Mr. Philip Geyelin
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Dear Mr. Geyelin,

"Kennedy and the Revision of History" is fine. I'm glad to see it and thank you for it.

You say, "What Kennedy would have done about Vietnam is unknowable." I think you are wrong and don't know or forgot what he did do. It should be in the Post's morgue. He had the Pentagon make a re-evaluation of our involvement and just before he was killed the Post carried about a stick of type reporting the release, which said we could begin withdrawing our advisers. A few days after he was killed there was about another stick of type in which the Pentagon is reported as saying that further re-evaluation disclosed that the earlier statement was optimistic. The rest is known, alas. In about 1967 I interviewed Genreal James Gavin at the ABA annual convention at the Shoreham for a book-and-author radio show. He confirmed that Kennedy had called his generals in and told them that political problems are not susceptible of military solutions and that we were withdrawing. One plane load did get back before he was assassinated. I believe that from this we do know, or can, but don't remember or didn't know because the two statements got so little play.

You also ask, "Why this insistence on trying to give even deeper meaning - well beyond what the available evidence will sustain -to this one, violent, hateful act?" One reason is because the assassination of any president, regardless of what the assassin or assins intended, has the effect of a coup d'etat.

I suggest also that you do not have the remotest notion of what the "available" evidence is. One reason is because papers like the Post have refused to report it when it became "available" through efforts other than the papers made. By use of FOIA, as I'm sure George Lardner will confirm to you, I've obtained, which frequently meant forced the dislosure of, perhaps a third of a million pages of previously withheld records. Any serious examination of them leaves it beyond question that the crime was never officially investigated and was never intended to be investigated. The sole effort was to make Oswald's lone guilt appear to be credible. I don't want to burden you but I can xerox perhaps a dozen pages of FBI records that will illustrate this plus one I got from the Department.

I believe that these records also leave it beyond reasonable question that the crime was beyond the capability of any one man and thus was the end product of a conspiracy and that had he not been killed Oswald could not have been convicted. If, indeed, tried.

These may appear to be extreme comments to one whose knowledge comes from what the papers carried but I do assure you they are not exaggerations. I suggest that this is a reason for trying to go "deeper," as I have for 25 years in what I think serves the nation's interest. I'm sorry thqt the papers won't mention any of this or the felonious misconduct of the government to prevent it. This is undenied in court.

If you think further about Kennedy's presidency and the revisionists, I suggest you'll find it was a quite different presidency after the Cuba missile crisis. I had intended this to be my third book and had it researched. When I could not get to it I let a then college student have much of it, including these two brief stories, for a thesis he was writing. I'm sure he'll remember it. He is now general counsel for Lucas films. His name is Howard Roffman. After law school he was clerk to a federal appeals court judge in Florida.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg

Harold Weisberg

Philip Geyelin

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Kennedy and the Revision of History

In last week's flickering flashbacks, we heard all over again that John F. Kennedy was witty, wicked, wise and ill-advised. Nothing beautiful or bad was left unsaid. And, yet, somehow nothing seemed to be settled.

It was as if after a quarter of a century the brutal, abrupt ending of the Kennedy presidency is still not accepted. Its historical significance, accordingly, is still not understood. Why this insistence on trying to give ever deeper sociological, political and historical meaning—well beyond what available evidence will sustain—to this one violent, hateful act? Why, indeed, do we celebrate the birth of two slain heroes, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, while commemorating the anniversary of the slaying of Kennedy?

Much of it, I think, has to do with what has befallen us since 1963 and with our freedom to wallow in contemplation of the alternatives history so conveniently cannot disclose. What if, we ask ourselves, Kennedy had served out two terms? Would we now be wringing our hands over an "America in decline?"

With no way of knowing, there's no harm in wistful conjecture—up to a point. But when it hardens into revisionist history, it badly serves not only the memory of John F. Kennedy, but our understanding of ourselves and of the assorted misadventures of the past tumultuous 25 years.

Surely something of consequence was lost in Dallas—a political golden age, for many, if not exactly a Camelot. But it was not the great historical "turning point" in the sense that many would have us believe. Kennedy's death, a single "random event," did not "prove" that "a world we once thought manageable cannot be brought to order," as columnist Richard Cohen seemed to be arguing the other day—surely not when you think of what we were later put through: the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Lyndon Johnson's despairing of his own Vietnam strategy, all in 1968; Nixon driven from office in disgrace in 1974; the final Vietnam ignominy in 1975; America held hostage in 1979.

Still less can it be said that Kennedy, as Cohen puts it, "personified a self-deluded and self-intoxicated America." Or that one rhetorical flourish ("pay any price") in his inaugural address "could only resonate in a country that felt it was master of its fate."

To believe all that, you have to presume that Kennedy believed it. That means not hearing the rest of the inaugural address with its grim summons to "a long twilight struggle" in defense of freedom "in its hour of maximum danger." You have to forget how little mastery Kennedy had of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in the early months of his presidency and also his later powerlessness to do more than hurl eloquent words at the Berlin Wall. You have to forget, as well, the sober restraint in what was to become by mid-1963 the dominant theme of his foreign policy: a world to be made safe not for freedom or democracy but for "diversity." Not to nit-pick, but Kennedy did not see the Peace Corps as "bright and idealistic Dale Carnegies," setting out to "win friends and influence people in the Third World," as Cohen seems to see it. Kennedy saw it as a modest effort to teach simple things to simple people largely unreached by massive conventional U.S. economic and military aid.

Again not to quibble, Kennedy did not think the Green Berets by themselves could "set things right in Vietnam." On the contrary he said in September 1963 that "in the final analysis it is their war. . . . We can send our men out there to advise them, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam." More than once, he rejected recommendations from trusted advisers to commit organized U.S. combat forces to the war.

What Kennedy would have done about Vietnam is unknowable. What we know is that in the year after his death, Congress rushed through, with only two dissenting Senate votes, a Tonkin Gulf Resolution that Lyndon Johnson later used as a blank check to expand our Vietnam involvement beyond Kennedy's wildest imaginings. Years later it was hardly noticed at first when Ronald Reagan led us into another quagmire in Lebanon. If you doubt our continuing capacity for self-intoxication, consider the chest-thumping, flag-waving popular response to the Libyan raid and the assault on Grenada, and the absence of any public clamor for serious debate in last fall's campaign on the budgetary crisis.

If American was "self-deluded" in the Kennedy years, in short, it was not of Kennedy's doing—and it did not end in Dallas. Far from exemplifying a nation that thought itself "master of its fate," Kennedy had come painfully to realize by November 1963 what Cohen suggests we have only lately come to realize—that "our reach has exceeded our grasp."