

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

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II.1

It's not possible for me to make a joke about the death of John F. Kennedy.

—Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

This Vonnegut quote appears on the first page of *Virtual JFK*. It was a good signal for me. One of the things it conveyed was that finally, after so many years, the mainstream academic community was going to seriously look at a painful but glaring question: If President Kennedy had lived, would he have withdrawn from Vietnam and not have Americanized that war?

In 2005, a little less than twenty scholars and former policy makers gathered at a place called the Musgrove Conference Center at St. Simons Island, Georgia. The subject was this very question. All of those involved had a distinct interest in the Kennedy presidency, the Johnson presidency, or the Vietnam War; many of them had studied all three. To give you an idea of who was there, let me mention several of the attendees.

Jamie Galbraith is the son of one of Kennedy's chief advisers and confidantes, John Kenneth Galbraith. He is a Professor of Government and Business relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Inspired by what his father told him about Kennedy and Vietnam, he has been an intelligent, articulate, and authoritative proponent of Kennedy's desire to withdraw all forces by 1965.

Frederick Logevall is a Professor of History at Cornell who in 1999 wrote an extraordinary volume called *Choosing War*. This was an exhaustive study of Johnson's decision-making from Kennedy's death until the great escalations of 1965 and beyond. A rather surprising revelation of the book was that, far from stumbling errantly into a colossal debacle, Johnson fully understood and measured what the potential costs in blood and treasure would be. His generals told him in 1965 that the conflict in Vietnam would take 500,000 troops to fight and would last anywhere from five to twenty years. Johnson gave the military 538,000 troops and much more.

Chester Cooper was an assistant to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and later worked for Assistant Secretary of State Averill Harriman. He was closely involved in the formation of Vietnam policy under both men and under both presidents.

Tom Hughes worked for Chester Bowles, a chief Kennedy adviser during the campaign of 1960. Once Kennedy was elected, Hughes worked first for Bowles

and then succeeded Roger Hilsman as director of Intelligence and Research at the State Department. He stayed there for the great escalations of 1965–8.

Another policy-maker in attendance was Bill Moyers. Moyers first worked for Lyndon Johnson on his senatorial staff. He then worked for JFK as Deputy Director of the Peace Corps. When Kennedy was killed, he reverted back to being an advisor for Johnson and then rose to Press Secretary. He parted ways with LBJ over Vietnam and left the White House in 1966.

The point is made: it's an impressive yet relatively mainstream roster. Some of the other participants are Frances Fitzgerald, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning book about America in Vietnam, *Fire in the Lake*; Tim Naftali, co-author of *One Hell of a Gamble*, a history of the Cuban Missile Crisis from the Russian viewpoint; and Marilyn Young, Professor of History at NYU and author of *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*. The three people who essentially arranged and ran the conference were David Welch, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto; Janet Lang, an associate professor at the Watson Institute; and last, but not least, James Blight, a Professor of International Relations at Brown. Blight has been part of a few books on the Kennedy presidency, especially dealing with the Missile Crisis.

They have made an interesting volume. It's uneven, and in the purest sense, not really a book. But it's interesting, even compelling, nevertheless. When I say it is not really a book, what I mean is that it is more an oral history plus a document annex. But since the discussions are footnoted, the oral history has a real basis in fact. And since all the participants were issued a thousand page briefing book of the most currently declassified documents on the Vietnam War, most of the discussion is state of the art. Further, the conference organizers arranged for audiotapes to be piped into the room so that the latest declassified phone calls and taped meetings could be heard too. Blight did his homework well. Many of the things that I talked about that were missing from the film of the same name, do appear here. And to say the least, the document annex is quite forceful (a matter I will get to later).

The conference lasted for two days. And the discussion centered on whether or not there was continuity or breakage between Kennedy's and Johnson's Vietnam policy. The book acknowledges the fact that, as John Newman noted in *Vietnam: The Early Decisions* (edited by Lloyd Gardner and Ted Gittinger), the myth of continuity has been chiefly maintained by prominent mainstream academics (p. 158). So this conference was a milestone in that regard. It was precipitated by the influence of Newman's compelling and fully documented 1992 book, *JFK and Vietnam*. (Newman is mentioned at several points in the discussion.) Prior to that volume some writers had talked about this breakage in policy; but it had been sporadic, the evidence mostly anecdotal, and not really sustained. In fact, all the material I could summon for my first book, *Destiny Betrayed*, could not even flesh out a moderately sized book. To give these people their due, though, they included Roger Hilsman in *To Move a Nation*, Ted Sorenson in his book *Kennedy*, Arthur Schlesinger in his long biography *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, Ralph Martin in *A Hero for our Time*, and Dave Powers and Ken O'Donnell in *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*. The last is the most inter-

