

Chapter 15

The Indochina Bind: John Kennedy and Vietnam

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Recently, when thinking about JFK and Vietnam, it occurred to me that I might offer a few observations from some frequently overlooked sources instead of a formal research paper. The sources are rather old; but they still seem instructive. The first is the late novelist Norman Mailer whose article entitled “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” appeared in *Esquire* magazine in the fall of 1960. The second is Daniel Ellsberg who included “The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine” in his 1972 collection of essays, *Papers on the War*. Finally, I want to draw on some insights developed in quite another context by James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck.

Mailer’s article, like so much of what he wrote, was a synthesis of his genuine capacity for cultural insight broader and deeper than the usual run of journalism and his very considerable ego; but he captured a useful truth about John Kennedy nonetheless. “[H]e was,” Mailer wrote, “like an actor who had been cast as the candidate.” He was a good actor, but not a great one, according to Mailer. He said it was too easy to see the gap between the role and the man, the aloof detachment that many others noted about Kennedy; but he attributed that quality to “the remote and private air of a man who has traversed some lonely terrain of experience, of loss and gain, of nearness to death, which leaves him isolated from the mass of others.”¹ Yet Kennedy was not Mailer’s man, not at first. The emotional and literary high point of the article was Eugene McCarthy’s nomination of Adlai Stevenson, “the passion . . . of everything in America which was defeated, idealistic, innocent . . . the plea of the bewildered who hunger for simplicity again”² Yet Kennedy’s “potentiality to excite” intrigued Mailer; his election would be, he said, “an existential event: he would touch uncharted depths in American life. He understood that Kennedy’s politics were ordinary, even “prefabricated,” he expected his unconventional *persona* to push his political acts towards the conventional. He expressed his distaste for what he took to be the candidate’s “dullness of mind,” yet

one knew . . . that regardless of his overt politics, America’s tortured psychotic search for security would finally be torn loose from the feverish ghosts of its old generals . . . and we as a nation would finally be loose again in the historic seas of a national psyche which was willy-nilly and at last, again, adventurous. And that, I thought, that was the hope for America.

¹ Norman Mailer, “The Third Presidential Paper—The Existential Hero: Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” *The Presidential Papers* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1963; Berkeley Medallion rpt., 1970), 45, 48.

² *Ibid.*, 57.

“So,” he wrote later, “I swallowed my doubts, my disquiets . . . and did my best to write a piece which would help him to get elected.”³ The article was, by his own later admission, a meretricious act of propaganda, a distortion of reality written in a vain and ultimately unsuccessful effort to affect reality.⁴

Yet he was not wrong, at least not entirely. Kennedy had had two brushes with death—his own shipwreck and his older brother’s death in an aircraft explosion—and he was indeed an actor (if hardly the professional that Ronald Reagan had been). And his *persona* has eclipsed his reality. In the nearly half century since Mailer wrote, people’s memories of the flesh-and-blood John Fitzgerald Kennedy have become very fuzzy. Kennedy’s assassination (and the possibilities that it foreclosed) became the stuff of rumor, theory, speculation, and legend. Certainly, the Kennedy myth has obscured just how traditional JFK’s foreign policy was when he entered the presidency; and that myth has made credible the proposition that Kennedy was prepared to abandon American support for the Republic of Vietnam following the 1964 election. He might even have meant what he said to several associates about it. Yet he remained a very conventional politician whose unconventional public *persona* gave him no cover at all from some of the most powerful political forces loose across the land. A calculation of those forces suggest that his behavior had he lived would have been very different from those his admirers would like to believe and not at all different from that his successors actually demonstrated.

This is where Daniel Ellsberg comes in, and we must remember that Dr. Ellsberg was (and is) considerably more than a fast man with a Xerox machine. In “The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine” Ellsberg used what he called “the McNamara study,” the so-called Pentagon Papers, to dissect presidential decision-making on Vietnam in several administrations.⁵ His conclusions remain very, very troubling, and not only as they illuminate the origins of the American war in Vietnam.

