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Roundtable Review 15-42

Marc J. Selverstone. *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022. ISBN 9780674048812.

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 Introduction by Andrew Preston, Cambridge University

It is the most irresistible “what if?” in modern history. What would President John F. Kennedy have done in Vietnam had he not been assassinated in November 1963? To war or not to war—for many historians, that is the question. The reason historians are still drawn to it is not just because of Kennedy’s enduring allure, but because of the near-perfect laboratory conditions for a proper counterfactual: the sudden removal of only one major participant (Ngo Dinh Diem also made an abrupt departure, but that was before Kennedy did); the availability of massive amounts of primary-source evidence; a suggestion that Kennedy was mulling over a military withdrawal; and an impending decision on whether to continue escalating in Vietnam or reconsider the whole thing entirely. Little wonder that scholars find “the Kennedy counterfactual” so tantalizing.

It is the greatest testament to Marc Selverstone’s great book that he simultaneously provides the most authoritative answer yet to the Kennedy counterfactual while largely resisting its siren song. Selverstone isn’t interested so much in the “what if?” parlor game as he is in clinically assessing whether Kennedy had an actual plan for actual withdrawal. And yet that forensic assessment, based on evidence of what did happen rather than what might have been, provides a compelling answer to what Kennedy probably would, and would not, have done. “Selverstone’s deeply researched and expertly argued book should settle the score on this issue,” Robert Brigham writes in his review. “While few books end a long-standing argument, I think this one will do just that.”

Full disclosure: I provided a promotional blurb for the book’s jacket:

With the precision of a surgeon’s scalpel, the courage of a mountaineer, and the storytelling instincts of a mystery writer, Selverstone tackles head-on one of the most tantalizing what-ifs in modern history. *The Kennedy Withdrawal* weighs all the evidence, from every angle, to render a verdict that is at once surprising, convincing, and authoritative. This will surely be the definitive account of JFK’s intentions in Vietnam.

So it’s nice to see that the reviewers here—a diverse, interdisciplinary group—mainly concur. Brigham praises *The Kennedy Withdrawal* as “unique” in the existing literature. David Anderson calls it a “brilliantly executed,” “meticulous,” even “masterful” book that makes a “persuasive case...based upon a mountain of material.” Sean McLaughlin hails Selverstone’s “airtight” case as a “truly excellent piece of scholarship” that is “essential reading for all Vietnam War scholars.” Yuen Foong Khong, the roundtable’s lone political scientist, finds the book “convincing” and admires Selverstone’s “careful parsing” of complex, often contradictory evidence. Even the most critical review, by Sarah-Jane Corke (and in truth, her thoughtful reflections are not all that critical), lauds Selverstone’s “ability to weave together the domestic and the foreign,” how he is “adept at showing how military and political considerations ran up against each other,” and how expertly he uses “several different methodologies.”

Corke also offers up one of the more interesting compliments I’ve read in a while, one that any historian would love to receive: “Selverstone’s work is also admirable in that it does not run from the historiography.” One suspects, however, that he couldn’t run, let alone hide, even if he wanted to, given how intensely divergent the historiography on this remains. The reviewers do an outstanding job, in differing but complementary ways, of providing historiographical context (and Khong pitches in with a clear and concise overview of international relations theory), so I won’t dwell on that here. But in brief, on one hand are historians who argue that Kennedy was already planning to withdraw from Vietnam; on the other are historians who argue that Kennedy was unlikely to deviate much from the path of escalation and war that his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, eventually chose in 1965. Selverstone deftly summarizes these competing schools of thought, in the book’s introduction, before investigating their claims against the evidence of what

Kennedy had actually decided and planned for. The detail might be microscopic, but the narrative built on the detail is enthralling, and in the end the reader can't help but be convinced that Kennedy did not leave behind any unfulfilled plans to withdraw the United States from South Vietnam.

H-Diplo readers who are expecting a brawl, as these roundtables often become and as one might expect on such a topic, will be disappointed. Criticisms of *The Kennedy Withdrawal* are few and far between, and those that are here are, by the standards of the genre, fairly mild. McLaughlin wanted deeper biographical context on the figure of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who is the second-most important actor in Selverstone's drama.¹ He also wanted Selverstone to speculate on whether the advocates of the "Kennedy withdrawal thesis" had ulterior motives, specifically repairing their own reputations left tattered by the disaster in Vietnam. This seems entirely plausible, if unproveable. After all, if Kennedy were going to pull out, then Johnson would shoulder all the blame and absolve almost everyone else—probably not the unapologetic Secretary of State Dean Rusk or the uber-hawk National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, but certainly the former officials who later claimed that Kennedy was planning to leave, including McNamara himself. Surely McLaughlin is onto something.² The other critique comes from Corke's review. Her thoughtful probing, which is part historiographical and part philosophical, is too nuanced and reflective to summarize adequately here, and I would do it injustice if I tried. Suffice it to say, though, she remains unconvinced that Selverstone has indeed settled the issue or had the last word on the topic, and she uses Peter Novick's methodological musings as a fascinating, unexpected guide.

Selverstone not only offers a gracious, substantive rejoinder to these critiques—which I'll also let speak for itself—he also uses his author's response as a kind of epilogue to ask questions and speculate on future work, by himself or other scholars. This is a tremendous service for scholars of the war, and one only hopes Selverstone has not finished with the subject. For while the reviewers on this roundtable may have found his treatment to be exhaustive and authoritative, even definitive, he himself admits that "blank spots in the story still remain."

Contributors:

Marc J. Selverstone is Director and Professor of Presidential Studies and co-chair of the Presidential Recordings Program at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs. He is the author of *Constructing the Monolith: The United States, Great Britain, and International Communism, 1945–1950* (Harvard University Press, 2009), which received the Bernath Book Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. He is also the editor of *A Companion to John F. Kennedy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) and general editor of the *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* (University of Virginia Press, 2014-).

Andrew Preston is Professor of American History at University of Cambridge, specializing in the history of American foreign relations. He is the author of *American Foreign Relations: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (Knopf, 2012). With Beth Bailey and Kara Vuic, he is the co-editor of a book series with Cambridge University Press, "Military, War, and Society in Modern American History." He is currently working on two major

¹ On such questions Selverstone rightly steers readers towards Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, *I Made Mistakes: Robert McNamara's Vietnam War Policy, 1960–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

² And have speculated as much myself: Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 130.

projects: a book on the idea of “national security” in American history and, as co-editor with Lien-Hang Nguyen, on volume 2 of the forthcoming three-volume *Cambridge History of the Vietnam War*.

David L. Anderson is Professor of History Emeritus at California State University, Monterey Bay, and Senior Lecturer of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. The author or editor of many books on the American war in Vietnam, his most recent is *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020). He is a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and a US Army veteran of the Vietnam War.

Robert. K. Brigham is the Shirley Ecker Boskey Professor of History and International Relations at Vassar College. He is a specialist on the history of US foreign policy, particularly the Vietnam War. Brigham is author or co-author of ten books, among them *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (PublicAffairs, 2018); *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power* (PublicAffairs, 2008); and *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (PublicAffairs, 1999), written with former secretary of defense, Robert S. McNamara, and James G. Blight. He has just completed *This is a True War Story: An Adoptee's Memoir* (Chicago).

Sarah-Jane Corke is the co-founder and past-president of the North American Society for Intelligence History (NASIH). She is Associate Professor of History at the University of New Brunswick. Her first book, *US Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, the CIA and Secret Warfare*, was published by Routledge in 2008. Her second book, an edited collection with Mark Stout, *Adventures in Intelligence History: Stories from The International Spy Museum and Beyond*, is under contract and due to be published in 2024 by the University Press of Kansas. Her third monograph, *The Nine Lives of Patricia and John Paton Davies*, was awarded a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant in 2022. She is also working on an edited collection with Stephen Long on *Western Covert Operations Against the Eastern Bloc*, and a history of the Director of National Intelligence with Michael Miner.

Yuen Foong Khong is Li Ka Shing Professor of Political Science at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. Among his publications are “How Not to Learn from History” (2022) and “Power as Prestige in World Politics” (2019), both in the journal *International Affairs*, and *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

Sean J. McLaughlin is Associate Professor of History and the archives/museum director at Murray State University. He has authored *JFK and de Gaulle: How America and France Failed in Vietnam, 1961–1963* (University Press of Kentucky, 2019) and “As Long as we Live, You Shall Be Remembered’: Canadian veterans of the Vietnam War and their struggle for recognition,” in *War and its Aftermath: Veteran Treatment and Reintegration in Post-War Societies* (Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2020). He is currently writing a monograph for the University of Nebraska Press on Jackie Robinson and the anti-racist baseball fan community in Montréal that rallied around him during his groundbreaking 1946 season as a minor leaguer in Canada.

 Review by David L. Anderson, California State University, Monterey Bay, emeritus

One of the most enduring and emotionally fraught debates about the costly American war in Vietnam is the mystery around the question of what if President John F. Kennedy had lived beyond 22 November 1963. Marc J. Selverstone's gritty and granular monograph punctures the alluring bubble of the Kennedy mystique that has obscured clear understanding of where the president stood on the war at the time of his murder. The book is a brilliantly executed analysis which keeps a disciplined focus on what the president did and did not do during the eighteen months in 1962–1963 during which his advisors weighed the merits and methods of a partial and potentially more complete withdrawal of American military personnel from South Vietnam.

During the thousand days of the Kennedy administration, future prospects of the ultimately doomed Republic of Vietnam (RVN), which had been sustained from its beginning by US assistance, went from cautious optimism to ominous foreboding. The timing of Kennedy's sudden departure from the scene coincided with the leadership vacuum in Saigon occasioned by President Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination on 1 November. What followed had less to do with what Kennedy might have done, than with what the Vietnamese in the north and south did and the real conditions in the country facing American leaders. Selverstone correctly avoids the counterfactual scenario of 1964–1965 with Kennedy in office. Counterfactuals have their place, especially in crafting national security policy in which practitioners must consult history to weigh possible courses of action. As Selverstone insightfully examines in his epilogue on the shadow of the mythical Kennedy over recent policy makers, including Barack Obama, distorted understanding of past actions and actors can interfere with effective policy making (239-242).

The scholarly debate around the meaning of the sudden transition from Kennedy to Lyndon Johnson has generally aligned around two interpretations. As articulated by Gary Hess, on one side is the Kennedy "exceptionalist" school or "turning point argument." It draws upon leadership style or personal agency of the two presidents and concludes that Kennedy either had already decided to withdraw militarily from Indochina in stages from 1963 to 1965, if reelected in 1964, or had made clear that American commitment to supporting South Vietnam had reached its limit.¹ This argument began with Kennedy insiders, including his brother Robert and his aides Kenneth O'Donnell and David Powers, and has been advanced in various nuanced forms by such highly regarded scholars as David Kaiser, Robert Dallek, Lawrence Freedman, and Howard Jones.² Hess labels the other side of the debate the "Cold War imperative interpretation" that emphasized Kennedy's repeated assertions of the prevailing containment and domino theories and his readiness to increase aid and advisors to ensure the survival of a non-Communist RVN and to embrace counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare as the effective, affordable, and proportionate way to victory for Saigon.³ The works of

¹ Gary R. Hess, "South Vietnam Under Siege, 1961–1965: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Question of Escalation or Disengagement," in David L. Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 148-151. See also Andrew Preston, "Vietnam," in Marc J. Selverstone, ed., *A Companion to John F. Kennedy* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 280-284.

² Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000); Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003); Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassination of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). On Robert Kennedy's version, see his interview quoted in Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 194-196.

³ Hess, "South Vietnam Under Siege," 151.

George Herring and Gary Hess are notable examples of this analysis, along with those of Robert Schulzinger, Marilyn Young, and John Prados.⁴

Selverstone self-describes his monograph as one that “straddles” the competing schools (3). That is a fair description, drawn from his extensive documentation that there was a repeatedly discussed and refined plan, orchestrated largely by Robert McNamara, of which the president was aware in broad strokes, if not in detail. On the personality question, Kennedy was more deliberative than Johnson, but he had more time to deliberate. Did Kennedy have the kind of leadership courage that he professed to admire to break with containment thinking in Vietnam? Selverstone demonstrates clearly that Kennedy dismissed neutralism, negotiation, or outright withdrawal as long as Saigon failed to demonstrate self-sustainability. Especially after false starts with Cuba and Berlin, Kennedy made determination and credibility his standard of effective deterrence of global Communism. Thus, Selverstone is able to accept the exceptionalists’ narrative that withdrawal was on the table, but he concludes that Kennedy never escaped the Cold War imperative.

For Kennedy, the middle ground between the extremes of abandoning South Vietnam and of increasing US military defense of the South—the choice that Johnson believed he confronted in 1965—was COIN (counterinsurgency) and nation-building. Kennedy became fascinated with making Vietnam an unconventional warfare laboratory, including utilizing novel weapons like the defoliant Agent Orange (33). The counterinsurgency school at what was then known as Fort Bragg bears his name. The Kennedy team, especially McNamara but also General Paul Harkins, commander of the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, underestimated Hanoi’s own ruthless determination and Saigon’s weaknesses, and arrogantly failed to acknowledge that the fate of the country lay entirely in the hands of the competing Vietnamese themselves. In his memoirs, McNamara confessed his miscalculation while also remaining loyal to the contradictory notion that somehow Kennedy would have eventually changed direction.⁵

One of the most compelling and masterful sections of this book is Selverstone’s sentence-by-sentence, phrase-by-phrase, and word-by-word dissection of the drafting and dissemination of the McNamara-Taylor report of 2 October 1963 (158-174). This document, more than any other single archival source, is the most cited evidence that Kennedy intended to withdraw US forces from Vietnam. Much of the other exceptionalist evidence is in the form of memoirs and oral-history recollections. Selverstone’s meticulous analysis reveals the fragile and complex nature of the report’s phrasing of the administration’s intention to withdraw one thousand American soldiers by December 1963 and to have most US personnel out of the country by 1965. These sentences in the report, in Selverstone’s account, were internally debated and nuanced and represented political and psychological calculation, not military strategy. They were intended to motivate Saigon to remain steadfast, to give an appearance of progress to hold off congressional criticisms of Diem, and to prevent congressional cuts in foreign aid with the argument that assistance to Saigon would make the 1965 deadline possible.

The author’s impressive archival research incorporates the roles played and positions taken by many senior aides and other policy influencers in Washington and Saigon. The sources range widely: US records, British Foreign Office files, news media, opinion polls, and individual papers, such as those of Robert Thompson

⁴ George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 6th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2019); Gary Hess, “Commitment in the Age of Counterinsurgency: Kennedy’s Vietnam Options and Decisions, 1961-1963,” in David L. Anderson, ed., *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993): 63-86; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

⁵ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, with Brian VanDeMark (New York: Times Books, 1995), xvi, 86-87.

and Maxwell Taylor. In view of Selverstone's long-time work with presidential recordings at the University of Virginia's Miller Center, it is not surprising that recorded conversations from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations are central to this monograph. The exceptionalist school has made much of the presumed personality differences between the presidents. It describes Kennedy as pragmatic and patient and Johnson as instinctive and impatient. Listening to tapes provides a window into such claims. I have spent time listening to recordings in the Johnson Library of Johnson's phone conversations with McNamara. They reveal Johnson's intelligence and toughness in verbal sparring and his persuasiveness in dealing with the Harvard-educated secretary of defense. On the Kennedy tapes, Selverstone observes that the president was frequently reserved and noticeably noncommittal but also asks pointed questions at key times. His queries revealed doubts about what vital interests America had in South Vietnam, but they also indicated concern that premature steps toward withdrawal might undermine the Saigon regime and the credibility of America's global containment posture. Researchers have attempted to interpret the Kennedy oracle, and the interpretation is often in the mind of the listener, not necessarily in the measured words of the speaker.

Selverstone asserts that the 2 October 1963 meeting on issuing the McNamara-Taylor report is key to understanding where the administration stood (175-182). It is one of the few Vietnam strategy sessions with Kennedy on tape. His comments indicate a disposition to delay removal of US troops and give no indication of abandoning the struggle. Selverstone projects from this discussion that Kennedy was likely to continue the war in 1964 and 1965 and also that his team was not candidly confronting the option of exiting Vietnam if it meant losing. McNamara argued in the session that, even if the insurgency was not defeated by 1965, Saigon would be in a position to finish the job.

If Kennedy's thoughts were elusive, McNamara's were not. The secretary of defense and General Harkins believed that COIN was working. Their reports provide some of the evidence that advocates of the revisionist school of Vietnam War historiography (the so-called "win theory") reference to contend that COIN tactics were correct and working and that Johnson's eventual big unit strategy was wrong.⁶ McNamara's withdrawal plan reflected his technocratic, managerial style. In Selverstone's words, the plan was always a "highly elastic" blend of strategic, bureaucratic, and political calculations (242-244).

Kennedy was consistent in his desire to win the war, according to the author, and the withdrawal discussions were a way to get political support for the war. Kennedy became uncomfortable with the deepening US commitment to South Vietnam. He was reflective and could change his mind, but he also had an interest in "brushfire wars" (COIN) as an alternative to big power wars (245-246). He embraced the domino theory and the importance of demonstrating resolve. The shadow of Camelot has obscured the meaning of his plan. He wanted to reduce US assistance to Saigon but not the US commitment to the survival of South Vietnam.

Selverstone's persuasive case is based upon a mountain of material in which he found no definitive evidence to support the change-of-course argument, and that finding is a major contribution to scholarship on Kennedy and the war. He utilizes no Vietnamese sources, and they are not needed to make his case. The absence of specific discussion of Vietnamese actors and actions in the Kennedy team's deliberations is itself revealing, however. Kennedy and McNamara were deciding in the dark with little clear knowledge of Vietnam itself. There was occasional reference to intelligence reports, especially on the coup plotting against Diem, but there was almost no discussion of Hanoi's calculations or of the response of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front if the United States increased or decreased its troops and aid. It has long been evident to historians, such as William Duiker and more recently Pierre Asselin, that Le Duan,

⁶ "A Roundtable on Mark Moyer's *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*," *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* 38:3 (2007): 5-22.

the Communist leader in Hanoi, was cautious and calculating but undeterred in 1962–1963.⁷ It is not apparent that Kennedy even knew who Le Duan was.

The Kennedy team discussed at times the strategic hamlet program that was central to the comprehensive COIN plan. McNamara reported that it was working. It is now evident that the success was a chimera.⁸ Although Kennedy seemed skeptical of excessive claims, it is likely that he died never having fully grasped the obstacles the United States faced, the magnitude of the challenge of nation building, and the inherently imperialist attitude it presented to all Vietnamese.

After Diem's assassination, there was virtually no effective government in Saigon, but this vacuum only slowly became apparent to the White House. Presumably the CIA had raw intelligence in mid-November, but the short window between November 1 and 22 did not provide time for it to be processed and presented to the president. The entire picture of developments within Vietnam was changing dramatically just days after Kennedy's death. Washington withdrew a few troops in December in accord with McNamara's plan, but the absolute troop strength did not decrease. The numbers were "an accounting exercise" in troop rotation and were symbolic, as Kennedy and McNamara had known they would be (210). In December, the Pentagon was getting reports that the government in Saigon was in turmoil and that the war was going badly. The Special National Intelligence Estimate, which turned attention toward North Vietnam and ultimately to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August, came in February 1964. Selverstone reflects that Kennedy would have had no choice but to recalibrate, as the withdrawal plan had always anticipated.

With Diem's death, Senator Mike Mansfield believed that the American effort to create a successful regime in Saigon was doomed. Having observed South Vietnam for more than ten years, he saw Diem as indispensable. When I interviewed Mansfield in Tokyo in 1986, he gave me his personal assessment of Diem: "My very strong belief was that he was the only one who could do the job in South Vietnam."⁹ Mansfield claimed in 1969 that Kennedy had shared with him a definite withdrawal plan, and Selverstone notes that this story became evidence for the Kennedy exceptionalist school. Selverstone assesses that Kennedy did share with Mansfield the fact that planning was in process, but likely at an early stage. Mansfield's biographer, Don Oberdorfer, found that the details of Mansfield's story varied in the telling.¹⁰ From my conversation with Mansfield, I am convinced that he genuinely believed Diem was South Vietnam's only hope. In his view, without Diem, the time had come for Washington to find an exit from the conflict. He may well have remembered Kennedy's comments to him the way he wanted to remember them.

The rapidity with which the withdrawal plan ended is the final evidence that Selverstone offers of how tenuous and simply aspirational it was. McNamara received briefings in Saigon in December on how the government was losing control of key areas. All talk of the 1965 withdrawal stopped for fear of showing lack of confidence in Saigon. Withdrawal had originally been defended as a sign of confidence in the South's government. No one was talking about sending regular US troops, but McNamara had made an about-face and was now looking for how to strengthen South Vietnam, not withdraw from it. The press understandably accused him of being muddled and less than candid. In a 25 February phone conversation cited by Selverstone (222), Johnson pinned McNamara down. He told the secretary that the time was coming to let

⁷ William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 313-315; Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 106-110.

⁸ Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 58-59.

⁹ Michael J. Mansfield, interview by David L. Anderson, Tokyo, 12 August 1986.

¹⁰ Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield: The Extraordinary Life of a Great American Statesman and Diplomat* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 195-196.

the RVN fall or for the United States to assume the burden, and McNamara agreed. With the 1964 election approaching, McNamara tried to take a middle course: not widening the war while increasing assistance to Saigon and not removing American troops until Saigon was ready. On March 26, McNamara made clear in a speech that the United States would not leave South Vietnam until it was independent and stable, and privately he directed Harkins and Admiral Harry Felt, the commander in chief in the Pacific, to cease all withdrawal planning (228). The Kennedy withdrawal ended without beginning.

Review by Robert K. Brigham, Vassar College

Marc Selverstone's *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam* challenges the view put forward by Kennedy court historians and his most energetic supporters that the president was determined to withdraw American advisors from Vietnam following the 1964 United States (US) presidential election. As proof that Kennedy had already decided to pull the plug on South Vietnam at the time of his death, advocates of the Camelot myth offer the withdrawal of 1,000 American advisors in late 1963 and the administration's nascent planning to withdraw all US military personnel by the end of 1965.¹ This argument has remained the dominant view of Kennedy's Vietnam policy.² Until now. Selverstone's deeply researched and expertly argued book should settle the score on this issue.

