

Chapter 12

JFK and Vietnam: An Unanswered Legacy in Film and History

Scott A. Racek

In the movies “The Fog of War” and “JFK”, references are made by Robert McNamara and Oliver Stone respectively indicating that President Kennedy intended to pull troops out of Vietnam. Filmmaker Errol Morris includes a scene in the Fog of War that has Johnson and McNamara discussing how Johnson argued it was a mistake for Kennedy to have announced troop withdrawals. In JFK, the argument is much more overt; Johnson is implicated in a plot to assassinate Kennedy so that U.S. military leaders could fight their war. There is noteworthy debate whether Kennedy would have fought the Vietnam War had he lived. This paper argues that the turning point of the Vietnam War was the death of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. Once the U.S. signed off on the assassination, the Pottery Barn rule (as seen in Iraq) became fulfilled; “if you break it, you own it.” With repeated failure of new regimes, Kennedy would have had no choice but to remain in the war.

The history of the relationship between the Vietnam War and John F. Kennedy has been generally a kind one, especially with regard to mainstream movies. *JFK* and *The Fog of War* both hold John F. Kennedy in high regard. They both make explicit that Kennedy was not going to fight the war in Vietnam. Both argue that Kennedy would have fought the war vastly differently had he lived. While this line of argument is speculative, it has helped perpetuate the Kennedy mystique. Defenders of Kennedy blame Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara for forcing an unpopular war on the nation. The challenge with both films is that they fail to take into account factors that would have forced Kennedy on a path similar to that of his successors. First, Johnson left most of Kennedy’s Vietnam advisors in place after Kennedy’s death. Presumably they advised Johnson and Kennedy similarly. Second, the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and the subsequent illegitimate and ineffective governments forced the United States to be more involved than it may have been otherwise. This critical period of time, July of 1963 to March of 1964 (between the assassination planning and the Gulf of Tonkin incident) shows the United States becoming more involved rather than less. In the absence of strong, legitimate and united leadership in Vietnam, the United States was forced to become South Vietnam’s proxy. In the words of Colin Powell, talking about the invasion of Iraq in 2003, “if you break it, you own it.” The assassination was a particularly important breaking point and after that, the United States “owned the conflict”. Kennedy knew this to be true, admitted it as much, and would have had to stay in the war, regardless of what the films might argue.

Background

While Lyndon Johnson often receives the harshest assessment with regard to America's participation in Vietnam, direct U.S. involvement goes back as far as World War II.¹ Through the OSS, the United States had supported the goals of Ho Chi Minh. Vietnam was occupied by Japan and Ho led efforts to give the U.S. valuable intelligence on enemy operations. And while an avowed communist, Ho was also pragmatic. He understood that a temporary alliance against the Japanese could pay dividends. In fact, though Ho was quasi-allied to the United States, he remained a committed communist throughout World War II. While working with the OSS, Ho was also becoming an important liaison with the National Liberation Front (Viet Minh or NLF), who were committed to reducing all foreign influences on their land. Prior to the Japanese occupation, the French had significant economic interests in the area and were eager to regain their influence. Franklin Roosevelt was realistic in his approach to Ho. Since his most important goal was unconditional Japanese defeat, FDR could justify a relationship with communists.² Indeed, the United States also had an association with Joseph Stalin.

When the war ended and attention turned to the Cold War, communist friendships that were once a necessity became untenable. Additionally, as anti-communist fervor swept the country in the late 1940's and early 1950's, Truman could not politically afford to be soft on communism. Moreover, Truman felt a certain obligation to De Gaulle to help him re-establish the former Vietnamese colony. As a result, Truman began sending significant amounts of aid to the French.³ This aid continued throughout the Korean War and the remainder of Truman's term.

When Eisenhower was elected in 1952, the country was at a Cold War crossroads. Eisenhower ended the war in Korea but insisted on a presence in Vietnam, even if it was only to support the French. By the early 1950's, however, the French were in trouble politically and militarily. The Viet Minh had shown themselves to be much better fighters than the French had ever appreciated and by 1952, the United States was paying one-third of the cost of France's staying in the region.⁴ In 1954, at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French were soundly defeated and lost control of the northern part of the country. That same year found the division of the country at the 17th parallel, with a unified north led by Ho, who by this time had renounced his support of the United States, and an unstable South, a quasi-democratic, anti-communist government led by Ngo Dinh Diem.⁵ Diem suffered from profound legitimacy problems. He and most of his senior staff were Catholic in a predominately Buddhist country. He had ignored the agreements

¹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Non-Classics, 1997), 101.

² Richard Harris Smith, *OSS : The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Lyons 2005), 188.

³ Karnow, *Vietnam*, 85

⁴ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam : Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U. S. Intervention in Southeast Asia*, Ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg (New York: Duke, 2005) , 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

of the Geneva accords, run for president against his chief rival Bao Dai and won a disputed election. He surrounded himself with relatives in positions of power.⁶ That the United States supported this regime tacitly made the Vietnamese people even more suspicious. National elections that were scheduled as a part of the Geneva Conference were cancelled. Diem knew that a national referendum would have swept Ho Chi Minh into power, but argued that since South Vietnam had technically never signed it, he was not bound by its terms.⁷

Throughout the 1950's, the United States supported the South Vietnamese financially, at a rate of almost two hundred million dollars per year. Eisenhower also slowly increased the number of advisors, eventually reaching almost one thousand. Because he was a proponent of the "Domino Theory," (that if one country in that region collapsed due to communism, then all the other countries would also fall), it is not entirely surprising that this was done, especially in light of French defeats. He used this particular phrase for the first time in an April 17, 1954, news conference, where he said, "Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the 'falling domino' principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."⁸ This argument was also used in later administrations to justify the eventual large increase in troops and funds to South Vietnam.⁹

By the election of 1960, there were several major events that put pressure on the U.S. government to respond to perceived communist aggressiveness. In 1957, Sputnik convinced much of the scientific and engineering community that the United States was falling behind the Soviets. In 1960 Francis Gary Powers' spy plane was shot down and the Paris summit was canceled. There was a socialist revolution fermenting in Cuba under Fidel Castro. Finally, and most significantly, there was the consistent belief that the Soviets had opened up a missile gap between the two countries. Kennedy especially sought to make this point throughout the 1960 campaign. There is some debate whether Kennedy himself knew that there was no gap (as the Eisenhower administration was arguing) but he knew that complaining of one accomplished two goals. It placed blame for the gap on Nixon, as he was vice-president under Eisenhower. It also buffeted Kennedy's own "soft-on-communism" criticism while allowing him to remain on the offensive. Nixon was thus forced to defend his own anti-communist stance.¹⁰ All of these events forecasted an eventual engagement in Vietnam.

⁶ Robert K. Brigham, "Battlefield Vietnam: A Brief History." *Battlefield Vietnam*, Public Broadcasting System, August 15, 2008 <<http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/>>.

⁷ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken : The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 59.

⁸ "President Eisenhower's News Conference, April 7, 1954." *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1954*, Mt. Holyoke College, 28 July 2008 <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/ps11.htm>>.

⁹ "CACCF Record Counts by Year of Death or Declaration of Death." Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War, Feb. 2007 *National Archives*. August 4, 2008 <<http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html#year>>.

¹⁰ Christopher A. Preble, Christopher A., *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap* (New York: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 198.

Throughout 1961 and much of 1962, however, Vietnam was low on Kennedy's priority list. There was the disaster of the Bay of Pigs and the brinkmanship of the missile crisis. Kennedy was not at all eager to engage Vietnam, but recognized by the end of 1962 the increasing intensity of the conflict. As a result, the "Vietnam thing" (as Kennedy refers to it in the early 1960s) was becoming more and more of a daily concern. At the turn of 1963, with many early crises behind him, Vietnam was one of the remaining hot spots that demanded more and more attention. How much attention has become the focal point of many books, films and debate within academia and serves as the starting point for discussion here.

JFK in Film

In the highly acclaimed and controversial film by Oliver Stone, *JFK*, the main plot "reveals" how and why Kennedy was killed. Among the conspirators included Castro, the Mafia and most alarming to conspiracy theorists, Vice-President Johnson in concert with the military industrial complex. Stone accuses Johnson of being part of the plot so that military generals could fight the war in Vietnam and goes on to insinuate that Kennedy would have pulled out all of the troops. The key scene in *JFK* that details this plan is a conversation between the protagonist Jim Garrison and the "man with all the answers," known in the film as "X." They have a conversation on the Mall in Washington, DC and X goes on to fill in many of the unanswered questions about the assassination. In this pivotal scene, X claims:

*I spent much of September '63 working on the Kennedy plan for getting all US personnel out of Vietnam by the end of '65. This plan was one of the strongest and most important papers issued from the Kennedy White House. Our first 1,000 troops were ordered home for Christmas.*¹¹

He goes on to describe the reasons why certain groups, namely the military, would want to get rid of Kennedy:

Already angered by Kennedy's liberal domestic politics, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and his signing of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union, top military brass undoubtedly were incensed in late 1963 when Kennedy let it be known that he planned to withdraw all US military personnel from Vietnam by the end of 1965.

With that decision, the military turned against him and, even if they wouldn't openly plot against him, the military leadership would not be sorry if something were to happen to Kennedy. . . .

