

'Hard-Nosed' Was Good; 'Idealistic' Was Scorned

Tough Guys In the Years Of Kennedy's Presidency

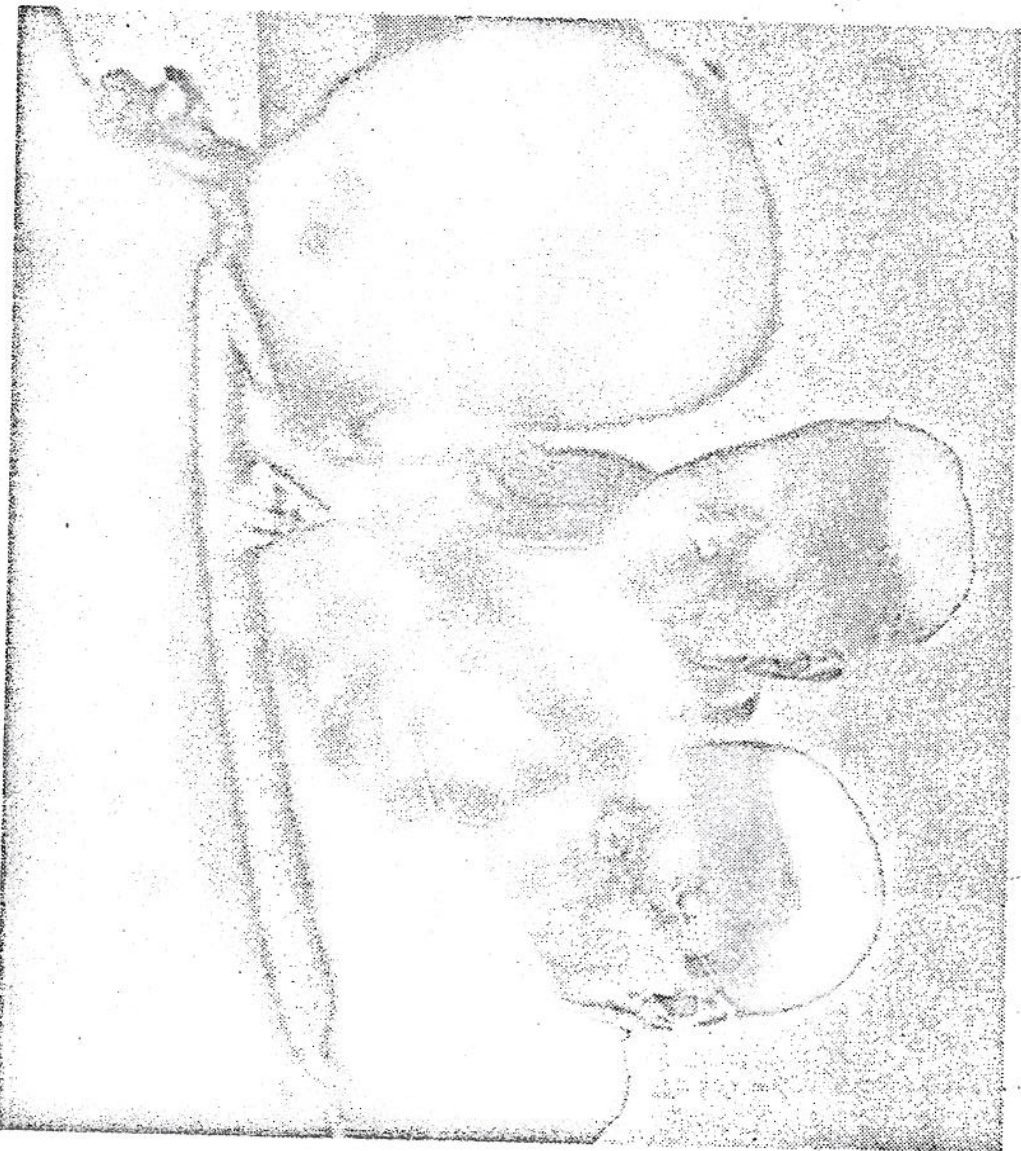
By RICHARD J. WAITON

A dozen years after his own death by assassination, John F. Kennedy is again being discussed, because of a growing belief that he and his Administration were involved in planning and perhaps attempting the assassination of Fidel Castro.

Current inquiries may support, enlarge or deflate that belief; not nearly enough is yet publicly known to fully establish which it will be. But it is not entirely beside the point to examine some of Mr. Kennedy's attitudes and Presidential behavior. Such an examination will not provide direct evidence on the question of whether he did or did not contemplate with equanimity the assassination of other national leaders. But it can help to establish the atmosphere in which the decisions of his Presidency were taken—including, perhaps, decisions concerning assassinations.

Such clarification is needed. Because of the trauma of Mr. Kennedy's death, and his grace and style while he lived, a mythic glow protects his memory, and serves him and history ill. Mr. Kennedy and his top advisers liked to think of themselves as men of action, as "tough" and "hard-nosed." Those terms were compliments in the Kennedy years.

Even before John Kennedy was elected, his campaign was admired and feared for its toughness. The West Virginia primary is a leading example. There were personal attacks on Hubert Humphrey



President Kennedy with Robert McNamara (right) and Gen. Maxwell Taylor.

The New York Times/George Farnes

and threats against his supporters. The Kennedy organization "clubbed"—Theodore White's word—Mr. Humphrey into defeat.

When President Kennedy took office, his inaugural address bristled. This was not just another speech but Mr. Kennedy's announcement to the nation and the world what kind of a President he intended to be. There were some eloquent phrases directed toward the search for peace, but his subsequent actions give more relevance to such language as this: "... we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it."

In his first few weeks, Mr. Kennedy began the largest and swiftest military buildup in the nation's

peacetime history, despite a huge defense budget that had been deemed adequate by Dwight Eisenhower. Mr. Kennedy set in motion the Bay of Pigs invasion, increased the American involvement in Laos and in June clashed with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna. Returning home, Mr. Kennedy called up 150,000 reservists. During 1961 and 1962 he quietly escalated the American involvement in South Vietnam. Then in October 1962 came that most frightening act of toughness, after the United States had discovered Soviet missile emplacements being constructed on Cuba. Mr. Kennedy confronted Mr. Khrushchev with a public ultimatum: Pull out or else. It was the ultimate toughness because the "else" might easily have become nuclear war.

Mr. Kennedy insisted on tough men around him. When Chester Bowles questioned some of his hard-line policies, he was fired as Under Secretary of State. When Adlai Stevenson questioned Mr. Kennedy's tough tactics in the Cuban missile crisis, someone in the administration, almost certainly Mr. Kennedy himself, leaked to the press that Mr. Stevenson had favored appeasement. Mr. Bowles and Mr. Stevenson were scorned by the Kennedy

men as soft and fuzzy-minded, as "idealists." Vietnam was also a measure of Mr. Kennedy's toughness. Mr. Kennedy had authorized clandestine missions into North Vietnam and took a sustained personal interest in the Green Berets, the tough, elite counter-insurgency forces. He personally supervised the selection of special equipment for their use and kept a beret on his desk.

Gradually, the Kennedy Administration concluded that the war could not be won, with Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, at the top. The Administration encouraged a coup. On the very eve of the coup, McGeorge Bundy, Mr. Kennedy's national security adviser, cabled from the White House: "Once a coup under responsible leadership has begun . . . it is in the interest of the U.S. Government that it should succeed." There is no reason to believe that Mr. Kennedy wanted Mr. Diem and Mr. Nhu dead; quite the contrary. But they were murdered in the coup.

Richard J. Watson is the author of "Cold War and Counter Revolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy."