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Source: *Diplomatic History*, Summer 1993, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 447-469

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24912245>

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HISTORIOGRAPHY

John F. Kennedy as World Leader: A Perspective on the Literature

BURTON I. KAUFMAN

In evaluating contemporary presidents, historians have often differed sharply from the American public. The gap over the last forty years between public perceptions and historical judgments of the Harry S. Truman presidency is a case in point, as is, to a lesser extent, the differences between public and historical assessments of the Dwight D. Eisenhower presidency. But there is probably no presidency on which public perceptions and historical evaluations have remained more at odds than that of John F. Kennedy.

Most Americans think of President Kennedy as the young, handsome, athletic, vibrant chief executive who was just coming into his own when he was cut down by an assassin's bullet in Dallas on 22 November 1963. Most historians, however, have painted quite another portrait of the nation's thirty-fifth president.¹ Those writing in the 1970s were particularly harsh in their criticism, characterizing Kennedy as a person of style rather than substance, of profile rather than courage, driven by ambition rather than commitment, physically handsome but intellectually and morally unattractive. With regard to foreign policy, they accused him of being a conventional Cold Warrior who brought the world to the brink of nuclear disaster during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Such views are still much in evidence. Indeed, the latest Kennedy biography, by Thomas Reeves, is among the most damning, and is made all the more so by the fact that Reeves is a well-respected historian and biographer who grew up sharing the popular view of Kennedy. In his

¹For a general discussion of Kennedy historiography and myth making see Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (Bloomington, 1988). See also Walter LaFeber, "Kennedy, Johnson and the Revisionists," *Foreign Service Journal* 50 (May 1973): 31-33, 39; Kent M. Beck, "The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (Autumn 1974): 45-55; and William E. Leuchtenburg, "John F. Kennedy: Twenty Years Later," *American Heritage* 35 (December 1983): 51-59. For a bibliography of works on Kennedy, now somewhat dated, see also Joan I. Newcomb, *John F. Kennedy: An Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ, 1977).

biography, Reeves notes, "the more I read, the more I became fascinated by what appeared to be a gap between JFK's image and the historical reality." As he studied Kennedy's life, he found that "many of [his] youthful observations from the 1950s and 1960s had to be revised."²

More recently, however, scholars have started to look at the Kennedy administration's foreign policy with more detachment and a better sense of balance. For the most part, they are still highly critical of the president. But they have moved away from simple Camelot bashing and have begun to stress the complexity of the foreign policy crises that the president faced and to challenge simplistic characterizations of Kennedy as a world leader.

The first important assessments of the Kennedy administration were written by administration officials like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who was special assistant to the president and served as unofficial White House chronicler; Theodore Sorensen, who was the president's special counsel and, along with Bobby Kennedy, one of his two closest advisers; and Roger Hilsman, who was director of intelligence and research at the State Department and a self-confessed member of Kennedy's inner circle. These men were lavish in their praise of the martyred president and did much to shape his popular image. They depicted Kennedy as a leader of almost heroic dimensions: a consummate pragmatist with an ironic sense of detachment, more concerned with protecting and promoting the national interest than with questions of ideology; yet an agent of worldwide social reform who became, in effect, his own secretary of state because of the ineffectiveness of the Department of State under Dean Rusk; a chief executive who early in his administration made mistakes, most notably the failed attempt in April 1961 to overthrow the Cuban government of Fidel Castro by landing a group of Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, but a person who learned from his mistakes and then successfully met Soviet challenges over Western access rights to Berlin and over Soviet missiles in Cuba.³ While acknowledging with considerable regret the expanded American military commitment in Vietnam during his administration, they argued that he had been boxed in by a policy he had

²Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1991), xi.

³Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., declared that Dean Rusk's "mind, for all its strength and clarity, was irrevocably conventional." *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 312. John Kenneth Galbraith, whom Kennedy appointed ambassador to India, remarked that he once got a sharp letter from McGeorge Bundy saying that Rusk "had come to suspect" that Galbraith did not hold him in high regard. Galbraith responded that this did "credit to [his] perception." Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal: A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years* (Boston, 1969), 156. Rusk believed it was his job as secretary of state to support the president in his policies, not to be a public advocate for any particular position. His reticence and self-effacement annoyed Kennedy. The president is reported to have complained to one political journalist that Rusk "never gives me anything to chew on, never puts it on the line. You never know what he is thinking." See Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York, 1991), 17. According to Theodore C. Sorensen, "too often, Kennedy felt, neither the President nor the [State] Department knew the Secretary's views." Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965), 270. On Rusk see also Warren I. Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (New York, 1980); and Thomas J. Schoenbaum, *Waging Peace and War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (New York, 1988). Cohen and Schoenbaum are more sympathetic to Rusk than most authors, although both criticize him severely for his unswerving support of the Vietnam War. "In the end," writes Schoenbaum, "he was trapped by his adherence to his own deeply held principles; he was unable to judge their limitations." Schoenbaum, *Waging Peace and War*, 432.

inherited from the previous administration and claimed that had he lived, he might have extricated the United States from Vietnam before it became a quagmire.

These accounts of Kennedy's presidency also promoted the idea that Kennedy's greatness as a world leader extended beyond his skill as a crisis manager. They asserted that his capacity to combine restraint of manner with toughness of purpose was surpassed only by his ability to energize diplomacy: to mobilize the spirit and will of peoples throughout the world; to understand and identify the United States with the forces of Third World nationalism; to fashion people-to-people programs like Food for Peace and the Peace Corps; and, near the end of his administration, to lessen the chances of nuclear proliferation by signing a limited nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviet Union. "He had accomplished so much," Schlesinger concluded. He had brought about "the new hope for peace on earth, the elimination of nuclear testing in the atmosphere and the abolition of nuclear diplomacy, the new policies toward Latin America, the reordering of American defense."⁴ To Hilsman, Kennedy was "a leader [and a] hero as well."⁵ To Sorensen he was a person of great wit and style, but one whom, Sorensen was confident, history would judge, not by his style, but by "what mattered most to him, [his] substance—the strength of his ideas and ideals, his courage and judgment."⁶

By portraying Kennedy in such hagiographic terms, his defenders probably did his subsequent reputation more harm than good. It would have been nearly impossible for any leader under careful scrutiny to live up to such an image. Opposition to a war for which Kennedy had to bear at least some responsibility and more general disapproval of a foreign policy that a whole school of historians considered imperialist in fact, if not in intent, also contributed to growing criticism of the Kennedy administration beginning in the early 1970s, as did the contrast between the Kennedy glitter of the early 1960s and the national discord of the late 1960s. But it was precisely the substance of Kennedy's statesmanship and "the strength of his ideas and ideals" alluded to by Sorensen that subsequent writers on his presidency have found most wanting and that are at the root of the Kennedy revisionism that has continued into the 1990s.

The first major assault on Kennedy's statesmanship came in 1972 with the publication of three important works on his foreign policy: David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, Richard J. Walton's *Cold War and Counter-Revolutionary: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy*, and Louise Fitzsimons's *The Kennedy Doctrine*. These were followed the next year by Henry Fairlie's equally critical *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation*. All four books attempted to address the question of what went wrong in the 1960s, and all four writers concluded that in one way or another Camelot had been a con game perpetrated on the American people.

Of the four books, Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, a best-seller, attracted the most national attention. A reporter for the *New York Times*,

⁴Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 857.

⁵Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, 1967), 582.

⁶Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 5–7.

Halberstam had earlier received a Pulitzer Prize for his hard-hitting coverage of the Vietnam War, in which he challenged Washington's claims that the United States was winning the war. In *The Best and the Brightest* he sought to explain how the United States became involved in the conflict during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. He placed much of the blame upon the intellectual and corporate elite (the "best and the brightest") who came to Washington with Kennedy in 1961. Arrogant and eager to test their new powers, these men were convinced that they could contain the Communist threat in Southeast Asia through the rational application of America's economic and military power. They lied and dissembled both to themselves and to the American people, twisting facts and creating truths, excising pessimistic reports of the war, inflating enemy body counts, and deflating North Vietnam's recuperative powers in order to justify a continuation and expansion of the war.

