What Would He Have Done?

JFK AND VIETNAM
Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power.
By John M. Newman.
Illustrated. 506 pp. New York: Warner Books.
$22.95.

By Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

WOULD President John F. Kennedy have finally sent in combat units and thereby Americanized the war in Vietnam? Or was he planning to withdraw the 16,000 United States military advisers he had sent to the South Vietnamese armed forces? These questions, long debated both by scholars and by former members of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, have now been thrust into public controversy by Oliver Stone's cinematic fantasy "J.F.K." In recent weeks, for example, two former Government officials deeply involved in Vietnam policy, Roger Hilsman, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs in 1963-64, and Walt W. Rostow, then head of the State Department's Policy Planning Council and later President Lyndon B. Johnson's national security adviser, have given the questions diametrically opposed answers in forceful letters to The New York Times.

Both Mr. Hilsman, who thinks Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam, and Mr. Rostow, who feels Kennedy would have expanded American involvement, agree, I believe, that it is impossible to say with assurance what a President might have done about problems that perhaps took new shape and intensity after his death. It is hard enough, Heaven knows, to tell what living Presidents are likely to do about anything. Moreover, astute Presidents are careful not to make critical decisions until they absolutely have to. Prudence calls, in the bureaucratic phrase, for "keeping options open." Still, conceding all the above, I think it is of more than academic interest to speculate whether, had Kennedy lived, American history might have taken a different course.

"JFK and Vietnam" is the most solid contribution yet to such speculation. Its author is John M. Newman, a retired Army officer with years of service in East Asia, now teaching East Asian history at the University of Maryland. His book is based on a meticulous and exhaustive examination of documents, many newly declassified — internal memorandums, cables, transcripts of phone conversations, minutes of meetings, intelligence reports — supplemented by oral histories in Presidential libraries and by interviews with people involved with Vietnam policy at the time. The narrative is straightforward and workmanlike, rather military in organization, tone and style. The analysis is occasionally oversubtle, sometimes reading a little too much into the hasty drafting and redrafting of Government documents. I should add, however, that though Oliver Stone helped find Mr. Newman a publisher, and though someone (the publisher?) has added a sensational subtitle, "Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power," Mr. Newman rigorously avoids conspiracy theorizing about Kennedy's murder.

• • •

His book's thesis is that Kennedy "would never have placed American combat troops in Vietnam" and that he was preparing for the withdrawal of the military advisers by the end of 1965. The Joint Chiefs of Staff began urging the commitment of combat units, Mr. Newman shows, as early as three months after Kennedy's inauguration. The Chiefs' wretched performance in endorsing the Bay of Pigs invasion and in proposing military intervention in Laos had fortunately disillusioned the President, and he rejected this advice then and thereafter. In the autumn of 1961, when Gen. Maxwell Taylor, a White House military adviser, and Walt Rostow returned from Vietnam recommending a

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a former special assistant to President John F. Kennedy, is a writer and historian. His most recent book is "The Disuniting of America."

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

An American military adviser giving bayonet training in South Vietnam in 1962.

commitment of 8,000 combat troops, Kennedy again rejected the proposal. As Mr. Newman writes: "There Kennedy drew the line. He would not go beyond it at any time during the rest of his Presidency."

I must declare an interest in this argument. I well remember the President's reaction to the Taylor-Rostow report. "They want a force of American troops," he told me. "The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off and you have to take another."

Mr. Newman is, I think, essentially right about Kennedy. Whether Kennedy was right is a question Mr. Newman does not face. Would the outcome have been better had the President sent an American expeditionary force in 1961? I doubt it — for reasons much on Kennedy's mind. Mr. Newman does not mention Kennedy's reaction, when he visited Vietnam as a young Congressman in 1951, to the French colonial army; but this was crucial in his skepticism about American military intervention. The war in Vietnam, he used to say, could be won only so long as it was a Vietnamese war. If we converted it into a white man's war, we would lose as the French had lost a decade earlier. (This is not latter-day recollection; I wrote it all nearly 30 years ago in "A Thousand Days.")

Nor does Mr. Newman mention Kennedy's relish in citing Gen. Douglas MacArthur's statement to him that it would be "a mistake" to fight in Southeast Asia. Kennedy recorded this statement in an *aide-mémoire*, something he rarely did, and, as General Taylor later recalled, "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.' " Kennedy's private remarks to Senator Mike Mansfield, the majority leader, to Senator Wayne Morse, to Roger Hilsman, to Michael Forrestal, the National Security Council man on Vietnam, to Kenneth O'Donnell, his appointments secretary, and to Lester Pearson, the Canadian Prime Minister, further confirm his desire to withdraw.

For all the rhetoric of his inaugural address about paying any price, bearing any burden, meeting any hardship, Kennedy was an eminently rational man, not inclined to heavy investments in lost causes. He was prepared to be as tough as necessary when vital interests were involved, but he was no war lover. His foreign policy displayed a characteristic capacity to *refuse* escalation when it made no sense — as in Laos, the Bay of Pigs, the Berlin wall confrontation, the missile crisis.

He believed from the start that the United States was, as he often said (privately), "overcommitted" in Indochina. As Mr. Newman reports, on April 6, 1962, he told Averell Harriman, then Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and Michael Forrestal to be prepared to "seize upon any favorable moment to reduce our commitment." But the Joint Chiefs kept up their clamor for military intervention. In a hysterical January 1962 memorandum cited by Mr. Newman, they predicted that "the fall of South Vietnam to Communist control would mean the eventual Communist domination of all of the Southeast Asian mainland" and that most of Asia would capitulate to what the military still stubbornly called the "Sino-Soviet Bloc." Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara declined to endorse this extravagance, and such hyperbole confirmed Kenne-

dy's low opinion of the military.