It was widely rumored that Vice President Lyndon Johnson -- long associated with dirty politics, gamblers, and defense officials -- was to be dropped from the Democratic ticket in 1964. Texas oilmen, staunch friends of Johnson and the military-

¹¹ *JFK*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Kevin Costner, Tommy Lee Jones, Kevin Bacon, DVD, 1991.

*industrial complex, were dismayed that Kennedy was talking about doing away with the lucrative oil-depletion allowance.*¹²

During that conversation, X also alludes to Johnson's involvement:

X (VOICE OVER)

Only four days after JFK was shot, Lyndon Johnson signed National Security Memo 273, which essentially reversed Kennedy's new withdrawal policy and gave the green light to the covert operations against North Vietnam that provoked the Gulf of Tonkin incident. In that document lay the Vietnam War. . . .

I keep thinking of that day, Tuesday the 26th, the day after they buried Kennedy, LBJ was signing the memorandum on Vietnam with Ambassador Lodge.

FLASHBACK TO: the White House, 1963. Johnson sits across the shadowed room with Lodge and others. His Texas drawl rises and falls. He signs something unseen.

JOHNSON

Gentlemen, I want you to know I'm not going to let Vietnam go the way China did. I'm personally committed. I'm not going to take one soldier out of there 'til they know we mean business in Asia . . .

(he pauses)

You just get me elected, and I'll give you your damned war.

X (V. O.)

. . . and that was the day Vietnam started.¹³

There are several historical inaccuracies with this conversation. While it makes great moviemaking, there was no conversation between Garrison and an "X". The closest person to matching X is Col. L. Fletcher Prouty USAF (Ret.), who wrote the book *JFK: The CIA, Vietnam, and the Plot to Assassinate John F. Kennedy* and from whom Stone has taken most of his material. Prouty was the Chief of Special Operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Kennedy years.¹⁴ While Prouty did work with some of the same people who formulated the withdrawal plan, there is no evidence that he himself worked on it.¹⁵ The memo to which Prouty refers is National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273. This memo did not give a timetable for leaving Vietnam, but recommended that if South Vietnam was able to support their own operations the Americans would leave.¹⁶ It is historical fantasy for Stone to argue that the troop withdrawal was going to happen definitively and without caveats.

JFK also highlights the reaction of the military to the pullout decision. It further assumes that Johnson was allied to the military industrial complex. Neither of these facts holds up under scrutiny. An earlier version of NSC Memo 273 was created on November

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Prouty, L. Fletcher, *JFK: The CIA, Vietnam and the Plot to Assassinate John F. Kennedy* (New York: Citadel Press, 1996), 7.

¹⁵ Reitzes, Dave, "LBJ and Vietnam", *The JFK 100*, 2001, 17 July 2008 <<http://www.jfk-online.com/jfk100menu.html>>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

21, 1963, while Kennedy was still alive and was expected to sign once he returned from his Texas trip. This earlier version, says, in part:

We should concentrate our own efforts, and insofar as possible we should persuade the Government of South Vietnam to concentrate its efforts, on the critical situation in the Mekong Delta. This concentration should include not only military but political, economic, social, educational and informational effort. We should seek to turn the tide not only of battle but of belief, and we should seek to increase not only our control of land but the productivity of this area wherever the proceeds can be held for the advantage of anti-Communist forces.¹⁷

Rather than discussing an active pullout in the memo, it predicts a higher level of commitment. When X claims that the Vietnam War lay in NSC memo 273, it was based on a document *initially drafted under Kennedy*.¹⁸ It gives no credence to a conspiracy by Johnson to increase troops dramatically nor lends any evidence that Johnson was involved in a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

A curious quote by Johnson is the "...I'll give you your damned war" comment. Conspiracy buffs argue that this quote proves that Johnson was pursuing a policy opposite that of Kennedy. But consider preeminent Vietnam scholar Stanley Karnow's interpretation of events:

Johnson subscribed to the adage that "wars are too serious to be entrusted to generals." He knew, as he once put it, that armed forces "need battles and bombs and bullets in order to be heroic," and that they would drag him into a military conflict if they could. But he also knew that Pentagon lobbyists, among the best in the business, could persuade conservatives in Congress to sabotage his social legislation unless he satisfied their demands. As he girded himself for the 1964 presidential campaign, he was especially sensitive to the jingoists who might brand him "soft on Communism" were he to back away from the challenge in Vietnam. So, politician that he was, he assuaged the brass and the braid with promises he may never have intended to keep. At a White House reception on Christmas Eve 1963, for example, he told the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "Just let me get elected, and then you can have your war."¹⁹

Rather than trust the military, Johnson was suspicious of their intentions. Moreover, Johnson's social programs were initially more important than Vietnam. Stone implies throughout *JFK* that Kennedy is the dove and Johnson the hawk. It was Kennedy who was going to pull out and Johnson who intended to escalate from the beginning. The reality is that Johnson was fully aware that the war was a lose-lose situation for him politically, especially in light of his Great Society plans. Johnson advisor Jack Valenti

¹⁷ Issue brief No. 273, *The National Security Council*, The White House.

