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LETTERS.

ON COLD WAR CAMELOT

Frederick, Md.

Andrew Kopkind's version of "J.F.K.'s Legacy" (Dec. 5, 1988) fails to recognize the drastic change in Kennedy's policies beginning with the 1962 missile crisis, and is wrong in its sneering reference to the 1963 American University speech, which states Kennedy's hope for those changed policies.

Such things as the first step toward détente, the limited test-ban agreement; canceling some military contracts, including the Blue Streak missiles for Britain; stating the new policy of refusing to recognize military dictatorships that overthrew democratically elected governments, as in the Dominican Republic; and ordering our withdrawal from Vietnam are hardly the policies of a "hard cold warrior from the start."

His little-remembered change in Vietnam policy was announced by the Pentagon shortly before he was assassinated and the reverted and expanded policy was announced by it shortly after his assassination. That he had called his generals in, one by one, and explained to them that Vietnam was a political problem and that political problems are not susceptible of military solutions was confirmed to me by one of those generals in 1967. The "brutal and self-defeating devastation of Vietnam" was begun by the Eisenhower-Dulles-Nixon Administration, was inherited by Kennedy and was made really bloody by Johnson and Nixon, not by Kennedy.

It is not reasonable to prate that Kennedy "never grasped the possibilities of Nikita Khrushchev's reforms" when it is a fact that these two leaders had an extensive exchange of still-secret communications, hardly on either part a hard cold war exchange.

It is the fiction of those who hated J.F.K. and those who were really responsible for the "plots of assassination" against Castro that this was Kennedy's policy. This is reflected in C.I.A. records disclosed to me. Does anyone really believe that once the Kennedy brothers were dead the C.I.A. would admit to undertaking those adventures on its own?

Harold Weisberg

KOPKIND REPLIES

New York City

I had forgotten the full force of John F. Kennedy's anti-Communism, as perhaps Harold Weisberg has, until reminded by the clips of the late President's speeches, pronouncements and press conferences that overran the TV networks on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. There was Kennedy Red-baiting the Eisenhower Administration for failing to recognize the Soviet threat; there he was promising to stop Communism wherever it appeared in the world; there he was rationalizing his beneficent programs such as the Alliance for Progress in starkly anti-

Communist terms. If that wasn't hard cold war stuff, I don't know what is. It was certainly there "from the start" and, I now see more clearly, to the last.

Those who were charmed by the Kennedy rhetoric—the liberal passages written by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Richard Goodwin—are inclined to misunderstand the nature of the Kennedy foreign policy. Kennedy's advisers, such as Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk and Maxwell Taylor, created the sophisticated "era of counterinsurgency" to replace the more simplistic Eisenhower-Dulles "era of massive retaliation." The Third World moved to the center ring of foreign policy activity. Truman (in 1945) and Eisenhower (after 1954) poked around in Vietnam, but their efforts were puny indeed compared with Kennedy's all-out intervention, which even by the time of his death was both "brutal and self-defeating," as those earlier efforts were not.

On many occasions Kennedy wished out loud that he could withdraw from what he saw was a deepening quagmire; there's no evidence he believed it was also a moral and ideological swamp. He planned to reduce his troops, as Lyndon Johnson did right up to the end, as soon as the "strategic hamlets" were undermined, the natives were pacified and the enemy was on the run. That was the time of hopeful prognoses and self-deluding strategies designed to produce "light at the end of the tunnel." To pull out of Vietnam, Kennedy would have had to order a radical reversal of policy in 1963 or early 1964, which of course he did not do. So the darkness persisted and the force reductions never came.

To listen to the rhetoric of Kennedy's wishful thinking and disregard the facts on the ground in Vietnam and elsewhere in the Third World is to miss the point of Kennedy's innovative brand of imperialism. It began, wherever possible, with pressure (violent as well as diplomatic) to remove nationalistic dictatorships and authoritarian regimes and replace them with reformist governments. New, modern, "charismatic leaders"—aping the Kennedy style and grateful to Washington for their installation—would attend to the welfare of their restless populations, open their economies to U.S. corporate investment and serve American strategic interests when the opportunity arose.

To aid the process of modernization and democratization, Kennedy sent Peace Corps volunteers into villages and barrios and offered Point Four aid, Food for Peace and Alliance for Progress assistance. The problem was that peaceful intervention didn't always work to counter insurgencies. Turn then to Plan B, and enter the Green Berets and the C.I.A., which was hyperactive all during the Kennedy Administration both with its own institutional forces and its "assets" in student, labor and cultural organizations.

The ideological rationale for intervention

on the side of "democracy" and for development in the Third World was that authoritarianism provokes insurgency, and economic oligarchy "breeds Communism." Weisberg is right that Kennedy favored democratically elected governments over military dictatorships (shades of Ronald Reagan!), but the point wasn't democracy. Rather, it was dependence on the United States and inclusion in the U.S. satellite system. As Kennedy told Schlesinger (as cited by Noam Chomsky in *Towards a New Cold War*), the United States would always prefer a democratic government in the Third World, but if forced to choose between an allied Trujillo and an independent Castro, it would choose the former.

It's ridiculous to hold that John and Robert Kennedy were not aware of and not responsible for the multifarious attempts to terrorize, subvert and ultimately destroy revolutionary Cuba. In fact, the Administration launched a campaign of historic barbarism against Cuba, including the use of biological weapons (African swine flu virus against livestock) and chemical agents (against sugar cane). Robert Kennedy was in charge of the operation (see "The Kennedy Vendetta: Our Secret War in Cuba," by Taylor Branch and George Crile 3d, in *Harper's*, August 1975). Cuban fishermen were blown out of the water by U.S.-sponsored terrorists and civilian targets inside Cuba were hit, with many casualties (O, *contras*!).

As to Kennedy's relationship with Khrushchev, it was as far from détente as possible. During the missile crisis, Kennedy refused to accept the principle of mutual withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the border regions of the opposing superpowers. The hawks around him, including his brother Robert, told him to hang tough, to humiliate Khrushchev and to risk escalation. He listened to them and brought the world to the brink of nuclear apocalypse by going far beyond what any reasonable assessment of American security interests demanded. Khrushchev's fall from power two years later was directly attributable to Kennedy's actions. Instead of encouraging Khrushchev's plans for reform in the Soviet Union, he dashed them.

Kennedy indeed seemed shaken by the missile crisis, and he was doubtless ambivalent about Vietnam and other areas of intervention. He occasionally made wonderful speeches about the need for peace and international cooperation. He was a master of rhetoric. But as John Mitchell once pointed out, it is more instructive to watch what an Administration does, rather than what it says.

Andrew Kopkind

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