esting. Although it was published in 1972, the same year as David Halberstam's best-selling *The Best and the Brightest*, it took serious issue with that standard reference book which argued for continuity. It went on for several pages (pp. 13–18, 442–4), sternly denying there was any continuity at all, and actually taking issue at one point with proclamations made by Johnson in his memoirs. (This theme—Johnson's attempt to rewrite the record—I will take up later.) Like Newman would argue in 1992, that book said that Kennedy had decided not to commit combat troops to Vietnam as early as 1961. They based this on two long discussions Kennedy had on the issue with French Premier Charles DeGaulle and General Douglas MacArthur.

In another form, the two authors who wrote about this subject in essays prior to Newman were Fletcher Prouty and Peter Dale Scott. Scott based most of his work on the Pentagon Papers. Prouty worked from that, plus his own experience inside the Pentagon. He wrote about Kennedy's plans to withdraw in his fine book *The Secret Team* (pp. 401–416), and in a short essay in *High Treason* (pp. 466–473). Scott wrote two interesting essays on the subject. One was originally published in *Ramparts* and the other in the Gravel edition of the Pentagon Papers.

But, as I said, John Newman's book went much further than any of the above—so much further that the publisher ditched the book. As Galbraith writes in his fine 2003 essay in *Boston Review*, 32,000 copies of *JFK and Vietnam* were initially printed in 1992. After 10,000 were sold, Warner Books ceased selling the hardcover. Even though the book had high visibility because of Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, the company never spent anything on promoting the book. Incredibly, it was never reprinted in trade paperback. When Newman complained about this in 1993, the company quietly returned his rights. But in spite of this, because the book was so well-documented, contained so much new material, and was so convincing in its argument, it has had a strong influence with both public opinion and with scholars.

Let me note an important point here in order to give Newman's book its full due. Even though the books and essays noted above had interesting snippets of information, and Scott and Prouty had serious arguments to make, their cumulative impact was minimal. Outside of those interested in President Kennedy's assassination—and, to a lesser degree, his short presidency—they made the briefest of ripples into the general public, the mainstream press, or the halls of academia. The double impact of the film *JFK* plus the publication of Newman's book had the effect of a shotgun blast at close range. Newman had labored over his book for ten years. Completely by coincidence, it was being finished at the time Oliver Stone was filming his movie of Jim Garrison's book *On the Trail of the Assassins*, and it fit in perfectly with the film because this is something that Garrison sincerely believed in at the time of his prosecution of Clay Shaw. (He had garnered this from things like the Sorenson book, plus another source that I will reveal in Part V of my review of *Reclaiming History*, which discusses Vincent Bugliosi's treatment of both Garrison and Stone.) So in the immense controversy that followed the film—and actually preceded it—Newman's book figured prominently. For instance, when it came out in 1992, Arthur Schlesinger reviewed it on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*.

After the controversy subsided, Newman's book began to have an impact in academia. The reason it took a while is that his book absolutely humiliated many of the previous standard-bearers in the Vietnam field, for instance, Halberstam, and Stanley Karnow, and William Conrad Gibbons. The book was so clear and logically argued that the question became: How could all of these so-called "scholars" have acted like lemmings and missed this easily delineated dividing line? In the aforementioned Gardner book, Newman states that the underlying tow is the collective attempt to deny that the Vietnam War was, contrary to popular belief, not an inevitable tragedy (p. 158); that who actually occupies the Oval Office does make a difference (p. 159). And *Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived* furthers this argument substantially. Once a historical paradigm is set, it is very difficult to surmount it—even if it is wrong. That's because, contrary to popular belief, there is strong pressure in the academic world not to rock the boat, not to break out of preconceived paradigms; that is, to become part of the Establishment. Much of this comes down through the influence of foundations, conservative think tanks, and, of course, the CIA's influence on campus. Two men written about in *Probe* previously, Thomas Reeves and Max Holland, are good examples of this.

