused of being over optimistic” in case the military situation did not make it feasible. He allowed the sentence on withdrawal to remain only if attributed to McNamara and Taylor, without his acquiescence. In public too he was more hesitant about the withdrawal plan than the military command. One might argue, then, that JFK did not share the optimism of his advisers, and was therefore unwilling to commit himself to withdrawal. This conclusion has two merits not shared by the thesis we are examining: (1) it has some evidence to support it; (2) it conforms to the general picture of Kennedy’s commitment to military victory provided by the internal record.

Newman’s efforts to demonstrate the “far-reaching and profound nature of this reversal” that changed the course of history when the iniquitous LBJ took over are no more impressive. Thus he cites an alleged comment reported by Stanley Karnow, in which LBJ privately told the Joint Chiefs: “Just get me elected and then you can have your war.” Putting aside the reliability of the source (which, elsewhere, Newman dismisses as unreliable when Karnow questioned the withdrawal thesis), the full context reveals that Karnow attributes to Johnson very much what

O'Donnell attributes to Kennedy; assuage the right, get elected, and then do what you choose. What LBJ chose was to drag his feet much as JFK had done.

Newman concedes that as of October 2, 1963, when the McNamara-Taylor withdrawal recommendations were presented, "So far, it had been couched in terms of battlefield success." But there was a "sudden turnabout of reporting in early November." "As the Honolulu meeting approached the tide turned toward pessimism as suddenly and as swiftly as the optimistic interlude had begun in early 1962," Newman writes. The participants in the Nov. 20 meeting received "shocking military news." "The upshot of the Honolulu meeting," he continues, "was that the shocking deterioration of the war effort was presented in detail to those assembled, along with a plan to widen the war, while the 1,000-man withdrawal was turned into a meaningless paper drill." The three components of the "upshot" are of course related. The fact that prior to the "sudden turn toward pessimism" the entire discussion of withdrawal had been "couched in terms of battlefield success" thoroughly undermines Newman's thesis, as becomes only more clear if we introduce the internal record that he ignores.

In the end, Newman relies almost exclusively on the virtually meaningless O'Donnell-Mansfield post-Tet reconstructions, while ignoring the internal record, briefly reviewed, which conforms closely to JFK's public stance. His tale is woven from dark hints and "intrigue," with "webs of deception" at every level. The military were deceiving Kennedy's associates who were deceiving Kennedy, while he in turn was deceiving the public and his advisers, and many were deceiving themselves. At least, I think that is what the story is supposed to be; it is not easy to tell in this labyrinth of fancy. We are invited to view the "unforgettable image of a President pitted against his own advisers and the bureaucracy that served under him" from the very outset, without a hint of evidence and no explanation as to why he chose to rely on them in preference to others. Newman concedes that JFK's public statements refute his thesis, but that's easily handled: JFK was cleverly feinting to delude the right-wing by preaching about the high stakes to the general public — who largely didn't care or were uneasy about the war, as JFK and his advisers knew, and could only be aroused to oppose withdrawal by this inflammatory rhetoric.

By the end, we are wandering along paths "shrouded in mystery and intrigue," guided by confident assertions about what various participants "knew," "pretended," "felt," "intended," etc. The facts, whatever they may be, are interpreted so as to conform to the central dogma, taken to have been established. Given the rules of the game (deceit, hidden intent, etc.), there can be no counter-argument: evidence refuting the thesis merely shows the depths of the mystery and intrigue. I will put aside further discussion here, returning to a fuller examination elsewhere.

Whatever genre this may be, any pretense of unearthing the facts has been left far behind. As in the case of the post-Tet memoirs, the Newman study and its reception are of considerable interest, but not as a contribution to history: rather, as an interesting chapter of cultural history in the late 20th century.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Noam Chomsky
Vain Hopes, False Dreams
September 1992

Retrieved on 19th June 2021 from chomsky.info
Published in *Z Magazine*.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net