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JFK and Vietnam In Oliver Stone's Eyes

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 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 Stone 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 Kennedy would have made in circumstances he never had to face.

Through Oliver's Looking Glass

Stone makes swaggering assertions about mighty unknowns. First, he maintains that JFK was going to abandon South Vietnam to a Communist takeover. Second, he tells us that right-wingers believed this, and killed the president to put Lyndon Johnson in the White House and ensure 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 So JFK had some basis for believing the war might be won soon and that U.S. forces could be withdrawn — without a Communist victory.



While some officials took the directive at face value, most saw it as a Kennedy bureaucratic scheme to regain control of the growing American presence in South Vietnam.

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 would be lost.

The clarifying event was, of course, the coup against Diem and his powerful brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, on November 1. The coup was fully support-

ed, 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.

JFK on Vietnam

As for Kennedy's underlying thinking about the war, that is a murky matter. In the last weeks of his life, he gave diverse signals as befits a president trying to keep open his options. 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 don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake."

Ted Sorensen has painted a more tortured picture of JFK'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 the dilemmas of Presidents Johnson and Nixon. These torments are not to be trifled with by Oliver Stone, or anyone, however many men shot JFK for whatever lunatic reasons on that tragic November day.

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