

WAS VIETNAM JFK'S WAR?

A film director says documents exist that prove President Kennedy wanted to withdraw

BY OLIVER STONE

WHY WOULD YOU GIVE OLIVER STONE \$7 OF YOUR money?" Thus spoke Richard Nixon, as quoted in the new book "Nixon off the Record," by Monica Crowley. The reference was to my film "JFK," which Ms. Crowley had paid to see.

Nixon, who did not see the film, nevertheless found it objectionable. His objections were not so much to the idea of conspiracy in the assassination but to the film's thesis that Kennedy had intended to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam. Nixon asserted that Kennedy was an unreconstructed "cold warrior."

Was he? New evidence is emerging that, on the contrary, President Kennedy's intention was to withdraw all American forces from Vietnam. I met with Robert McNamara last year, when I was preparing to make my film "Nixon." He confirmed to me what he has since published in his memoir, "In Retrospect": that it is his strong belief that JFK was planning to pull all U.S. troops out of Vietnam after the 1964 election and that he had already started the process before his death.

In the book McNamara writes, "I think it is highly probable that, had President Kennedy lived, he would have pulled us out of Vietnam ... I think he would have come to that conclusion even if he reasoned, as I believe he would have, that South Vietnam and, ultimately, Southeast Asia would then be lost to communism ... Kennedy would have agreed that withdrawal would cause a fall of the 'dominoes' but that staying in would ultimately lead to the same result, while exacting a terrible price in blood ... So I conclude that John Kennedy would have eventually gotten out of Vietnam rather than move more deeply in."

McNamara explains in his book that at a "very important" National Security Council meeting on Oct. 2, 1963, President Kennedy made three decisions: (1) to completely withdraw all U.S. forces from Vietnam by Dec. 31, 1965; (2) to withdraw 1,000 U.S. troops by the end of 1963 to begin the process; and (3) to make a public announcement, in order to put this decision "in concrete."

Following the fateful Oct. 2 meeting, there was another NSC meeting on Oct. 5 that formalized the decision. Then, on Oct. 11, National Security Action Memorandum 263 was issued, which codified the decision and mandated the withdrawal of the first 1,000 troops. It should be noted that at this time there were only a total of about 16,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam, all of which were noncombat advisers. Under Lyndon Johnson, the figure became more than half a million combat troops.

This sequence of events is documented in detail in the seminal work "JFK and Vietnam," by John Newman, professor of history at the University of Maryland. Four days after Kennedy's death a revised order, NSAM 273, was issued by President Johnson,

which reversed the Kennedy policy and mandated an escalation of the war in Vietnam.

The revised proposal was first raised at a Honolulu conference of Vietnam military planners on Nov. 20 and 21, 1963—ironically, almost simultaneous to JFK's assassination on Nov. 22 in Dallas. Records of this conference are still classified. A tape of the crucial NSC meeting of Oct. 2, 1963, exists at the Kennedy library in Boston but has not yet been made public. Other records pertaining to Vietnam policy dating from the fall of 1963 are also still classified.

What has been made public recently is an oral history of these events given by McNamara to the Office of Secretary of Defense in the Pentagon in 1988, 20 years after he left that office. The oral debriefing, which was classified but made available to Professor Newman, makes it clear that McNamara strongly urged President Kennedy to pull out of Vietnam in 1963.

"Sometime in the latter part of 1963," said McNamara, "following my return from a trip to South Vietnam, I recommended to President Kennedy that we announce a plan to begin the removal of our forces." McNamara recommended that we pull out our advisers to the South



Vietnamese army, and let it fend for itself. "I believed that we had done all the training we could ... More training wouldn't strengthen them; therefore we should get out. The president agreed."

After the Oct. 2 meeting, Kennedy asked McNamara to issue these recommendations as a "report" from himself as secretary of defense along with Gen. Maxwell Taylor. McNamara made the announcement personally from the steps of the White House. As he headed off to face the reporters, JFK yelled after him, "And tell them that means all of the helicopter pilots, too."

Kennedy's own public statements on Vietnam were cautious, and sometimes contradictory. He knew that he would face a tough race for re-election against Barry Goldwater in 1964 and could not afford to look "soft on communism." Nevertheless, the evidence is clear that he had made up his mind to pull out of a losing effort in Vietnam. As McNamara points out in his book, this is fully consistent with Kennedy's own pragmatism and with the lessons he learned from the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis and other international incidents.

After the film "JFK" was released, Congress passed a bill entitled the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992. It mandates release of all government documents related to the assassination, with very limited exceptions. Since 1993, some 2 million to 3 million pages of documents have been released. However, little or nothing has been declassified pertaining to JFK and Vietnam. This is a serious omission that needs to be corrected, for the sake of history.

Under President Kennedy, less than 100 Americans lost their lives in Vietnam. Under Presidents Johnson and Nixon, that number increased to more than 58,000. Was Vietnam Kennedy's war? Nixon claimed it was. But Robert McNamara, who should know, says it was not. When the tapes and documents are finally released, the American people can decide for themselves.

STONE is the director of "Platoon," "Born on the Fourth of July," "Heaven and Earth," "JFK" and "Nixon."