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History of the Second World War

Case of Sacco and Vanzetti
(with introduction by the author)

From Philip II to Hitler

The League Pennant Race

*Essays on
Nixon,*

AMERICAN TRAGEDY

Kennedy, Johnson, and the
Origins of the Vietnam War

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No War in Laos

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"Let the word go forth," John F. Kennedy declared in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, "... to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed." And indeed, Kennedy's cabinet and staff were composed almost entirely of members of what is coming to be called the "GI generation," born roughly between 1901 and 1924, and shaped by the critical decades of their youth.¹ Having fought the Second World War as soldiers, they looked forward to taking over the strategic direction of the Cold War. Kennedy himself had begun a calculated pursuit of the presidency immediately after the Second World War, in 1946, when he ran for Congress in metropolitan Boston. In November 1960 he had narrowly defeated another GI, Richard Nixon, despite Nixon's advantage of representing the incumbent party in an era of peace and prosperity.²

Kennedy's father, a highly successful businessman and a prominent member of the Roosevelt administration, had originally promoted his son's political career. Having failed himself to achieve high elected office, Joseph P. Kennedy had initially put his hopes in his oldest son, Joseph Jr., but Joe Jr. had died on a highly dangerous mission in Europe during the Second World War. His second son, Jack, had abandoned thoughts of an academic career and stepped into his brother's shoes after the war. Elected to the House in 1946 and the Senate in 1952, he emerged after 1956 as a leading presidential contender. He had traveled widely and spoken often on foreign policy, most notably in 1957, when

a Senate speech expressing sympathy for the cause of the Algerian rebels had won worldwide attention, especially among emerging nations in the Third World. Kennedy had announced a sweeping domestic program during the 1960 campaign, but he certainly came into office more concerned with foreign than domestic affairs, and he immediately found himself facing crises on several fronts.

Although Kennedy was President for only three years, he remains the most compelling American political figure of the second half the twentieth century. The atmosphere of his presidency; his shocking and still hotly debated assassination; a steady stream of revelations about his personal life; an apparently inexhaustible market for fantastic rumors about his life, his death, and his career; and the subsequent lives of his brothers, his widow, his children, and his nieces and nephews have all kept his mystery alive, but they have also obscured the man, and the President, that he actually was. Only in the last ten years has the release of extensive documentation enabled us to follow his foreign policy in detail.³ The picture that emerges is far more complex than the image most older Americans remember. On the one hand, Kennedy, as many observers immediately understood, wanted great things both for himself and for his country. On the other hand, he was a brilliant natural diplomat who enjoyed the details of foreign policy and who was frequently more sensitive to the dangers of rash action than the contemporaries he chose as his leading subordinates. Nowhere was this difference more apparent than with respect to Southeast Asia.

During the first four months of the Kennedy administration the Laotian crisis competed for center stage with the crisis in the Congo, where Premier Patrice Lumumba's death was announced on February 13, and the worsening confrontation with Cuba, which climaxed in the disastrous invasion at the Bay of Pigs in the third week of April. Meanwhile, Yuri Gagarin made the first orbital flight around the Earth; French generals in Algeria tried and failed to overthrow Charles de Gaulle; freedom riders were beaten in Alabama; and the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain failed to make any progress on a nuclear test ban. Despite an initial flurry of interest, Vietnam remained a relatively minor issue throughout this period and rarely intruded upon the horizon of the American public, but Laos brought the nation to the brink of war and raised critical issues about American goals and strategies in Southeast Asia.

Publicly the climax of the Laotian affair occurred at Kennedy's tele-

*not
true*

fully explained, but State informed Lodge on September 12 that it would continue.¹⁸

In a press conference on September 12 the President took humorous digs at his two main prospective campaign opponents, Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Senator Barry Goldwater, expressed opposition to long-range school busing to achieve racial balance, and pushed for ratification of the test ban. Then he took a new and balanced line toward the Diem government, making clear that he still believed it had to change:

What helps to win the war, we support; what interferes with the war effort, we oppose. I have already made it clear that any action by either government which may handicap the winning of the war is inconsistent with our policy objectives. This is the test which I think every agency and official of the United States government must apply to all of our actions, and we shall be applying that test in various ways in the coming months, although I do not think it desirable to state all of our views at this time.

... In some ways I think the Vietnamese people and ourselves agree: we want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home.

Kennedy had put his finger on the critical issue: whether South Vietnamese-American agreement on objectives could also lead to agreement on strategy sufficient to continue an allied effort.¹⁹

Lodge, who immediately refused yet again to open talks with Diem until Diem had to ask him for something,²⁰ was now engaged in an all-out war with MACV and the Saigon CIA station. Harkins now argued that the war was being won, not lost, and, echoing Diem, characterized both the Buddhist and student movements as "well-organized, covertly led Communist trick[s]" undertaken in response to Communist military failure.²¹ The ambassador and the general also argued over the significance conversations in which both Thuan and Big Minh expressed their despair over the situation, and the Embassy independently expressed the opinion that the political crisis was bound to affect the war effort.²² Lodge on Friday September 13 also wrote Rusk confidentially, asking for the replacement of CIA Station Chief Richardson, whom he now regarded as a symbol of American support for Diem and Nhu, by Lansdale, who could supervise a change of government. McCone violently rejected this suggestion, offering to replace Richard-

son, but arguing that the agency had no confidence in Lansdale whatever, and complaining that "this whole thing was built up by him [Lansdale] through Rufus Phillips."²³ Halberstam reported serious disagreements among the American community on Sunday, September 15.²⁴ The State Department, at Kennedy's request, had asked Lodge to keep disagreements out of the papers, but Lodge regarded leaking as an ambassadorial prerogative.²⁵ Meanwhile, Madame Nhu's attacks on the United States made daily news, and Monday's papers reported that she planned to visit the United States.

By Monday, September 16, Hilsman had prepared drafts of two alternative cables for Lodge, one a "reconciliation track" and the other a "pressures and persuasion track," and a draft letter from Kennedy to Diem.²⁶ After two more days of ExCom meetings, a telegram drafted by Bundy gave Lodge authority to suspend American aid to use as he saw fit to try to bring about a long series of changes. These included a forthcoming attitude by Diem toward those who had opposed him, the release and toleration of Buddhist and student activists, "full latitude of expression" for the press, an end to police operations against the non-Communist opposition, cabinet changes, the surfacing of the Can Lao party, the repeal or amendment of Decree Law 10, and, if possible, the departure of both Nhus from Saigon or Vietnam. Lodge promptly commented that nearly every one of these suggestions would certainly strike Diem as politically suicidal, but Rusk and McNamara wanted a final try.²⁷

The President, who had refused simply to decide between Lodge and Hilsman on one side and McNamara and Taylor on the other, still hoped to bridge the gap between them, and also to deal with growing doubts about the military situation. On September 16, Halberstam had once again reported that recent Viet Cong attacks showed that the strategic hamlet program was overextended in the Ca Mau peninsula and quoted an American that the government refused to correct the situation. Kennedy had immediately asked McNamara how accurate the story was.²⁸ Then, rather than bring Lodge home for consultation, Kennedy on September 17 asked McNamara and Taylor to visit Saigon themselves to survey the situation, both "in terms of actual progress of operations and of need to make effective case with Congress for continued prosecution of the effort."²⁹ Lodge complained that the mission would undermine American policy and later found it "inconceivable

