

Kennedy and Vietnam

On Oct. 11, 1963, President Kennedy issued top-secret National Security Action Memorandum 263. In it he called for stepped-up training for South Vietnamese forces so they could take over the duties of U.S. forces, thus permitting the bulk of Americans to withdraw by 1965.

Based mainly on that document, Oliver Stone's "JFK" movie asks us to believe one of the great historical "ifs" of the century: that if the young President had survived through a second term, the U.S. would have been spared the ordeal of full-scale war in Vietnam.

It is fair for Mr. Stone or anyone to take up that historical sword. But on a matter that remains so raw for so many Americans, it is gross of him to distort the record, and foolish to be so confident of decisions J.F.K. would have made in circumstances he never had to face.

Stone makes swaggering assertions about mighty unknowns. First, he maintains that J.F.K. was going to abandon South Vietnam to a Communist takeover. Second, he tells us that right-wingers (from the F.B.I. and C.I.A. to the Mafia) believed this, and killed the President to put Lyndon Johnson in the White House and insure that the U.S. would stay the course in Vietnam. I am competent only to address the first point.

To begin with, NSAM 263 was grounded in one of the few periods of genuine optimism about the war. So J.F.K. had some basis for believing the war might be won soon and that U.S. forces could be withdrawn — without a Communist victory. Put another way, J.F.K. might never have issued the directive if he had thought it would mean losing the war.

While some officials took the directive at face value, most saw it as a Kennedy bureaucratic scheme to regain control of the leaping American presence in South Vietnam — up from about 700 in 1961 to almost 17,000 in late 1963. The idea being to keep force levels from going up, order them to go down.

Most officials also viewed the withdrawal memo as part of a White House ploy to scare President Diem of South Vietnam into making political reforms. Without such reforms, many officials believed, the war they thought so vital would be lost. That is precisely how the State Department instructed the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to understand NSAM 263.

The clarifying event was, of course, the coup against Diem and his powerful brother-in-law, Ngô Dinh Nhu, on

Nov. 1. The coup was fully supported, if not inspired, by the U.S. in good part because of the fear that Nhu was conspiring with North Vietnam to "neutralize" South Vietnam. In other words, the Kennedy team felt that Diem and Nhu might be selling out to the Communists. Whatever J.F.K.'s precise intentions, the removal and killing of Diem profoundly increased America's political responsibility for the war.

As for Mr. Kennedy's underlying thinking about the war, that is a murky matter. In the last weeks of his life, he gave sharply diverse signals as befits a President trying to keep open his options, especially before an election. To CBS he said: "In the final analysis, it is [the South Vietnamese] who have to win or lose this struggle." Then he added, "But I

Oliver Stone's version vs. the tortured reality.

don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. . . ." To NBC he said he believed "the domino theory," whereby the fall of Saigon to Communism would lead to the collapse of America's position throughout Asia.

Brushing aside these complications, some have argued that Mr. Kennedy had gained self-confidence from successes like the Cuban missile crisis and would not have felt the need to prove himself in Vietnam — as did Lyndon Johnson. Soon after the assassination, Ted Sorensen painted a more tortured picture of J.F.K.'s thinking. "The struggle could well be, he thought, this nation's severest test of endurance and patience," the Kennedy intimate wrote. "He was simply going to weather it out, a nasty, untidy mess to which there was no other acceptable solution. . . ."

These words carry great weight. They echoed the private soul-searching of President Eisenhower and foreshadowed almost precisely the documented dilemmas of Presidents Johnson and Nixon. These torments are not to be trifled with by Oliver Stone, or anyone, however many men shot J.F.K. for whatever lunatic reasons on that tragic November day. □

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