Utilizing recently released secret White House tapes, alongside declassified documents, memoirs, and oral histories, Selverstone argues that Kennedy had not made up his mind on what to do in Vietnam at the time of his assassination in Dallas. The president was still waiting to see what the new Saigon government would bring following Ngo Dinh Diem's murder in November 1963. He was also deeply concerned about progress against the insurgency in its key strongholds in South Vietnam. Progress was always at the center of Kennedy's Vietnam planning. What is so unique about the treatment here, however, is that Selverstone clearly shows that Kennedy entertained the idea of withdrawing US advisors based on a set of assumptions that never materialized. Could the US help the Saigon government achieve stability on the military front? Could South Vietnam make considerable progress against the insurgency? Could the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) stand on its own? At the time of his death, Kennedy had no clear answers to any of these pressing questions. The president, Selverstone concludes, did not like to act on speculation (175-203).

Selverstone asks us to remember that Kennedy was a Cold War liberal: that is, he was liberal on some domestic issues, but hawkish when it came to the contest with the Soviet Union and China. Selverstone offers up example after example of the young Kennedy taking up positions to the right of most of his Democratic colleagues in Congress. Kennedy was sharply critical of the Truman administration for its handling of the Chinese Civil War and Korea. As senator, Kennedy had also criticized President Dwight Eisenhower for allowing the Soviet leaders to make huge advances in the global south and for the missile gap. Kennedy also argued that Eisenhower had allowed conventional US forces to atrophy. During the 1960 US presidential election, Kennedy ran to the right of Vice President Richard Nixon on foreign policy issues and hit the Eisenhower administration hard on its policies toward Fidel Castro's Cuba. All of this suggests that the Kennedy withdrawal myth is wishful thinking. According to Selverstone, Kennedy was a committed cold warrior (4-9).

Once in the White House, Kennedy did put some distance between the Oval Office and Vietnam policy. Despite rosy predictions by some of his staff, Kennedy feared that Saigon was not making significant progress where it counted. Selverstone argues that Kennedy wanted some plausible deniability as he faced a second term. Much of the Vietnam planning fell then to Robert S. McNamara, the secretary of defense, and a small group of his associates at the Pentagon and on the National Security Council (NSC). McNamara consulted widely on the prospects for military victory in Vietnam. Victory seemed elusive. McNamara worried, however, that a complete withdrawal from South Vietnam would have far-reaching implications. P.J.

¹ Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979); James Galbraith, "Exit Strategy," *Boston Review* (October/November, 2003), 29-34.

² Prominent examples are: Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassination of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Honey, a Southeast Asia specialist at the University of London who had often been hired by RAND, a think tank contracted by the Department of Defense to study Vietnam, shared this concern. He told McNamara that a Communist victory in South Vietnam would undermine the US global position. “Not another political leader in all of Asia will place any confidence in the world (sic) of the West” (164).

McNamara and Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy’s chief military adviser, agreed. They desired to lower the US profile in South Vietnam and operationalize a withdrawal plan. According to Selverstone, that plan was always predicated on success against the insurgency. When pressed by Kennedy, McNamara and Taylor predicted some limited gains in 1963, but argued that stability in the provinces near Saigon in 1964 and everywhere in South Vietnam except the Mekong Delta by the end of 1965 seemed likely. McNamara was more skeptical than Taylor on this point, but both concluded that even if the insurgency had not been destroyed by those dates, it was time to hand the fighting over to the South Vietnamese. McNamara told the president, “But I am sure that if we don’t meet those dates, in the sense of ending the major military campaigns, we nonetheless can withdraw the bulk of US forces, according to the schedule we’ve laid out—worked out—because we can train the Vietnamese to do the job” (171). McNamara was spelling out a Vietnamization policy not unlike that of President Richard Nixon in 1969.

Selverstone argues that Kennedy remained skeptical. Initial reports in late 1962 and early 1963 had pointed to significant gains in the strategic hamlet program. But by late summer 1963, the counterinsurgency program had stalled. Kennedy was worried. He saw the McNamara withdrawal plan as conditional, and those conditions were not being met. Still, there was something to gain politically from going ahead with the 1963 withdrawal of 1,000 US advisors. To those who wanted to hold the line in South Vietnam, the advisor withdrawal signaled progress in the war. For critics at home, the planned withdrawal offered assurance that the Kennedy administration expected results in South Vietnam. As the president told journalist Walter Cronkite, there were limits to the US commitment and the war was for South Vietnam to win. The announced withdrawal would also signal to the new leaders in South Vietnam that the US expected progress on the war and an end to the political intrigue in Saigon. According to Selverstone, the assistance program was not a blank check (146-150).

Kennedy was not just worried about events in Saigon. He also feared that Hanoi was making plans to change the course of its commitment to the southern revolution. Again, much of the thinking in Washington, according to Selverstone, was speculative at best. Would Hanoi increase its allotment of supplies to the south, aiding the insurgency? Would Hanoi increase North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam to take advantage of the chaos in Saigon as many experts were predicting? Was Hanoi planning for a new phase in the war, one in which more conventional methods and forces would be used? Kennedy and his team could only guess what Hanoi would do in late 1963. In typical Kennedy fashion, then, Selverstone concludes that the president was trying to keep his options open in South Vietnam. He floated the withdrawal plan for political reasons, but also seemed willing to sustain the commitment of program assistance to Saigon when he was gunned down in Dallas.

The more likely case, one put forward by *The Kennedy Withdrawal*, is that had Kennedy survived Dallas and been re-elected to a second term, the Americanization of the war might have looked different or been long-delayed. Selverstone does not go as far as Lawrence Freedman and Fred Logevall, who argue that Kennedy would have avoided Americanization of the conflict.³ Instead, he concludes that Kennedy’s commitment to a free South Vietnam was still intact at the time of his death. Selverstone argues that Kennedy and his national security team would have probably acted on the military situation on the ground as it evolved over the next

³ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford, 2002) and Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: California, 1999).

few years.⁴ Rather than signal an eagerness “to wind down the US assistance effort,” Selverstone concludes, “the policy of withdrawal—the Kennedy withdrawal—allowed JFK to preserve the American commitment to Vietnam” (246). Kennedy “never relinquished his interest in brushfire wars, nor did he dampen his rhetoric about their necessity,” Selverstone contends. “He continued to operate from a worldview that embraced the precepts of domino [theory] thinking...and the demonstration of resolve” (245).

As Kennedy prepared to head to Dallas, the two Cold War themes he hoped to bring home to the voters ahead of the 1964 US presidential election were *patience* and *persistence*. These had been the hallmark of the administration’s Vietnam policy since January 1961. Kennedy intended to tell the Dallas audience that American assistance played a key role “in enabling those who live on the periphery of the Communist world to maintain their independence of choice.” US assistance could be “painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task” (203). The president also signaled a willingness to delay the advisors’ departure beyond the 1965 date that was projected for their removal.

One of Kennedy’s most influential NSC aides, Mike Forrestal, met with the president just before his Dallas trip. Kennedy had ordered him to meet with Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia to smooth over relations. Kennedy hinted that he was not pleased with the depth of strategic thought informing US policy in Southeast Asia, and that he hoped Forrestal would help him remedy that problem after the 1964 election. According to Forrestal, the president went to Dallas with the idea that his administration had to “get prepared for whatever it was that the government under his guidance decided to do about Vietnam.” He was not willing to go any further. “There was no suggestion,” Forrestal later acknowledged “that he wanted to drop it or to radically change anything, but there was certainly a suggestion that he was getting nervous about it” (202).

The president was getting nervous about events in Vietnam, but as Selverstone correctly argues, Kennedy’s nerves were not yet policy. What does seem clear, however, is that by early 1964, the new president, Lyndon Johnson, and most of his key advisors—who had also been Kennedy’s advisors—characterized the 1965 withdrawal date as aspirational and likely to change as conditions on the ground changed. According to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, who had also served in the Kennedy administration, the 1965 withdrawal date “has never been anything more for us than a target for the completion of certain specific forms of technical training and assistance” (227).

Even McNamara, who had been the most hopeful of Kennedy’s national security team for a withdrawal of US personnel, had to concede in early 1964 that the potential existed for more, not less, US advisors. McNamara maintained that “substantial reductions in the members of US military training personnel should be possible before the end of 1965,” but that the Johnson administration should “continue to reiterate that it will provide all the assistance and advice required to do the job regardless of how long it takes” (226). Johnson agreed, arguing that the struggle in Vietnam “cannot be ignored, we must stay there and help them, and that is what we are going to do” (227). He told McNamara shortly after taking office that “I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing” (222).⁵

McNamara eventually ordered his subordinates to end all planning for the withdrawal of US troops. Johnson’s view had won the day, but, Selverstone contends, had Kennedy won a second term, he might have come around to Johnson’s way of thinking given the realities on the ground in South Vietnam. Selverstone

⁴ This view is shared by Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: California, 2005), who also argues that Kennedy was always vulnerable to military pressure.

⁵ See also Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999).

joins a long list of scholars who argue that what Kennedy did in Vietnam between 1961 and 1963 was far more important than what he did not do or was planning to do.⁶

The Camelot myth was carefully cultivated by the president's widow with the help of Kennedy biographers, including Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Theodore White.⁷ As Johnson escalated the war, these Kennedy caretakers subtly argued that the fallen president would have rejected the way the war had become militarized. He would have gotten the US out of Vietnam because he had been a skeptic all along.⁸ The almost non-stop commemoration of Kennedy, especially in films like Oliver Stone's *JFK*, has only added to this view that Kennedy was ready to quit Vietnam. But Selverstone has examined the source material carefully, especially the presidential tapes, and his conclusion that Kennedy had not yet made up his mind on what to do in Vietnam is grounded in a more concrete and historical way than the efforts by the keepers of the flame.

What makes *The Kennedy Withdrawal* so impressive is its attention to detail, its use of little-known documents from archives and the presidential tapes, and its interpretative framework. While few books end a long-standing argument, I think this one will do just that.

⁶ George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford, 1999), George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

⁷ Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy* (New York: Hyperion, 2011); Theodore White, "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue," *Life* 55:23, 158-159.

⁸ Schlesinger, "What Would He Have Done?" *New York Times Book Review*, 29 March 1992, 3, 31; Roger Hilsman, "How Kennedy Viewed the Vietnam Conflict," *New York Times*, 20 January 1992, 18.

 Review by Sarah-Jane Corke, University of New Brunswick

In 1989 historian Peter Novick published what is to my mind the most important historical work of the twentieth century.¹ Everything I have read since has been filtered through the lens that Novick held up in *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question in American History*. Thereafter, I understood that attempting to write an ‘objective’ historical account of the past would be the equivalent of “nailing jelly to the wall.”²

It was Novick’s slick metaphor that haunted me as I moved through historian Marc Selverstone’s excellent new book, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam* (emphasis in the original title). How many nails would he need to keep his jelly attached to the wall, I wondered? The book, after all, flirts with one of the most controversial historiographical questions in our field; a counterfactual, no less. Would John F. Kennedy have gotten the United States out of the Vietnam War if he had not been assassinated in November of 1963?