But, for reasons stated above, *JFK and Vietnam* could not be denied. Slowly but surely it began to turn the paradigm around. The shocking thing about the book is that, not only did it enrage the conservatives, it also infuriated the so-called Leftist leaders at the time, namely Alexander Cockburn and Noam Chomsky. Galbraith's 2003 article in *Boston Review*, using the since declassified record, negates the rather silly arguments of both polemicists. (And I will detail this further in Part V of the Bugliosi review.) And the great triumph of Newman's work is that the documents declassified by the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) only fortify what he wrote. Because of that, other historians who wrote after him followed in his footsteps: LBJ broke with Kennedy's policies on Vietnam. This included David Kaiser in *American Tragedy*, Robert Dallek in *An Unfinished Life*, and Howard Jones in *Death of a Generation*. Two other books which should be mentioned in this regard which favor Kennedy not Americanizing the war, but are more equivocal in their judgments, are the works of the aforementioned Logevall and Lawrence Freedman's ironically titled *Kennedy's Wars*. (I say "ironically" because the book comes to the conclusion that Kennedy was determined not to get involved in any wars.)

II.2

This book takes a leap forward, because at the end of the conference a vote was taken on whether, if he had lived, Kennedy would have Americanized the war. Half the respondents said he would not have, and would have withdrawn. Thirty percent said he would have escalated, as Johnson did. And twenty percent said it was too difficult to say, (p. 210).

Let me add here that the discussion of the issue is quite wide-ranging. As the film did, the book takes in the other opportunities Kennedy had to get involved in wars, which he refused to do. The authors put great weight on Kennedy's ac-

ceptance of failure at the Bay of Pigs rather than sending in American forces, which Admiral Arleigh Burke wanted him to do. As many commentators do—including myself—they see this as a defining moment in President Kennedy’s presidency. In the document section of the book, they print three memoranda that depict Kennedy’s reaction to the disaster he was led into by the CIA. Clearly, Kennedy went through a definite pattern after the Bay of Pigs: shock and dismay at his advisers, feedback as to what exactly had gone wrong, and how the debacle had now placed America in the eyes of its trusted allies abroad. In other words, he grew from the experience. And the book also notes briefly the two reports that were issued as a result of the Bay of Pigs: the presidentially commissioned Taylor Report, and the internal CIA report by Inspector General Lyman Kirkpatrick. Both of the reports concluded that the operation was poorly planned and weakly reviewed. As writers like Paul Fay have noted, Kennedy vowed that he would never again accept the advice of his CIA and Pentagon advisers without grilling them at length and in depth.

What is important about this episode is that it occurs just seven months prior to the first dramatic milestone in Kennedy’s conduct of the Vietnam War: In the fall of 1961, Maxwell Taylor and assistant National Security Adviser Walt Rostow went to Vietnam. They then delivered a report to Kennedy in late October. The recommendation was that, since the Viet Cong were gaining strength and Ngo Dinh Diem’s position was weakening, the time had come for the U.S. to commit combat troops to the conflict. The debate on this issue lasted for over two weeks. It appears that the only person resisting the siren song of direct military intervention was President Kennedy.

One of the really valuable documents included in the book is probably the only set of notes taken on this debate, by White House military aide Colonel Howard Burris (pp. 282–3). They deserve to be summarized and paraphrased at length. Here is the gist of it:

Kennedy stated that Vietnam is not a clear-cut case of aggression as it was in Korea. He says that the conflict in Vietnam is “more obscure and less flagrant”. Kennedy notes that in a situation such as Vietnam, allies are needed even more since the USA would be subject to intense criticism from abroad. He compared the record of the past, where the Vietnamese had resisted foreign forces who had spent millions against them with no success. He then compared the situation in Berlin with Vietnam, saying that in Berlin you had a well-defined conflict whereas the Vietnam situation was obscure—so obscure that you might soon even have Democrats in his own party bewildered by it; especially since you would largely be fighting a guerilla force, and “sometimes in a phantom-like fashion”. Kennedy said that because of this, the base of operations for American troops would be insecure. At the end of the discussion Kennedy turned the conversation to what would be done next in Vietnam, “... rather than whether or not the U.S. would become involved.” I should add that, during the talk, Kennedy turned aside attempts by Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Lyman Lemnitzer to derail his thought process. Kennedy had learned his lesson well.