¹⁸ Reitzes, Dave, "LBJ and Vietnam", *The JFK 100*, 2001, 17 July 2008 <<http://www.jfk-online.com/jfk100menu.html>>.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

lamented that “Vietnam at the time was no bigger than a man's fist on the horizon. We hardly discussed it because it was not worth discussing.”²⁰ That Stone argues that Johnson was behind Kennedy’s assassination because of Vietnam is more of a reflection on Stone’s attitude on the war than on the facts. While there are unresolved questions stemming from the assassination of Kennedy, there is no evidence that Kennedy was killed because of a pullout of Vietnam. Moreover, there is no support that Johnson or the military industrial complex was involved in a plot of any kind.

In *The Fog of War, Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara*, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara makes similar claims about Kennedy and Vietnam. McNamara repeats the charge that Kennedy was going pull one thousand advisors out by the end of 1963. The film plays a conversation between President Johnson and McNamara shortly after Kennedy’s death that implies that Kennedy was flirting with pulling out. In part, Johnson claims,

I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the President thought otherwise and I just sat silent.²¹

About the potential pullout McNamara says “...we can say to the Congress and people that we have a plan for reducing the exposure of U.S. combat personnel.” Kennedy responds: “(M)y only reservation about this is, if the war doesn’t continue to go well it will look like we were overly optimistic.”²² This statement reveals not only the challenging nature of Vietnam as early as 1963 (when there was an increase to sixteen thousand advisors in the country), but it also reflects the fact that pullout was not necessarily a foregone conclusion. It does reveal that Kennedy and McNamara were potentially trying to find a way out of Vietnam. But both knew that that pullout was not without serious political ramifications. And while one thousand troops *were* sent home in December 1963, Karnow argues, “...their departure was essentially a bureaucratic accounting exercise.”²³ They were not sent home as a precursor for a larger withdrawal. In the next scene, McNamara repeats the charge that Kennedy was going to pull all troops out by the end of 1965. He claims that Kennedy had essentially “announced” the withdrawal of U.S. troops by drafting NSC 273, when in fact, Kennedy was implying the opposite.

There is more evidence to support the argument that Kennedy was going to continue U.S. presence in the region. This is seen in the minutes from that National Security Council Meeting. It was McNamara and General Taylor who suggested that the military could finish their ‘mission’ by 1965. This ‘mission’ was solely to train the South Vietnamese military for battle against the North and NLF. It was not to fight the war on their behalf. Indeed, whether South Vietnamese troops would be ready for this

²⁰ Karnow, *Vietnam*, 338-339.

²¹ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, Dir. Errol Morris, Perf. Robert McNamara, 2003.

²² Ibid.

²³ Karnow, *Vietnam*, 268.

responsibility was an open question in 1963. In fact, when Vietnamization was attempted years later, it was a failure.

Finishing the mission by 1965 was more wishful thinking than reality. Moreover, if Kennedy was interested in avoiding further escalation, why would he have implicitly agreed to the removal of Diem? It seems that if Kennedy had wanted to disengage, he would have washed his hands of the country once the coup occurred. Kennedy had publicly proclaimed in July of 1963 “in my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort [in Vietnam] would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia, so we are going to stay there.”²⁴ While this may have been posturing, it would have been hypocritical for Kennedy to make such a strong point and then pull out. Kennedy also made a public statement in an interview with Walter Cronkite in September of 1963 in which he argued:

I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the Government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. . . . [I]n the final analysis it is the people and the Government [of South Vietnam] itself who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help, and we are making it very clear. But I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. I know people don't like Americans to be engaged in this kind of an effort. Forty-seven Americans have been killed in combat with the enemy, but this is a very important struggle even though it is far away.²⁵

While it is certainly possible that Kennedy could have said one thing publicly and another privately, to put himself in that corner plainly points to Kennedy keeping troops beyond 1964. Overall, in his term, Kennedy increased the number of advisors in Vietnam from nine hundred to sixteen thousand and thirty. He substantially enlarged the number of Special Forces (specifically Green Berets).²⁶ Kennedy believed that using counter-insurgency troops and tactics was the best way to deal with the “Vietnam thing”. This commitment to irregular troops was designed to show the South Vietnamese that the United States was there to help them. It was not a commitment to leaving.

A major point of congruence between *JFK* and *The Fog of War* is that Kennedy was going to end military engagement after the 1964 election. Both films however, miss the larger issue of the assassination of Diem. This coup would have prevented Kennedy's pullout because of its political ramifications. When it did not stabilize the region, he would have had no choice but to further engage. Trying to move the war onto the Vietnamese took a major setback once Diem was gone.

