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LIFE BOOK REVIEW

A dim new view of J.F.K.

COLD WAR AND COUNTERREVOLUTION

The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy
by RICHARD J. WALTON
(The Viking Press) \$7.95

For those who want to see John F. Kennedy as the consummate cold warrior, a counterrevolutionary whose "most enduring legacy" is the Vietnam war, an anti-Communist whose crusades were "much more dangerous than any policy Eisenhower ever permitted," there is no better brief than Richard J. Walton's *Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy*.

J.F.K., Walton argues, was a combination of *machismo* and Machiavelli. "Again and again . . . Kennedy would make a perceptive observation and then act in directly contrary fashion." Speaking of nations in a revolutionary situation, Kennedy commented in early 1961, "We would be badly mistaken to consider the problems in military terms alone. For no amount of arms and armies can help stabilize those governments . . . whose social injustice and economic chaos invite insurgency and penetration and subversion." An apparently irrefutable argument against American involvement in Vietnam, yet Kennedy then proceeded to involve us.

He was, Walton asserts, a brinksman in Berlin—calling up 150,000 reservists, stimulating a national fallout shelter boom—because he believed Khrushchev's wall was "a test of American resolve." He took the world to the edge of nuclear catastrophe because he saw Russian missiles in Cuba as "a test of American determination." He mistook brevity (McNamara, Rostow, Bundy) for wisdom; there was no patience for long-winded knights (Stevenson, Bowles) at the round table. His pride: "In three years," Walton quotes Ted Sorensen as saying, Kennedy built "the most powerful military force in human his-

tory . . . at a cost of some \$17 billion in additional appropriations." His monument: the Bay of Pigs.

Revisionist chic? Not quite. Walton is a careful scholar whose analyses of events such as the Bay of Pigs misadventure, the tragi-farce of Laos, the Cuban missile crisis, the arms race are intelligent if not always persuasive. His method is to cite the leading Kennedy memoirists (Theodore Sorensen, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Roger Hilsman) against themselves. And at a minimum he has provided a valuable countervailing hypothesis to explain the ambivalence which even devoted Kennedy rememberers concede was ever-present.

Finally, though, he doesn't convince. Of course Kennedy is responsible for the Bay of Pigs, yet the book's thesis, which underplays the role of bureaucratic momentum, demands that he be *exclusively* responsible; and so we learn that "Even though planning was begun in his administration, Eisenhower was a careful man, and even if he had been prepared to entertain the plan in principle, he almost certainly would have dismissed it as absurd in practice." No such happy presumptions are made in Kennedy's favor when discussing, say, Vietnam.

That Kennedy's actions often con-



Richard J. Walton

tradicted and belied his words is nicely documented. So nicely, however, that one can't take too seriously Walton's judgment that because Kennedy said shortly before he died that he didn't agree we should withdraw from Vietnam, "These are crucial words in any estimate of John Kennedy."

This book, which includes no new documents, no original reporting, no direct observation, doesn't aspire to equal time with such carnivals of inside information as Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days* or Sorensen's *Kennedy*, yet they should be read together. But one suspects that Walton will be read by Kennedy-neutralists less as an antidote than as a footnote to the conventional wisdom, because on issue after issue he is not content to locate J.F.K. as participant in a disaster-chain extending back to the late '40s. For Walton, Kennedy was *the* cold warrior. "There is no escaping the fact," he writes, "that whatever the subsequent responsibility of Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy began the Vietnam war. It has been his most enduring legacy." History is not served by replacing one mythology with another.

by Victor S. Navasky

Mr. Navasky's most recent book is *Kennedy Justice, a study of Robert F. Kennedy's attorney generalship*.