One of the most important discoveries in the volume is that in the mid-nineties, National Security Advisor Bundy had decided to write a book about his experience with Kennedy and Johnson over Vietnam. His co-author on that endeavor was at the Musgrove Conference. His name is Gordon Goldstein. The two had worked on the book for two years. But Bundy unfortunately passed away in 1996 before it was finished. Goldstein says that one of the great surprises he had in working on the book was that Bundy had virtually no memory of the debate in November of 1961 (p. 76). In fact, Goldstein says that Bundy was actually surprised at (1) how hawkish he was in the 1961 debate; and (2) how resistant at all costs Kennedy was. At this time, Bundy actually wrote a memo to Kennedy in which he recommended a force of 25,000 troops be sent because South Vietnam actually wants to be part of the U.S.A. (pp. 280–1)! How resistant was Kennedy to all this? When General Max Taylor tried to sneak 8,000 combat troops in for “flood relief” purposes, Kennedy consulted with an agriculture expert to prove you didn’t need them for that purpose (p. 77). After two years of delving into the record, Bundy came to the conclusion that Kennedy would not have committed combat troops to Vietnam. As he told Goldstein: “Kennedy very definitely was not going to Americanize the war in Vietnam; and Lyndon Johnson very definitely, *from the moment he succeeded Kennedy*, was going to do whatever it took to win the war in Vietnam, including sending U.S. combat forces in large numbers ...” (p. 53, emphasis added to a key phrase that I will return to later). This now makes it unanimous. The three men in closest proximity to Kennedy concerning military strategy are now on record as saying that Kennedy was not going to commit troops to Vietnam: McNamara in his book *In Retrospect*, Taylor (pp. 357, 365), and now Bundy.

The book also nails Walt Rostow. As I said, Rostow accompanied Taylor on the Vietnam trip of 1961. Rostow was one of the biggest hawks in the White House up until Kennedy’s November 1961 decision to increase the advisors but not to send in combat troops. This decision was memorialized in NSAM 111, in late November of 1961. Right after this, Kennedy got so tired of Rostow’s memorandum suggesting further American commitment to Vietnam—like invading the north with a million-man US army—that he took him out of the White House and placed him in the Policy Planning Department of the State Department (p. 182). Now, Rostow writes his myriad hawkish memos for Rusk to read—and they seem to have had an effect, because when Johnson took over, Rusk now became a real hawk on the war (p. 154). But further, when Bundy decided to resign as National Security Advisor, he suggested two men to replace him: Thomas Hughes, or Moyers. Johnson rejected them both. He placed Walt Rostow in the job. Johnson had to have known what he was getting with Rostow, because he was around for the debates of November of 1961. He knew that the Taylor–Rostow Report recommended American combat troops. He had to have known that Kennedy argued eloquently and soundly against the commitment of combat troops. After all, Howard Burris, the man who wrote the memo containing Kennedy’s arguments—which I quoted from above—was working for Johnson. So when LBJ rescued Rostow from his figurative Siberia in the State Department, he knew what he was getting. And he would have recalled him only if he knew that Rostow’s agenda coincided with his own—which was to escalate the war (p. 175). In fact, when Rostow was appointed National Security Advisor, he told Johnson about Kennedy’s “deep commitment to the independence of

Vietnam from which he would not have retreated” (p. 152). According to Chester Cooper, Rostow looked upon negotiations as tantamount to surrender. Rostow wanted a simple goal: an independent South Vietnam. By 1965–6, the actual goal of both Johnson and Rostow was this: “Bringing the Vietnamese communists to their knees via continuously escalating the level of punishment they received from U.S. air and ground forces until the communists gave up.” (p. 179) This was nothing but a delusional fantasy. And Kennedy understood this in 1961 from (1) his visits to Vietnam during the French imperialist war there in the fifties; (2) his talks with MacArthur; and (3) his conversations with De Gaulle.

After this November 1961 decision and the reassignment of Rostow, Kennedy went to Seattle and made a speech. This was the day after NSAM 111 was signed. He talked about how America had to be cautious on the world stage because any crisis might escalate into a catastrophic nuclear war. He specifically mentioned how the massive amount of U.S. firepower could be rendered useless by guerilla warfare and infiltration. He then added that although the U.S. could ship arms abroad, it was up to those peoples to use them correctly and for the right ideals. We could not impose our will on others, and there could not be “an American solution to every problem” (pp. 287–8). These were wise and prophetic words, which Rostow and Johnson did not understand or even wish to comprehend.