Although Halberstam regarded President Kennedy more favorably than he did the men who worked for him, the president, in his view, still embodied most of what was wrong with the "best and the brightest." He was "too cool, too hard-line in his foreign policies, too devoid of commitment." He was motivated solely by political considerations, "which made him cautious and almost timid," certainly too cautious to challenge conventional perceptions about Communist expansionism. This timidity resulted in the great irony of the Kennedy administration, "that John Kennedy, rationalist, pledged above all to rationality should continue the most irrational of all major foreign policies, the policy toward . . . Asia."⁷

It was left to Louise Fitzsimons and Richard Walton, however, to challenge the bulk of the assertions made by Kennedy apologists. In their view, Kennedy epitomized the Cold Warrior. He forsook diplomacy for confrontation during the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, heightened the arms race, brought the world to the brink of nuclear holocaust, and, on the basis of what Fitzsimons called the "Kennedy Doctrine" (the right to intervene politically and militarily in the internal affairs of other, less powerful, nations), engaged in counterrevolutionary activities and introduced counterinsurgency tactics into places like Laos and Vietnam.⁸ Indeed, Walton referred to Kennedy as "the great counterrevolutionary of the postwar world," a leader who supported self-determination but "did not understand revolution" and "prosecuted the Cold War more vigorously, and thus more dangerously, than did Eisenhower and Dulles."⁹ While Fitzsimons was less strident in her indictment of Kennedy, the thrust of her remarks was the same. With more sadness than bitterness, she stated that ten years after his eloquent and well-known inaugural address, in which he promised to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty," his words rang out with "an ominous sound of recognition."¹⁰

⁷David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1972), 12, 93, 96, 102.

⁸Louise Fitzsimons, *The Kennedy Doctrine* (New York, 1972), 8–9.

⁹Richard J. Walton, *Cold War and Counter-Revolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (Baltimore, 1972), 34–35, 211.

¹⁰Fitzsimons, *The Kennedy Doctrine*, 3–4.

Kennedy's rhetoric was also the subject of Henry Fairlie's *The Kennedy Promise*. A British reporter and commentator, Fairlie argued that from the time he took office, Kennedy spoke the language of a Cold Warrior. Instead of calling for policies based on reasoned and limited aims, he offered a prescription for the nation that exaggerated its international obligations. The American people, swept up by his rhetoric and charisma, accepted his definition of national purpose "without question." The result was a messianic "madness of empire" that proved "too exacting for a free society to bear without grievous dislocation."¹¹

The assault on Kennedy's reputation as president and statesman elicited a strong response from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who in 1973 dismissed Walton's and Fitzsimons's work as not worthy of "extended coverage" and maintained that Fairlie portrayed Kennedy in a manner that bore little resemblance to reality.¹² But while revisionists did not go unchallenged, theirs remained the most widely held view in the historical literature. For example, in his well-received *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (1976), Bruce Miroff remarks that Kennedy's ambition was "to assert control over not only the American global establishment, but also the course of events around the globe." In his important study, *J.F.K.: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (1983), Herbert Parmet concludes that Kennedy's "constant need to demonstrate toughness had helped to manufacture potential disasters everywhere." In *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-63* (1989), a collection of essays edited by Thomas G. Paterson, Paterson comments that "arrogance, ignorance, and impatience combined with familiar exaggerations of the Communist threat" to assure that Kennedy's foreign policy would fail. And in the most recent study of the Kennedy administration, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (1991), James N. Giglio remarks that Kennedy "became a victim of his own rhetoric. Having promised to act tough and do more, he limited his options in foreign policy."¹³

Even though revisionism prevails, critics of Kennedy's foreign policy have become increasingly subtle and sophisticated in their arguments. They no longer engage in the same sort of frontal attacks on Kennedy's character. They interpret the Kennedy presidency as a transitional one facing the emergent problems of the 1960s. And even more important, they pay greater attention to the interplay of domestic and foreign concerns and their influence on Kennedy's foreign policy.

One question of considerable interest to a number of these scholars has been Kennedy's alleged manipulation of public opinion. In his book, Fairlie

¹¹Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (New York, 1973), 10-12.

¹²Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "J.F.K.: Promise and Reality," *Commonweal* (25 May 1978): 290-91.

¹³Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1976), 32; Herbert S. Parmet, *J.F.K.: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1983), 352; Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York, 1989), 23; James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, KS, 1991), 45. Two other important revisionist accounts of Kennedy's foreign policy are Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston, 1982); and Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*.

maintained that the president used rhetoric to mobilize the nation around his foreign and defense policies, creating crises when none existed and turning incidents into emergencies. In related fashion, Walton argued that Kennedy toyed with the media, engaging in a “policy of deception, distortion, and secrecy” to fashion public opinion.¹⁴ Few writers contest the fact that, like two other Democratic presidents, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Kennedy regarded and employed language as a political weapon. According to Kent H. Beck, in the 1960 campaign the Democratic candidate “set out to construct a rhetorical position [on the issue of Cuba] firm enough to offset [Richard] Nixon’s advantage on foreign policy, yet so noncommittal that it would not frighten the public or antagonize Democratic liberals.”¹⁵ In “John F. Kennedy and the Green Berets,” Justin Gustainis even argues that Kennedy engaged in the “rhetorical use of myth” to gain public and congressional support for the army’s Special Forces (the Green Berets), who were to have primary responsibility for counterinsurgency operations. By portraying the Green Berets as the modern equivalent of the “frontier hero,” he also sought, according to Gustainis, to pacify the nation’s political Right and bolster his own public image.¹⁶ Even Schlesinger has acknowledged that the president was sometimes guilty of rhetorical overkill. In 1973 he termed as “unfortunate” the lines in Kennedy’s inaugural address about paying any price, bearing any burden, and meeting any hardship. He also admitted that some of the president’s programs, like the Alliance for Progress, were “oversold.”¹⁷

It is one thing, however, to argue that Kennedy used rhetoric as part of his political arsenal and quite another to suggest, as Fairlie did, that Kennedy’s hyperbole and rhetorical flourishes were responsible for the nation’s combative foreign policy. Several writers, including Giglio, Parmet, and David Burner, have now qualified this view considerably. As they have reminded their readers, Kennedy was probably reflecting national opinion as much as crafting it in his remarks. After a series of humiliating foreign policy disasters, including the cancellation of Eisenhower’s trip to Japan because the Japanese government could not guarantee his safety, the U-2 incident, and the subsequent scuttling of the Paris summit meeting between Eisenhower and Khrushchev, the president did not have to be much of a pied piper to lead the American people down the path of an aggressive foreign policy. Furthermore, Kennedy’s rhetoric, when compared to the previous administration’s talk about “brinkmanship” and “massive retaliation,” does not seem all that menacing. His much-quoted inaugural address has been taken out of context.

¹⁴Walton, *Cold War and Counter-Revolution*, 44–45, 54–57, 182–88.

¹⁵Beck, “The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (Autumn 1974): 45–55; Beck, “Necessary Lies, Hidden Truths: Cuba in the 1960 Campaign,” *Diplomatic History* 8 (Winter 1984): 37–59.

¹⁶J. Justin Gustainis, “John F. Kennedy and the Green Berets: The Rhetorical Use of the Hero Myth,” *Communications Studies* 40 (Spring 1989): 41–53. See also Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise*, 187; William C. Cockerham, “Green Berets and the Symbolic Meaning of Heroism,” *Urban Life* 8 (1979): 111; Alasdair Spark, “The Soldier at the Heart of the War: The Myth of the Green Beret in the Popular Culture of the Vietnam Era,” *Journal of American Studies* 18 (April 1984): 29–30; and John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 41–69.

¹⁷Schlesinger, “J.F.K.: Promise and Reality,” 290–91.

More than a call to arms, it was a response to a truculent speech Khrushchev had delivered two weeks earlier, in which he said that capitalism was retreating before communism. In fact, there was a dual theme throughout Kennedy's address. Giglio points out that "even though promoting military strength and global commitment," he was also seeking "peace through negotiation, cooperation, and arms limitation."¹⁸

It should also be noted that Kennedy's ability to mold public opinion appears also to have been limited. In their important study, *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, the Presidency, and Foreign Policy* (1984), Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering, and Ralph B. Levering review over six thousand news stories from five of the nation's leading newspapers on the four major crises of the Kennedy administration (Laos, Vietnam, Berlin, and Cuba). They conclude that while Kennedy cultivated good relations with the press and was able, when there was policy consensus, to get the press coverage he wanted, he failed to command the news when there was strong opposition to his policies. They argue persuasively that the press is "a reflective institution," noting that if there are other political actors opposed to a policy, the press "will reflect, focus, and magnify their views, and the White House will feel the heat as it did during the prelude to the Cuban missile crisis."¹⁹ All this suggests that while Kennedy may have been guilty of fueling existing crises, he did not manufacture them, and therefore the idea that he mobilized the nation to support an aggressive foreign policy by manipulating the media does not provide an adequate framework for understanding his foreign policy.