As Selverstone points out in the first line of the book, this controversy “has long animated debate about America’s calamitous war in Southeast Asia” (1). And what a controversy it is (2-3, 229-246).³ In both of my undergraduate foreign relations courses, students wrestle with this question. The students are still fascinated by Kennedy.⁴ For my part, the question appeals to me because it is so obviously unanswerable. Thus, it provides me with the time and space I need get them to think about writing the history of the unknown, which leads them, to acknowledging how similar the unknown and known are in historical writing. You can see it in their eyes when it clicks. It is a profound moment.

I wondered if Selverstone’s book would close that opening. Could he, where other historians have so far failed, offer proof that the jelly could be successfully nailed to the wall?⁵

Thankfully, no. As he acknowledges in his introduction, “is impossible to answer, ‘the great what if’ with any certainty” (1). Instead, he tells us he is going to narrow the focus of his study down to a smaller, extremely specific, historical question, which addresses Kennedy’s decision-making process around the withdrawal of 1,000 US troops (2). But while his narrative carefully sketches and smudges the shadows of the larger debate, it also takes a hard line through his “targeted history,” which allows him to argue that there now exists “*indisputable proof* (my emphasis) that the Kennedy administration undertook a sustained and systematic effort

¹ American historians of the US who have not read *That Noble Dream* must do so. It is an even more important book today than it was over thirty years ago when it was first published. Yes, it is now dated. Yes, the final section, titled “objectivity in crisis,” has been done better by others—and here I recommend anything by Keith Jenkins—but Novick’s classic helps us understand the field and the way politics, nostalgia, and practice, define the past in surprising ways. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question in American History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989). On Keith Jenkins, see: Jenkins, *On ‘What is History?’ From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London: Routledge, 1995); Jenkins, *Why History: Ethics and Postmodernity*, (London: Routledge, 1999); Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline*, (London: Routledge 2002); Keith Jenkins, *At the Limits of History: Essays on Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2009); and Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

² According to Novick, the phrase “nailing jelly to the wall...was a crusty intellectual historian’s characterization of the attempt to write political history.” According to Novick, it is the concept of historical objectivity that is “gelatinous.” Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 7.

³ Selverstone does an excellent job of outlining the various players.

⁴ Much of that pull has been constructed by the Kennedy family and his advisors, as Michael Hogan illustrated in *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy: A Biography* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵ The closest anyone has come, at least to my mind, is Fredrik Logevall in his masterful *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

to schedule the removal of American servicemen from South Vietnam and turn the war over to the government in Saigon” (1).

Despite the certainty of his language, emphasized above, throughout the rest of his book Selverstone’s treatment of the evidence is more cautious. For example, he immediately goes on to suggest the strategy for withdrawal was “chiefly the brainchild of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara,” not President Kennedy, and that its viability rested on three pre-conditions that were never realized: that the war would progress satisfactorily; that the South Vietnamese would eventually be able to manage their own defenses; and that the North would not escalate the conflict (3-4).

He also illustrates, in chapter 1, how unwilling Kennedy was to go on the record and clearly define his position on Vietnam. As a result, “senior officials” were able to “misinterpret the president’s position” (44, 50). This became problematic because there was never a consensus among the president’s advisors on the best course of action. Moreover, key players, like McNamara, came to hold contradictory positions, which he argues is evident when one examines their public and private comments (73).

To say that the administration was equally divided over what to do in Vietnam would be an overstatement, but nevertheless, divisions did exist (66, 95). These divisions ended in what National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy termed “the administration’s ‘civil war’” (176). The great debate, Selverstone argues—channelling the arguments of noted Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis—occurred because the Executive Branch failed to align the pursuit of its policy with the broad spectrum of its strategy for securing it (71).⁶ As Selverstone argues, many of those involved never came “to grips with the tension” between [the administration’s] policy and its strategy: the desire for “a limited and qualified commitment” and the “rhetoric casting Saigon’s fall in apocalyptic terms” (70, 172).

The failure to align policy and strategy, means and ends, was the result of a contradiction that lay at the heart of the administration’s efforts in Vietnam. This contradiction, according to Selverstone, was never resolved while Kennedy was alive. As a result, American policymakers, “began to undermine” their “commitment [to Vietnam] at the very moment they were seeking to bolster it” (78, 157). All of this helps explain the historiographical controversy over what Kennedy would have done if he had lived. Different stakeholders perceived the President’s strategy differently. These differences were reflected and refracted through the lived experiences of those who worked for the administration, in the primary documents, the emerging historiography, and the [hi]stories that continue to be written today.

Before addressing the historiography, and the place of Selverstone’s book in it, I want to note a couple of strengths in his work. The first is his ability to weave together the domestic and the foreign—internal and external factors—that played a role in the strategy that emerged and diverged. He is particularly adept at showing how military and political considerations ran up against each other (29, 34, 119-120, 136). Second, for such a limited question, Selverstone’s work is notable for its use of several different methodologies. Geopolitics, ideologies, culture, gender, and public opinion all find their way into his text at different moments (35, 94, 96). He is also particularly adept at identifying the key ideas and events that shaped Kennedy’s thinking. The missionary impulse, falling dominos, the lessons of Munich, and notions of progress are also factored into his account; so too are domestic and partisan politics, the role of Congress and the media (52-53, 101, 108). All of this is much harder to do than Selverstone makes it look. Given the sophisticated way he approaches the methodological interventions, and the way that the book gets at how

⁶ John Lewis Gaddis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

complex the policymaking process is, *The Kennedy Withdrawal* is ideal to use as a model for graduate students. It also reminds us of all the subtle nuances that go into a well-crafted history of US foreign relations.

Silverstone's work is also admirable in that it does not run from the historiography. He embraces it in both his introduction and in his epilogue. Therein he carefully centers his own argument in the existing debates, arguing that his work "straddles the Cold warrior and exceptionalist camps" that were best outlined by historian Gary Hess in the still indispensable *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*.⁷ According to Silverstone, although Kennedy had "grown deeply uncomfortable with the US assistance program" he remained wedded to it as he boarded his plane to Dallas in November of 1963. In making this argument he challenges the "Camelot" view of the Kennedy withdrawal" an interpretation which he argues is "partial to the exceptionalist position on JFK" (3). However, as any good historiographer would, he also explains to the reader not only where his work fits in the historiography, but how and why certain trends have come to dominate the scholarship during specific periods of time. As several excellent historiographers have pointed out, the past and the present are intimately related.⁸

In the end, Silverstone provides a strong and compelling "granular history" (2) that is tied to one of the most contested subjects in twentieth century US foreign relations. The book also presents what I would argue is an objectivist thesis. But the contradictory and conflicting pieces of evidence he presents, on the divisions and misunderstandings within, and over, the administration over policy, allows for a much more subjective appreciation of the past. As a result, students of the Vietnam War who are looking for a clear yes or no answer on whether Kennedy would have removed the 1,000 troops will probably not find it here.

Given the tension in this work—the contradiction between argument and evidence—I returned to Novick for insight. He explains that during "periods of ideological consensus, the conviction that 'truth is one' has been reassuring; [however] in more contentious times, a pluralist, perspectival orientation was more effective."⁹ Silverstone's book appears to do both. He provides both a unitary truth by way of his thesis and a perspectival orientation in his argument. To my mind, then, perhaps it is time to move beyond Novick and explore the duality inherent in our world and how it might inform historical analysis.

Today, we are living in a highly partisan environment in which new political consensuses are taking shape. In our period of contentious consensuses there are those who have worked very hard to forge a new unity. Yet, Novick's ghost also still walks among us. He shadowed me as I made my way through Silverstone's text and he prodded me to ask, given all the misunderstandings over what American policy was, how is it possible to conclude that there is "indisputable proof" that the Kennedy would have sanctioned one action or another?

To my mind, Kennedy remains an enigma, and I am content with that, with the unknowable. However, I am also aware how uncomfortable others become when they face the mystical. It goes against everything they want to believe about our discipline. But, despite the best efforts of some scholars, positivist and/or objectivist thinking will not make it so.

⁷ Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2008). Many of Hess's arguments also appear in his essential article. See Hess, "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History* 18:2 (1994): 239-264.

⁸ Here I recommend Gerald K. Haines and Samuel Walker, eds., *American Foreign Relations: A Historiographical Review* (Westport: Praeger, 1987)

⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 5.

Review by Yuen Foong Khong, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy,
National University of Singapore

On 11 October 1963, President John F. Kennedy approved National Security Action Memorandum 263 (NSAM-263), which formalized his decision to withdraw 1,000 military personnel from the 16,000 already present in South Vietnam. This first withdrawal was to be completed by the end of 1963, to be followed by additional drawdowns in 1964 and 1965. If the plan had been fully implemented, the bulk of US personnel would have left South Vietnam by the end of 1965. These withdrawals, however, were contingent on South Vietnam's ability to hold its own against the National Liberation Front (NLF, Vietnamese Communists or Viet Cong). Six weeks after he approved NSAM-263, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. By the spring of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson had scuttled all the withdrawal plans, in part because "battlefield realities in South Vietnam" were unfavorable and in part because Johnson did not think that "the American public has fully understood the reason for withdrawing any advisers" (124).

A major achievement of Marc Selverstone's *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam* lies in its use of this overlooked episode to shed light, and, one might argue, take sides, on the debate between those who believe that Kennedy would not have gotten the US into the Vietnam War—the Camelot, or, in Selverstone's words, the "exceptionalist" camp—and the "Cold Warriors" who argue that Kennedy would have done what Johnson did (2-3).¹ The Cold Warriors emphasize continuity (between Johnson and Kennedy), whereas Camelot focuses on discontinuity. Using the troop withdrawal debate to adjudicate between these two positions, Selverstone arrives at the following conclusion:

While Kennedy inspired the policy to reduce America's profile in Vietnam, its announcement in October 1963 served to sustain that presence into the foreseeable future...as much as it signaled an eagerness to wind down the US assistance effort, the policy of withdrawal...allowed JFK to preserve the American commitment to Vietnam (246).

Selverstone, in other words, weighs in on the side of the continuity, rather than the discontinuity, thesis. A careful historian, Selverstone implies but stops short of explicitly claiming that Kennedy would have done what Johnson did: send hundreds of thousands of troops to war in Vietnam in the name of preserving America's commitment. For Selverstone, what Kennedy might have done to preserve that commitment, is "ultimately unknowable" (18). Citing Kennedy aide Michael Forrestal, Selverstone suggests that in late 1963, Kennedy himself "probably did not know what he would do if faced with Saigon's ultimate collapse" (18). In a similar vein, in 1964, Robert Kennedy took the view that "We'd face that when we came to it" (18).

Selverstone's thesis that Kennedy's troop withdrawal plan was not a prelude to military disengagement from Vietnam, but was instead a temporary fix that allowed Kennedy to maintain America's commitment, is convincing. By focusing his analysis on the withdrawal plan, Selverstone chooses what political scientists call a "hard case"²—a case that favors the rival interpretation (to Selverstone's) of what Kennedy would have done—for it would have been easy to argue that the withdrawal plan provided prima facie evidence that Kennedy was keen to get out of Vietnam. Interpreters from the Camelot camp have done precisely that. Yet

¹ An example of the Camelot camp is Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003). An example of the Cold Warrior camp is John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

² Harry Eckstein, "Case Studies and Theory in Political Science," in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 7 (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 79–138.

Silverstone's careful parsing of the debate and motivations behind the withdrawal plan, supported by new archival sources, comes to a different conclusion.

Especially revealing is Silverstone's analysis of what the withdrawal meant for the principals. For Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara—the main proponent of the withdrawal option—it was about fiscal prudence as well as the need to “accommodate” South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was concerned about the growing US military footprint in his country and how that diminished his nationalist credentials (116, 122, 160). For National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor (and to some extent McNamara too), it was a way to pressure Diem's government to buck up and improve its battlefield performance (160). Kennedy's position on the withdrawal was more complex:

Indeed, while Kennedy had become increasingly uncomfortable with the depth and implications of the US commitment, his fealty to *the broader dynamics* that expanded it, including the many dimensions of *the credibility imperative*, would likely have created *cognitive dissonance* were he to abandon it (245, italics mine).

This essay elaborates on the three italicized claims contained in the above paragraph, namely the broader dynamics, the credibility imperative, and Kennedy's cognitive dissonance. These themes are all touched on, but not systematically explored, in Silverstone's account. The elaboration of these points brings the insights of political science to bear on the issue: they corroborate and reinforce Silverstone's analysis. Indeed, while how Kennedy might have responded to a collapsing South Vietnam is “ultimately unknowable,” it can be argued that insofar as one can show the salience of these three considerations to Kennedy, the burden of proof is on those who argue that Kennedy would *not* have ordered a ground war in Vietnam if Saigon was at risk of falling.

As the broader international dynamics are well-known to historians and political scientists, Silverstone does not dwell on them. Still, it is useful to be explicit about how those dynamics impacted the US and Kennedy. The conventional understanding (among political scientists at least) is that the Cold War world was bipolar, with the US and the Soviet Union as the two superpowers whose aggregate power towered above all others. Given this structural reality or condition, geopolitical rivalry between the two top powers was to be expected: any strategic gains by one will be perceived as a loss for the other. The domestic political expression of this is the “Cold War consensus” which predisposed US policymakers to counter perceived strategic threats from the Communist world (Soviet Union and China) actively.³ Historians focus on the policy manifestation of this bipolarity without necessarily privileging it (bipolar structure) as a causal factor. Hence in his conclusion on why the US fought in Vietnam, historian George Herring focused on the containment policy of the US, which called for preventing the expansion of Communist influence/power, while historian John Lewis Gaddis refined the containment thesis by portraying the US war in Vietnam as an instance of what he calls “symmetrical containment.”⁴

³ Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 1979). For a contrasting view on the salience of the Cold War consensus, see Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴ George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), x. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), Chapter 8.

Bipolarity and its policy manifestation as containment can thus explain why the US was strongly predisposed to fight in Vietnam. Political scientist Kenneth Waltz's exposition of why the US intervened militarily in Korea in 1950 (and by implication Vietnam in 1965) puts great causal weight on structure:

In the great-power politics of bipolar worlds, who is a danger to whom is never in doubt.... Any event in the world that involves the fortunes of either automatically elicits the interest of the other. President [Harry] Truman, at the time of the Korean invasion could not very well echo [British Prime Minister] Neville Chamberlain's words in the Czechoslovakian crisis by claiming that the Koreans were a people far away in the East of Asia of whom Americans knew nothing. We had to know about them or quickly find out.⁵

This specification of the “broader dynamics” is reminiscent of the view that history is made by “great forces” (bipolarity) rather than “great or fallible human beings” (Kennedy or Johnson). Selverstone's analysis confirms the arguments of those who argue that bipolarity induced the two superpowers to act in certain ways.⁶ Based on their assumption of how structure proposes and the decision-maker disposes, they bypass digging into the archives or consulting newly declassified phone calls to suggest that confronted with a South Vietnam in peril, Kennedy would have done what Johnson did.

This privileging of structure over individuals sounds parsimonious and persuasive until we consider President Dwight Eisenhower's Vietnam decision-making in 1954. Eisenhower was confronted with an analogous dilemma to Johnson's in 1965: intervene or lose valuable ground to the Communists. In Eisenhower's case, the real estate was North Vietnam; in Johnson's case, it was South Vietnam. Despite strong pressures from France and his advisers to use US air power to relieve the Vietminh's siege of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower decided against military intervention.⁷ Eisenhower's decision sealed the fate of the French garrison; it also meant the “loss” of North Vietnam to the Vietminh. This case involves the same Cold War bipolar structure, but a very different decision. Individuals do matter.

Eisenhower was able to get away with letting North Vietnam “fall” to Communism in 1954 for two reasons. First, having intervened in Korea to “save” South Korea in 1950, fighting the Chinese to a standstill, and signed the armistice in 1953, the US was leery of the prospect of getting involved in another land war in Asia. The containment imperative notwithstanding, war exhaustion and dissatisfaction with the outcome of the Korean War (i.e., the failure to “liberate” North Korea) acted as strong deterrents against using US military power to reverse the siege at Dien Bien Phu. Second, the intervention in Korea had demonstrated the credibility of US power—that the US was willing to commit its power to defending a piece of real estate it considered (albeit belatedly) vital. Despite failing to “liberate” North Korea, the US and its United Nations allies managed to restore the status quo ante in South Korea. The resolve of US leaders in 1950–1953 reassured the US itself and its allies about the credibility of US power.⁸ Put another way, it bought time for the US until the next big test: South Vietnam in 1965.

Selverstone discusses the importance of credibility and resolve to Kennedy throughout the book. The credibility question can also be posed comparatively: would Kennedy have placed the same premium as

⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 170.

⁶ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 8, 161-193. Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, 24-25.

⁷ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 74-78.

⁸ Khong, “The United States and East Asia: Challenges to the Balance of Power,” in Ngaire Woods, ed., *Explaining International Relations since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 8.

Johnson did on US prestige and credibility? That concerns about US prestige and credibility were key to Johnson's decision to intervene in Vietnam is widely accepted by historians and political scientists.⁹ Did Kennedy give the same weight to such credibility concerns? There can of course be no definitive answer to such a counterfactual question. But the analyst can make an educated guess. First, Kennedy and Johnson's senior national security advisers were almost identical—Johnson inherited the Kennedy team, with Bundy, McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk as the key players. Faced with the same situation in the mid-1960s—the risk of South Vietnam being lost to the National Liberation Front—it stands to reason that these individuals would have proffered the same advice to Kennedy as they did Johnson.¹⁰ That advice would have consisted in the strategic necessity, based on prestige and credibility concerns, of preventing South Vietnam from falling to the Communist side. “Not to be a Paper Tiger” was the metaphor that McGeorge Bundy used to encapsulate these concerns.¹¹ The counterpoint to this insight is that Kennedy, unlike Johnson, would have been better placed to ward off the pro-intervention push of his advisers. Kennedy was more confident about his foreign policy expertise, and perhaps his Attorney-General brother, Robert Kennedy, would have played a moderating role in questioning the more hawkish options as he did during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Yet everything we know about Kennedy and his convictions about America's role in the world, based on his senior thesis *Why England Slept*, which analyzed democracy's vulnerabilities when faced with dictatorships, to his assertions of his belief in the domino theory, suggests that he came from the same strategic mold as his advisers.¹² He shared their convictions about how crucial maintaining US prestige and credibility was in protecting the national interests of the US (or securing world peace).

The role of former President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1960s is also relevant here. As mentioned, Eisenhower had demurred from intervening in Vietnam in 1954; his decision resulted in the ejection of the French from Vietnam and North Vietnam's coming under Communist rule. Almost as if he were suffering from buyer's remorse, Eisenhower's advice to his successors—Kennedy and Johnson—was decidedly hawkish, centering on the importance of preventing further losses in Indochina. In Eisenhower's handover briefing to Kennedy, he placed Laos at the top of the foreign policy agenda, telling Kennedy with “considerable emotion” that the US could not permit a Communist victory in Laos. Laos was “key to the whole area”: if it went Communist, “it would be just a matter of time until South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma would collapse.”¹³

This was of course the domino theory which was made famous by Eisenhower in the 1950s. In 1961, in order to prevent Laos from going Communist, Eisenhower believed that the US “must intervene in concert with

⁹ Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945–1968* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2011).

¹⁰ The possibility that Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk might tailor their advice to align with the wishes of a President who may have signaled his intention to withdraw from Vietnam cannot be dismissed. However, given what we know about their respective world views, their preferred historical analogies, and their convictions about the importance of maintaining US prestige and credibility, it is safer to assume that they would have proffered the same advice to both Kennedy and Johnson.

¹¹ See “Notes of Meeting,” 21 July 1965, Document 71, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume III, Vietnam, June–December 1965*, David C. Humphrey, Edward C. Keefer, and Louis J. Smith, eds., (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), available online at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d71>; and Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Holt, 2008), 167.

¹² The thesis was published in book form in 1940. John F Kennedy, *Why England Slept* (New York: Funk, 1940).

¹³ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam, Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Vol. 2, 636-637.

our allies.” Crucially, if “we were unable to persuade our allies, then we must go it alone.”¹⁴ Going it alone was precisely what Eisenhower refused to do at Dien Bien Phu. His about-face on this issue in 1961 can only be explained by his perception of the huge stakes involved in Laos. In the event, Kennedy chose a negotiated settlement, resulting in the neutralization of Laos in 1961, a decision of which Eisenhower was privately critical.

But the Kennedy administration never seriously considered the Laos model—negotiations leading to neutralization—for South Vietnam for at least four reasons. First, the neutralization of Laos led to a coalition government, with a sizable role for the Communist Pathet Lao. As Selverstone writes, “Neutralization not only failed to stabilize Laos, but it facilitated North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam (17). Second, Ngo Dinh Diem was extremely averse to neutralization and made it known to the administration (78). Third, the stakes in South Vietnam were higher: North Vietnam had gone over to the other side. The domestic political and international prestige costs of a South Vietnam with a coalition government that included the Communists, would have been very high. Fourth, Kennedy believed he had a way of countering the Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam that stopped short of conventional warfare akin to the Korean War, namely, adopting a counterinsurgency strategy like the British did in Malaya. The latter involved isolating the population away from the supporters of the Communist insurgents in “New Villages” (Malaya) or “Strategic Hamlets” (South Vietnam). Robert G. K. Thompson, the British general behind the “New Villages” concept in Malaya, was brought in as an adviser to the US military. Selverstone notes that Thompson was concerned about the “number of [US] servicemen streaming into Vietnam” for fear that the “VC [Viet Cong] can develop a case that the US is running the show and have in fact replaced the French with all its implications” (67).

Thompson’s concerns notwithstanding, his counter-insurgency model found adherents within the administration. State Department official Roger Hilsman, Kennedy’s self-styled counterinsurgency expert, believed, alongside Thompson, that the best way “to pull the teeth of the Viet Cong terrorist campaign” was not by killing Communists but by protecting the peasants in these hamlets. For Hilsman, “[t]his technique was used successfully in Malaya against the Communist movement there.”¹⁵ This counter-insurgency strategy is example par excellence of the Kennedy administration’s emphasis on “flexible response”—the utilization of a range of calibrated military and economic tools to defeat the adversary—in lieu of the Eisenhower policy of either doing all (massive retaliation) or nothing when confronted with Communist provocation..

Selverstone’s observations on the tension between Kennedy’s growing discomfort with the “depth and implications of the US commitment,” and his belief in “the precepts of domino thinking, the salience of cascade dynamics, the importance of symbols, and the demonstration of resolve” (245) are insightful. He suggests that Kennedy would have experienced serious cognitive dissonance were he to have acted to resolve the tension by walking away from South Vietnam. Here, we may point to two other considerations that would have aggravated Kennedy’s cognitive dissonance even more had he chosen to disengage from South Vietnam.

