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On Revisionism

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, Oct. 31 — The November issues of just about every magazine have a story pegged to the tenth anniversary of the death of John F. Kendedy.

The stories in McCall's, Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping and Redbook are the standard magazine-selling stuff that Tom Wicker demolished in his book. "Kennedy Without Fears"; Esquire has a couple of intelligent pieces about what the history books say and what kids think about him now, and Playboy takes the tack of the with-it revisionists.

"Now we know that the mild-mannered Chief Executive was in reality the toughest cold-warrior of them all," Playboy heads its piece. The writer Garry Wills takes the position — in all seriousness — that President Kennedy was a hero at the Bay of Pigs and a villain at the Cuban missile crisis.

"Actually, he was more mature in his conduct of the Bay of Pigs affair," explains the revisionist: "After indulging the first folly, he did not back it up with bombers — which may or may not have provoked a Russian response."

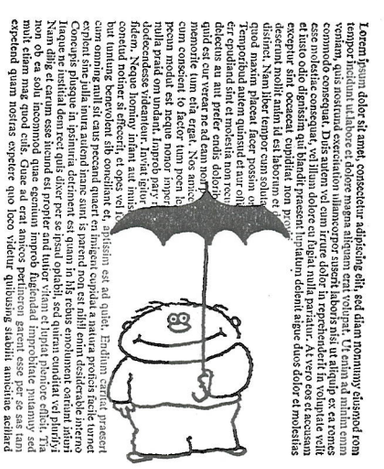
Having acted with the proper restraint at the Bay of Pigs, in this topsy-turvy view, President Kennedy blundered at what most of us consider his finest hour, the Cuban missile crisis: "The only aim in this case," writes Mr. Wills, "was a confrontation with Russia, to show how tough we were. . . . Khrushchev is the real hero of the crisis, the one who drew back from the nuclear holocaust. Kennedy was prepared to go full way — and for nothing."

Similarly, one supposes, Mr. Nixon is the villain in endangering the world over the small matter of blocking Soviet forces from moving into the Middle East and ultimately knocking over Israel: Heroically—to the revisionists — Mr. Brezhnev backed off.

Forthright revisionists are a gutsy group, making us think the unthinkable, and provide a refreshing change from the conformity of devious deviationists. But the challenge to conventional wisdom should be unconventional wisdom, not conventional foolishness. The record of a President who reflected the temper of his time should not be wrenched about to reflect the distemper of revisionist historians.

How will the revisionists of a decade from now view the Nixon Administration? Which of the treasured shibboleths of Nixon friends and foes will be shattered by the historians of tomorrow, now gaily playing hopscotch and stealing hubcaps?

Keeping in mind the credo of revisionism — that today's perceived truth is tomorrow's guaranteed falsity — let us project ourselves ten years ahead to listen to the different drummers (good name for a rock group) as they reject Establishment orthodoxy and assess the Nixon years in their own way:



1. *Foreign Policy:* Mr. Nixon, they will say, was a milquetoast President whose appeasement in the name of "détente" led to (a) the takeover of India and Australia by the second wave of Chinese Red Guards; (b) the Siberian computer revolution, the domination of world technology by giant brains from the great plains behind the Urals, making the U.S. the world's least-favored nation, and (c) "Faisal's Folly," the outright purchase of Western Europe by Arab oil interests, who then found themselves stuck with a white elephant.

2. *Domestic Policy:* Mr. Nixon's unwillingess to keep his hands off the economy led to permanent wage and price controls, rationing, black markets, Socialism, and like that; his knuckling-under to militant environmentalists led to unemployment, economic stagnation and a creeping increase of wilderness areas; and his craven revenue-sharing led to rampant local selfishness, unconscionable tax reductions, and a lessening of respect for Washington's authority.

3. *Watergate:* Here, the revisionists will say, you have to give Nixon credit. The confidence he displayed in delegating authority to his campaign aides was a classic in management decentralization. The ferocity with which he went after news leakers showed a prescient understanding of the nature of the world struggle of the late nineteen-seventies. And his firing of Archibald Cox and the Harvard harassers was a necessary rejection of the élitist domination of anti-egalitarians (most revisionists in 1984 will be graduate students in Colorado and Alaska).

In ten short years—think of it, 1984 is only a decade away—the revisionists will conclude that Mr. Nixon was a lily-livered pacifist abroad, an other-directed liberal at home, and his reputation was saved only by his profound understanding of the lengths one has to go to win elections.

Who knows—this time the revisionists might not even wait ten years.