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What if JFK had lived?

Evidence hints he was shifting hawkish stance

By Gerald D. McKnight
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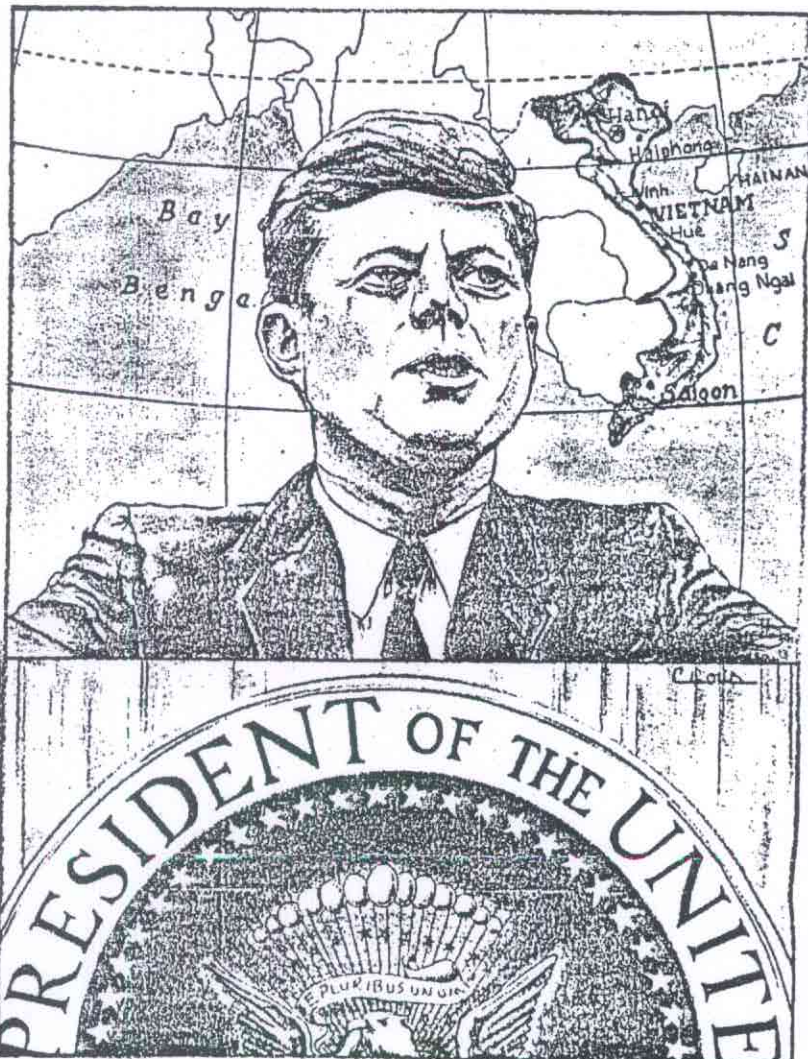
With the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy approaching, there is a compelling need to reflect back on the ramifications of Dallas. What if the assassin (or assassins) had missed and Kennedy lived to complete two terms?

Would much have been different in American life since then? While there has been much speculation about the assassination and the subsequent fundamentally flawed investigation into "The Crime of the Century" by the Warren Commission, there has not been much serious discussion of Kennedy's unfulfilled presidency.

There is a hard kernel of truth in the observation that the American presidency is a job one learns by being and doing. For JFK, his greatest test and his highest grades came in October 1962 with the Cuban missile crisis. The October crisis was a crash course in presidential leadership and crisis management. This brush with nuclear disaster left both principals in this big power square-off badly shaken. In his first letter to Kennedy after the settlement of the crisis, Khrushchev remarked that at its height he could "smell flesh burning." The Soviet premier apparently made it excruciatingly clear that he never wanted to stare into the nuclear abyss again.

