

Eilsberg

A very surprising discovery to me in the fall of '67, as I began to study the documents of '61 in connection with the McNamara study project, was that the major decision Kennedy had made was to *reject* the recommendation made to him by virtually everyone, that he send combat units to Vietnam. Kennedy realized that most of the people in the country, whatever the politics, would have said, "If it takes combat troops, or if it takes heavy bombing or nuclear weapons, it's obviously not worth it for us. We won't succeed."

Kennedy did decide to send in advisers. He *had* had too many retreats that very year, and he couldn't afford another one. But at the same time, he chose not to put troops in, and he was careful to conceal from Congress and the public that any of his advisers had defined the situation as being so critical as to require troops as a solution.

John McNaughton told me in the fall of '64 that Robert McNamara had told him of an understanding with President Kennedy that they would close out Vietnam by '65, no matter what happened, whether it was in good shape or bad. McNamara had told him exactly what Robert Kennedy had told me: that his brother had determined not to send troops.

It's consistent with other stuff that's come out since then, such as what Kenny O'Donnell says. O'Donnell was Kennedy's close friend and chief of staff. He says that Kennedy decided in late '62, and more strongly in early '63, that our position was essentially hopeless in Vietnam and that we should get out, but that he could not afford to close out our involvement there before the election of '64, precisely because, as he said, "When we get out, whenever it is, there will be a McCarthyite attack on me and I will be accused of selling out the country and losing Indochina to Communism. After we win the election I can take that, but I can't afford it before the election."

Now, that is very far from a flattering story, because, although it shows realism about Vietnam, it also shows a willingness to keep bombing the Vietnamese for a couple of more years in order to get through the election.

I said to Bobby: "What made him so smart, how could he be so clear-sighted about the low likelihood of success?" And I remember he really burst out at that point saying: "But we were there; we had seen it! We were there together in the early Fifties, and we saw the position the French were in and saw what they were trying to do to the Indochinese. And my brother was determined early that we would never get into that position."

Now, all of this was very plausible to me, because I had been getting a feeling from reading these documents that the only men who were capable of visualizing the trap that Vietnam might be for us were people who happened to have a direct acquaintance with the French experience. George Ball was one. He had been a consul in this country for the French during that period. The others, the great majority of officials, just could not conceive that we could be subject to the same problems as the French; they couldn't think of us as colonialists, or racists, for God's sake. They thought of us as so much more competent and powerful than the French that the problem looked entirely different. But people who had actually known the French experience could see otherwise, and Jack Kennedy was one of those.

I've never really referred to that interview, although it was genuine historical data from a participant, because I wanted to avoid being one of those who went around saying that he could vouch for the certainty that Kennedy would carry out those intentions, if he were put in a crisis. But I think it is true to say that Kennedy was more likely to have closed out, cut the losses in '64, '65, than any of the other Presidents we've had.