- port probably did not prove anything because no one trusted him. See *ibid.*, 22.
85. *Ibid.*, 32, 33.
 86. *Ibid.*, 46. For some reason the telegram describing these conversations did not go out until September 2.
 87. *FRUS*, 1961-63, II, 35.
 88. This comes from Krulak's record, *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, XI, pp. 540-544. See also *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 37.
 89. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, II, p. 161.
 90. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 43.
 91. Chase and Lerman, *Kennedy and the Press*, pp. 485-486 (emphasis added).
9. The Coup, August-November 1963
1. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, III, IV.b.4, p. 42.
 2. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 54, 56, 57, 63, 66, 70. Hilsman suggested to Lodge that he use the threat of a congressional aid cut-off in his talks with Diem.
 3. *Ibid.*, 44. Although Geoffrey Warner, in "The United States and the Fall of Diem, Part II: The Death of Diem," *Australian Outlook* 28, no. 4 (1974), pp. 3-17, published an account of this conversation based upon d'Orlandi's diary, the *FRUS* editors have still deleted their names.
 4. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 58, 60.
 5. *Ibid.*, 72.
 6. *Ibid.*, 77.
 7. *Ibid.*, 76.
 8. *New York Times*, Sept. 9, p. 1; Chase and Lerman, *Kennedy and the Press*, pp. 487-488; *FRUS*, 1961-63, III, 80.
 9. Reports by Col. Bryce F. Denno, July 19; Lt. Col. Richard Powell, Sept. 9; Brig. Gen. Delk Oden, Sept. 9; and Col. Wilbur Wilson, III Corps adviser, Sept. 11, all in Newman papers, JFK.
 10. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 82 (Krulak's report) and 83 (meeting of Sept. 10). See also Krulak's own record of this meeting, Taylor papers, NDU, box 50.
 11. According to Krulak's record, Mendenhall went further, saying that he and Truheart agreed that the war could not be won under the Diem government.
 12. None of the three note-takers at the meeting recorded this remark, but it has found its way into several subsequent histories and was recently confirmed by Phillips himself. It may be significant that Krulak's record omits Harriman from the list of participants. The next day Krulak, counterattacking, gave Bundy a rather unconvincing memo attempting to refute what Phillips had said about the situation in Long An province. JFK,
- NSF, VN, box 199. Krulak's memo acknowledged 38 armed attacks and 256 total incidents involving strategic hamlets in Long An province.
 13. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 85.
 14. *Ibid.*, 93. On Rusk's role in the China White Paper see Warren I. Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (Totowa, N.J., 1980), pp. 39-41.
 15. *FRUS*, 1961-63, III, 86.
 16. *Ibid.*, IV, 88, 89; *New York Times*, Sept. 11, pp. 1, 42.
 17. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 93, 94.
 18. *Ibid.*, 97.
 19. Chase and Lerman, *Kennedy and the Press*, pp. 490-496.
 20. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 102, 111.
 21. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 96.
 22. *Ibid.*, 130, 134, 136, 138, 139.
 23. *Ibid.*, 104, 120. This real-life incident appears to be the origin of Seymour Hersh's fantastic story that Kennedy asked Lansdale to go to Saigon as CIA station chief to arrange Diem's assassination—a story which the record makes clear is without foundation. I informed Hersh—well before the publication of his book—that the White House calendar shows that Lansdale never saw Kennedy during 1963. See Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot*, pp. 426-428.
 24. *New York Times*, Sept. 15, pp. 1, 4.
 25. See Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*, pp. 222-223.
 26. See *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 114, for cables that generally followed Hilsman's papers.
 27. The telegram is *ibid.*, 125; on the meetings, see 113, 115, 120n.
 28. *New York Times*, Sept. 16, p. 2; *FRUS*, IV, 117. Halberstam seemed to quote from Phillips's June report on the strategic hamlet program as a whole, which no one in the White House had ever seen.
 29. *Ibid.*, 124, 125. To Harriman's horror, Rusk initially designated not Hilsman but U. Alexis Johnson, the Deputy Undersecretary for Political Affairs and Rusk's right-hand man, as the State Department representative.
 30. See *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 126, and Saigon 557, Sept. 22, Newman papers, JFK.
 31. McNamara memo, DD, 1982, 446B; USOM memo, Sept. 1, JFK, NSF, VN; Halberstam article, Sept. 16, 1963.
 32. Alsop also took a parting shot at the young Saigon press corps before his departure, blaming them, in part, for Diem and Nhu's unfortunate views. See Alsop's columns, *Washington Post*, Sept. 16, 18, 20, 23.
 33. *FRUS*, 1961-63, IV, 143.
 34. See Manelli, *War of the Vanguished*, pp. 140-152.
 35. About six months later Michael Forrestal told his oral history interviewer that Kennedy had always hoped that Diem might mend his ways. JFK.