What Ellsberg called “the quagmire myth” was the explanation for the disastrous descent into war offered in the late sixties by many former supporters—even architects—of the war who had come to oppose it. His principal example was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s *The Bitter Heritage*.⁶ In Schlesinger’s model of decision-making, the Vietnam War was “a triumph of the politics of inadvertence Each step in the deepening of the American commitment was reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary. Yet, in retrospect, each step led only to the next, until we find ourselves entrapped in that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia.”⁷

Using the McNamara study’s documents, Ellsberg then provides an almost microscopic analysis of one critical Kennedy administration decision: to send advisers

³ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁵ Daniel Ellsberg, “The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine,” in *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972; Touchstone rpt., 1972), 42-131.

⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47, quoted by Ellsberg, “Quagmire Myth,” 50.

and materiel assistance to Ngo Dinh Diem's South Vietnam in November 1961. The method thoroughly debunks Schlesinger's model. Kennedy and his councilors took that decision, and others, Ellsberg says, not in a spirit of overconfidence, but in a spirit of pessimistic crisis management, at times that the leadership frequently thought things were much worse than they were willing to explain to the American public. (The long quotations from documents not serve only as factual evidence; they illustrate Ellsberg's instruction in the art of reading bureaucratic memos.) Ellsberg argues that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations did not undertake initiatives in the vain hope that they might win the war with them; rather they did what they did in the grim hope that their actions would stave off defeat, at least for a little while. Why did they do that? And why does the record show that the actions they took were so frequently considered inadequate to the problem by so many professional observers of the Vietnamese conflict?

At that point in the analysis, Ellsberg turns to an earlier decision point, 1950 and Harry Truman's extension of military aid to France's effort to retain its colony. Simply put, Ellsberg's analysis sees that decision made in the context of the political heat that administration was taking (from Republicans, to be sure, but also from Democrats like young Representative John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts) for what people were calling "the loss of China."⁸ 1949 was a bad year for Truman and the Democrats and 1950 was going to be worse. The Communist victory in China's civil war had come only weeks following the first Soviet atomic explosion, and at about the same time that a jury convicted former State Department official Alger Hiss of perjury for denying he had been a Soviet spy in the 1930s. Klaus Fuchs, a Soviet spy on the Manhattan project, whose espionage was not in doubt after his confession, had just been caught in Great Britain. Secretary of State Acheson and his department spent over a thousand pages explaining the Communist victory in China and the lack of American control over it—to no avail. "The argument simply did not 'sell,' even though its logic rested on the unarguable facts. . . ."⁹ Instead, Americans, many of them anyway, chose to believe what Sen. Joe McCarthy told them: "This must be the product of a great conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man."¹⁰ Truman and Acheson, indeed all Democrats tried to block that punch, but their aid to France in Vietnam and their immediate military support of invaded South Korea could not protect them. Having eked out an unexpected victory in 1948, the Democrats saw their power ebb away beginning in the 1950 Congressional elections. After the polls closed in 1952, the Democrats were shut out of power in both the executive and legislative branches.

By that time, not only had Truman and Acheson failed to preserve an anti-Communist China, they had also presided over a war that became a long and costly stalemate. They had made their choice of a Korean stalemate for very good reasons, a course and reasons with which the Joint Chiefs of Staff concurred. It didn't matter. With considerable help from the Republicans (which included Sen. Robert Taft's very explicit support of Sen. McCarthy), the people voted the Democrats out. Opponents and voters

⁸ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰ Quoted *ibid.*

delivered a hard, hard lesson, which the Democrats learned well enough to leave them with two unspoken political rules. First, allow no country—especially no Asian country and particularly not Vietnam—to “go Communist” (or to develop a coalition including Communists or even to develop a legal Communist party) while you were in power in the United States. The price of failure in following this rule would be political extinction. Second, do not get into a land war on the mainland of Asia. Failure to follow this rule had lesser immediate consequences, especially if you were acting in accordance with rule number one. However, the United States could not win such a war at any price realistic Americans were willing to pay, and the failure to live up to the expectations of what Acheson called “believers in American omnipotence” would also knock you out of the corridors of power.¹¹ “If I tried to pull out completely now,” Kennedy said to Mike Mansfield in 1963, “we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I’m reelected. So we had better make damned sure that I *am* reelected.”¹²

Joe McCarthy and what a “Joe McCarthy red scare” could do was no abstraction to anyone in Kennedy’s foreign policy councils. Lyndon Johnson was a freshman senator through the years of McCarthy’s rise and fall and had seen how he had destroyed careers, including those of senators who took issue with him. Secretary of State Dean Rusk had been Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs during the Truman administration; and he was the *only* survivor among the State Department’s postwar cadre of senior Asia specialists. Kennedy himself had had to steer cautious courses personally and politically: there *was* some personal affinity between the two Irish-Catholic senators, Kennedy’s father liked him, and one of Kennedy’s sisters even dated him briefly. Yet if the two of them had to appeal to some of the same ethnic groups for support, Kennedy understood full well that he needed *both* them *and* the liberals who despised and feared McCarthy in order to win national office. Largely, he had ducked the issue and he may have been relieved when life-threatening surgery kept him away from McCarthy’s censure hearings.

Kennedy and his people were also, however, survivors of the Korean stalemate, the second half of Truman’s end-of-term purgatory which meant they were as afraid of violating Ellsberg’s second rule as they were of breaking the first. They had to be tough enough, and successful enough, to forestall a Communist Vietnam on their watch. At the same time, however, they did not want to do so much that they invited Chinese intervention and the nightmare land war in Asia. Hence, the second half of Ellsberg’s title, “the Stalemate Machine.”

That brings us to the insights of James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck, Hollywood scriptwriters who adapted a Dorothy M. Johnson short story into the 1962 screenplay for one of John Ford’s classic westerns, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. James Stewart plays an eastern-educated lawyer who has moved to the frontier, an idealist seeking to be part of “civilizing” the West. Liberty Valance, played by Lee Marvin, is a hired gunslinger who represents everything Stewart’s character seeks to

¹¹ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 303, quoted in Ellsberg, “Quagmire Myth,” 82.

¹² “LBJ and the Kennedys,” *Life*, August 7, 1970, quoted by Ellsberg, “Quagmire Myth,” 97.

overthrow. The tenderfoot lawyer ends up in a gunfight with Valance and he wins. And “the man who shot Liberty Valance” is thereupon elected to political office, eventually becoming a US Senator and Vice-Presidential candidate. But the lawyer *didn't* shoot Liberty Valance. A rancher—played by John Wayne—did, for personal reasons that have to do with the film’s romantic sub-plot. The film, in fact, depicts Stewart’s Senator trying to “set the record straight” by talking to a small group of reporters and editors. It doesn’t work. “This is the West,” they tell him. “When the fact becomes the legend, print the legend.”

Print the legend, indeed. One place to apply that insight is to the mythology of leaders. Certainly the legends thrown around Jack Kennedy and the ways they got there are real and important, as are the mythologies of Nikita Khrushchev, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh. So too are the things those leaders did, whether or not they are consistent with the mythology. Those myths exist in many different places, viewed by people with a wide variety of perspectives. We might well ask a question begged (and not answered) by Norman Mailer’s effort to make Kennedy exciting: how does what the military historian John Keegan calls “the mask of command” that a leader adopts influence the great business that leader transacts?

Yet there is something else. As Ellsberg demonstrates very well, both the perceived Kennedy and the real Kennedy acted in the midst of someone else’s legend as they sought to obey the rules of political survival in the Cold War. They had to live in the legendary world Joe McCarthy had convinced Americans was real. The Truman administration’s defense of its record in China was based on facts and sound reasoning; its behavior in Korea in accordance with sensible military advice. So too, both options, staying out of Vietnam, or going in with “war-winning” force were well and truly founded. It didn’t matter. It couldn’t “sell.”

Writer Richard Rovere once described McCarthy’s method as “the multiple untruth.” The many small lies McCarthy and his friends reeled off together created a much larger lie, but an opponent would fly off on a wild goose chase trying to discredit each small, component part of the Big Lie. An opponent who went after the Big Lie could be refuted by repetition of one or more of the component small lies. Now, McCarthy came, and eventually went, having made the mistake of making an enemy of Dwight Eisenhower. But the caricatures of the Cold War and the Democratic Party that the McCarthyites created persisted even though they were based on little more than partisan buncombe. They were the “facts” that had become legend; and the papers printed the legend.

One expects politics and political competition to have a role in determining the policy objectives the country will pursue with its military means. Politics and political competition are how a democratic republic does its public business. Yet it is unfortunate (to say the least) that we realize the very great degree to which a legend conjured up by one political party for the specific purpose of denigrating another was able to determine great questions of peace and war a half century ago. It is something else to recognize that

the papers, and a 24-hour news cycle, and the Drudge Report, still print McCarthy's legend, a half century later.