

## **Review of *Virtual JFK: Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived* Part I**

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*Virtual JFK: Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived* is introduced by historian James Blight as a “What if” film. That is, it tries to recast and reshape history as if some definite historical event had not happened. For example, what if Robert E. Lee had not invaded the North and met disastrous defeat at Gettysburg? What if Hitler had not overruled his generals and postponed the invasion of Russia until the next April, instead of the delayed June launch in 1941? Would world events have turned out differently?

The film takes this point of view with President John Kennedy and the war in Vietnam. The question: If Kennedy had lived, would the Vietnam War have escalated into the colossal disaster it did under President Johnson? Director Koji Masutani and James Blight take a rather unique approach to this question. What they do is examine the number of opportunities President Kennedy had to go to war previously in his administration. They then prognosticate what he would have done in Vietnam based upon that record. Although others have done this to a limited degree, I don't recall anyone else doing it over the expanse of time and multiplicity of instances as Blight and Masutani do here.

The documentary begins with an aerial view over Vietnam while some statistics are shown to the viewer. They are quite familiar to anyone who has read up on this issue. There were 16,000 advisers in Vietnam during Kennedy's last year in office. In 1968, right before the Tet Offensive, Lyndon Johnson had committed over half a million ground troops to the conflict. And the air war that raged over the country was the largest in history—which, considering what the Allies did to Japan and Germany in 1944 and 1945, is saying something.

From here Masutani cuts to Blight in an image that seems borrowed from Errol Morris, the godfather of the modern documentary. Blight, just about full figure, is standing in front of what looks like a huge cyclorama, which is colored a kind of liquid silver. Blight begins with an explanation of the Cold War. How the accumulation of atomic weapons precluded any direct confrontation between the USA and Russia. Therefore, the American war in Vietnam started out as a proxy war with the Russians and Chinese aiding the north and the USA helping the south. The question then becomes, how did that initial proxy confrontation turn into direct American involvement on such a massive scale? And secondly, would Kennedy have gone along with it?

Here, Blight and Masutani begin an examination of six instances during Kennedy's presidency. They posit each of these as incidents that Kennedy could have used as *casus belli* to escalate into war. In fact, Blight later adds that no other president he knows faced this many temptations in such a short period of time as President Kennedy, which is probably true; at least, I can't think of

another president who was faced with these many tension filled episodes in three years.

The first was the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961. Here was a poorly planned and weakly reviewed operation left over from the Eisenhower administration. CIA Director Allen Dulles and Director of Plans Richard Bissell kept the written blueprints close to the vest, to the point they would not even let JFK take them home with him. And two predictions that the CIA made to Kennedy did not come true and sealed defeat for the invaders. First, there was no general uprising on Cuba to support the exile attack. And secondly, Castro was able to get enough armor into position to stop the beachhead from forming. At this point, Blight points out something that JFK did which sealed defeat for the Cuban exile force. Admiral Arleigh Burke was off the horizon heading a Navy fleet at the time. Realizing all would be lost if the USA did not intervene, he asked Kennedy for permission to intercede. Kennedy called Burke and told him not to. He had no desire to get into a war in a tropical jungle 90 miles away from Florida. Richard Nixon, the action officer for the operation under Eisenhower told Kennedy he would intercede if it were his call. And he later sniggered about JFK choosing failure.

Blight very smartly emphasizes Kennedy's altered demeanor after this debacle. Those close to him said Kennedy was shocked by what had happened. He would sit through meetings about it and not say anything for 45 minutes. Clearly, during those many days in his private purgatory, Kennedy was reevaluating those around him who had all endorsed the plan. This was a turning point in who he decided to trust from here on in.

The second incident mentioned is the Laotian Crisis of 1961. This is a subject that had been relatively ignored by most historians, so I am glad it gets brought up here. The best treatment of it that I have seen is in David Kaiser's volume *American Tragedy*. When Eisenhower left office, he actually told Kennedy that Laos was more important on the world stage than Vietnam. Kennedy decided to act fast on this and negotiate a settlement with the Russians. The Pathet Lao, aided by both the Soviets and North Vietnamese, was making strong progress against the anti-Communist Prince Boun Oum. In early 1961, the Pathet Lao opened a strong offensive on the Plain of Jars, which the Royal Laotian Army under General Phoumi Nosavan could not contain. Kennedy alerted the Army and Navy units in the Pacific, CinCPac, to go on alert. With this stick in hand, Kennedy then began to extend the carrot of a cease-fire. This was achieved in Geneva, with fourteen nations convening a conference in May of 1961. As Blight notes, not one American combat troop set foot in Laos.

The third episode was the Berlin Crisis of late 1961. In the summer of 1961, the Russians and East Germans were worried about the great number of emigrants fleeing from East to West Berlin. They began to take up preparations to build the Berlin Wall. On August 13, 1961, the border between the two cities was closed. Then construction teams were sent out to start erecting the wall. On August 30th, JFK called up 148,000 reservists. The KGB started a wide-ranging diversionary plan to stir up trouble in places like Central America and Africa. The crisis was clearly escalating into high gear. At this point, October 22, 1961,

Army General Lucius Clay decided to send diplomat Albert Hemsing to East Berlin to see if the Soviets and East Germans would allow him to travel into East Germany as provided for by the 1945 Potsdam Conference. They let him proceed. But the next day, a British diplomat was stopped and his passport was seized. Five days later, Clay asked Hemsing to try again. But, in advance, and without Kennedy's permission, he sent tanks and an infantry battalion to a nearby airfield. Hemsing was allowed to proceed but the Russians now moved 33 tanks to the Brandenburg Gate. Clay's tanks now moved opposite the Russian tanks. As the film notes, Kennedy called Clay and told him he wanted the tanks removed. Russian Premier Khrushchev and JFK now talked and decided to mutually remove the tanks. As the film notes, Kennedy ended up being grateful for the Berlin Wall. As historian John Lewis Gaddis notes, Kennedy later stated, "It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war." (*The Cold War: A New History*, p. 115)

The fourth incident took place in November of 1961 and concerned a crucial tactical decision about American involvement in Vietnam. In October of 1961, there was a debate raging within the administration on whether or not to commit combat troops to South Vietnam to support the failing regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy decided to send Gen. Maxwell Taylor and National Security Assistant Walt Rostow to Vietnam for an on the ground inspection. While there, Taylor suggested to Diem committing 8,000 US combat troops to the area. Diem enthusiastically agreed (John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, p. 133). When Taylor and Rostow returned, a two-week-long drama was enacted over their recommendation. On November 22, 1961, Kennedy issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 111. It increased the number of advisers, but it committed no combat troops. And further, it made no commitment to saving South Vietnam from communism. As John Newman notes, this NSAM was a milestone in Kennedy's Vietnam policy. First, it drew a line in the sand: Kennedy was not going to commit combat troops to the area, even when things looked desperate and the fate of the country was in the balance. Second, learning from the Bay of Pigs, he was now more than willing to buck the opinions of both the generals and his advisers on a subject they perceived as vital to American national security (Newman, p. 138).

The fifth episode was, of course, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Here President Kennedy again refused to take the advice of both his military commanders and his chief advisers. As with Vietnam in November of 1961, when virtually everyone in the room told him to either invade or launch an air attack, he chose not to. Instead he decided to blockade the island. And meanwhile he worked out a back channel with the Russians through his brother Robert Kennedy and Russian diplomat Georgi Bolshakov. A potential attack on the island was averted—as was probably nuclear war. Since, as was later discovered, in addition to the atomic missiles the Russians had transported to the island, they had also given the Cubans tactical nukes which were portable. The Cubans controlled these. And if any American invasion had crossed the Caribbean, Che Guevara was urging Castro to use them.

The sixth and last incident was the announcement of Kennedy's Vietnam withdrawal plan in the fall of 1963. This announcement actually began in earnest in

May of 1963. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara made it clear at his conference in Hawaii with State Department and military personnel from Vietnam that President Kennedy wanted to begin a phased withdrawal. And he wanted the South Vietnamese to begin taking over the war. Secondly, he wanted to achieve a thousand-man American troop withdrawal by the end of the year (Newman, p. 359). This was then accelerated by the McNamara–Taylor trip to Saigon in September, and also by Kennedy’s hand in writing the report based on that trip, during which he explicitly told McNamara he did not want a coup attempt against Diem (*ibid.*, p. 401). The report included the thousand-man withdrawal. This recommendation was then formalized in NSAM 263, which was signed on October 11. The film includes little of the above factual background. It concentrates on a phone conversation between McNamara and JFK in which they discuss the need to find a way to get out of Vietnam. And it then follows this up with the McNamara–Taylor Report as the device to arrange the withdrawal around. Blight then intones that Kennedy was willing to risk failure in Vietnam rather than commit US combat troops.

