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The Free Press

FORMERLY BROOKLYN FREE PRESS

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Publishing since 1983

FEBRUARY, 1992

25¢

February

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History, Gershwin might have written, is a sometimes thing. In the case of the Kennedy assassination, it is sometimes less than that. In no other area is this more apparent than in the mutated history that a number of conspiracy theorists have offered of President Kennedy's running of the Vietnam War. We have all heard the stories of John Kennedy the Peacemaker and how he was going to pull US forces out of Vietnam. At the risk of sounding heretical, it must be said: The story is a lie.

John Kennedy entered the White House with the promise — clearly stated in his inaugural address — that the US “shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty” and he meant to meet those foes with “flexible response” and “counter-insurgency warfare,” the latest in new-wave war-making. What was forgotten in the post-assassination mourning was Kennedy the Cold Warrior.

After the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy vowed to take a stand in Vietnam. In April, 1961 — the same month as the Cuban invasion — the President began the escalation in Vietnam and part of that escalation was the increase of US advisors and additional mobile Special Forces teams. Kennedy saw the challenge in Southeast Asia and said “now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place.” The day after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, US military personnel in Southeast Asia were ordered to wear their uniforms for the first time. By early 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the request of the President initiated the Military Assistance Command Vietnam.

When Kennedy took office, there were 800 US “advisors” in South Vietnam, and during his three-year term that number climbed to over 16,000. Kennedy continually lied to the press about the role of the

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advisors and insisted they were non-combatants. But his role in the prosecution of the Vietnam War was deeper than the escalation of troops. Under the Kennedy administration the use of fragmentation bombs were first used, the free-fire zone became a reality, napalm became a standard response, and the use and development of chemical and biological weapons went into overdrive. In 1961 John Kennedy authorized the use of Agent Orange and other defoliants, and by 1962 BZ, an hallucinogenic spray, was authorized. In 1959 chemical warfare accounted for \$50 to \$75 million of the Defense Department budget. By 1963 the number had reached \$300 million. Thereafter, the budget for chemical-biological warfare was classified.

Kennedy had been warned against a land war in Asia by Charles DeGaulle, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower and others, and his reluctance to introduce US Marines in to Vietnam was shared by his own military advisors. Up until 1963, US involvement in Vietnam could have gone either way, and while it was still possible to contain the commitment to the so-called advisors, the situation changed. What changed policy in Vietnam in 1963 wasn't the assassination of Kennedy. It was the assassination of the premier of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo

Dinh Diem.

Jim Marr's *Crossfire* (on which Stone's *JFK* is based in part) downplays the significance of the coup and Kennedy's involvement in it. Jim Garrison in *On the Trail of the Assassins* (the other book *JFK* is based on) blames the assassination of Diem on the CIA and fails to mention that the coup was a policy decision of the New Frontier. Oliver Stone's *JFK* doesn't even mention it. Kennedy may have been naive enough to believe that Diem might escape with his life, but Kennedy was the driving force behind the coup. Of this there is no doubt. When Diem and his brother were machine-gunned to death in the back of an armored personnel carrier, the US Embassy in Saigon became the de facto seat of government. Within two years of the coup against Diem, three other successful coups would take place in an

The theory that the military-industrial complex killed Kennedy so that the war in Vietnam could be pursued for power and profit is as gutless and despicable as the Warren Commission Report.

attempt to find a government the US deemed acceptable. Diem's assassination, coming just three weeks before Kennedy's, sealed our fate in Vietnam. Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, the author of *The Secret Team*, and scores of articles on Vietnam, the Kennedy assassination, and the CIA (and who is the model for Donald Sutherland's character Mr. X in *JFK*) has for years pushed the theory that Kennedy was killed by the military because the President wanted to withdraw US troops from Vietnam. That alleged intention has been cited by any number of subscribers to the military-killed-the-President theory. It was Prouty who became one of Stone's star advisors — and one of his major embarrassments. During the filming of *JFK* it was revealed that Prouty was on the board of directors of Liberty Lobby, the racist, neo-Nazi organization that considers Hitler's plan to exterminate Jews to be a hoax and worries about the

mongrelization of white America. Bizarre as it may be, Oliver Stone continues to support Prouty.

What Prouty fails to point out is that Kennedy believed the war would be over because the war would be won. What Kennedy — and his "best and brightest advisers" — failed to see was the neo-colonial aspects of the coup and that although Diem was an embarrassment there was no reasonable replacement.

That a phased withdrawal was being considered has been common knowledge since the Pentagon Papers were published. In October of 1963, Kennedy signed National Security Action Memoranda 263, which implemented an unannounced phased withdrawal of 1,000 US advisors from Vietnam and approved the recommendations of the US military high command. Those recommendations, drawn up by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor, essentially said that the war was progressing well but warned that Diem's political repression in Vietnam could change the "present favorable military trends."

The day after Kennedy was killed, Presi-



dent Johnson signed national Security Action Memoranda 273. What NSAM 273 said was that the US was still committed to the defense of Vietnam and the 1,000 man withdrawal would continue. But events in Vietnam after the assassination of Diem deteriorated and slid into deep decline and the high angle of the slide wasn't immediately apparent. The "strategic hamlets" program, which had worked in Indonesia, failed completely in Vietnam. The Vietnamese high command were in a state bordering on paranoia and the Viet Cong were politically exploiting the obvious hand of the US in the coup d'etat. To make matters worse, that was the good news. The bad news was that both NSAM and NSAM 273 were, as they say at the US State Department, "overtaken by events."

What eventually drove the escalation in Vietnam was congressional approval of combat forces via the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. That the events in the Gulf of Tonkin incident were manipulated to create a response that dwarfed the threat is no longer seriously disputed. That the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was directly the result of Kennedy Administration policy is com-

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