Kennedy, too, in the aftermath of the missile crisis, registered a dramatic shift away from his previous cold-warrior posturings and policies. To really appreciate this shift, it is useful to compare the text of his inaugural address, harsh and bellicose, with the conciliatory and peace-oriented language of the president's June, 1963, speech at American University.

Two months after the speech, when JFK reminded his listeners that "we are all mortal," the United States and the Soviet Union signed a partial test-ban treaty, ending testing of nuclear weapons



Post illustration by Marla Cloud

in outer space. Other initiatives consistent with the Kennedy of the American University speech were discussed, and some were set in motion, during the few months left before Nov. 22.

Kennedy was serious about extending diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China, and he had authorized back-channel discussions with representatives of Castro's Cuba with a possible view toward normalizing relations if he were re-elected. JFK showed every out-

ward sign during his last 18 months in office that he was open to new perspectives and was not afraid to change his mind.

However, looming in the background and threatening to spike all these presidential initiatives was the intractable problem of Vietnam. All of JFK's efforts to reduce cold war tensions and minimize the risks of future nuclear confron-

Please see JFK, C-7

JFK:

Evidence suggests he was changing

From C-1

tations hinged on some hard choices he faced with Vietnam. By 1963, Kennedy had committed more than 16,000 military advisers to that Southeast Asian country to deny the South to the Vietnamese revolutionary forces.

By the autumn of 1963, the adviser war was not working. Some of the president's top advisers were urging that he escalate U.S. involvement by introducing combat units into the struggle. Yet on Oct. 5, 1963, JFK authorized the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam. This plan was made public on Nov. 20, when an accelerated withdrawal plan was also authorized by the White House.

Was this the beginning of an American disengagement from Vietnam? Some close members of the Kennedy circle and others who shared the president's confidence, like Gen. James Gavin, Kenneth O'Donnell, Navy Undersecretary Paul Fay, and Sens. Wayne Morse and Mike Mansfield, all insisted that Kennedy was on the verge of changing his Vietnam policy before the fateful November trip.

If Kennedy was resolved not to expand the war by committing U.S. ground troops and was looking for a way out of Vietnam, then his death changed the history of the 1960s and perhaps the history of this nation. The events that immediately followed Dallas are telling. On Sunday, Nov. 24, in a private briefing session at the White House, Lyndon Johnson made the first of a series of fateful decisions: to find a military solution to the war in Vietnam. Two days after Dallas, Johnson started the nation down that steep slide into the long, dark night of Vietnam.

The first casualties of this Nov. 24 decision were the cancellation of the troop withdrawal troops and the failure to implement plans for a speed-up of force withdrawal.

All the other JFK 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, Johnson learned (as the last Southern President, Woodrow Wilson, learned before him) that this nation could not simultaneously wage a foreign war and carry out reform at home. Governmental commitment and funds needed to prosecute the war at home against poverty were diverted and sucked dry by the Asian war. To be sure, the economic and social issues that surfaced in the 1960s were independent of the Vietnam War, but had Kennedy lived to be re-elected and moved to liquidate that war, the political system could have faced these pressing challenges in a more compassionate and gentler political atmosphere.

Had JFK lived to fulfill his presidency and been re-elected in 1964 — a very strong possibility, considering his own political talents and the stubborn habit of 20th-century Americans to re-elect their presidents — 1968 could have been a year of comparative domestic tranquility in which a successful president turned over the Oval Office to another peace-oriented member of his own party.

Instead, the nation was subjected to hammer blow after hammer blow — the war in the streets, ghetto rebellions, the "Days of Rage" in Richard Daley's Chicago and a spate of sickening political assassinations. In retrospect, it is astonishing that the national psyche survived at all intact.

Instead of peace, the revival of confidence in our political institutions, and a reduction in cold war tensions, the nation got Richard Nixon, four more years of Asian war, and the nightmare of Watergate. The dual traumas of Dallas and Watergate are related in an integral way: 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 investigate faithfully this highest form of treason, then that political system also invited that massive abuse of presidential powers we call Watergate.

McKnight is a professor of history and chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland.