Further Evidence

To the Editor:

Historians and pundits criticize the movie "J.F.K." on the grounds that it plays loose with the facts. On the subject at the very heart of the debate — John F. Kennedy's Vietnam policy — they play loosely with the facts themselves. They claim that because Kennedy appointees like Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and others advised Lyndon Johnson to send combat troops to Vietnam, that Kennedy, had he lived, would have sent them in too.

Sound convincing? Perhaps, but it is so far from the truth. Those same men also advised Kennedy to send in the combat troops, but that was something Kennedy always refused to do. Kennedy turned down combat troops, not when the decision was clouded by ambiguities and contradictions in reports from the battlefield, but when the battle was unequivocally desperate, when all concerned agreed that Vietnam's fate hung in the balance, and when his principal advisers told him that vital U.S. interests were at stake.

A highly respected general, Bruce Palmer, who in 1963 was a senior officer in the Pentagon, believes Kennedy would not have committed major U.S. forces to Vietnam "and that quite a different situation would have unfolded" had he lived. Another much-decorated general, James Gavin, wrote in The Boston Globe in 1968: "Having discussed military affairs with [Kennedy] often and in detail for 15 years, I know he was totally opposed to the introduction of combat troops in Southeast Asia."

Kennedy's plan to withdraw from Vietnam after his reelection has also been put in doubt in the current crossfire. Some, like Stanley Karnow, claim his order to withdraw 1,000 U.S. advisers was a gimmick. Others, such as Leslie H. Gelb (column, Jan. 6) say the order was a real plan but based on Kennedy's optimism about the war. Still others say the withdrawal order was simply a device to pressure South Vietnamese President Diem to make political reforms.

The record suggests otherwise. Recently declassified documents reveal Kennedy ordered the withdrawal not be raised with Diem as part of the pressures being applied to him. They show Kennedy was privy to intelligence that exposed optimism about the war to be unfounded. The idea that the withdrawal was a public relations ploy does not square with Kennedy's instructions to keep it secret.

Publicly Kennedy made statements unsupportive of withdrawal, but privately talked about his plans to withdraw. What did this mean? His secret implementation of withdrawal suggests Kennedy was feinting right while moving left — not the reverse.

Looking at both sides of "J.F.K." is unsettling: the wound of Vietnam is bad enough, but the thought that it might not have happened had Kennedy lived hurts worse. Yet we must deal with it. The facts are that President Kennedy was withdrawing from Vietnam at the time of his murder. It is crucial that we understand the record instead of using it as a shuttlecock in this debate. To do otherwise trivializes not only Kennedy's life, but also the price our nation paid for his death.

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Odenton, Md., Jan. 12, 1992

The writer, a teacher of Asian history and author of the forthcoming "J.F.K. and Vietnam," was a consultant on "J.F.K.," the film.