At the same time, though, the argument that Kennedy's foreign policy was circumscribed by the legacy he inherited from Eisenhower—a position Kennedy apologists have long maintained—also seems of limited utility. One immediate problem with this claim is that those who make it want to have it both ways, placing considerable responsibility for failures like the Bay of Pigs operation on the previous administration but ignoring the contributions of the Eisenhower administration to what they consider Kennedy's most significant achievements. An example of how they have slighted the previous administration is their treatment of economic development assistance programs like the Alliance for Progress for Latin America, which they attribute almost exclusively to Kennedy's concern about the pressing economic needs of Third World nations.²⁰ While it is true that even as a senator Kennedy played an important role in garnering congressional support for development aid and as president was responsible for the establishment of the Alliance for Progress, several authors, including Kennedy's former deputy national security adviser, Walt Rostow, have shown that these programs originated in the Eisenhower administration.²¹

¹⁸Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 27–28; Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 63–64. David Burner, *John F. Kennedy and a New Generation* (Glenview, IL, 1988), 52–53, 76. See also Schlesinger, "J.F.K.: Promise and Reality," 290–91.

¹⁹Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering, and Ralph B. Levering, *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, the Presidency, and Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill, 1984), esp. xi–xii, 195–203.

²⁰On this point see footnote 69.

²¹W. W. Rostow, *Eisenhower, Kennedy and Foreign Aid* (Austin, 1985), esp. 198–201. Compare also Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days*, 155–72, 427, and Sorensen's *Kennedy*, 350–51, 529–37, with my *Trade and Aid: Eisenhower's Foreign Economic Policy, 1953–1961* (Baltimore,

Not only are Kennedy apologists unfairly selective in discussing the president's legacy from the previous administration but they also fail to take proper note of the opportunities Kennedy had to cancel or fundamentally alter policies pursued by his predecessor. Certainly this was the case with respect to the Bay of Pigs operation. There can be no doubt that there was considerable institutional pressure on the new president to proceed with the invasion of Cuba. The director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, reassured Kennedy that the operation had a good chance of success, and there was no opposition to it from either the Department of State or the Pentagon. Although the Joint Chiefs of Staff did express some misgivings about the plan, no one seems to have offered any serious criticism of it at cabinet meetings. Reflecting upon the situation, Irving L. Janis, a psychologist, has emphasized the sometimes pernicious impact of groupthink, or peer-group pressures, on crucial decisions like the Bay of Pigs.²² Schlesinger and Sorensen also make a compelling argument when they point out the costs of canceling the operation. As Schlesinger has commented, the decision on whether to go forward with the attack was presented to the president in such a way that he had to choose between disbanding "a group of brave and idealistic Cubans, already trained and equipped, who wanted very much to return to Cuba on their own or permit[ting] them to go ahead."²³

Nevertheless, the amphibious landing in Cuba involving fourteen hundred exiles trained in Guatemala had little chance of succeeding. One historian of the operation, Trumbull Higgins, recently referred to it as "the perfect failure," and argued that, contrary to claims by Kennedy's defenders, the president agreed with the CIA-sponsored plan when he first learned about it in November as president-elect.²⁴ As Schlesinger and Sorensen have maintained, one important reason why he continued to support the invasion after he took office was the faulty information he received from the CIA and the Pentagon.²⁵ But Joshua H. Sandman shows that this was due in part to the lack of proper lines of communication within the administration as a result of Kennedy's decision to dismantle the national security apparatus established by Eisenhower.²⁶ In the view of Thomas Paterson, who has written extensively on U.S.-Cuban relations since Castro came to power in 1959, an even more fundamental reason for the doomed operation was Kennedy's anti-Castro fixation, which blinded him, Paterson maintains, to the moral and legal—as

1982), esp. 209. In addition see James M. Hagen and Vernon W. Ruttan, "Development Policy under Eisenhower and Kennedy," *The Journal of Developing Areas* 23 (October 1988): 1–30.

²²Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascos* (Boston, 1972), 14–49.

²³Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 215–16. See also Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 294–301; and Haynes Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs: The Leaders' Story of Brigade 2506* (New York, 1964). Johnson's early account of the invasion is based on conversations he had with leaders of the Bay of Pigs operation. Johnson places most of the responsibility for the botched invasion on the CIA rather than on the president.

²⁴Trumbull Higgins, *The Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs* (New York, 1987), 66–67.

²⁵Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 214–16; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 294–96.

²⁶Sandman, "Analyzing Foreign Policy Crisis Situations: The Bay of Pigs," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16 (Spring 1986): 310–16. See also Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 133.

well as the logistical and military—questions involved in “violently overthrowing a sovereign government.”²⁷

Clearly, then, it is wrong to attribute the Bay of Pigs fiasco primarily to the legacy Kennedy inherited from Eisenhower or even to his inexperience in office. The president was being historically accurate as well as politically responsible in assuming blame for the disaster. But Higgins and journalist Peter Wyden, in the two most recent books on the invasion, also emphasize the need to put Kennedy’s part in the affair into a broader historical perspective than either Paterson or the earlier revisionists have done. Wyden agrees with Paterson’s assertion that Kennedy sought to punish Castro. He notes that the president was determined to demonstrate to the Cuban leader “the smack of firm government.” But he believes the president and his advisers never had a firm grip on the situation. Whereas most scholars portray Kennedy as a firm and decisive leader, Wyden claims that he was weak and indecisive and that the air strikes he canceled might have made a difference once the Cuban exiles were onshore.²⁸ In contrast, Higgins credits the president “for resisting the far greater folly of an open and indefinitely prolonged American military intervention, regardless of the immense pressure brought to bear and of the serious political consequences for himself.”²⁹ Either way, Kennedy appears much more restrained and circumspect than earlier revisionists have suggested.

Historians generally agree that the failure at the Bay of Pigs had major consequences for the new administration. Having lost all confidence in the foreign policy apparatus outside the White House, Kennedy increased his own grasp over foreign policy. While the operation’s failure prompted the president to launch Operation Mongoose (an effort to undermine Cuba through a systematic program of sabotage) and perhaps to conspire with the Mafia to assassinate Castro, it also made him wary about increasing America’s military involvement in Laos, where the United States had already sent three hundred military advisers in an effort to keep the Communist Pathet Lao forces from overrunning the country.³⁰

²⁷Thomas G. Paterson, “Fixation with Cuba: The Bay of Pigs, Missile Crisis, and Covert War against Castro” in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*, 123–55.

²⁸Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York, 1979).

²⁹Higgins, *The Perfect Failure*, 173.

³⁰Although acknowledging the existence of Operation Mongoose, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in 1978 denied these charges, which first surfaced in Washington in 1975 during an investigation by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence headed by Frank Church of Idaho into plots to murder foreign leaders. Conceding that in 1960 (before Kennedy’s election), the CIA had “set in motion the plot to kill Castro,” Schlesinger remarked that “there was no evidence that any [CIA] officials ever mentioned it to any President.” The Church committee had already reached the same conclusion, and there has been no evidence to prove otherwise, although Paterson has commented that after the Bay of Pigs, “intensified economic coercion joined assassination and sabotage as methods to undermine the Castro government” and Reeves has underscored Kennedy’s secret meeting with Mafia boss Sam Giancana. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston, 1978), 494–517; Paterson, “Fixation with Cuba,” 138; Reeves, *A Question of Character*, 277–79. See also Brown, *JFK: History of an Image*, 72–74; and Burner, *John F. Kennedy and a New Generation*, 68. On U.S. involvement in Laos during this period see Usha Mahajani, “President Kennedy and United States policy in Laos, 1961–63,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2 (September 1971): 87–99. Stephen E. Pelz points out that the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed sending troops into Laos, warning the president that there were insufficient forces to meet potential Communist threats in Berlin, the Caribbean, Vietnam, and the Congo. Stephen

Kennedy's restraint was tested in the next major crisis of his young administration—Berlin. During a tense, two-day meeting with Kennedy in Vienna in June 1961, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev threatened to turn Berlin over to the East German government after signing a German peace treaty. After the meeting the president issued a statement of American determination to defend West Berlin with a buildup of American military might. In August, Khrushchev counterattacked by announcing the successful testing of a one-hundred-megaton nuclear weapon, and by building the infamous Berlin Wall, which would put an end to the stream of East Germans fleeing to the West. After that, the crisis ebbed, but not before Kennedy ordered a convoy of fifteen hundred American troops down the Autobahn into West Berlin and sent Vice President Johnson to the city in order to demonstrate his determination to keep Berlin open to the West.

Kennedy apologists maintain that the president conducted himself responsibly and courageously; early revisionists that he acted provocatively and dangerously.³¹ Both sides have ample evidence to support their views. In *The Berlin Crisis* (1973), Robert Slusser, a Soviet historian, has argued that Soviet politics had more to do with the crisis than any action taken by the president. In Moscow a power struggle was taking place between Khrushchev and his hard-line opponents in the Presidium and both attempted to choreograph the crisis to their own advantage. According to Slusser, Khrushchev provoked the crisis in order to force a treaty over Germany by the end of 1961. He hoped such a treaty would be the prelude to improved relations with Washington. Khrushchev's opponents escalated the crisis by forcing him to cease demobilization and resume atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. It was this political tug-of-war taking place inside the Kremlin, not anything Kennedy said or did, that in Slusser's view made the Berlin crisis so dangerous. "Several attempts have recently been made to depict John F. Kennedy as a dogmatic anti-Communist whose actions helped create the very crises with which his administration tried to cope," Slusser has written. "What emerges from intensive study of the Soviet side in the Berlin crisis of 1961, however, is the recognition that the Soviet threat to vital interests was in actuality even more direct and dangerous than anyone in Washington at the time realized."³²

In his recent study of the Kennedy-Khrushchev relationship, however, Michael Beschloss throws most of the responsibility for the Berlin crisis back into Kennedy's court. He does not deny the considerable domestic political pressures Khrushchev faced in his dealings with the American president. On the contrary, he criticizes the president for not understanding these pressures, particularly in the wake of the recent Sino-Soviet split and the Soviet leader's

Pelz, "When Do I Have Time to Think?" John F. Kennedy, Roger Hilsman, and the Laotian Crisis of 1962," *Diplomatic History* 3 (Spring 1979): 215–29. See also Kenneth L. Hill, "President Kennedy and the Neutralization of Laos," *Review of Politics* 31 (July 1969): 353–69.

³¹Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 288–339; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 583–601; McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, 1988), 358–85; Walton, *Cold War and Counter-Revolution*, 80–93; Fitzsimons, *The Kennedy Doctrine*, 97–125; Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 65–82.

³²Robert M. Slusser, *The Berlin Crisis of 1961: Soviet-American Relations and the Struggle for Power in the Kremlin, June–November 1961* (Baltimore, 1973), x–xi, 157–70.

agreement with Kennedy on Laos. "Taking a hard line on Berlin," Beschloss writes, "would help avoid charges that he was soft on Washington and impress his Soviet critics, the Chinese and the Third World, with his assertion of Soviet power." Although Beschloss is also highly critical of Khrushchev for his inflammatory rhetoric and his bullying of the president in Vienna, he blames Kennedy for most of his problems with the Soviet Union. In fact, he maintains that the Soviet leader's determination to seek a final settlement of the Berlin question was not unreasonable. "Khrushchev would have been hard pressed," he writes, "to ignore Berlin in 1961, even if he had wished. For two and a half years, he had insisted on the fundamental importance of resolving the problem of Berlin and Germany."³³

Beschloss's portrayal of the president, however, is not one-dimensional. Although Kennedy acted most often like a conventional Cold Warrior, at times he appeared inexperienced, irresolute, and "vulnerable to intimidation." These fluctuations in Kennedy's style and behavior confused and confounded Soviet leaders. "During his first five months in office," Beschloss states, "the President had given Khrushchev the dangerous impression that he was at once more passive and more militant than Eisenhower." Because Kennedy appeared particularly vulnerable following the Bay of Pigs, Khrushchev decided to press ahead "with removing the Berlin 'cancer' from Eastern Europe and codifying the permanent division of Germany."³⁴

Other books on the Berlin crisis and the building of the Berlin Wall also refer to Kennedy's vacillation and indecisiveness during the crisis. In addition, they make it clear that the construction of the wall was a blessing in disguise for the White House, enabling Kennedy to extricate the United States from a confrontation with the Soviet Union by stopping the mass exodus out of East Berlin without denying the West its access rights to the city. As early as 1971, Jack M. Schick in *The Berlin Crisis, 1958–1962* criticized Kennedy for a lack of clarity about American objectives in Berlin and for his policy of seeking negotiations through intimidation, the same policy that Khrushchev pursued.³⁵ The next year Eleanor Lansing Dulles argued that a show of Western fortitude could have prevented the construction of the Berlin Wall. Curtis Cate makes the same point in *The Ides of August: The Berlin Wall Crisis, 1961* (1978), an angry anecdotal account of the crisis in which Cate contrasts the courage of Berliners with what he sees as the pusillanimity of Kennedy and his advisers.³⁶

In 1980, Honoré Catudal took an entirely different approach to the Berlin crisis, applying to Kennedy's conduct the various models of policy formulation so popular among political scientists. Placing the president's response to Khrushchev's threats on Berlin within the context of an ongoing

³³Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 232.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Jack M. Schick, *The Berlin Crisis, 1958–1962* (Philadelphia, 1971), 137–241.

³⁶Eleanor Lansing Dulles, *The Berlin Wall: A Crisis in Three Stages* (Columbia, SC, 1972); Curtis Cate, *The Ides of August: The Berlin Wall Crisis, 1961* (New York, 1978). Other accounts of the Berlin crisis include Norman Gelb, *The Berlin Wall: Kennedy, Khrushchev and a Showdown in the Heart of Europe* (New York, 1986); Jean Edward Smith, *The Defense of Berlin* (Baltimore, 1963), 228–341; and Eric Morris, *Blockade: Berlin and the Cold War* (New York, 1973), 195–249.

struggle inside his administration between the hawks who favored a military response and the doves who preferred quiet diplomacy, he takes issue with revisionist historians who have argued that Kennedy's call in July for a buildup of American military forces was a surrender to the militants. "Although some revisionist historians would call his [decisions on Berlin] a capitulation to the hard line," he writes, "they actually represented somewhat of a compromise between the 'hawks' and 'doves.'" Kennedy did not declare a national emergency or ask for an immediate mobilization of forces, he notes. Furthermore, he slashed additional military budget requests from \$4.3 billion to \$3.2 billion, and in his 25 July speech to the American people on Berlin, he coupled his stress on firmness with a willingness to negotiate.³⁷

The literature on the Berlin crisis, therefore, suggests that Kennedy was neither the decisive and courageous statesman that Kennedy apologists have maintained nor the irresponsible and dogmatic Cold Warrior that early revisionists have claimed. Instead, it portrays a leader who was determined to maintain Western access to Berlin even if that meant military conflict with the Soviet Union but who, without appearing overly concerned about the people whose lives were most affected by its construction, quietly accepted the Berlin Wall as a way of resolving the crisis. As Kennedy's national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, later put it, the president believed the freedom of two million West Berliners was worth fighting for, while "freedom of circulation in an already divided city was not."³⁸ At the same time, Slusser and Catudal indicate the need to consider the bureaucratic dynamic within which both Khrushchev and Kennedy operated.

The literature on the Cuban missile crisis, the most dangerous crisis of the Kennedy presidency and, arguably, of the entire Cold War era, profiles the president in much the same fashion. The issue most heatedly debated by students of the crisis is that of Kennedy's conduct as crisis manager. Did he perform as brilliantly as Kennedy apologists and many other historians have said? Or did he unnecessarily bring the world to the brink of nuclear war without first giving quiet diplomacy a chance, as early revisionists claimed? A second, related, question concerns Khrushchev's motives for sending medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles to Cuba. Did he take this action to defend Cuba from a possible American invasion, or to redress the strategic imbalance in favor of the United States, or to engage in a form of nuclear blackmail in hopes of compelling the United States to agree to a Berlin settlement? These are the explanations most often given to explain Khrushchev's actions.