First, his was an administration that had vowed to “pay any price, bear any burden” in the pursuit of preserving the Cold War peace and stability. The withdrawal option would have made that vow ring hollow. Second, the political-diplomatic context of the early 1960s—from the Vienna summit to crises in Berlin, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Laos, and of course the Cuban Missile Crisis—reinforces Selverstone’s point about the salience, to Kennedy and his advisers, of cascade dynamics, symbols, and demonstrating resolve. Gordon Goldstein’s study of McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s national security adviser, emphasizes the premium that Bundy placed on resolve and credibility. In fact, for Bundy, “[e]ven a failed intervention in Vietnam... would

¹⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, 2: 636-637.

¹⁵ *US Department of State Bulletin*, 8 July 1963 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1963), 44.

be better than no intervention at all...to 'lose' now or to 'lose' later after committing 100,000 men? Tentative answer: the latter."¹⁶ Bundy's answer was a response to the Vietnam crisis in 1965, but it would stand to reason that his belief in the imperative of protecting "American credibility" would be just as relevant in 1963. McNamara and Rusk may not have agreed with Bundy on whether it would still be worth it if one knew beforehand that the US could not win, but they were very much with him on the centrality of maintaining US credibility. Pitted against this strategic mindset of his advisers, any ideas that Kennedy may have harbored about a face-saving withdrawal would have been psychologically disagreeable. The path of least cognitive dissonance for Kennedy would have been to opt to preserve the American commitment to south Vietnam.

Silverstone's analysis of the Kennedy's withdrawal may be seen as a microcosm of America's Vietnam decision-making in the 1960s; all the conflicting imperatives that would surface in 1965 were also evident from 1961-1963. For reasons articulated and documented in the book and elaborated in this review, I believe Silverstone's work does more than "straddle" the Cold War and exceptionalist camps" as he claims (3). My reading of *The Kennedy Withdrawal* suggests that Silverstone's bottom line hews closer to the former than the latter, for as he writes, although "Kennedy... had grown deeply uncomfortable with the US assistance program, [he] was nevertheless looking to sustain it at the time he went to Dallas" (3).

¹⁶ Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 167.

 Review by Sean J. McLaughlin, Murray State University

A US Army division's worth of historians has spent the last 60 years obsessing over the unanswerable question of what President John F. Kennedy would have done in Vietnam if Lee Harvey Oswald had not robbed him of the opportunity. According to the most popular version of the story, it all went irreparably wrong immediately after his assassination, which saw a cool-headed problem solver replaced as president by an ogre-ish cowboy with a shoot-first inclination.¹ The notion that Kennedy would have made smarter decisions, and that ultimate responsibility for a humiliating military defeat and the deaths of over 58,000 American service personnel, should be dumped onto his successor, President Lyndon Johnson, has been so tempting to so many because it provides a simple answer to an incredibly complex question. This view also offers a convenient scapegoat for the lies revealed in *The Pentagon Papers*² that permanently broke the American public's trust in government, making it incredibly difficult for subsequent Democratic presidents to implement their progressive visions for the nation over resistance from Congressional obstructionists who were elected by a highly skeptical public.

I was invited to join this roundtable panel as the author of a 2019 book on France's failed attempt to convince Kennedy to choose diplomacy over military escalation in Vietnam. The idea for *JFK and de Gaulle*³ came to me 20 years ago, while I was living in a shoebox apartment in a Communist-era high rise in Southern Poland with just one basic cable English language TV channel, BBC World. One of the more memorable diplomatic moments of its wall-to-wall coverage of the slow-motion march to war in Iraq came when French President Jacques Chirac clumsily told new NATO members from Central Europe that supported the Bush administration's hawkish Iraq policy that they "had missed an opportunity to shut up."⁴ This was around the time that I started seeing the parallels between American actions in Iraq in 2003 and Vietnam 40 years earlier much more clearly. What interested me most was the cultural dynamic that led American decisionmakers to consistently tune out very salient arguments about the cost of wars of choice from their closest allies in Europe. In 2003, Chirac was poorly expressing the frustrations of a poor man's Charles de Gaulle, realizing that he too was failing to convince his American counterpart to step back from a destructive folly for both America and a beleaguered Third World people. There was a seed here that brought me back to grad school to begin work on a doctoral thesis that evolved into *JFK and de Gaulle*.

One of the Rumsfeldian "known-knowns"⁵ for those of us working in the field was that we desperately needed someone to write an airtight monograph like the one Marc Selverstone has just delivered in *The*

¹ Oliver Stone, dir., *JFK* (Burbank, CA: Warner, 1992); John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992); Fletcher Prouty, *JFK: The CIA, Vietnam, and the Plot to Assassinate John F. Kennedy* (New York: Carol, 1992).

² Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy, Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017). See also David Rudenstine, *The Day the Presses Stopped: A History of the Pentagon Papers Case* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002); John Prados and Margaret Pratt Porter, eds., *Inside the Pentagon Papers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); and Tom Wells, *Wild Man: The Life and Times of Daniel Ellsberg* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001).

³ Sean J. McLaughlin, *JFK and de Gaulle: How America and France Failed in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019).

⁴ Craig S. Smith, "Chirac Upsets East Europe by Telling it to 'Shut Up' on Iraq," *New York Times*, 18 February 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/18/international/europe/chirac-upsets-east-europe-by-telling-it-to-shut-up-on.html>.

⁵ Department of Defense News Briefing, Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers, 12 February 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160406235718/http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>.

Kennedy Withdrawal. I found in this truly excellent piece of scholarship many similarities between Kennedy's tepid engagement with the withdrawal planners on the military side who Selverstone highlights and the diplomats I studied who desperately wanted him to pursue political alternatives to war. Both groups presented ideas that would have served American interests much better in hindsight, but neither ever captured his full attention or found the right arguments to shake him out of an increasingly dangerous policy drift. Kennedy's defenders reflexively cite a planned 1,000-troop drawdown in late 1963 that they believe foreshadowed a much wider disengagement from South Vietnam before it turned into a quagmire for the United States.⁶ His assassination disrupted these plans, the thinking goes, and put the country on an unalterably hawkish path under Johnson. Selverstone's laser-like focus on the actual machinations of the Kennedy administration's withdrawal planning leaves us considerably better-positioned to properly understand what the president's intentions were and their broader implications around the time of his death in November 1963. Definitive backing evidence for the Kennedy withdrawal-theory is not found in what should now be considered the definitive account on the topic. Selverstone "finds that Kennedy, who had grown deeply uncomfortable with the U.S. assistance program, was nevertheless looking to sustain it at the time he went to Dallas" (3). Most importantly, his work does not support the position of "exceptionalist" scholars who argue that in a second term Kennedy would have taken the United States in a very different direction in Vietnam.⁷

The picture that emerges here is that serious withdrawal planning was indeed real, but that it was initiated in 1962 and managed by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who had been one of the administration's more hawkish advocates of escalation in Vietnam in 1961.⁸ His efforts began during a period of relative calm in South Vietnam that allowed for optimistic thinking about the possible near-term end of the sprawling American training mission. The South Vietnamese had just rolled out new strategies that even highly respected third-party counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson, who was fresh off a victory for Britain in Malaya, believed would win the war for Saigon.⁹ Kennedy was not, however, directly involved in withdrawal planning, as evidenced by the lack of documentary records or Oval Office tape recordings through which Selverstone has meticulously combed. *The Pentagon Papers* created the false impression that Kennedy was central to the launch of withdrawal planning, but Selverstone identifies it instead as the byproduct of McNamara's 1962 tour of South Vietnam and favorable assessments about the prospects for Project Beef-Up (72), which had more than doubled the number of American military advisors, widened the scope of their activities, and dramatically opened the aid spigot for the Saigon government.¹⁰ Rather, McNamara prepared his case for an eventual near-complete exit and tried to make it saleable to Kennedy by tying it to a detailed timeline on deliverables. Kennedy would typically acquiesce only so far as McNamara's proposals left enough flexibility for alterations on the fly. Getting out was not Kennedy's priority; his primary goal was keeping all of his options open for as long as possible. So central was the defense secretary to this

⁶ James Galbraith, "Exit Strategy," *Boston Review* (October/November, 2003).

⁷ Selverstone's list includes William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York: Scribner, 1985); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance For Peace and the Escalation of War In Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged The Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and, Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁸ "1961 Rusk-McNamara Report to Kennedy on South Vietnam," *New York Times*, 1 July 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/01/archives/1961-ruskmcnamara-report-to-kennedy-on-south-vietnam.html>.

⁹ Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 129.

¹⁰ William Prochnau, one of the early JFK era arrivals in Vietnam from the American press corps, argues in *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett—Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles* (New York: Times Books, 1995) that the launch of Project Beef-Up in the fall of 1961 should be viewed as the start of the American War (232).

process that Harvard University Press could have gone with a clunky, sales-depressing title like *The McNamara-Kennedy Withdrawal*.

Selverstone clearly demonstrates that withdrawal planning was sustained and provable over the last 18 months of the Kennedy presidency. The single most important question he asks about this planning is whether it was contingent on the course of the war (2). The answer is an unequivocal yes. By late 1962, American military planners settled on a loose three-year timeline to bring nearly all of their personnel home after what they assumed would be a successful mission to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to prosecute the war on its own. They did not expect that the Communist-led insurgency would magically disappear by the end of 1965, but rather that it would peter out to manageable levels towards the end of the decade. Just how realistic was this, though? Selverstone writes, “no official—military or civilian—offered any compelling justification for how or why those developments would come to pass. They simply presumed that [President Ngo Dinh] Diem and his armed forces would degrade the [People’s Liberation Armed Forces] and [National Liberation Front] to allow for Saigon to control the country thereafter. It was a crucial assumption behind withdrawal planning – untested and, in time, grounded in the remarkable premise that the enemy would remain a static force” (93). We all know how the story ends (and just saw a sadly familiar conclusion to the American project in Afghanistan), which leads to the question of whether these withdrawal plans had any real meaning if they could not be executed until after there was an implausible turn of events on the battlefield.

The biggest obstacle to actually planning and implementing a withdrawal from Vietnam was Kennedy’s inclination to hedge down to the last second before fully committing to a decision. This was a byproduct of the president’s attempt to simultaneously act according to two contradictory thoughts: first, that South Vietnam must not be allowed to fall to the Communists because of the damage this would cause to American prestige and because of spillover effects in Southeast Asia; and, second, that American combat troops must never be deployed in a bloody fight there because his domestic audience was unwilling support this sacrifice. While a skeptical Johnson did implement Kennedy’s pledge of 31 October to withdraw 1,000 troops by the end of 1963, this “was little more than a symbolic act, as all involved recognized it would be” (210). The White House envisioned this move as a means of projecting confidence in the American training program and progress in ARVN’s counterinsurgency campaign. The reality was that with additional troop deployments in the fall, there was no reduction in the absolute number of American troops in Vietnam even with this withdrawal, which was “an accounting exercise” for the purposes of public-relations as McNamara and Kennedy envisioned (210). Selverstone makes clear that this one act that so much of the Kennedy withdrawal theory argument rests on was completely inconsequential. On the day of his assassination, Kennedy had planned to speak to a luncheon audience at the Dallas Trade Mart about Vietnam, which he was going to frame as a Cold War responsibility from which the United States could not shirk (203). These were not the words of a leader on the cusp of walking away from a 10-year commitment to a non-Communist outcome in South Vietnam.

