

(See also this file 26 Apr 66.)

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Sunday, July 12, 1970

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News Behind The News

Kennedy Questioned War

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WASHINGTON — If, as Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island has suggested, President Nixon has not really made up his mind about the basic choice in Vietnam, he may be interested in a story which has recently come to light here about one of his predecessors.

Pell's contention is that the President can't decide whether it is more in the national interest to withdraw all our troops, even if the action results in a unified Vietnam under Hanoi, or whether it is more in the national interest to try to maintain a division of the country, though it requires a large garrison of Americans to do so.

About two-and-a-half months before he died, John F. Kennedy faced a microcosm of the same problem. It has now been revealed that he was — on the eve of his death — very close to a decision.

On an afternoon in late August 1963, President Kennedy made a direct telephone call to the South Vietnamese embassy. The recipient of the call, who for reasons of tradition in his service still does not wish to be identified, answered the operator's statement that the White House was calling with the question, "With whom do I have the honor to converse?"

"With the President of the United States," came the answer in that jocu-

lar tone of self-astonishment which Kennedy reserved for mention of his title, "and I wonder whether you could come over to see me about 4 p.m."

THUS WAS INITIATED a long conversation during which the President told his visitor that it was becoming impossible for him to continue military or economic aid to a government "which does not share our concept of government or of how to deal with one's own people."

The Vietnamese official listened carefully and assured the President that he would promptly and faithfully convey to his government the substance of his remarks. He did so by cable that evening, adding the warning that in his opinion the President was undergoing a change of heart and that the end of American assistance might be at hand.

It was about a week later — after Kennedy had suggested on national television that "in the final analysis it is their war. They are the ones who will have to win it or lose it" — that the official heard from him again.

Once more the President called directly and this time wanted to know whether there had been any reply to the cable about the presidential views.

The answer was that there had been no reply. Indeed, there never was one, though to this day the Vietnamese official does not know why.

Three months later, John Kennedy was dead, and as Sen. Pell put it in the speech which pointed up President Nixon's basic indecision, "it is a moot point whether President Kennedy would have continued to escalate our involvement if he had not been assassinated."

THE POINT IS indeed moot, though the story told above adds strength to the argument of Kennedy intimates that near the end of his life he was increasingly persuaded that the war in Vietnam served no useful American purpose.

But all history is speculation, involving as it does the constant comparison of choices, and so the story told above has meaning now. President Kennedy was appalled by evidence of what the South Vietnamese government was doing to its people. He had begun to doubt that there was a government worth saving. Seven years later, the evidence has mounted to the point where no more is required.

Yet the choice is still there — for President Nixon as it was for Kennedy. Sen. Pell, a moderate who has slowly changed his mind, puts it this way: "Even we in the Senate fall into the error of not considering (this war) in the context of the past; we fall into the error of forgetting history, thus condemning ourselves to repeat it."

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