Although the literature on the crisis is massive and continues to grow, a consensus seems to be emerging on a number of these issues, fostered in part by the memoirs of numerous participants in the crisis and by a conference at Harvard University in 1987 that brought together many of these participants and scholars from both the United States and the Soviet Union.³⁹ There seems

³⁷Honoré Marc Catudal, *Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis: A Case Study in U.S. Decision-Making* (Berlin, 1980), 180–81.

³⁸Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 367–69.

³⁹The literature on the missile crisis merits separate treatment, but an excellent introduction to some of the issues involved can be found in Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 190–

to be no question that Kennedy was prepared to use military force to take the missiles out. As Raymond Garthoff, a staff-level adviser in the State Department during the missile crisis, has remarked, "from the first day [of the crisis] the president never wavered from one basic decision: the Soviet missiles must be removed."⁴⁰ In fact, the president may have been planning a military operation to overthrow Castro even before learning of the missiles in October. According to James G. Hershberg, "the Pentagon, acting at the direction of the president and the secretary of defense, dramatically accelerated contingency planning for military action against Cuba in late September or early October 1962, just as the president was ordering a sharp increase in Castro covert operations." In Hershberg's view, therefore, Khrushchev was probably telling the truth when he said that he sent the missiles to Cuba to protect the island against an American invasion, a view shared by Paterson and Barton Bernstein.⁴¹

Soviet participants at the 1987 conference on the missile crisis have confirmed Khrushchev's near obsession with an American invasion of Cuba as a result of Kennedy's rhetoric and activities associated with Operation Mongoose. They have also acknowledged Khrushchev's desire to redress the strategic imbalance in missiles, which the White House had made public soon after Kennedy took office. But as Paterson has pointed out, these two explanations for Khrushchev's actions are not incompatible. "The Soviets hoped to enhance their much weaker deterrent power in the Cold War and [at the same time] save a threatened ally."⁴²

Not only was Kennedy set on forcing Moscow to dismantle the missiles and take them back to the Soviet Union he was also determined not to negotiate over the matter. The issue of whether the president should have tried the path of quiet diplomacy before raising the possibility of nuclear war in a televised address on 22 October has elicited considerable controversy. Those who argue that he should have tried diplomacy maintain that he might have been able to persuade Moscow to remove its missiles from Cuba in exchange

215. See also William J. Medland, *The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962: Needless or Necessary?* (New York, 1988); and David L. Larson, ed., *The "Cuban Crisis" of 1962: Selected Documents, Chronology and Bibliography* (Lanham, MD, 1986). For Soviet perspectives consult Ronald R. Pope, ed., *Soviet Views on the Cuban Missile Crisis: Myth and Reality in Foreign Policy Analysis* (Lanham, MD, 1982).

⁴⁰ Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, 1989), 44. See also Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1971); Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 392–456; Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It: Dean Rusk with Richard Rusk and Daniel S. Papp* (New York, 1990), 229–45; Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York, 1972), 261–81; George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York, 1982), 158–73; and Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929–1969* (New York, 1973), 489–98.

⁴¹ James G. Hershberg, "Before the Missiles of October: Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike against Cuba?" *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990): 163–98; Paterson, "Fixation with Cuba," 141–42; Barton Bernstein, "Commentary: Reconsidering Khrushchev's Gambit—Defending the Soviet Union and Cuba," *ibid.*, 231–39.

⁴² James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1989), 238–52, 293–302; Paterson, "Commentary: The Defense-of-Cuba Theme and the Missile Crisis," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990): 205–6. See also Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 377–87; and Herbert S. Dinerstein, *The Making of a Missile Crisis, October 1962* (Baltimore, 1976).

for his agreement to remove America's obsolete Jupiter missiles from Turkey.⁴³

Interestingly, though, one of those most strongly challenging that claim is Sergo Mikoyan, son of the former first deputy premier of the Soviet Union, Anastas I. Mikoyan, and secretary to his father at the time of the missile crisis. According to Mikoyan, Khrushchev and the Presidium were not interested in negotiations but in seeing how far they could push Kennedy before he responded. They were taken completely by surprise when the president announced on television that the Soviets had placed missiles in Cuba and warned that any nuclear missile fired from Cuba against a nation in the Western Hemisphere would be regarded as an attack by Moscow against the United States and would require a full retaliatory response.⁴⁴

At the same time, participants at the Harvard conference seemed to agree that President Kennedy would have stopped short of war with the Soviet Union. One of the most dangerous moments of the crisis occurred following Kennedy's receipt on 26 and 27 October of two letters from Khrushchev, the first agreeing to remove the missiles from Cuba in return for a promise from the United States not to invade Cuba, the second insisting that the United States would first have to remove American missiles from Turkey. Instead of responding to the second letter, whose terms were unacceptable, the president responded to the first letter, accepting its conditions. In response, Khrushchev, who had been assured secretly by Bobby Kennedy that his brother would remove the Jupiter missiles from Turkey, agreed to withdraw the Soviet missiles from Cuba.

Until recently, most writers have maintained that had Khrushchev rejected the president's response to his first letter, war would have followed. At the Harvard conference, however, McGeorge Bundy read a letter from Dean Rusk, the former secretary of state, that revealed that Kennedy was willing to allow the United Nations to act as an intermediary should Khrushchev still insist on a quid pro quo for removal of the Cuban missiles. According to a plan worked out at the White House, Secretary General U Thant would ask both parties to withdraw their missiles from Cuba and Turkey, and Kennedy would consent to the UN request. The plan rested on the assumption that a request from the United Nations would be more palatable to the American people than unilateral action by the president. Robert S. McNamara, secretary of defense under Kennedy, also indicated that such a ploy was under serious consideration even though word of it never surfaced. "It's possible," he remarked, "that the President would have settled on something like the missile trade. . . . To my mind [an invasion of Cuba] was highly unlikely."⁴⁵

⁴³Walton, *Cold War and Counterrevolution*, 134–42; Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 96–97; Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, 278–79.

⁴⁴Bernd Greiner, "The Soviet View: An Interview with Sergo Mikoyan," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990): 205–22. See also Arnold J. Horelick, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," *World Politics* 16 (April 1964): 378–83; Blight and Welch, *On the Brink*, 299–301, 303–4; and Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 42–45.

⁴⁵Blight and Welch, *On the Brink*, 82–84, 263; Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 94–96.

None of this undermines the point made by revisionists concerning Kennedy's responsibility for the Cuban missile crisis. Paterson may have been overly simplistic when he commented that "the origins of the crisis . . . derived largely from the concerted American campaign to squash the Cuban revolution." But there can be no denying Kennedy's almost irrational attitude toward Castro and his determination to undermine his regime.⁴⁶ At the same time, though, the point made by Schlesinger and Sorensen a quarter of a century ago—that, throughout the thirteen-day crisis, Kennedy resisted military action—remains valid. As even the Soviet participants at the Harvard conference acknowledged, moreover, Khrushchev, who was profoundly ignorant of the United States, not only badly misjudged the president but ignored the advice of his own experts in thinking that he could get away with placing nuclear missiles within the Western Hemisphere and so close to the Florida coast.⁴⁷ Finally, it now seems clear that while Kennedy was determined that the missiles had to be removed even if that meant some form of military action, he was willing to accept as a *quid pro quo* the removal of America's missiles from Turkey.

Two other matters having to do with the Cuban missile crisis shed additional light on Kennedy's conduct of the crisis. The first concerns the decision-making process. In his landmark work, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1971), Graham Allison argued the need to look at the Cuban missile crisis—and, by extension, any major crisis—in terms of bureaucratic politics rather than any particular rationale. More specifically, he strongly suggested that the playing out of the crisis had to do as much with the tug of personalities and bureaucratic interests within the ExCom (the executive committee Kennedy established to advise him on the crisis) as with any single decision Kennedy made.⁴⁸

Almost certainly Allison exaggerated the role of bureaucratic politics in the development and outcome of the missile crisis. As Ronald Steel has pointed out, Kennedy's first and in many respects most important decision—to forgo diplomacy in favor of force to get the missiles out of Cuba—was made without resort to the ExCom.⁴⁹ Throughout the crisis, moreover, the president relied far more on his brother and his own judgment in making his decisions than on the ExCom, which had difficulty reaching agreement on anything.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the debate that took place in the ExCom provided him with a menu of options and a sense of the risks each one involved. In their meetings at the White House, ExCom members consulted outside experts like former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, looked at various proposals from a number of different angles, and discussed and rejected simplistic stereotypes. Bobby Kennedy and Ted Sorensen played devil's advocate. In a sense, the

⁴⁶Paterson, "Commentary: The Defense-of-Cuba Theme and the Missile Crisis," 256. See also Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 188–89.

