

How Kennedy Viewed the Vietnam Conflict

To the Editor:

The theme of the Oliver Stone film "J.F.K." is that President John F. Kennedy planned to withdraw from Vietnam and that to prevent this, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and possibly people close to Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson conspired to assassinate him. Most of this is palpable nonsense, but as Kennedy's Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, the officer responsible for Vietnam, I can testify that the first point is essentially true and correct.

On numerous occasions President Kennedy told me that he was determined not to let Vietnam become an American war. He agreed to have Americans serve as advisers, and he also authorized American pilots training Vietnamese to fly T-28's to do the actual flying — covertly — in bombing missions inside South Vietnam. But he refused every suggestion to send American combat forces.

Once, at that time, you reported in a small front-page box that some American major general was visiting Vietnam. The President called me at home and in decidedly purple language took me to task for letting an American general visit Vietnam. "Remember Laos," he said on this and other occasions; the United States, he said, must keep a low profile in Vietnam so we can negotiate its neutralization as we had in Laos.

When he paused for breath, I pointed out that I had no authority to deny a general permission to visit Vietnam — in fact, I had not even known about the trip. "Oh," said the President and slammed down the phone without even saying goodbye. That afternoon a National Security Action Memorandum came out saying that no officer of flag or general rank could visit Vietnam without the written permission of the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. When Kennedy took office, Laos was the hot spot, and the departing

President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, warned Kennedy he might have to fight there. If so, Eisenhower said, he would support the decision. Over the next few weeks Kennedy made several hawkish public statements. But after the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba, he changed his attitude. He told several people, including Richard Nixon, that since "the American people do not want to use troops to remove a Communist regime only 90 miles away, how can I ask them to use troops to remove one 9,000 miles away?"

Shortly after the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy sent W. Averell Harriman to head the Geneva negotiations on Laos. Harriman was fond of saying that he got the instructions for six months of negotiations in a five-minute telephone conversation. "All these people want me to go for a military solution in Laos," Kennedy told Harriman, "but that is impossible. What I want you to do is find a political solution."

When South Vietnam asked for more aid in 1961, Kennedy sent Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor and Walt W. Rostow to Vietnam to investigate. They recommended not only an increase in aid and advisers, but also 10,000 U.S. combat troops. Kennedy approved of the aid and advisers but refused to send troops. According to Roswell Gilpatrick, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, even sending advisers was done reluctantly.

President Kennedy is sometimes quoted as citing the so-called domino theory that if South Vietnam fell, the rest of Southeast Asia would follow. But the quote is taken out of context. It was in answer to a question not about troops or fighting but about why Kennedy continued to send Vietnam economic and military aid.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in his book "Robert Kennedy and His Times," documents other episodes showing President Kennedy's determination not to let Vietnam become an American war. One was when Gen. Douglas

MacArthur told him it would be foolish to fight again in Asia and that the problem should be solved at the diplomatic table. Later General Taylor said that MacArthur's views made "a hell of an impression on the President ... so that whenever he'd get this military advice from the Joint Chiefs or from me or anyone else, he'd say, 'Well, now, you gentlemen, you go back and convince General MacArthur, then I'll be convinced.'"

Referring to the recommendation that Taylor and Rostow made to send troops, Taylor said: "The last thing he [Kennedy] wanted was to put in our ground forces. ... I don't recall anyone who was strongly against [the recommendation], except one man and that was the President."

In a press conference in March 1962, Kennedy said that sending combat troops would be "a basic change ... which calls for a constitutional decision, [and] of course I would go to the Congress."

In July 1962 Kennedy ordered Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to start planning for the phased withdrawal of U.S. military personnel from Vietnam, but it was not until May 1963 that the Pentagon produced a plan. Before his tragic death in an airplane crash, John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for international affairs, said he understood President Kennedy wanted to close out Vietnam by 1965, "whether it was in good shape or bad."

The historical record, in sum, is clear: President Kennedy was determined not to let Vietnam become an American war — that is, he was determined not to send U.S. combat troops (as opposed to advisers) to fight in Vietnam nor to bomb North Vietnam. This does not prove he would have withdrawn completely, including the 16,500 advisers. However, the record is clear that he had laid the groundwork for doing so. Shortly before his death, he took the first step by ordering the first 1,000 advisers home.

ROGER HILSMAN
New York, Jan. 15, 1992