²⁴ Gettleman, Marvin E., Jane Franklin, and Marilyn Young, eds. *Vietnam and America : A Documented History* (Grand Rapids: Avalon Travel, 2000), 141.

²⁵ Robert T Mann, *Complete Idiot's Guide to the Cold War* (New York: Alpha, 2002), 189.

²⁶ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam : Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U. S. Intervention in Southeast Asia*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg (New York: Duke, 2005) 177.

Coup d'état

The roots of the assassination of Diem are found in the Eisenhower Administration.²⁷ One of the challenges the U.S. faced in keeping South Vietnam a democracy, ironically, was the Diem regime itself. Diem's actions, including his illegal consolidation of power, raised alarm in Washington. The dilemma of supporting an autocratic ruler was at the heart of conflict over further U.S. involvement. In October 1954, years after the U.S. had started sending aid, Eisenhower sent Diem a letter stating he was willing to send more financial aid and support to South Vietnam in exchange for reforms in the country. These reforms included the firing of the defense minister, reorganizing the armed forces, selecting officials in his government based on merit rather than loyalty and a reduction in the number of family members in prominent positions of power.²⁸ The overriding concern from Washington was that Diem was using his position for his own personal gain rather than for best serving the Vietnamese people. As a result, Eisenhower wanted to use aid as leverage for reforms. By doing so, Eisenhower hoped that he could control Diem. As he says in his letter:

The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Viet-Nam in undertaking needed reforms. It hopes that such aid, combined with your own continuing efforts, will contribute effectively toward an independent Viet-Nam endowed with a strong government.²⁹

Unfortunately for the administration, Diem chafed at these reforms and refused to implement them. Support came anyway, as early as January 1955. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was wary of Diem, but ultimately believed that his government would be the most effective one in being a bulwark against the communist north. To highlight this point, Dulles, in August of 1955, supported Diem's decision not to hold national elections as mandated by the Geneva accords.³⁰ Dulles knew that national elections would certainly have gone against Diem and the country would unify under Ho Chi Minh. This would be the worst possible outcome for the U.S. and underscores how differently the Vietnamese people saw the war. They largely saw it as a civil conflict and a war to expel imperialists. The United States, as McNamara points out in his film, saw the war in terms of the Cold War. The decision by Dulles to continue to support Diem could not make this point any clearer. It is ironic that the United States was supporting a

²⁷ John Prados, "JFK and the Diem Coup", *JFK and the Diem Coup*, 5 Nov. 2003, The National Security Archive, 2 July 2008 <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsaebb/nsaebb101/index.htm>>.

²⁸ John Prados, "The Vietnam War", *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, The Cold War*, 15 July 2008, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

²⁹ Dwight D Eisenhower, "Letter to Ngo Dinh Diem, October 23, 1954," *Letter to Ngo Dinh Diem*, 23 Oct. 1954, July 1998, Modern History Sourcebook 10 June 2008 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1954-eisenhower-vietnam1.html>>.

³⁰ John Prados, "The Vietnam War," *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, The Cold War*, 15 July 2008, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

fledgling “democracy” by not supporting elections. In other words, it was acceptable for the U.S. to support an illegitimate dictator as long as he was anti-communist.

Another way that Eisenhower tried to leverage reforms was through the threat of troop withdrawal. As the late 1950's came however, the warning remained but the number of troops actually increased. Another time, the U.S. threatened to withdraw their ambassador if reforms were not enacted. This threat, however, like all the others, was never carried out. Notably, while aid increased, members of the Eisenhower administration were also looking at what the removal of Diem could mean for the war effort. The person at this forefront was Ambassador J. Lawton Collins, who was advocating removal as early as March of 1955.³¹ Nothing was consummated at the time because Diem was able to consolidate power relatively quickly; instead, Eisenhower went to great lengths to protect Diem even though he largely ignored U.S. largesse. The CIA warned Diem in March of 1955, for example, that it would not be seen as legitimate to stage a rigged South Vietnamese election in which he would ‘win’ by a large percentage.³² Diem disregarded this warning, and won 98% of the vote. Amazingly, he won 118% of Saigon's vote.³³ And still the aid came. Diem could discount the demands of the United States because he knew that being anti-communist was worth a great deal of money. In this sense, the foundation of the Vietnam War was built on the acquiescence of the Eisenhower administration. By actually withholding aid, the administration might have done better job of controlling Diem.

Kennedy fell into the same trap as Eisenhower. His withdrawal threats were also aimed at leveraging Diem. As Karnow points out:

Early in 1963, South Vietnam's rigid President Ngo Dinh Diem was cracking down on internal dissidents, throwing the country into chaos. Fearing that the turmoil would benefit the Communist insurgents, Kennedy conceived of bringing home one thousand of the sixteen thousand American military advisers as a way of prodding Diem into behaving more leniently.³⁴

Had Diem’s behavior changed and reforms enacted, he may not have been removed. But did all this lead to Kennedy “plan” Diem’s removal and assassination? Johnson, for one, believed that the Kennedy brothers were behind it. In a February 1, 1966, call to Senator Eugene McCarthy, Johnson says “they started on me with Diem, you remember. ‘He was corrupt and he ought to be killed.’ So we killed him. We all got together and got a goddamn bunch of thugs and assassinated him. Now, we've really had no political stability [in South Vietnam] since then.”³⁵ He was so convinced of this fact

³¹ Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*. (New York: Kansas University Press, 2004), 149.

³² *Ibid.*, 151.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-3.

³⁴ Karnow *Vietnam*, 46.

³⁵ Bradley S. O’Leary, Edward Lee, and L. E. Seymour, *Triangle of Death: The Shocking Truth about the Role of South Vietnam and the French Mafia in the Assassination of JFK* (Danbury: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 47.

that when JFK himself was killed, Johnson initially believed it was in retaliation for the Diem killing.

The truth is that Kennedy was aware of coup d'état planning that was going to remove Diem and his brother. Documents recently released by the National Security Archive reveal information being exchanged about Diem's removal as early as July of 1963. In that month, John McCone, director of the CIA, briefed Kennedy about a CIA associate being approached by South Vietnamese General Tran Van Don about an imminent plot. That coup was allegedly scheduled for a time between July 10th and July 19th. Because the general was such a respected figure, it was believed that the plot was real.³⁶ And while that particular plot did not occur, plotting was well underway for another.

In August, the political situation in South Vietnam became more intense as Diem's brother and advisor Ngo Dinh Nhu's Special Forces attacked the Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon. Subsequent clashes pitted Buddhists against the Diem forces in which thirty civilians were killed, two hundred wounded and one thousand four hundred Buddhist monks were arrested. This occurred on top of the reported fifty thousand dead and seventy thousand imprisoned that occurred under Nhu's command. Early conversations revolved around removing only Nhu. An August 24, 1963 memo between the State Department and Saigon bears out U.S. concerns. In the memo, the sender, Roger Hillsman, director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, indicates that the United States supported the removal of Nhu and even Diem if that is what it would take to get rid of Nhu. Unfortunately for Kennedy, it was not yet official policy and the administration spent the rest of that last week in August trying to remove its support of such a plan without seemingly reinforcing Diem.³⁷ During subsequent meetings between JFK and his Vietnamese experts, he goes back and forth about a coup and the potential consequences. Within his staff, there was support for Nhu's removal only, both Nhu and Diem's removal and a plan to disassociate the administration from any coup attempt. Notably, in meetings throughout the fall of 1963, it was Bobby Kennedy and Max Taylor, among Kennedy's most trusted advisors, who argued against U.S. involvement. Kennedy ended up not orchestrating the event but supported it both passively (by agreeing to not oppose it) and actively (the CIA gave the plotters \$42,000 on the morning of the plot).³⁸ The administration ultimately decided that Diem and Nhu should be removed in order to bring stability to the region. By pulling Diem's financial support, they gave the plotters the signal that the United States would not oppose the coup. Interestingly, National Security Archive documents do reveal an administration keenly interested in the coup's outcome. Failure could delegitimize the U.S.'s efforts for stability while further driving Diem away from collaboration. Success could mean a

³⁶ John Prados, "JFK and the Diem Coup," *JFK and the Diem Coup*, November 5, 2003. The National Security Archive, July 2, 2008 <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsaebb/nsaebb101/index.htm>>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Marilyn Young, *Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins 1991), 91-2.

major improvement in relations between governments in Washington and Saigon and give Kennedy a better chance at success against the North and Viet Minh.³⁹

The coup did not play out quite as Washington thought. Whereas the CIA had insisted that they be given forty-eight hours in advance of the coup, the plotters gave four minutes instead.⁴⁰ As the overthrow began on November 1st, the phone lines to the American military advisory group were cut, leaving the United States without knowledge as to the outcome. This silence held true through November 2nd when Diem and Nhu were arrested and killed. Initial reports coming from the coup plotters indicated that the brothers committed suicide by either poison or gun. It was not fully clear until two weeks later how the brothers died, even though the CIA was initially reporting that they had been assassinated. Diem and Nhu's deaths took Kennedy by surprise. McNamara made the point later that Kennedy's reaction shocked him. As he said later, coups are unpredictable and death was a probable byproduct.⁴¹ Indeed, the documentary evidence indicates that many in the administration considered the Diem brothers in personal danger.

