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I didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—What if President John F. Kennedy had not been murdered in Dallas 50 years ago next week? What if? What might have been different?

It's plausible that he would have reversed the Americanization of the Vietnam War in 1963 and, perhaps, withdrawn us altogether early in his second term.

This would have been a slippery rabbit for Kennedy to pull out of a very short hat. High officials in the CIA, military and State Department opposed leaving without victory.

Opponents of withdrawal saw South Vietnam as a must win in light of the Korean stalemate, Soviet support for "wars of liberation," the Bay of Pigs disaster, construction of the Berlin Wall and other episodes where America had been unable to achieve clear victories in complicated, Cold-War situations.

Kennedy knew that if he withdrew, he would be called "soft on Communism" by hawks in both parties and would be blamed for the "loss" of Indochina just as President Truman was unfairly saddled with the "loss" of China.

It was these fears that pushed a doubting Lyndon Johnson into scaling up a conventional war that was not about holding ground, a war that could not be won with a strategy that was not designed to win.

Kennedy came into the White House believing in the "domino theory." Even as late as September 2, 1963, he told CBS's Walter Cronkite: "If we withdraw from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam. Pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya... would go." (Johnson stated his version in early 1964: "If we quit Vietnam tomorrow, we'll be fighting in Hawaii and next week we'll be fighting in San Francisco.")

Consistent with that theory, Kennedy boosted American military personnel in South Vietnam from fewer than 1,000 when he was inaugurated in January, 1961 to 16,700 on November 22, 1963.

These numbers suggest that Kennedy was increasingly committed to this conflict as a response, perhaps, to the step-by-step worsening of the political and military situation in South Vietnam.

Kennedy's escalation of personnel, however, was mainly limited to advisors, Special Forces, covert CIA operations and technical assistance, not regular combat troops.

Kennedy never wanted to fight either a French-style colonial war or a Korea-style, conventional war in South Vietnam. That explains, I think, why he rejected an October, 1961 proposal of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs to send 200,000 American combat troops to South Vietnam.

By November, 1963, American war policy resembled a rotating triangle. It had a let's-escalate-and-win side, a let's-stay-and-negotiate-a-deal side and a let's-get-out-whatever side.

Kennedy's Administration was divided among these three approaches. He, himself, had moved from one to the next to the next.

The question raised by Oswald's intervention is this: Which side was Kennedy on in November, 1963?

Evidence exists to show that Kennedy had ended up in the leave-without-victory camp earlier that year.

Less clear is whether he thought the war was unwinnable regardless of how much we did; whether he thought winning, or even stalemate, was not worth the likely cost; whether he still believed in the domino theory; and whether he planned to oppose Communist revolutions in the Third World in more favorable circumstances.

At a Pentagon conference in Honolulu in May, 1963, McNamara signaled the change in Kennedy's position when he proposed an accelerated plan to phase down the American presence.

Five months later, on October 2nd, Kennedy, with McNamara's concurrence, ordered the withdrawal of 1,000 American troops from South Vietnam by the end of the year and the removal of all the rest by the end of 1965.

On October 4th, General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, sent them a memo reflecting the unambiguous Kennedy-McNamara position: "All planning will be directed toward preparing RVN [Republic of Viet Nam aka South Vietnam] for the withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by the end of the calendar year 1965."

The Taylor memo also directed the Chiefs to "execute the plan to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963." (James K. Galbraith, "Exit Strategy: In 1963, JFK ordered a complete withdrawal from Vietnam," Boston Review, Oct./Nov., 2003; www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam/exit.htm)

Several months before Dallas, Kennedy had decided to leave Vietnam without a military victory. He was not willing to “pay any price, bear any burden, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty” in South Vietnam. It’s possible he would have stuck with South Vietnam through two terms had its leadership been less repressive, its government more responsive and its military more competent.

When Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency the day Kennedy was killed, he tried to have it both ways. He ran as the peace candidate in 1964, proclaiming in October: “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.”

As Johnson’s I’m-for-peace campaign played out in 1964, he was also increasing our military presence in the South; ramping up covert activities against the North, one of which led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; and creating momentum toward the big war that he began in 1965.

If it’s true that Kennedy was extricating America from Vietnam at the end of 1963, then many of the thousands of deaths, injuries and miseries that ensued during the next 12 years can be laid in large part on Lee Harvey Oswald. Without his shots from the Texas School Book Depository, most of all of what happened next would not have happened at all.

Today, Vietnam is one nation—a Communist nation, one of four in the world, along with China, Cuba and Laos. It trades with us as fast as it can, welcomes our investments and businesses, conducts joint military exercises, opposes the terrorist acts that torment us, encourages Americans to visit and has had full diplomatic relations with us since 1995.

Vietnam is, today, one of the most pro-American countries in Southeast Asia. About 71 percent of the Vietnamese polled in 2002 viewed the U.S. favorably, which undoubtedly exceeds our opinion of ourselves.

Against this record is that of the purges, killings, “reeducation camps” and continuing human-rights violations that Hanoi’s version of Communism imposed on the South after its 1975 victory.

The long-term, strategic interests of the United States almost 40 years after “losing” South Vietnam do not seem to have been harmed. It was the thousands of individuals who were wounded and killed on all sides who bore the loss.

Had Lee Harvey Oswald slept in on November 22, 1963, it’s arguable that the 60s would not have happened as they did.

What if Kennedy had been able to close out the low-level commitment to South Vietnam by the end of 1965?

We would not have endured a big, divisive, expensive war that required a big conscript army. The 60s and 70s would have had to have been less disruptive, rebellious and painful.

There might never have been either a Johnson presidency or a Nixon presidency. No Great Society. No Medicare. No civil rights legislation. No 1968, with its assassinations and campus upheavals. No legislation to protect the environment, occupational safety and consumers. No coming off the gold standard in 1971. No thaw with China. No Watergate.

Had Kennedy gotten out of Vietnam, the U.S. government would not have had to engage in so much multi-level lying to its citizens during those years. It was the dishonesty, deceptions, cover-ups and the increasing absurdity of destroying a country in order to save it that slowly broke the American people's trust in their government. We are still paying the price for that.

Had there been no war, the late-60s movements like black power, campus protests, feminism and environmentalism might not have drawn fuel from anti-war, anti-authority anger. Change would have probably arrived on softer feet, with less rancor and breakage.

The events of the 60s were not inevitable, and none had to happen in the forms they took. History could have unwound each from a different spool, or not at all.

Had Oswald not shot Kennedy, we would be living in a different country with a different set of cultural memories.

Had Kennedy gotten out of Vietnam, I would not have met any of the women that were in my life after college. I would not have fathered the two children I did. I would not have done any of the career things I've done.

Other Boomers who were scuffed up and changed in the 60s and 70s might also lay a part of the responsibility for how their lives turned out on Lee Harvey Oswald, the alienated loser who succeeded in only two things—changing history and changing us.

And after all that's been said and all that's been done during the last 50 years, the American public is still not certain who was involved in the assassination, how exactly it happened and what lay behind it.

It's time to know.

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I've written twice about The Frisbee King of Key West. The links below show a television interview with him last week. Contact me if you know a writer who is looking for a book or movie project.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjNhxw12JtA>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vHVRe0Xuks>