- rigged. Phoumi referred to his cousin Sarit by the courtesy title "Uncle," which many Americans erroneously interpreted literally.
41. *Ibid.*, 354, 355.
 42. *Ibid.*, 373, 375, and m.s., pt. 2, 476.
 43. See *ibid.*, 367, 377, 379, 384, 391, and m.s., pt. 2, 438, 505.
 44. *Ibid.*, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400.
 45. *Ibid.*, 415, 416, 418.
 46. *Ibid.*, 421, 426, 429, 430, 431, 432, 434, 444.
 47. *Ibid.*, 438, 349, 440, 446, 447, 448, 450.
 48. *Ibid.*, 462, 463, 464.
 49. *Ibid.*, 467, 469, 472, 473, 474, 476.
 50. *Ibid.*, 486, and m.s., pt. 2, 675.
 51. *Ibid.*, 487.
 52. *Ibid.*, 485, 490.
 53. *Ibid.*, 492.
 54. *Ibid.*, 493, 495.
 55. *Ibid.*, 497.
 56. *Ibid.*, m.s., pt. 2, 690.
 57. A deletion occurs at this point in the record.
 58. *Ibid.*, 498 (emphasis added).
 59. *FRUS*, 1961-63, XXIV, 1, 2.
 60. *Ibid.*, 3.
 61. Accounts of the meeting by Kennedy himself, Gen. Wilton Persons, and Herrer are *ibid.*, 7, 8, 9. See also Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History*, Sept. 1992, pp. 568-587, which includes notes by Clark Clifford and Robert McNamara.
 62. See Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, pp. 247-260.
 63. See the recent book by Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 146-200.
 64. See Eisenhower's memo to Dulles, Sept. 8, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, II, pt. 1, pp. 460-463, and many comments by Eisenhower during NSC meetings reported in the same volume.
 65. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1950-1963* (Boston, 1972), pp. 185-187.

2. No War in Laos, January-June 1961

1. Strauss and Howe, in *Generations*, pp. 261-278, date the birth years of this generation as 1901-1924, but in my opinion many Americans born in the 1901-1904 period are more typical of the previous Lost generation.
2. The accusation that Democrats actually stole the election—now a tenet

- of Republican dogma—has little evidentiary basis. A detailed study of the voting in Illinois in 1960 concluded that Kennedy won that state fairly, and even a shift of Illinois to the Republican column would not have changed the result. See Edmund F. Kallina Jr., *Courthouse over White House: Chicago and the Presidential Election of 1960* (Orlando, 1988).
3. The author of the most recent sensational best-seller devoted to Kennedy made a calculated and avowed decision to ignore that documentation, with results of predictably dubious validity: Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston, 1997); see also Hersh, "May-Zelkowitz Confidential," *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1998), pp. 654-661, in which Hersh explicitly discounts archival sources.
 4. *FRUS*, 1961-63, XXIV, 10, 12; VIII, 11; and see CM-85-61, JFK, NSF, Countries, Laos: General, 2/16/61-2/19/61.
 5. Harold W. Chase and Allen H. Lerman, eds., *Kennedy and the Press: The News Conferences* (New York, 1965), p. 25.
 6. *FRUS*, 1961-63, XXIV, 13. Kennedy apparently kept no record of this talk in the White House. The farcical aspects of Laotian politics and the peaceful character of the people immediately struck most observers in Laos, and also emerged in various press reports, even those of *Time* magazine, despite its generally tough line against Asian Communism. See, e.g., *Time*, Feb. 3, 1961.
 7. Isaiah Berlin oral history, JFK.
 8. *FRUS*, 1960-63, XXIV, 14, 15. Deprit 840 to Vientiane, *ibid.*, 15. Charles "Chip" Bohlen, the former ambassador to Moscow who had become a special assistant to Rusk, proposed the approach to Moscow.
 9. *Ibid.*, 17, 20.
 10. *Ibid.*, 19.
 11. Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia had refused even a personal appeal from Kennedy, leading the *New York Times* of Feb. 26 (sec. 1, p. 16) to brand the President's "first serious venture into personal diplomacy" a failure.
 12. Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, II (Washington, 1986), p. 60.
 13. The March 9 meeting is *FRUS*, 1960-63, XXIV, 25; see also a March 3 meeting and its results, *ibid.*, 22. The agreed military measures included an airlift of 14 Marine helicopters, their crews, and maintenance personnel to Udorn, Thailand, on the Laotian border. See Marolda and Fitzgerald, *The Navy and Vietnam*, II, pp. 60-61.
 14. *FRUS*, 1960-63, XXIV, 31.
 15. No contemporary minutes of this meeting have come to light, but see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston, 1965), pp. 332-333, and Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words* (New York, 1988), pp. 246-248.
 16. On Rostow's role see Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering, and Ralph