The Kennedy administration was culpable in the coup that removed the Diems from power. They did not dissuade plotters from the coup attempt and gave financial backing. Kennedy did not, however, authorize nor plan to have the brothers killed. The Church Committee, formed in the 1970's to investigate the government's role in the assassination of world leaders, concluded that Kennedy had no active role in the Diem assassination and did not know about it beforehand.⁴² Nevertheless, that the upheaval led to an unintended murder does not erase the responsibility that Kennedy now had for Vietnam.

Aftermath

In the aftermath of the assassination, Kennedy recorded a memo on November 4, 1963, in which he says that both Saigon and his advisors were divided on the extent they should have supported the coup. Kennedy says, in part:

Over the weekend, the coup in Saigon took place. It cumulated three months of conversation about a coup, conversations that divided the government here and in Saigon...I feel that we must bear a good deal of responsibility for it, beginning with our cable of early August in which we suggested the coup. (This is the cable which indicated our early support for a coup.)⁴³

³⁹John Prados, "JFK and the Diem Coup," *JFK and the Diem Coup*, November 5, 2003. The National Security Archive, July 2, 2008 <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsaebb/nsaebb101/index.htm>>.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Jones *Death of a Generation*, 159.

⁴²Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 155.

⁴³John F. Kennedy, "JFK's Memoir Dictation on the Assassination of Diem," *Presidential Recordings Program*, University of Virginia, August 10, 2008 <<http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/clip/1963-11-04-jfks-memoir-dictation-assassination-diem>>.

The fact that Kennedy speaks of both U.S. responsibility and the divided nature of the debate highlights its controversial outcome. Kennedy knew three days after the event that the responsibility he spoke of was to be problematic.

If one of the goals of the removal of Diem was to bring Vietnam more in line with U.S. policy, the overthrow had the opposite effect. Successor Duong Van Minh moved his government further away. As historian George Kahin points out, "they (USG) expected that the new leadership in Saigon would accept greater American direction of the fighting and an escalation of U.S. military participation that would extend to the bombing of North Vietnam."⁴⁴ This was a reasonable expectation of the new government, yet Minh's top goal turned out to be reconciliation of the country. The government would not be under the umbrella of communism in his plan, united nonetheless. This is one reason why Minh sought to pacify the NLF. Minh's goals, not surprisingly, were soundly rejected by the U.S. because it was a level of appeasement unacceptable to U.S. goals for the region. This disagreement served as the foundation for a series of dysfunctional relationships after Diem. Indeed, much of the southern population saw the U.S. as being worse than the communists. Many saw the U.S. as the imperialist successors to the French, not their protectors.

One of the problems the new government had was in its structure. General Minh led a leadership group known as the Military Revolutionary Committee. This council was made up of a disorganized membership of twelve who repeatedly moved in and out of office. Their perspective on the war was similar to Minh's and was starkly different than that of the U.S.⁴⁵ While the U.S. was looking for stability and military aggressiveness against the Viet Minh, the new junta saw an opportunity to negotiate a settlement. They saw themselves as being closer to the population, not anti-Buddhist as Diem was. Minh and his minions often referred to themselves as "non-communists" rather than "anti-communists".⁴⁶ This is an important distinction because Kennedy had expected and needed the new group to be as anti-communist as Diem was. As an example of this incongruence, Minh and his advisors argued that a bombing of North Vietnam was unnecessary. They were afraid that it would prompt a full invasion of the North and with it, their "defensive war" justification would be lost. To Minh, the bombing made little sense because it would not only kill Vietnamese (a point that rarely deterred Diem and Nhu) but it would also provoke a harsh response. Even the most hawkish leader of the junta, General Khanh, was unwilling to bomb the North.⁴⁷ One of the most important critics of this stance was McNamara. To him, the bombing of the North was essential. The North needed to understand the military might they were up against. As a result of his position, McNamara found himself in a dilemma. He had been against the removal of Diem, but he found the new government even less capable and willing to take military action.

⁴⁴ Kahin, George M. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Broadway 1988), 221.

⁴⁵ Karnow, *Vietnam*, 288.

⁴⁶ Kahin, *Intervention*, 62.

⁴⁷ Catton, 213.

Minh was also opposed to an increase of American advisors and insisted that their “advising” did not go below that of the regional level. He wanted to retain operational control of the army by restricting access. In doing so, Minh was actively trying to assert his independence from the United States while slowly creating a steady path to reunification. This path called ultimately for an independent South Vietnam under neither North Vietnamese nor United States control.⁴⁸ Since reunification was also goal of Ho Chi Minh's, it was alarming for the U.S. to hear this new plan.