II.3

One of the most fascinating parts of the book is the discussion of the role of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in Kennedy’s administration. When Kennedy sent Rostow and Taylor to Vietnam in the fall of 1961, he seems to have understood what they would come back with. After all, JFK fully comprehended what Rostow was about pretty quickly. What I will discuss next reveals just how wise Kennedy had become and how smart he was at maneuvering the people in his own Cabinet after the Bay of Pigs. Almost concurrently with the trip by Rostow and Taylor, he also sent John Kenneth Galbraith to Vietnam (p. 129). He realized that what Galbraith wrote up would counter the Rostow–Taylor recommendations. It did, of course. But Kennedy did not throw this report out for open discussion: he told Galbraith to give it to McNamara only. This becomes crucial in any discussion of Vietnam in the JFK administration, because, as the book notes, after the issuance of NSAM 111, the only person in the Cabinet who seems to understand what Kennedy is headed for is McNamara. And, in fact, Howard Jones discovered that Roswell Gilpatric, McNamara’s Deputy Secretary, talked about the fact that Kennedy eventually entrusted his boss with putting together a withdrawal plan. He referred to it as “part of a plan the president asked him [McNamara] to develop to unwind this whole thing” (p. 371). This began in earnest in 1962 when McNamara went to the Joint Chiefs and told them to put together a plan for withdrawal. As Jim Douglass wrote in his fine book *JFK and the Unspeakable*, the Chiefs dragged their feet on this one for a year. Finally at the so-called SecDef conference of May 1963, they presented a plan to the Secretary. He criticized it as being too slow (pp. 288–291). After telling them to hurry it along, he had a taped conversation with Kennedy and Bundy in October of 1963. He told Kennedy the military mis-

sion of the U.S. would be completed by 1965, and if it were not, the South Vietnamese would be ready by then to take it over. Bundy then interjects, “What’s the point of doing that?” McNamara replies, “We need a way to get out of Vietnam. This is a way of doing it. And to leave forces there when they’re not needed, I think is wasteful and complicates both their problem and ours.”

The above ARRB declassified tape was heard and shown on-screen in the accompanying film to this book. When played at the conference, its effect was startling (pp. 100, 124). Why? Because mainstream writers like Karnow and Halberstam had always depicted Vietnam as McNamara’s War—and much of the documentation showing this to be false had been concealed from the public. In fact, Goldstein actually asked, “Who is the Robert McNamara on these tapes?” To me, the comment by Bundy—“What’s the point of doing that?”—is the key. As Gilpatric explained, and Galbraith elucidated, McNamara was appointed by JFK to be his “point man” on the withdrawal. He was going to drive it home with occasional encouragement from Kennedy. This “back channel” idea was endorsed by James Galbraith, who talked about it with his father. John Kenneth Galbraith told his son that JFK often operated like this. In James Galbraith’s words about McNamara at the conference: “Kennedy and he [McNamara] were agreed in advance that this was the course of policy they were going to follow. That was a position they didn’t share ... with virtually no one else. They then imposed this, with McNamara playing the role of giving the argument he already knows Kennedy is going to accept, because Kennedy told him to do it.” (p. 129) This concept was posthumously endorsed through Bundy. When co-author Goldstein talked to Bundy about why McNamara switched so quickly from endorsing combat troops in November of 1961 to being so dovish a month later, Bundy said there was only one answer to explain the apparent paradox: Kennedy had asked him to do so (p. 125). In fact, McNamara was so immersed in making the withdrawal plan work that he asked the State Department intelligence group (INR) to give him more optimistic scenarios of what was happening on the ground (p. 117). According to Newman, this was probably done because once the CIA and Pentagon realized Kennedy was going to withdraw, they began to change their intelligence estimates from rosy to pessimistic—and further, they backdated the revisions to July of 1963 (Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 425, 441; Gardner and Gittinger, p. 172). Realizing that Kennedy’s plan was to use the false and rosy estimates to hoist them on their own petard—that is, to withdraw U.S. forces since they were not needed anymore—the CIA and Pentagon began to fight back.

What this all says, of course, is that, as in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy understood that his Cabinet and military advisers were not giving him what he wanted fast enough. In October of 1962, he worked secretly through his brother, Robert Kennedy, and to a lesser extent with Rusk. This time around he worked with McNamara, and to a lesser extent with Galbraith. With McNamara running interference, NSAM 263, ordering the withdrawal of the first thousand advisers from Vietnam, was signed in October of 1963. (It should be added here that the death of the Nhu brothers in November of 1963 had no effect on the withdrawal plan; see p. 372.) The press release that announced NSAM 263 also stated that this first thousand-troop draw-down was part of a phased with-

drawal of the major part of all U.S. forces. And that withdrawal would be completed by the end of 1965 (p. 300).

Finally, when Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Max Taylor wrote his memo on NSAM 263 to the service Chiefs, there was no mention about the withdrawal being contingent upon victory (pp. 106, 110). This is a myth promulgated by anti-Kennedy polemicist Noam Chomsky. Virtually no one at this conference bought it.

II.4

Ever since Lyndon Johnson's role in the escalation of the Vietnam War was dramatically depicted in Oliver Stone's film JFK, there has been an attempt by some, such as Michael Beschloss and Vincent Bugliosi, to soften that image. What these two try to say is that Johnson was a reluctant warrior who was manipulated by others into plunging America into an epic tragedy that needlessly consumed the lives of over 58,000 Americans and two million Vietnamese. In other words, Stone and John Newman (who served as a consultant on the film) got it wrong: they unfairly distorted what Johnson's real role was in this affair. What this book shows, and with utter finality, is this: it is Beschloss and Bugliosi who have it wrong; if anything, Stone and Newman were being kind to Johnson: the reality is actually worse. And the recall of Walt Rostow to commandeer the escalation is only part of it. The book brings in a new angle: Johnson understood that he was breaking with Kennedy's policy, and he consciously tried to cover his tracks.

The story begins with the alterations in NSAM 273. This was the rough draft of a presidential order as assembled by Kennedy's advisers in Hawaii just prior to Kennedy's trip to Dallas. The conference there was meant to make any necessary adjustments to Vietnam policy after the death of the Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother. Because of his murder in Dallas, the rough draft of this order, actually written by Bundy, was never signed by President Kennedy. The opening of the draft said that the U.S. mission was still to assist the Government of South Vietnam against the Communist insurgency. It also mentioned that the U.S. intended to withdraw, as made clear by the White House announcement of October. Paragraph seven stated that there should be "actions against North Vietnam using *South Vietnamese resources*, especially sea resources" (Newman, p. 440, emphasis added).

At Johnson's first Vietnam meeting on November 24, 1963, there was a quite different tone and attitude than anything Kennedy had said with his Cabinet. The new president stated clearly, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." He ordered South Vietnamese Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to "tell the generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word." (Newman, p. 442) This is rather an odd thing to say, because the "word" prior to Dallas was that the U.S. was intending to withdraw and turn the war over to South Vietnam. Johnson then said that he was unhappy with our emphasis on social reforms, that he had little tolerance for the U.S. trying to be "do-gooders" (*ibid.*, p. 443). He then added that he had "never been happy with our operations in

Vietnam” (*ibid.*). His intent was clear: to win the war (McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 102). He then issued a stern warning: he wanted no more dissension or division over policy; any person that did not conform would be removed. (This would later be demonstrated by his banning of Hubert Humphrey from Vietnam meetings when Humphrey advised Johnson to rethink his policy of military commitment to Vietnam.) When the meeting was over, Bill Moyers remained in the room with Johnson. LBJ said, “So they’ll think with Kennedy dead we’ve lost heart ... they’ll think we’re yellow” Moyers asked whom he was referring to. Johnson replied the Chinese and the Russians. Moyers asked his boss what he was going to do now. Johnson said he was going to give the generals what they wanted: more money. LBJ continued by saying that he was not going to let Vietnam slip away like China did. He was going to tell those generals in Saigon “to get off their butts and get out in those jungles and whip the hell out of some Communists” (*Newsweek*, February 10, 1975).

It’s hard to believe, but it is imperative to remember: this is just 48 hours after Kennedy’s death. As the book notes, Johnson’s presidential style was completely different from Kennedy’s. And it locked him into his blinkered view of Vietnam. He tended to personalize the war; he was intolerant of dissent; he wanted to intimidate the opposition, both in the White House, and on the battlefield (p. 192). By the summer of 1965, Johnson had so cowed any dissent within his Cabinet that after he had already committed 85,000 combat troops to Vietnam, Gen Westmoreland actually requested another 85,000. LBJ called for a meeting and asked for a vote. The minutes of this meeting end with: “There was no response when the president asked whether anyone in the room opposed the course of action decided upon” (p. 193). Westmoreland got his troops.