None of America’s primary allies wanted Kennedy to escalate the American military role in Vietnam, but nearly all of them chose to self-censor their reservations about his policy there out of fear of causing offense to the White House.¹¹ France alone invested considerable effort over the duration of the Kennedy administration trying to persuade it of the merits of a diplomatic off-ramp, one that it would help facilitate to

¹¹ For contemporary British, Canadian, French and German takes on Kennedy’s policy in Vietnam, see: Eugenie Blang, *Allies at Odds: America, Europe, and Vietnam, 1961–1968* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011); Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?: Britain, the US and the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Andrew Preston, “Balancing War and Peace: Canadian Foreign Policy and the Vietnam War, 1961–1965,” *Diplomatic History* 27:1 (2003): 73-111.

give its American allies as graceful an exit as possible. This campaign was to no avail, because Kennedy mistakenly assumed that if he continued to wait, he might be able to secure a better outcome than a draw without sharing any credit for it with what his advisors saw as vultures in the French diplomatic corps. For their part, French officials acknowledged that “while Kennedy was able to maintain his calm, self-confidence, and problem-solving abilities through adversity, he did display some alarming character traits in crisis situations, most notably impulsiveness, indecisiveness, and a general lack of reflection on the potential consequences of his actions.”¹² This view was shared at the time by the dean of American cold warriors, former secretary of state Dean Acheson,¹³ who told a mass audience of State Department employees in the summer of 1961 that Europeans likened Kennedy to “a gifted amateur practicing with a boomerang and suddenly knocking himself cold. They were amazed that so inexperienced a person should play with so lethal a weapon.”¹⁴

As a young Congressman, Kennedy spent five weeks in Europe over the winter of 1950–1951 personally surveying what he described as the “will to resist” of America’s allies that were facing serious internal and external Communist pressure.¹⁵ As president a decade later, he seemed incapable of subjecting South Vietnam to a similarly frank assessment and capitulated to a false hope that the corrupt, unpopular government of President Ngo Dinh Diem would somehow rally and win despite all evidence to the contrary. There were many persuasive reasons to fully embrace twin-track military withdrawal and diplomacy in 1963, yet still Kennedy resisted any dramatic change in course. The Battle of Ap Bac in January, in which American-trained and equipped ARVN units took on the insurgents in large formations for the first time, was an unmitigated disaster. Even with massive superiority and numbers and equipment, its members fought with a timidity that belied any notion that heavy American investment was enough to prepare the ARVN for the heavy sacrifices that lay ahead. In the spring, the Saigon government carelessly provoked widespread civil disobedience and earned international condemnation with its ham-fisted sectarian repression of the country’s Buddhist majority, severely undermining its counterinsurgency campaign by creating a second internal enemy. The status quo was the worst possible course of action in 1963, but Kennedy found it too difficult to quit Diem, then finally took only a *laissez-faire* position towards the coup plotting that led to Diem’s murder. The result was a total catastrophe that was passed on to incoming President Johnson. Despite this, the faith-based withdrawal theory holds that Kennedy was somehow going to fix it all in the end.

There are two related sections late in *The Kennedy Withdrawal* where I wanted a little more from Selverstone’s narrative. In his concluding chapter on the cancellation of withdrawal planning under Johnson, he briefly summarizes McNamara’s evolution from hawk to driver of the withdrawal process under Kennedy to a hawk once again for Johnson all in the span of two years. He writes,

McNamara had sensed the general direction in which the president he served had wanted to move. For Kennedy, it was to prepare for the moment when the United States could reduce its involvement; hence, the pursuit of a framework to implement JFK’s preferred course. For Johnson, it assumed a more energetic and expansive posture to avoid the loss of Vietnam; thus, the more heated rhetoric and planning to intensify the war. McNamara’s conception of

¹² McLaughlin, *JFK and de Gaulle: How America and France Failed in Vietnam, 1961–1963* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 89-90.

¹³ Douglas Brinkley, *Dean Acheson: The Cold War Years, 1953–1971* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 196.

¹⁴ McLaughlin, *JFK and de Gaulle*, 138.

¹⁵ McLaughlin, *JFK and de Gaulle*, 37.

loyalty explains, in part, his policy positions: it was fealty he owed the president, not the nation (215).

There is more discussion of McNamara's fascinating pattern of flip-flopping in the work of Aurélie Basha i Novosejt¹⁶ that does not need to be repeated here, even if a little more engagement with it would have been appreciated.

Similarly, there is an informative section from pages 232-236 on how Robert Kennedy seeded the Kennedy withdrawal argument on *Face the Nation* in November 1967 and was posthumously joined over the next 30 years by a number of high-ranking members of his brother's foreign policy team, including Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Michael Forrestal, National Security Council aide, then Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor, and finally McNamara himself.¹⁷ It is laudable for powerful men to reflect on their mistakes in the hope of offering lessons that will help their successors avoid the same pitfalls; the documentary *The Fog of War*¹⁸ was riveting on its release a little over eight months into President George W. Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq. Still, I cannot help wondering about the reputation-polishing motivations of former high ranking Kennedy officials in their twilight years. How much responsibility did they actually take for the tragedy America imposed on Vietnam as they all came together around the same time in defense of the man who hired them, shifting blame for decisions they helped make onto a handy fall guy who lacked a defensive mythmaking industry of his own? A little dabbling with this form of speculative psychohistory would have added to the conclusion. Neither of these quibbles detracts from Selverstone's laudable effort. In sum, *The Kennedy Withdrawal* is essential reading for all Vietnam War scholars.

¹⁶ Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, *I Made Mistakes: Robert McNamara's Vietnam War Policy, 1960–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Roger Hilsman, "How Kennedy Viewed the Vietnam Conflict," *New York Times*, 20 January 1992, 18; Arthur Schlesinger, "What Would He Have Done?" *New York Times Book Review*, 29 March 1992, 3, 31.

¹⁸ *The Fog of War*, dir. Errol Morris, (2003: Hollywood, Sony Pictures), film.

Response by Marc J. Selverstone, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia

I would like to thank Dan Hart for commissioning this roundtable, Andrew Preston for introducing it, and David Anderson, Robert Brigham, Sarah-Jane Corke, Yuen Foong Khong, and Sean McLaughlin for enlivening it through their time, energy, and expertise. I am deeply appreciative of their efforts, and am gratified that they find the book so valuable. Given their respective interests and knowledge of the field, it was especially helpful to see them tease out its implications and assess its place in the literature.

While I am flattered that several reviewers frame *The Kennedy Withdrawal* as a definitive or even final word on the subject, I am treating their pronouncements as figurative rather than literal declarations, as there is still much to learn about the planning to remove US troops from Vietnam. In fact, one of my takeaways from the study is a continued ignorance of key episodes, several of which I highlight in this response. But first, I would like to address the questions and concerns the readers raised.

Sean McLaughlin wishes I had given additional thought to the evolution of President John F. Kennedy's senior advisers, particularly Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, whose transformations between hawk and dove seem worthy of further exploration. I share this interest in McNamara's twists and turns, which observers have traced to his understanding of loyalty and deference to authority. At key moments, McNamara tailored his advice to his superiors' biases, no doubt recognizing the power he accrued from aligning with them. His behavior was thus somewhat at odds with the assumptions that reviewer Yuen Foong Khong makes about senior officials proffering similar advice to both Kennedy and Johnson. Although McNamara was hardly a cipher, he tacked toward his presidents' inclinations on broad matters of posture, and several studies highlight the wellsprings and influence of this penchant. While I might have extended this critique, I thought it best to defer to existing works in advance of Philip and William Taubman's forthcoming biography, which should provide much greater insight into McNamara's persona and its impact on policy.¹

McLaughlin also thinks I might have borrowed from psychohistory to probe the musings of senior officials on Kennedy's ultimate intentions. For aides who later supported the idea of an incipient Kennedy withdrawal, McLaughlin sees potentially self-serving motives at work, as these officials shifted blame for their own decisions onto President Lyndon B. Johnson. Indeed, complex motives might well have been operative, as a Kennedy withdrawal might have redeemed not only the country but their own reputations. It's an intriguing proposition, but I'll leave it to more intrepid scholars to wade in these waters.

Sarah-Jane Corke raises altogether different concerns in her review. In seeking to understand the "tension" in my book between "argument and evidence," I fear that it misreads my purpose. My goal was not to speculate on the great what-if—which, on one level, her review acknowledges—but to explore what withdrawal planning meant at the time. The "indisputable proof" I offer pertains only to the voluminous record of that planning—the scheduling of a US troop withdrawal—and not to Kennedy's intention of executing one. The

¹ See Craig McNamara, *Because Our Fathers Lied: A Memoir of Truth and Family from Vietnam to Today* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2022); Aurelie Basha i Novosejt, *"I Made Mistakes": Robert McNamara's Vietnam War Policy, 1960–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Paul Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and Five Lives of a Lost War* (New York: Knopf, 1996); and Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993). For an additional data point, it is worth noting the alleged encounter in September 1963 when McNamara upbraided Col. Edward G. Lansdale for failing to support a notional plan to "get rid" of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. McNamara's sense of obligation—"When [the President] asks you to do something, you don't tell him you won't do it"—is further suggestive of his posture. See Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 364-369.

evidentiary case for that planning really is indisputable, but its meaning is not, and it is the meaning of withdrawal that I sought to probe. At no point do I assert what Kennedy's extended Vietnam War would have looked like or how long it would have lasted, save into 1965, as even his most ardent admirers acknowledge. I therefore remain unclear as to why Corke sees a disparity between "argument and evidence," especially since none of the evidence I marshal reflects an irrevocable decision to disengage in whole or in part.

In addition, Corke's review mischaracterizes my focus by limiting it to "Kennedy's decision-making process around the withdrawal of 1,000 US troops." While the thousand-man reduction is indeed a key facet of the story, it is a subset of the larger effort to withdraw the bulk of US troops. In fact, the thousand-man reduction did not intersect with broader withdrawal planning until roughly nine months after that planning began, and four months after it first appeared in the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam.² Moreover, the thousand-man withdrawal ended several months before the cancellation of the comprehensive withdrawal, which I cover in the book's final chapter. Suffice it to say, the thousand-man withdrawal sheds considerable light on the political dimensions of withdrawal planning, but it is one piece of a much larger puzzle.

As for whether Kennedy would have implemented the thousand-man withdrawal, Corke references my silence on the matter. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that Kennedy would have sanctioned the 1963 reduction had he lived to enact it. He had publicly and repeatedly referenced it in remarks just prior to his death; both he and McNamara had rationalized its implementation regardless of military progress; its political value remained intact; and Johnson, who presided over the thousand-man withdrawal, was far more dubious of it than Kennedy. While guesstimating anything Kennedy might have done after 22 November is inherently speculative, I am more comfortable doing so in this case, as the timelines for the thousand-man withdrawal (mere weeks out) and the comprehensive withdrawal (two years hence) were vastly different.