The film then cuts to a snippet of the Zapruder film: Kennedy being assassinated in Dallas. We then watch the terrain of Vietnam from B-52s flying overhead. Blight then says that with the historical models established beforehand, it seems unlikely that Kennedy would have committed to Vietnam.

The film concludes with what I think is its best section: the Johnson reversal of Kennedy’s policy. It takes a different angle here by saying that due to the landslide election of 1964, Johnson had heavy majorities in both houses of Congress, therefore he had a wide leeway politically for whatever his policy in Vietnam was going to be. In February of 1965, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey wrote him a memo strongly advising LBJ not to continue the escalation of the war that he had started after the Tonkin Gulf Incident of August 1964—which, of course, is just eight months after Kennedy’s death. Humphrey wrote that this policy had already damaged America’s credibility with its allies, but further, the South Vietnamese government was a mess, and it seemed the Viet Cong rebels were winning. To escalate further would involve the USA in a war that would be fought without the generals really knowing what they were doing. This was a prophetic warning. What did Johnson do in reaction to these wise words? As the film notes, he did three things: (1) he had Humphrey blackballed from further policy meetings on Vietnam; (2) he had surveillance placed on him; and (3) he told National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy to keep an eye on who Humphrey was talking to.

One month later, Johnson unleashed Operation Rolling Thunder in earnest. This would later evolve into the greatest air campaign in military history. That same month, the first detachment of 3,500 Marines would land at Da Nang. This would eventually expand to 538,000 combat troops at its pinnacle in 1968. The film notes that by the summer of 1965, five months after the Humphrey memo, 500 American troops were dead. By January of 1967, 8,000 were dead. By March of 1968, 19, 000 were dead. As Newman notes, Johnson was so befuddled by what had happened, that around this time period he was actually wondering if his error had been waiting too long to commit combat troops (*ibid.*, p. 449)!

And with this, the film makes an important point. It concludes that Vietnam wrecked Johnson's presidency, ravaged his personality and character, and made his family rue the day that he ascended to the presidency. But whatever the personal consequences that make Johnson into a sympathetic figure, and no matter how reluctant he was in this new path, once he became president he committed to it completely. To the point that, as with Humphrey, he would harbor no contrary view. And, as the film notes, this was a huge difference with Kennedy: JFK learned his lesson well on those Cuban beaches in April of 1961; he learned not to implicitly trust his military advisers, since they always thought they would win; and therefore, if unchallenged, would always paint a rosy scenario—and afterwards, he would have to clean up the mess.

The film is less than ninety minutes long, and I have added a lot of background detail in the above that is not actually in the film in order to flesh it out more for the reader. I actually wish the film had been longer so it could incorporate more of these facts and more of the revelations of the Assassination Records Review Board, since these all but closed the book on this ersatz debate about JFK and Vietnam. The only two people who probably think Kennedy was not getting out at the time of his death are Noam Chomsky and Alex Cockburn—and they are not historians: they are political polemicists.

This now makes four mainstream historians who have come around to the view of Kennedy's intent to withdraw from Vietnam as expressed in Oliver Stone's film JFK. First there was David Kaiser's *American Tragedy* in the year 2000. Second, there was Robert Dallek's *An Unfinished Life* in 2003. Third was Howard Jones' *Death of a Generation* published in 2004. And now there is Blight in this film and also an accompanying book. (I should also mention in this regard a volume that preceded these, yet was clearly in line with them: 1995's *In Retrospect*, by Robert McNamara.)

Let me take a moment to pay tribute to the man I believe is behind this paradigm shift, which is one of the hardest things there is to achieve in the field of history. Clearly, but without naming him, this film owes its genesis to John Newman's splendid 1992 volume *JFK and Vietnam*. That book was packed with so much factual data that no serious and interested person could dismiss it. Newman took ten years to complete that book, and finally it has begun to take hold in the halls of academia. Just three years after that masterly performance, Newman wrote another extremely important book called *Oswald and the CIA*. Perhaps no author achieved as much in such a short time as John did in this field. I understand he is retired from it now; he is therefore probably leading a much happier life. If so, works like this film are an homage to his earlier effort. We all owe him thanks.