As for Johnson, the new administration in Saigon was underwhelming. The neutralist solution that the new government sought with the North would negate any influence over the region and allow the communists to have the influence Washington was fighting so hard to prevent. Kennedy, Johnson and their advisors all had mistakenly believed that once Diem and Nhu were gone, the new junta would accept military guidance and leadership from the U.S.⁴⁹

The Kennedy/Johnson administrations were not the only ones unhappy with the direction of the new regime in Saigon. Minh was fully aware of this. As a result, there were factions within the South Vietnamese military who were poised to be removed or demoted under an anti-corruption sweep. Even those close to Minh were not immune from prosecution. These two groups successfully plotted against him and overthrew him in early 1964.⁵⁰ The subsequent government was barely organized when the Maddox was attacked. The resulting Gulf of Tonkin resolution gave the U.S. government all the ammunition it needed for wider military engagement regardless of who was in power in Saigon.

Once Diem was assassinated, the United States owned Vietnam. The assassination was the critical threshold for U.S. involvement. To best explain how the United States became invested to the aftermath of the coup, a contemporary example provides guidance. In 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell made the argument that to invade Iraq was similar to the Pottery Barn rule. That is, “you break it, you own it.” President Bush and his administration argued that Saddam Hussein was so tyrannical that the U.S. would be greeted as liberators. Without the proper planning as to how the post-Saddam government was going to operate, however, the United States ran the country much longer than originally anticipated. Indeed, the United States “owns” Iraq because of a lack of Iraqi leadership. The United States “owns” Iraq because the United States has to run the political institutions until the Iraqis are able to do it on their own. In the same way, the U.S. owned Vietnam. The institutions of the country were externally run, and poor forecasting forced the U.S. to be more engaged than they would be otherwise. This Pottery Barn rule is as applicable to Vietnam as it is to Iraq.

It would have been helpful in Iraq if the U.S. government had learned the lessons of Vietnam. Disaster can strike when a leader is removed without operational plans to address the subsequent power vacuum. The Kennedy administration needed more than

⁴⁸ Prados, “The Vietnam War.”

⁴⁹ Karnow, *Vietnam*, 243.

⁵⁰ Prados, “The Vietnam War.”

assurances that things would be different before they signed off on the takeover. Not only was Minh not up to the challenge of running the country, preferring to host parties to doing the dirty work of government, his ideas about how to reconcile with the North were worlds apart from the U.S. plan.⁵¹ Minh's successor, Nguyen Khanh, was no more successful in getting the country stabilized. Ironically, the U.S. encouraged Khanh to take over even though they had little knowledge of how he might be different. "The episode (Khanh taking over) further illustrated how little the Americans could monitor... the arcane political maneuvers of their South Vietnamese clients."⁵² Nevertheless, Khanh was erroneously seen as the savior that the Americans needed. He was replaced in a 1965 coup by Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, who then was then replaced by Nguyen Van Thieu in 1967.⁵³ All of these regimes were failures, largely because they were never seen by the United States or South Vietnamese as competent or legitimate.

In my view, after the assassination of Diem, Kennedy would have had no choice but to stay in Vietnam. He would have seen what Johnson saw; a series of ineffective governments mostly incapable of administering themselves but willing to injure U.S. intentions by making peace overtures. Kennedy admitted in his recordings that he felt some responsibility in the aftermath of the coup. I would argue that this assumption of responsibility would have meant similar outcomes to what Johnson eventually faced. With the 1964 election only one year away, Kennedy would have had much to answer for if he had pulled the troops out, especially in light of his earlier reputation as being soft on communism.

One underlying theme in the study of historical political regimes is legitimacy. Diem partially lost his when he rigged the election in 1955, and it continued to dissolve the more he persecuted Buddhists. The fact that the U.S. government was unwilling to see Diem creating a hostile environment for U.S. intentions argued for intervention. Debatably, both Eisenhower and Kennedy were in a no-win situation. They had sustained Diem and when he did not turn out to be the leader that the U.S. needed, they had little choice but to support his removal.

The films *JFK* and *The Fog of War* both spend significant time honoring the memory of JFK. *JFK* argues Kennedy was killed partially because he planned on exiting Vietnam. And while McNamara in *The Fog of War* does not go nearly as far as Stone, he still largely exonerates Kennedy from responsibility. *JFK* completely ignores the assassination of Diem as an important event and McNamara only makes passing mention of it. I argue that this incident is telling as to what Kennedy would have done had he lived. Kennedy knew of and signed off on the coup. He understood the political, military and strategic implications of the event and most certainly would have stayed in Vietnam. Johnson soon learned the ineffectiveness of the subsequent South Vietnamese regimes and as a result, found himself deeply imbedded in the future of the region even before the Gulf of Tonkin incident. To argue that Kennedy would have left Vietnam in similar conditions ignores the reality of the situation on the ground. As the Iraq conflict

⁵¹ Prados, "The Vietnam War."

⁵² Karnow, *Vietnam*, 337.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 338.

teaches, to remove a leader without proper planning is to possess the future of that country.