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# Kennedy Would Have Stood by Vietnam in '65

To the Editor:

"How Kennedy Viewed the Vietnam Conflict" by Roger Hilsman (letter, Jan. 20) calls for elucidation.

While neither President Kennedy — nor any other senior responsible official at the time — wanted to Americanize the Vietnam War, the Kennedy Administration nevertheless made the one fateful decision in 1963 that did precisely that.

It was the decision, whose principal proponent was Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman, to encourage the coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem that took place in early November 1963 and resulted in the the assassination of the Vietnamese President and his brother. That decision — though not the assassination — was approved by President Kennedy over the objections of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and John McCone, the Central Intelligence Agency director.

Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr., who preceded Henry Cabot Lodge at the Embassy in Saigon, also opposed the coup. The facts on this are on the public record in documents released by the State Department under the Freedom of Information Act and described in detail by the historian Ellen Hammer in the book "A Death in November."

This decision created a political vacuum in the Republic of Vietnam that could not possibly be filled by the United States or any other outsider. It reduced the choices available to the Johnson Administration, which succeeded Kennedy less than three weeks after the Saigon coup, to surrendering South Vietnam to Hanoi or Americanizing the war. Neither the domestic nor the international political situation made a surrender of Vietnam to the Communists a viable option for President Johnson.

After the Bay of Pigs disaster, with which the Kennedy Administration began, and the weakness Kennedy exhibited in his dealings with Nikita S. Khrushchev on Berlin, surrender in Indochina would have been even less of an option for Kennedy, had he lived. In light of the responsibility Washington assumed in promoting the overthrow of Diem, the notion that Kennedy would or could have walked away from Vietnam by 1965 is almost as much nonsense as Oliver Stone's falsification of history in the movie "J.F.K."

WOLF LEHMANN

Rockville, Md., Jan. 27, 1992

*The writer was deputy chief of mission of the United States Embassy in Saigon in 1974 and 1975.*

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## Feared China's Role

To the Editor:

Further to the discussion raised by the Oliver Stone movie "J.F.K.":

No one can be confident what a President who died in November 1963 would have done in the quite particular circumstances of July 1965. Moreover, there is bound to be something self-serving as well as unscientific in any such projection. I limit myself to four statements of fact.

• Representative John F. Kennedy's view of Asia, June 1952-February 1961: Down to the autumn of 1951, Kennedy's view of the world was narrowly focused on Stalin's threat to Western Europe. He did not at first vote for President Truman's Point Four. A trip through the Middle East and Asia late in 1951 changed his perspective. In the House on June 28, 1952, he said this about Asia:

"Mr. Chairman, last year when this bill was before the House, I offered a motion to cut technical assistance. But this fall I had an opportunity to visit Southeast Asia, and I think we would be making a tremendous mistake to cut this money out of the bill. Here is an area, Asia, where the Communists are attempting to seize control ... where the tide of events has been moving against us. The Communists have a chance of seizing all of Asia in the next five or six years."

In that period, he also argued for Vietnamese independence from the French and economic and military aid for independent South Vietnam.

Christophe Vorlet

• President Kennedy's view of Vietnam in July 1961: In the summer of 1961, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor and I were working with the President on this matter. Our joint memorandum to the President dated Aug. 4 said:

"As we understand your position: you would wish to see every avenue of diplomacy exhausted before we accept the necessity for either positioning United States forces on the Southeast Asian mainland or fighting there; you would wish to see the possibilities of economic assistance fully exploited to strengthen the Southeast Asian position; you would wish to see indigenous forces used to the maximum if fighting should occur; and that should we have to fight, we should use air and sea power to the maximum and engage minimum United States forces

on the Southeast Asian mainland."

On this basis the Taylor mission went to Southeast Asia in October.

• President Kennedy's view of Asia in December 1961: The following passage from my book "The Diffusion of Power". (1972) sets out President Kennedy's view of Southeast Asia in relation to Asia as a whole, the only time I heard him make such a statement in private:

"He said if we walked away from Southeast Asia, the Communist takeover would produce a debate in the United States more acute than that over the loss of China. Unlike Truman with China or Eisenhower in 1954, he would be violating a treaty commitment to the area. The upshot would be—a rise and convergence of left- and right-wing isolationism that could affect commitments in Europe as well as in Asia. Under these circumstances, Khrushchev and Mao could not refrain from acting to exploit the apparent shift in the balance of power. If Burma fell, Chinese power would be on the Indian frontier: the stability of all of Asia, not merely Southeast Asia, was involved. When the Communist leaders had moved — after they were committed — the United States would then react. We would come plunging back to retrieve the situation. And a much more dangerous crisis would result, quite possibly a nuclear crisis."

• President Kennedy's view of Vietnam and Asia, September-November 1963: On Sept. 2, 1963, in an interview with Walter Cronkite:

"... in the final analysis it is the people and the government" — of South Vietnam — "itself who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help, and we are making it very clear, but I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake.

"We took all this — made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is quite secure. We have to participate — we may not like it — in the defense of Asia."

On Sept. 9, 1963, questioned by David Brinkley:

Q. "Mr. President, have you had any reason to doubt this so-called "domino theory," that if South Vietnam falls, the rest of Southeast Asia will go behind it?"

A. "No I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists. So I believe it."

His remarks prepared for delivery at the Trade Mart in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, included these words about countries bordering the Communist world: "Our assistance to these nations can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task."

On Jan. 1, 1965, the Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi said at a diplomatic reception: "Thailand is next." By early 1965 Sukarno had left the United Nations and joined an aggressive coalition led by Beijing, which included North Korea and North Vietnam. He began a massive confrontation against Malaysia, requiring the British Commonwealth to mobilize some 80 warships. Regular North Vietnamese forces were moving for the first time into South Vietnam.

These were the circumstances that led Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore to say: "We may all go through the mincing machine." President Johnson reluctantly, but with overwhelming Congressional, news media and public support, decided to send large United States forces to Vietnam.

Those who believe that John Fitzgerald Kennedy would have walked away from the disintegrating situation in Asia in 1965 have every right to their opinion. But clarity about our history and wisdom about our future are not advanced by setting aside hard, relevant facts.

W. W. ROSTOW

Austin, Tex., Jan. 28, 1992