

Perspective

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Frederick, Md. — John F. Kennedy has been in the news more than at any time since the 25th anniversary of his assassination. Controversy continues to swirl around "JFK," the Oliver Stone film that has reignited conspiracy theories.

And the release of letters between Mr. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the height of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis shows the young president as more than a match for his older Russian counterpart.

From all this media attention, there arises a compelling need to reflect on the ramifications of Mr. Kennedy's death. What if he had lived to complete two terms? Would much have been different in American life since then?

In the aftermath of the missile crisis, Mr. Kennedy began a dramatic shift away from his previous Cold Warrior posturings and policies.

To appreciate this change, it is useful to compare the text of his inaugural address, harsh and bellicose, with the conciliatory and peace-oriented language of his speech at American University in June 1963.

Two months later, when he reminded the American people that "we are all mortal," the United States and the Soviet Union signed a partial nuclear test ban treaty.

Other similar initiatives were set into motion in the final months before Dallas. Mr. Kennedy was serious about extending diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China, and he authorized back-channel discussions with representatives of Fidel Castro's Cuba with the possible view of normalizing relations.

Mr. Kennedy showed every outward sign during his last 18 months that he was open to new perspectives and was not afraid to change his mind.

However, looming in the background and threatening to spike these hopeful goals, was the intractable problem of Vietnam. All of Mr. Kennedy's efforts to reduce Cold War tensions and minimize the risks of future nuclear confrontations hinged on some hard choices he faced with this Southeast Asian nation.

By 1963, the president had committed more than 16,000 military advisers to South Vietnam to prevent its conquest by the Communists of the North.

By autumn, it was apparent that the "adviser war" was not working. Some of the president's top aides were urging that he escalate U.S. involvement by introducing combat units. Instead, on Oct. 5, 1963,

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If Kennedy had not been killed . . .

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Mr. Kennedy authorized the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam. On Oct. 11, he signed the then top secret National Security Memorandum 263, which authorized increased training of South Vietnamese forces so they could shoulder the duties of U.S. soldiers.

Was this the beginning of a U.S. disengagement from Vietnam? Some close members of the Kennedy circle insist that Mr. Kennedy was on the verge of changing his Vietnam policy before the trip to Dallas.

If Mr. Kennedy had resolved not to expand the war by committing U.S. ground troops and was looking for a way out of Vietnam, then Dallas changed history.

The events that immediately followed Dallas are telling. On Sunday, Nov. 24, in a private briefing session at the White House, President Lyndon B. Johnson made the first of a series of fateful decisions: to find a military solution to the war.

The first casualties of this Nov. 24 decision were the cancellation of the withdrawal of the 1,000 troops and the failure to implement plans for a speed-up of more withdrawal of forces. All of Mr. Kennedy's other initiatives, including any prospects of strengthening detente with the Soviet Union, were either scrapped outright or pushed aside as the war planners in Washington searched for the right combination of military measures to win in Vietnam.

In time, Mr. Johnson learned that America could not simultaneously wage a

foreign war and carry out social reform at home.

To be sure, the economic and social issues that surfaced in the 1960s were independent of the Vietnam War, but had Mr. Kennedy lived, been re-elected and ended our involvement in Vietnam, the political system could have faced these home-front challenges in a more compassionate and gentler political atmosphere.

1968 could have been a year of comparative domestic tranquility. Instead, the nation was subjected to hammer blow after hammer blow — the war in the streets, the "Days of Rage" in Chicago and a spate of sickening political assassinations.

It is painful to recall that in 1968, before they, too, were cut down by assassins' bullets, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy urged America to unbind her sons from Asia and begin to bind her wounds at home.

The death of Bobby Kennedy robbed the American people of a chance to vote for a genuine peace candidate. Instead, we got Richard M. Nixon, and four more years of war.

The ultimate legacy of Dallas is chilling: If a president can be gunned down in public and his foreign-policy initiatives quickly repudiated, and if our government of laws failed in its duty to faithfully investigate this highest form of treason, then that political system invited the massive abuse of presidential powers that history books now refer to as "Watergate." □