My own questions about withdrawal planning extend beyond the book, as blank spots in the story remain. One of them involves the origins of withdrawal planning. Published accounts diverge on how, when, and why the administration launched its effort to schedule a US troop withdrawal. The earliest documented explanation came in 1971, via the "Pentagon Papers," which maintains that in July 1962, and "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."³ That is not how McNamara himself describes the matter in his 1995 memoir. Instead, he claims he initiated withdrawal planning based upon an inference he drew from the administration's public statements. "To me," he writes, "that implied we ought to set a time limit on US training support," which he then endeavored to affirm as policy.⁴ Curiously, the passage from the Pentagon Papers rests on no documentation whatsoever. I once raised this matter with former Defense official Leslie H. Gelb, given his role in coordinating the Pentagon Papers project. As he tells it, the certainty expressed in the Pentagon Papers stemmed from conversations its authors had with members of the armed forces, even though the study was supposed to rest solely on the review of documents.⁵

² "Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam," 25 January 1963, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963*, eds. John P. Glennon, David M. Bachler, Charles S. Sampson (Washington, DC: 1990), 3:36–49, doc. 18.

³ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 2:175.

⁴ Robert S. McNamara, with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 48–49.

⁵ Author interview with Leslie H. Gelb, 11 July 2007.

Several events from April 1962 further muddy the waters. Early that month, Kennedy received a memo on Vietnam from US Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith, who called for a political settlement and a halt to further troop deployments. Galbraith's paper led to a flurry of activity in the State Department, the Defense Department, and the White House after Kennedy asked for an evaluation of its merits. McNamara never provided Kennedy with a written review, even though the President asked for one, and Maxwell D. Taylor, Kennedy's military representative, responded in an equally cryptic fashion (65-66). We do know that in discussing the memo with W. Averell Harriman, the State Department's bureau chief for the Far East, Kennedy "observed generally that he wished us to be prepared to seize upon any favorable moment to reduce our involvement [in Vietnam], recognizing that the moment might yet be some time away."⁶ But we know little about McNamara's connection to these developments and what he did with his knowledge of them.

A purported exchange one month later between McNamara and General Paul D. Harkins, head of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, adds to the mystery. After a May 1962 briefing in Saigon, McNamara asked Harkins to start thinking about a drawdown of US troops, a request that Harkins found baffling since the assistance program was just then ramping up. Word of that exchange comes exclusively from intelligence official George Allen. Neither McNamara nor Harkins mention it in their accounts of the period, nor has any further documentation on it come to light.⁷ It is worth noting, though, that when McNamara formally ordered withdrawal planning to commence in mid-July, none of the civilian or military officials then meeting with McNamara, including Harkins, offered any resistance akin to what Harkins expressed in May. It is therefore plausible that McNamara, in the interim, paved the way for his directive, lending further heft to Allen's account. And it is conceivable, perhaps even likely, that McNamara moved in that direction because of the April discussions about the Galbraith memo. But we simply don't know the precise chain of events between those April discussions and McNamara's exchange with Harkins in May, let alone the thinking and conversations preceding McNamara's directive six weeks later.

We also would benefit from a more complete accounting of the seminal events of 2 October 1963. The day began with McNamara and Taylor returning from Vietnam and briefing Kennedy on their trip; it ended with the administration's announcement of the proposed 1963 and 1965 withdrawals. Purportedly, the 1965 withdrawal clause had previously been struck from trip report, but questions about it remain. When did that clause make its way back into the report? How did the conversation about its reinsertion flow between McNamara and Taylor? How did McNamara and Taylor discuss the clause with Kennedy during their private Oval Office meeting that afternoon? What arrangements did they make regarding the public statement on withdrawal? We don't have good answers to these questions since detailed records of the relevant exchanges have yet to surface.⁸

Still more questions remain about the familiarity of withdrawal planning throughout the bureaucracy, including at the White House. There's hardly any evidence, for instance, of National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and National Security Council (NSC) aide Michael Forrestal acknowledging such planning prior to the fall of 1963. The same goes for Secretary of State Dean Rusk, as well as State Department area chiefs Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman. Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting commented on it during the spring and summer of 1963, but his replacement, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., was largely silent on the matter;

⁶ "Memorandum of a Conversation Between the President and the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman)," 6 April 1962, *FRUS*, 2:309-310, doc. 148.

⁷ George Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 2001), 149-150.

⁸ As for the reinsertion of the withdrawal clause in the trip report, my own sense is that it came on the morning of 2 October, as Taylor's calendar indicates that a conversation with McNamara addressed "a change in draft trip report for the President" just prior to their arrival at the White House. Maxwell D. Taylor Papers, Box 21, Diary, 1963, National Defense University.

Kennedy himself failed to mention it when giving Lodge his marching orders in mid-August. Why was this so? We know that the withdrawal plan wasn't "secret," given the number of people working on it at the Pentagon. But the absence of engagement from both the State Department and the White House is striking. Perhaps its particulars were so specific to Defense that there was little for others to contribute. But given the potential impact of withdrawal on Saigon and beyond, the siloing is notable—unless, as real-time evidence suggests, the scheduling of withdrawal was an exercise in contingency planning as much as it constituted a sacred policy framework.⁹

We also lack certainty on where Kennedy himself stood on the prospects for success in Vietnam. He had voiced concerns about Diem in public as well as in private, and he seemed increasingly uncomfortable with the depth of the assistance program. Still, he was dubious of the press and its critical reporting, which he tried to square with a raft of conflicting studies generated by administration and legislative officials. Indeed, it is hard to discern what Kennedy knew about key dimensions of the struggle, let alone what he thought about its merits and future. It is far from clear, for instance, that he knew of Communist Party General Secretary Le Duan, as David Anderson writes, and we have little understanding of how he gauged Hanoi's strategy and tactics, especially in light of a proposed US troop reduction (though Robert Brigham sees Kennedy as fearful of northern escalation).¹⁰ In the end, as I write, Kennedy "had reason to doubt the believers and side with the skeptics, and he likely gravitated toward that more pessimistic perspective." But his "commitment to comprehensive withdrawal—calculated, conditional, and arguably tepid—reflected a more complex reality than whether Washington and Saigon were winning or losing in Vietnam" (195-196).

My own take is that the planning for withdrawal was serious and systematic, but that the execution of withdrawal was always open to modification. I therefore conclude that at the time he went to Dallas, Kennedy was still committed to preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam—a conclusion that, as Khong notes, political science both corroborates and reinforces. In framing this argument within the historiography, I locate it between the "Cold War" and "exceptionalist" schools, as Gary Hess describes them, with the former suggesting continuity between Kennedy and Johnson, and the latter pointing toward discontinuity.¹¹ Khong finds that I lean toward the Cold War camp, though I stop short of claiming that Kennedy would have followed in Johnson's footsteps. Brigham seems to agree, noting that I join "a long list of scholars who argue that what Kennedy did in Vietnam between 1961 and 1963 was far more important than what he did not do or was planning to do." Perhaps my position is that of "soft continuity," a stance that recognizes Kennedy's interest in prosecuting the counterinsurgency but is skeptical of him dispatching half a million troops to Southeast Asia.¹² Indeed, I remain impressed by Kennedy's resistance to deploying

⁹ As Bundy described it for the Overseas Press Writers in February 1964, withdrawal planning targeted "the likely date at which the principal supporting functions, troop-using functions, of our effort there could in fact be devolved to adequately trained, managed, and operated Vietnamese force (*in situ*). It has nothing to do with whether we would continue our basic commitment, or whether we would give up our purpose, or whether we think there is a date at which all of South Vietnam will be cleaned up." "Talk by McGeorge Bundy to Overseas Press Writers at the Sheraton Carlton Hotel, February 26, 1964," National Security Files, Messages to the President, Box 1, McGeorge Bundy, Vol. 2, 3/1-31/64 [1 of 2], Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

¹⁰ Regarding Le Duan, it seems as though Johnson became familiar with him only in January 1966. In a taped phone call with the Secretary of Defense, McNamara spelled Le Duan's name letter by letter and then explained that it was Le Duan and the "hardliners" who were pressuring Ho Chi Minh to continue the war. Conversation WH6601-08-9502-9503, 17 January 1966, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.

¹¹ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 57-64.

¹² My framing of "soft continuance" draws on Andrew Preston's characterization of the "soft hawks" who populated McGeorge Bundy's National Security Council. Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

integrated fighting units to Vietnam. While Kennedy understood that Americans were dying in combat and had tacitly sanctioned their continuous deployment, he appeared loath to Americanize and overly militarize a conflict he regarded as inherently political.

But as much as Kennedy “wanted to reduce US assistance to Saigon,” as Anderson notes, he also sought to sustain “the US commitment to the survival of South Vietnam.” His embrace of counterinsurgency warfare, domino dynamics, covert action, and the credibility imperative all remained operative, and his interest in a conditions-based withdrawal make it difficult to see him reversing course anytime soon, especially given his public remarks about staying the course. While we cannot say that he would have responded as Johnson did to circumstances in 1964—deploying 7,000 additional troops, bombing North Vietnam, and orchestrating the Tonkin Gulf Resolution—Kennedy may well have taken affirmative action to forestall both Saigon’s collapse and the perception of US irresolution, particularly in advance of the November 1964 presidential election.

For those interested in what-if scenarios, another way to frame the Kennedy/Johnson counterfactual is to rewind the clock to 1961 and consider Johnson’s response had circumstances thrust him into the Oval Office two years earlier. Might Johnson have supported Maxwell Taylor’s recommendation that November to deploy 8,000 combat troops instead of mere military advisers? Might Johnson have declared South Vietnam a vital US interest? Might he have committed the United States irrevocably to Saigon’s preservation and decided to intervene militarily, if necessary—all positions Kennedy opposed?

Obviously, there are no answers to these questions. But the value of this scenario is that 1) it underscores Kennedy’s willingness to reject his aides’ hawkish advice well before he had proven his mettle in foreign affairs (as he had done earlier with respect to Cuba, Laos, and Berlin); and 2) it forces us to consider Johnson’s posture at a time when we know Kennedy’s own stance. True, Johnson later rejected some of his advisers’ recommendations on Vietnam—there was no reserve call up in July 1965, no declaration of national emergency, no prime-time, full-dress speech explaining the necessity of the massive troop deployment, no searching debate in Congress. But these measures speak to the atmospherics rather than the substance of the commitment, a commitment that seemed more inviolable for Johnson than for Kennedy. Indeed, Johnson rejected his advisers’ counsel so that he might more easily go to war. Kennedy did so to stay out of one.¹³

Nevertheless, at the time he went to Dallas, Kennedy was still committed to the fight. His willingness to support the planning for withdrawal reflected strategic, tactical, and political considerations which morphed over the course of that effort. While Kennedy continued to frame the struggle as “their war,” he remained dedicated, through administrative, economic, and military means, to assisting Saigon in its hour of need. By the fall of 1963, those means also included the announcement of a proposed troop withdrawal, which sought to mollify critics of American aid. Withdrawal thus allowed Kennedy to limit US assistance while still preserving it. The irony of withdrawal, then, is that it enabled Kennedy to sustain the American commitment to Vietnam, even as it imagined a far different outcome.

¹³ As I note in the book, Johnson’s tone on Vietnam was “more insistent” than Kennedy’s, and while Kennedy and Johnson were equally interested in a successful outcome, Johnson’s rhetoric “signaled a pronounced desire to prosecute the war more vigorously” (205-206).