⁴⁷Blight and Welch, *On the Brink*, 301–2. See also Greiner, "The Soviet View: An Interview with Sergo Mikoyan," 207.

⁴⁸Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, 1971), esp. v–viii, 1–9.

⁴⁹Steel, "Cooling It," *New York Review of Books* 19 (19 October 1972): 43–46.

⁵⁰On this point see especially Robert McNamara's comments at the Harvard conference. Blight and Welch, *On the Brink*, 51. See also *ibid.*, 123–24.

ExCom acted as a brake on precipitate action, although the sheer exhaustion of the men serving the president, as described at the Harvard conference, may in fact have been one of the great dangers of the crisis.⁵¹

The second matter concerning the missile crisis has to do with the role of domestic politics. Early revisionists argued that Kennedy played politics with or even manufactured the crisis in an effort to gain Democratic seats in Congress in the November elections.⁵² In 1986, Paterson and William J. Brophy challenged that view, maintaining that Kennedy did not have to create a crisis for the Democrats to do well in November because the polls already showed that the Democrats would win impressively in the midterm elections.⁵³

More recently, however, Richard Ned Lebow has argued the need for a more sophisticated assessment of Kennedy's political motives than either earlier revisionists or Paterson and Brophy have presented. In contrast to Paterson and Brophy, Lebow maintains that Kennedy was very concerned about the domestic political consequences of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. But what bothered him as much as the political cost of *not* confronting the Soviets over the missiles was the cost of *challenging* Moscow, for he was worried that if he invaded Cuba or launched an air strike, even prominent Democrats like Senators Richard Russell of Georgia and J. William Fulbright of Arkansas would turn against him. Instead of causing the president to manufacture a crisis, therefore, political concerns made him shy away from military action. According to Lebow the action that Kennedy finally decided upon, a quarantine, "represented a tradeoff between the imperatives for action . . . and the risk of a confrontation."⁵⁴

In sum, the literature on the Cuban missile crisis suggests that while the world was a more dangerous place as a result of the missiles in Cuba, it did not quite reach the brink of nuclear disaster as both early revisionists and Kennedy apologists maintained. It also shows that Khrushchev has to bear a good share of the responsibility for the crisis; that in any evaluation of Kennedy as crisis manager, bureaucratic and domestic political considerations have to be factored in; and that, finally, the president was far more judicious in his conduct of the crisis than early revisionists have allowed. In other words, where Kennedy's conduct as world statesman is concerned, the literature on the Cuban missile crisis parallels that on the Bay of Pigs and Berlin crises.

According to most accounts of the Kennedy administration, the Cuban missile crisis had a sobering effect on the president, leading him to tone down

⁵¹Ibid., 47, 72–73, 95–96, 123, 128–29. See also Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 138–66. Janis regards the Cuban missile crisis, in contrast to other situations, including the Bay of Pigs, as one instance in which groupthink was successful.

⁵²James A. Nathan, "The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour Now," *World Politics* 27 (January 1975): 262–65; Barton J. Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," in *Reflections on the Cold War: A Quarter Century of American Foreign Policy*, ed. Lynn H. Miller and Ronald Preussen (Philadelphia, 1974), 131–33; Ronald Steel, "Endgame," *New York Review of Books* 12 (16 March 1969): 15; Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, 282–83.

⁵³Thomas G. Paterson and William J. Brophy, "October Missiles and November Elections: The Cuban Missile Crisis and American Politics, 1962," *Journal of American History* 73 (June 1986): 87–119.

⁵⁴Richard Ned Lebow, "Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Traditional and the Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Fall 1990): 471–92.

his rhetoric and to seek an accommodation with the Soviet Union. At American University on 10 June, he called for improved relations with Moscow and advocated a nuclear test ban treaty. Although he failed to achieve the comprehensive agreement he wanted, in July the United States and the Soviet Union signed a limited agreement prohibiting the atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons.⁵⁵ As a result, even so ardent a critic of Kennedy as Thomas Reeves has commented on the beneficial impact of the Cuban missile crisis on the president. After the crisis, he notes, "it seemed imperative to limit the possibilities of mutual destruction."⁵⁶

Not all historians share this view, however. Paterson points to Kennedy's continued efforts to destroy the Castro regime and concludes that he learned very little from the missile crisis.⁵⁷ In a fascinating and incisive essay, Gordon Chang maintains that Kennedy and his closest advisers even pursued the possibility of a joint Soviet-American attack on China in order to prevent it from developing its own nuclear capability.⁵⁸ Similarly, Desmond Ball shows that, despite the president's sincere efforts on behalf of a nuclear test ban treaty, he supported a strategic missile program providing for the production of one thousand Minuteman missiles, even though the so-called missile gap of the 1960 election had been debunked. He argues, furthermore, that Kennedy made that decision largely in response to domestic political pressures with little regard for existing military needs.⁵⁹

More likely, the impact of the missile crisis on Kennedy was real but modest. His foreign policy continued to be unpredictable. As a result, it remains uncertain what he would have done, had he lived, about the conflict in Vietnam, which became the most significant legacy of his abbreviated administration. Like the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War has spawned a virtual cottage industry of books and commentary, much of it touching upon

⁵⁵According to Glenn T. Seaborg, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission during Kennedy's administration, however, "the situation was to get worse [after the Cuban missile crisis] before it got better." See his *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban* (Berkeley, 1981), esp. 172–85. See also Bernard J. Firestone, *The Quest for Nuclear Stability: John F. Kennedy and the Soviet Union* (Westport, 1982).

⁵⁶Reeves, *A Question of Character*, 397. See also Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 215–17.

⁵⁷Paterson, "Introduction: John F. Kennedy's Quest for Victory and Global Crisis," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 4–23. See also idem, "Fixation with Cuba," 153–55; and idem, "Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK's Foreign Policy," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 54 (Spring 1976): 210–12.

⁵⁸Gordon H. Chang, "JFK, China, and the Bomb," *Journal of American History* 74 (March 1988): 1287–1310. The article also appears as a chapter in idem, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948–1972* (Stanford, 1990), 228–52. For a critical view of Kennedy's policy with respect to China see also James Fetzer, "Clinging to Containment: China Policy," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 178–97; and Warren I. Cohen, "The United States and China since 1945," in *New Frontiers in American-East Asian Relations: Essays Presented to Dorothy Borg*, ed. Warren I. Cohen (New York, 1983), 159–63. Cohen writes that there was "little in Kennedy's attitude toward the People's Republic on the policies he pursued to suggest that he was interested in . . . seeking accommodation with Beijing." *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁹Desmond Ball, *Politics and Force Levels: The Strategic Missile Program of the Kennedy Administration* (Berkeley, 1980). For the administration's war plan against the Soviet Union, based on "an inflexible overwhelming nuclear offensive to destroy . . . the full range of Sino-Soviet bloc targets," see Scott D. Sagan, "SIOP-62: The Nuclear War Plan Briefing for President Kennedy," *International Security* 12 (Summer 1981): 22–51.

Kennedy's responsibility for America's growing involvement in the conflict.⁶⁰ Although former Kennedy aides like Kenneth O'Donnell, Pierre Salinger, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., have persistently maintained that at the time of his assassination, Kennedy was considering withdrawal or had already decided to withdraw from Vietnam after the 1964 presidential election, former Secretary of State Dean Rusk maintains that at no time did "Kennedy ever say or hint or suggest to me that he was planning to withdraw from Vietnam in 1965."⁶¹ Even Schlesinger has acknowledged that "Kennedy's legacy [on Vietnam] was dual and contradictory" and that "he had left on the public record the impression of a major national stake in the defense of South Vietnam."⁶²

Three writers who have dealt recently with the question of Kennedy's role in the Vietnam War also disagree as to what course he would have followed. In *An International History of the Vietnam War: The Kennedy Strategy* (1986), R. B. Smith argues the need to understand Kennedy's strategy of counterinsurgency on "its own terms, and not as a prelude to intervention." Nevertheless, he also believes that Kennedy would probably have continued the war in Vietnam because of his view of the mounting importance of the Third World.⁶³ In contrast, William J. Rust, a correspondent for *U.S. News and World Report*, maintains that Kennedy most likely would have gotten out of the country although he acknowledges "the absence of a clear direction to Kennedy's policy and the contradictory speculation of his former advisers."⁶⁴ In the most recent study of Kennedy's Vietnam policy, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (1992), John M. Newman declares that by the time of his assassination, Kennedy had realized his Vietnam policy was a failure and that "had he lived, he still would have had time to take his case truthfully to the American people in 1964, and he might have done so."⁶⁵

Thus there remains no clear answer as to whether America's role in Vietnam would have been substantially different had Kennedy lived and won reelection in 1964. That may be because the president was unclear himself about what course to pursue. Certainly Newman and Rust indicate that this was the case. What is particularly fascinating about Newman's book, in fact, is the author's characterization of Kennedy as a leader who was not in

⁶⁰An indispensable reference work to the literature prior to 1982 is Richard Dean Burns and Milton Leitenberg, eds., *The Wars in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos* (Santa Barbara, 1985). This should be supplemented with the bibliographical essay in George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York, 1986), 283-302. See also Herring's review article, "America and Vietnam: The Debate Continues," *American Historical Review* 92 (April 1987): 350-62; Warren I. Cohen's review essay, "Vietnam: New Light on the Nature of War?" *The International History Review* 9 (February 1987): 108-16; and John Mirsky's review essay, "Reconsidering Vietnam," *The New York Review of Books* 38 (10 October 1991): 44-51.

⁶¹Kenneth B. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye': Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Boston, 1970), 16-18; Salinger, *Je Suis un Américain* [I am an American] (Paris, 1975), 239; Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 755-58. Rusk's comment is in Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 254.

⁶²Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 758.

⁶³R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War: The Kennedy Strategy* (New York, 1986), 2-16.

⁶⁴William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York, 1985), xi-xvi, 179.

⁶⁵John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York, 1992), 458-59.

command of his own policy. Newman spins a tale of suspense and conspiracy, suggesting, for example, the existence of a secret arrangement between President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam and Vice President Lyndon Johnson, whom Kennedy sent to Saigon in May 1961 to reassure Diem of American support. According to Newman, Johnson, acting without the knowledge of the president, encouraged Diem to ask Kennedy for American combat troops, something the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but not the president, supported. "Unfortunately, this important episode has thus far been lost in the dustbin of history," Newman writes.⁶⁶ Because much of *JFK and Vietnam* is filled with such gossipy tidbits of history based largely on circumstantial evidence, Newman's argument has to be treated with considerable caution and even skepticism. But his portrayal of the president as tragic hero is not inconsistent with other portrayals of Kennedy described elsewhere in this essay.

Rust's characterization of Kennedy is very similar to Newman's. Like Eisenhower, Rust says, Kennedy had major reservations about committing American forces to Vietnam, and he was disgusted with the repressive Diem regime. But because he feared the international and domestic political consequences of a withdrawal from Vietnam, his administration "could never credibly threaten [Diem] with the ultimate sanction—abandoning the country to the Communists." As a result, even though the president told CBS News anchorman Walter Cronkite in September 1963 that "in the final analysis," it was up to the Saigon government to win or lose the war, he sent sixteen thousand combat troops to Vietnam. Even worse, despite intense debate within the administration over whether to support a coup to overthrow the Diem government (which, of course, the White House did), the president and his senior advisers failed to pay adequate attention to the possibility raised in Cronkite's interview with Kennedy that "with or without Diem, the war might be a loser."⁶⁷ In sum, Kennedy's policy toward Vietnam, according to Rust, was prompted by fear and resulted in frustration, futility, and failure.⁶⁸

Although the historiographical debate over Kennedy's foreign policy has naturally concentrated on the president's conduct of the major crises facing his administration, it has also touched upon a number of other issues, including his overall policy toward the Third World; his grand design for Europe; his foreign economic policy; his efforts on behalf of nuclear disarmament; and

⁶⁶Ibid., 67–78. Kennedy's ambassador to Vietnam, Frederick Nolting, also strongly suggests that Kennedy had lost control of his Vietnam policy, in part because State Department officials and military leaders often acted at cross purposes from one another. Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam* (New York, 1988).

⁶⁷Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 50–59, 128–30, 137–38, 179.

⁶⁸See also the fine essay by Lawrence J. Bassett and Stephen E. Pelz, "The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 223–52. Among the factors influencing Kennedy's Vietnam policy, Bassett and Pelz note issues of credibility, Kennedy's personal reputation, Khrushchev's bluster, domestic politics (fear of losing southern and northern white ethnics in the 1964 election should Vietnam fall to the Communists), and Kennedy's personal and ideological commitment to containment in South Vietnam. Ibid., 245–46. In addition, consult Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York, 1987), an account of the Kennedy administration's involvement in the coup against Diem. Hammer writes about the "mirage that American policy makers had pursued in Vietnam" prior to the coup (p. 312).

those programs closely associated with his administration, such as the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps. Space precludes an extended discussion of these issues. But the literature on these matters confirms that Kennedy was both more complex and more ambiguous than either the Kennedy apologists or the early revisionists have allowed.

For example, his policy toward the Third World suggests a statesman very much aware of and sympathetic to Third World nationalism. Yet it also suggests an inveterate Cold Warrior whose dogmatic anticommunism often blinded him to the very forces he championed, a leader who often seemed imaginative, innovative, and daring but whose foreign policy, hindered by a torpid bureaucracy and the president's own orthodoxies, was traditional, cautious, and not particularly effective. Writing on the Alliance for Progress and Latin America, for instance, Stephen Rabe declares that New Frontiersmen exaggerated their ability to promote change and "underestimated the daunting nature of Latin America's socioeconomic problems."⁶⁹ More than that, Rabe asserts, "through its recognition policy, internal security initiatives, and military and economic programs, the Administration demonstrably bolstered regimes and groups that were undemocratic, conservative, and frequently repressive."⁷⁰

As for the Middle East, Kennedy was the first American president to recognize Arab nationalism as a force independent of the Cold War. For a period of time he even engaged in a friendly correspondence with the foremost leader of the Arab world, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. But as Douglas Little has pointed out, traditional American support for Israel, the strength of the American Jewish community, ongoing concern about Soviet influence in the Middle East, and divisions within the Arab world itself, particularly following a coup in Yemen believed to have been instigated by

⁶⁹The Alliance for Progress has itself elicited a considerable literature. Its impact on Latin America is an issue that scholars have debated with considerable passion. According to Schlesinger, the alliance was, indeed, a major accomplishment, "channeling the energies of both public and private agencies as never before." See *A Thousand Days*, 660. Sorensen is more ambivalent, conceding that "reality did not match the rhetoric which flowed about the Alliance on both sides of the Rio Grande" but emphasizing its contribution to Latin America's economic growth. See *Kennedy*, 535–36. Similar views can be found in Lincoln Gordon, *A New Deal for Latin America: The Alliance for Progress* (Cambridge, MA, 1963); Herbert K. May, *Problems and Prospects for the Alliance for Progress: A Critical Examination* (New York, 1968); and Harvey S. Perloff, *Alliance for Progress: A Social Invention in the Making* (Baltimore, 1969). For the opposite view see Victor Alba, *Alliance without Allies: The Mythology of Progress in Latin America* (New York, 1965). For a more balanced view consult Jerome Levinson and Juan de Onis, *The Alliance that Lost Its Way: A Critical Report on the Alliance for Progress* (Chicago, 1970); and Abraham F. Lowenthal, "United States Policy toward Latin America: 'Liberal,' 'Radical,' and 'Bureaucratic' Perspectives," *Latin American Research Review* 35 (1973): 3–26. Even Schlesinger later criticized the alliance for its cumbersome bureaucracy. See Schlesinger, "The Alliance for Progress: A Retrospective," in *Latin America: The Search for a New International Role*, ed. Ronald G. Hellman and H. Jon Rosenbaum (New York, 1975), 57–92.

⁷⁰Stephen G. Rabe, "Controlling Revolutions: Latin America, the Alliance for Progress, and Cold War Anti-Communism," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 109–22. On many of these same points see also Paul J. Dosal, "Accelerating Dependent Development and Revolution: Nicaragua and the Alliance for Progress," *Inter-American Economic Affairs* 38 (Spring 1985): 75–96; and Joseph S. Tulchin, "The United States and Latin America in the 1960s," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 30 (Spring 1988): 1–36. Tulchin also adds that "as in all matters," style was so important to Kennedy "that a clear argument elegantly presented impressed him more than mountains of data and evidence presented in an indiscriminate fashion" (p. 14).

Nasser, undermined Kennedy's efforts at an "even-handed policy" and pushed Nasser closer to the Soviet Union.⁷¹

Kennedy also championed the cause of black nationalism in Africa. But according to Richard Mahoney, who gives him high marks for his African policy, the president did so at least in part to win and maintain the support of blacks in the United States. Africa became a "surrogate for the explosive subject of civil rights." Moreover, Kennedy's African policy was erratic; he was unwilling, for example, to oppose Portugal over its colony of Angola for fear of losing the American lease to the military complex in the Portuguese Azores. Mahoney acknowledges that as a result "the expectations [of Africans] proved far greater than the achievements" of Kennedy's African policy.⁷²

Kennedy's concern for the Third World was one reason why he endorsed the establishment of the Peace Corps, the concept of which originated with Hubert Humphrey and Congressman Henry Reuss of Wisconsin. But in a highly favorable account of the Peace Corps, which he terms Kennedy's "bold experiment," Gerald T. Rice points out that the Democratic candidate for president also supported its establishment because he needed an attractive campaign issue as the 1960 election drew to a close. Furthermore, the White House regarded the Peace Corps as an instrument of American foreign policy in the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union as much as an agency for economic development.⁷³

In addition to promising to reach out to the Third World more than his predecessor, Kennedy also talked about a "grand design" for Europe, by which he meant a greater sense of partnership between the United States and a united Western Europe. But by all accounts the grand design was never achieved. In part, this was due to the obstructionism of President Charles de Gaulle of France. But according to Frank Costigliola, it was also due to Kennedy's unwillingness to engage fully in the type of partnership with Europe that he professed to want. What he really wanted, Costigliola

⁷¹Douglas Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism," *Journal of American History* 75 (September 1988): 501-27; Mordechai Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel: Analysis and Documents* (Tel Aviv, 1983), esp. 14-16, 22-30; William J. Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy toward Egypt* (Albany, 1985), 121-49. See also Little, "From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed: Seeking Order in the Middle East," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 156-77; and James Goode, "Reforming Iran during the Kennedy Years," *Diplomatic History* 15 (Winter 1991): 13-29. For Kennedy's policy toward other parts of the Third World consult Ronald J. Nurse, "Critic of Colonialism: JFK and Algerian Independence," *The Historian* 39 (February 1977): 307-26; B. J. Jain, "The Kennedy Administration's Policy towards Colonialism: A Case Study of GOA, 1961 in the Indian Context," *Indian Journal of American Studies* 14 (July 1984): 145-54; B. J. B. Krupadanam, "US Food Aid to India and Its Implications," *ibid.*, 169-83; and Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 221-54.

⁷²Richard Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York, 1984), 24-33, 203-22, 248. See also Thomas J. Noer, "New Frontiers and Old Priorities in Africa," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 253-83; and F. Usgboaja Ohaesbulam, "Containment in Africa: From Truman to Reagan," *TransAfrica Forum* 6 (Fall 1988): 7-33.

⁷³Gerald T. Rice, *The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps* (Notre Dame, 1985); Gary May, "Passing the Torch and Lighting Fires: The Peace Corps," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 284-316; Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedy and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York, 1980). Wofford helped organize the Peace Corps and served for two years as Kennedy's special assistant for civil rights.

maintains, was to turn Western Europe into a “unified, faithful helpmate” of the United States. While former Undersecretary of State George Ball, one of the administration’s strongest proponents of the grand design, does not take such a harsh, revisionist view of Kennedy, he makes clear his own regret that Kennedy never really embraced the Atlantic partnership he advocated.⁷⁴

Closely tied to Kennedy’s grand design was his foreign economic policy, predicated on trade expansion and a resolution of the nation’s balance-of-payments problem. As William Borden has written, the president hoped that increased exports would “be the key to domestic growth, curing the balance of payments deficit, and cementing the alliance with Western Europe.” The president’s efforts to liberalize world trade soon ran into the wall of European agricultural protectionism. But according to Borden, an even more fundamental flaw in Kennedy’s foreign economic policy was his failure to adjust the nation’s international financial and monetary policy to reflect the weakened state of the American dollar. Instead, he pressured the nation’s European trading partners and allies to defend the reserve status of the dollar, not only angering and embarrassing them, but also binding “his successors to this defensive strategy, and [bringing] the entire [international monetary] system down with the dollar in 1971 and 1972.” In sum, what Kennedy did, according to Borden, was to “launch an aggressive but ultimately futile defense of American economic hegemony.”⁷⁵

In Eastern Europe, Kennedy promised an activist policy that, in contrast to Eisenhower’s policy, would try to weaken Soviet influence in the region through cultural agreements and flexible aid and trade policies. As a result, Eastern Europeans greeted his election with great enthusiasm. But A. Paul Kubricht shows that reality outran promise. In Czechoslovakia, for example, “Kennedy’s willingness to use aid and trade policy to create leverage for the United States . . . was non-existent.” What applied to Czechoslovakia also applied to most of the other Eastern European nations. Notwithstanding his campaign promises, the president was simply unwilling to challenge Congress on such a sensitive issue as trade and aid to Eastern bloc countries. Because of the escalation in “the ideological confrontation between East and West” that took place during his administration, the president’s own interest in strengthening economic and cultural ties with Eastern Europe also diminished considerably.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Frank Costigliola, “The Pursuit of Atlantic Community: Nuclear Arms, Dollars, and Berlin,” in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*, 24–56; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*.

⁷⁵William S. Borden, “Defending Hegemony: American Foreign Economic Policy,” in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*, 57–85. On Kennedy’s trade policy see also Thomas W. Zeiler, “Free Trade Politics and Diplomacy: John F. Kennedy and Textiles,” *Diplomatic History* 11 (Spring 1987): 127–42; Alan P. Dobson, “The Kennedy Administration and Economic Warfare against Communism,” *International Affairs* 64 (Autumn 1988): 599–616; and John W. Evans, *The Kennedy Round in American Trade Policy: The Twilight of the GATT?* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 11–16.

⁷⁶A. Paul Kubricht, “United States-Czechoslovak Relations during the Kennedy Administration,” *East European Quarterly* 22 (September 1989): 355–64; idem, “Politics and Foreign Policy: A Brief Look at the Kennedy Administration’s Eastern European Diplomacy,” *Diplomatic History* 11 (Winter 1987): 55–65. See also Joseph F. Harrington, “Rumanian-American Relations during the Kennedy Administration,” *East European Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1984): 215–36; idem, “American-Romanian Relations in the 1960’s,” *The New England Social*

In summary, then, Kennedy's role as world leader defies easy description or analysis. The literature on his foreign policy has suggested a person with two very different sides, torn by contradictory impulses. On the one hand, there was the Kennedy of Camelot, a worldly, perceptive, strong, and judicious leader exuding confidence and charisma, deeply affected by the early crises of his administration, recognizing the rapid changes taking place in the world, and responding with a New Frontier of foreign policy initiatives. Then there was the darker Kennedy, a shallow, cynical, passionless, and vainglorious politician, a traditional Cold Warrior, a weak and vulnerable president not always in control of his own foreign policy, and for all these reasons, an extremely dangerous man to have in the Oval Office. If the first image is the one of Kennedy apologists and the second of the early revisionists, the most recent literature suggests a more complex figure whose personality embraced elements of both images, but more of the latter than the former.

Studies Bulletin 43 (1985–86): 18–56; and Stephen S. Kaplan, "United States Aid to Poland, 1957–1964: Concerns, Objectives and Obstacles," *Western Political Quarterly* 28 (March 1975): 147–66.