KENNEDY made concessions about advisers, but he held the line against troops. The commitment of combat units, he observed in March 1962 with a deference to the Constitution not notable among his successors, "calls for a constitutional decision, [and] of course I would go to the Congress." In July 1962 he directed the Pentagon to come up with a plan for the withdrawal of the advisers by the end of 1965. The plan was approved in May 1963, with the first 1,000 men to be returned at the end of that year.

But the military clamor persisted; the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate; the number of advisers sent to Vietnam increased; their participation in combat, especially in the air, increased too. The first American fatalities, Mr. Newman tells us, created a new problem. Kennedy wanted to play down American involvement, and the military collaborated enthusiastically in the production of cover stories, false claims of battlefield success and other forms of press control. But what started as deception of the press the military soon extended to deception of its civilian masters — the Secretary of Defense and the President. "Deception within the deception," Mr. Newman calls it, and he impressively documents the effort by top commanders — not by officers in the field — to persuade Kennedy and McNamara through phony estimates of enemy strength,

Continued on page 31

3/29/92

Continued from page 3

body counts and other manipulated statistics that South Vietnam was winning the war.

In the end, of course, facts were more powerful than cooked top-secret reports, and Saigon's troubles could not forever be disguised, especially from the alert American press corps. Buddhist protests in the summer of 1963 compelled the Administration to confront the problem of Ngo Dinh Diem, the increasingly unpopular and repressive President of South Vietnam. The Kennedy Administration divided angrily, some wishing to encourage Vietnamese generals planning a coup against Diem, others favoring (in a phrase of the day) "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem."

MR. NEWMAN explains Kennedy's disapproval of American participation in an anti-Diem coup on the ground that success would have forced the United States into greater responsibility for the fate of Vietnam. "JFK and Vietnam" makes it clear that, despite anti-Kennedy mythology, the Administration ultimately accepted the coup but did not order or contemplate the assassination of Diem.

"JFK and Vietnam" is by no means, however, an apologia for Kennedy. Beyond demonstrating that Kennedy was opposed at every point to the dispatch of combat units, Mr. Newman is continually critical of him for his lack of "clear understanding of the nature of the Vietnamese society," for his failure to undertake a systematic examination of fundamental questions, for the consequent corruption of policy by competing bureaucracies in Washington and Saigon, and for a policy he describes as haphazard, nearsighted, incoherent, "more of a reaction against using combat troops than a well-coordinated political, economic and social response to the problems in Vietnam."

In extenuation, Mr. Newman observes that the situation was "well out of hand" by the time Kennedy became President and that "the hope, enthusiasm and vigor he symbolized only helped to forestall serious consideration of the true nature of the problem and the long odds America faced." He might have added that Kennedy had other things on his mind. Vietnam in the early 1960's was a marginal issue compared with problems regarding Berlin, Cuba, Mississippi, the nuclear test ban treaty and Capitol Hill. Even Lyndon Johnson hardly mentioned Vietnam in his 1964 State of the Union Message and gave it little more than a hundred words a year later.

Mr. Newman is most critical of the disconcerting gap between Kennedy's private doubts and his public statements in support of the domino theory and in opposition to withdrawal from Viet-

nam. In this "public duplicity," he writes, Kennedy "besmirched his own reputation and that of the office he held."

It seemed more complicated at the time. Kennedy wanted to give the Saigon Government a chance to succeed. Little would have more quickly undermined that Government than going public about withdrawal. Moreover, the American mood in 1963 was overwhelmingly hawkish, as expressed in such influential organs of opinion as The New York Times and The Washington Post. According to a Louis Harris poll that summer, Americans by a 2-to-1 margin favored sending in troops "on a large scale" if the Communist threat grew worse. Americans still believed, in those faraway days, that they could work their will around the planet.

Eleven years before, the Republicans had made "Who lost China?" a powerful issue in a Presidential election. No Democrat wanted to run in 1964 against "Who lost Indochina?" Kennedy told Kenneth O'Donnell, "If I tried to pull out completely now from Vietnam, we would have another Joe McCarthy scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm re-elected."

This course, Mr. Newman properly observes, raises basic questions about American democracy. "When is it permissible for the President to mislead the public about his intentions with respect to war? With respect to anything? Is there a higher end that justifies these means? If one President may deceive to stay out of a war, cannot another do likewise to go into one?" Kennedy, he argues, would have done better to take his case forthrightly to the people. That is an understandable retrospective judgment, perhaps a correct one. Still, Mr. Newman's course might have resulted in the election in 1964 of a Presidential candidate who agreed with Gen. Curtis LeMay of the Air Force that North Vietnam should be bombed back to the Stone Age. Unfortunately, Kennedy's contradictory legacy on Vietnam permitted Lyndon Johnson to plunge into the escalation and Americanization of the war honestly believing that he was doing what Kennedy would have done.

This important book deserved better treatment from its publisher. The very first sentence contains a grammatical error. The copy editing is abysmal: the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs is John Manning on page 428 and Robert Manning on page 438; Adm. Harry D. Felt's political adviser is Edwin Martin on page 158 and Edward Martin on page 177; on page 416 one encounters "Ed" Sorensen of Kennedy's White House. What has happened to the editorial process at our publishing houses? □