This drastic change in tone accomplished two things. First, it gave the signal to the hawks and closet hawks that, unlike with JFK, they would now have Johnson’s ear. Secondly, the altered intelligence reports about the declining fortunes on the battlefield would now have their intended effect. Bundy now changed the rough draft of NSAM 273 in accordance with Johnson’s “stronger views on the war” (Newman, p. 445). First, in keeping with Johnson’s “no dissension or division” reprimand, the new NSAM expressly forbade any public criticisms of the war effort. Second, paragraph seven about South Vietnamese operations against the north was rewritten—and it was rewritten in a way that allowed the U.S. to participate in these covert operations against North Vietnam (*ibid.*, p. 446). Thus began OPLAN 34A, which was submitted to Johnson less than a month later. Johnson approved it on January 16, 1964. This resulted in Operation DESOTO, consisting of US maritime patrols acquiring visual, electronic, and photographic intelligence in the Tonkin Gulf. These patrols began on February 28, 1964. In early August, the second patrol resulted in the North Vietnamese attack on the U.S. destroyer Maddox, and this opened the door to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which Johnson vigorously pursued as his approval to begin the U.S. air war against North Vietnam; and these first air strikes were considered by Ho Chi Minh to be acts of war by the U.S. (p. 162). As the air war intensified—eventually turning into the colossal Operation Rolling Thunder—the U.S. needed protection for the air bases being built. So in early March of 1965, just seven months after the Maddox incident, the first U.S. combat troops arrived in South Vietnam. And 1965 was the year that Kennedy had intended to

complete his withdrawal plan—after he was reelected. Johnson did the opposite: he inserted combat troops after his reelection. As Newman notes in *JFK and Vietnam*, the November 1964 election would have been used by Kennedy to disguise a withdrawal; Johnson used it to disguise his plan for intervention (Newman, p. 442). In fact, Johnson essentially said this to the Joint Chiefs in December of 1963: he told them at a Christmas party, “Just get me elected, and then you can have your war.” (Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 326)

II.5

Much of the above is taken from Newman’s 1992 book. In working with John after meeting him in 1993, he told me that one of the problems he had in writing *JFK and Vietnam* was that the CIA eventually found out what he was doing. And they would visit archival institutions—like the Hoover Institute at Stanford—and remove certain things in advance.

This problem was alleviated by the arrival of the ARRB. I say alleviated; it was not completely cured. For instance, although the ARRB interviewed several people who attended the Honolulu Conference of November 1963, none of them could produce the stenographic record of the meeting. In late 1997, the Board released the records of the SecDef Conference in May of 1963. This was McNamara’s meeting with his Vietnam advisers in Hawaii. Clearly, at this meeting, McNamara is hurrying the withdrawal plan. And as I wrote in *Probe* (Vol. 5, No. 3), “On page after page of these documents, at every upper level of the Pentagon, everyone seems aware that Kennedy’s withdrawal plan will begin in December of 1963 ... and this would be the beginning of an eventual complete withdrawal by 1965” (p. 19). How clear was the message McNamara was carrying for Kennedy? General Earle Wheeler wrote “that proposals for overt action invited a negative PRESIDENTIAL decision” (*ibid.*, capitals in original). Compare this to Johnson’s telling the generals to get off their butts and whip hell out of some communists. Also, in the November 26 version of NSAM 273, Johnson ordered the planning of “intensified operations against North Vietnam”, both overt and covert, covering “the full spectrum of sabotage, psychological and raiding activity”. Further, the intensified operations were also against the country of Laos. These operations could now be made without clearance from the State Department. Concerning Cambodia, the new order was to show that charges of US clandestine operations into that country were groundless—which they were not—with no actual measures taken to show they were such (*ibid.*). The entry into Laos and Cambodia were added by LBJ and Bundy and were alterations of Kennedy’s policy.

But *Virtual JFK: Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived* goes even further in this regard. At the November 24, 1963 Cabinet meeting mentioned above, McNamara must have understood the message that the withdrawal plan was now in the crosshairs of a newly-hawkish president. And this surely must have been even more evident when Bundy made the appropriate alterations to NSAM 273 that Johnson desired. But in a newly declassified phone call of February 20, 1964, the point that there was a new sheriff in town was hammered home: Johnson told McNamara, “I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the pres-

ident thought otherwise, and I just sat silent.” (p. 310) This is stunning. It clearly denotes that Johnson was aware of what Kennedy was planning, and that he was planning it through McNamara; and, furthermore, that he was so opposed to it that he thought it was “foolish”. But since he was in a subordinate position he had to suffer through it. After the assassination, however, he was subordinate no more. And now he was telling the guy who he knew was running the withdrawal plan that it was over.

In another conversation, less than two weeks later, he actually makes McNamara take back what he said in 1963 about the initial thousand-man withdrawal and the eventual complete withdrawal in 1965. He begins to formulate excuses to say that the plan didn’t really mean that “everybody comes back, that means your training ought to be in pretty good shape that time”. And then Johnson tries to soothe McNamara’s silence over this contradiction—read “lie”—by saying that there was nothing really inconsistent in these new statements he wanted McNamara to make (*ibid.*). LBJ is consciously breaking with Kennedy’s policy and he is getting Kennedy’s “point man” on board as he tries to cover his tracks. In January of 1965, Johnson continues this strategy with McNamara. Johnson calls McNamara and tells him that at a Georgetown party the Kennedy crowd had got the word out that Johnson was using CIA Director John McCone “to put the Vietnam War on Kennedy’s tomb. And I had a conspiracy going on to show that it was Kennedy’s immaturity and poor judgment that originally led us into this thing, that got us involved ... And that this was my game: to lay Vietnam off onto Kennedy’s inexperience and immaturity and so forth.” (p. 306) Johnson then continues by saying that since McNamara was part of Kennedy’s administration, that he did not resent very much what was said or he would have spoken up (*ibid.*). Johnson later had Rostow collect all of Kennedy’s public statements supporting the war to show there was no breakage in policy between the two men. Johnson’s co-opting of McNamara was now complete. The war that was unfairly tagged as McNamara’s War was really imposed on him by Johnson.

But even prior to these conversations, on February 3, 1964, LBJ revealed that he knew what he was going to do, way before Rolling Thunder and the commitment of combat troops. In a phone call with John Knight of the *Miami Herald*, he said that there were three options he had. The first was to get out; but he said the dominoes would then start falling over. “And God Almighty, what they said about us leaving China would just be warming up compared to what they’d say now.” So getting out was eliminated. He then said that “you can sit down and agree to neutralize all of it. But nobody is going to neutralize North Vietnam, so that’s totally impractical.” So now, neutralization was eliminated. “And so it really boils down to ... getting out or getting in.” (p. 211) Now if you compare the getting-out option with the dominoes falling all over Southeast Asia, and even greater historical Red baiting than losing China, which option do you think Johnson had in mind? And further, what kind of foreign policy thinker compares losing a country the size of China with the narrow peninsula of South Vietnam? Answer: A thinker with—unlike Kennedy—no discrimination or sophistication. As Logevall notes here, Johnson was a hawk from the beginning. With him it was, “We can fight them in South Vietnam, or we can fight them in San Francisco.” (p. 169)

But it was actually even worse than that. Johnson was so shallow in his foreign policy views that he actually compared losing South Vietnam with what Neville Chamberlain did with Hitler at Munich! He actually said this to biographer Doris Kearns (*Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, p. 264). He then added, “And I knew that if we let Communist aggression succeed in taking over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country an endless national debate ... that would shatter my presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy.” (He was exactly wrong, of course: it was his prosecution of the war that destroyed his presidency.) Incredibly, he then compared the loss of China and the rise of McCarthy and the Red Scare with the loss of South Vietnam. After comparing them, he actually said the loss of the latter would be worse! “Losing the Great Society was a terrible thought, but not so terrible as the thought of being responsible for America’s losing a war to the Communists. Nothing could possibly be worse than that.” This is ignorance that is almost beyond description.

But it is particularly stark when compared with what Bundy told Goldstein Kennedy was planning for in his second term. The goals were: (1) a reduction in East–West tensions; (2) reduction in nuclear weapons held by the U.S. and U.S.S.R.; (3) strict arms control; and (4) normalization of relations with China (p. 227). If anyone thinks Bundy was talking through his hat, Dean Rusk vouched for the China venture.

Further contravening Beschloss and Bugliosi, Johnson could not wait for a confirmation of the second attack on the Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin. There was real confusion about whether such an attack occurred—and it turned out that it had not. But in listening to the dialog between Admiral Sharp, McNamara, and Johnson, it became clear that Sharp’s efforts to discern the truth “were gradually eclipsed by the need LBJ felt to order some kind of retaliation and to do it quickly” (p. 379). To me, all the above is indicative of a man who has been thoroughly indoctrinated into the complete, and false, paradigm of the Cold War. As Richard Mahoney showed in *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, Kennedy had not been so indoctrinated. So the agony and depression LBJ felt as the Vietnam disaster unfolded was in part because he knew there were other options he could have chosen—and, unlike Kennedy, he had not. As Moyers stated, “He knew more than anyone in the room what it was going to cost him: everything, as he kept saying, was on the table. His agenda, and lives, and knowing more than anyone else, he still made the choice. It was his to make; no one made it for him.” (p. 197)

The book is well worth buying. In my view, it closes the chapter on a debate that has been going on since 1992. As shown here, it’s a debate that should have never started.