A Roundtable on Marc Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment in Vietnam*

Chester Pach, Jessica M. Chapman, Tizoc Chavez, Jessica Elkind, Phillip E. Catton, and Marc Selverstone

Introduction: "JFK/Blown Away/What More Do I Have to Say?"

Chester Pach

Sixty years after his murder in Dallas, John F. Kennedy continues to fascinate the public and intrigue historians almost as much for what he might have done had he lived to serve a second term as president as for what he actually did while in the White House. What Marc J. Selverstone calls "the great what if"—what JFK would have done in Vietnam had Lee Harvey Oswald never pulled the trigger—has shaped our understanding of Kennedy's presidency as well as the trajectory of recent U.S. history.

After U.S. combat troops began to fight, die, and falter on the battlefields of Vietnam, whispers from Kennedy insiders that "Jack would have acted differently" turned into confident assertions that JFK intended to withdraw U.S. forces from Vietnam after securing reelection. Oliver Stone amplified these claims in his brilliant but deeply flawed film JFK, in which Kevin Costner, playing Orleans Parish district attorney Jim Garrison, tells the jury in his closing argument, "I submit to you that what took place on November 22, 1963, was a coup d'état. Its most direct and tragic result was a reversal of President Kennedy's commitment to withdraw from Vietnam."

While many historians have embraced or challenged the Kennedy withdrawal thesis, no scholar has studied it as thoroughly or thoughtfully as Marc Selverstone. In response to Billy Joel's musical question in "We Didn't Start the Fire," Selverstone has a lot more to say about the Kennedy withdrawal, including much that is new and some that shifts our understanding of JFK and Vietnam.

Perhaps the most important conclusion he draws is that the Kennedy withdrawal wasn't Kennedy's idea after all, but Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's. Inspired by a comment from the president, who was concerned about media commentary that Vietnam was turning into an American war, McNamara initiated planning in April 1962 to help the Saigon government develop the capability to stand on its own within three years. Selverstone shows that one plan soon turned into two, when British counterinsurgency expert Robert G. K. Thompson suggested an interim withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. military advisors by the end of 1963. Thompson and many U.S. officials who embraced his idea considered it a gesture to prove "we are winning" (113).

In some of the most valuable sections of the book, Selverstone demonstrates that both withdrawal plans rested on dubious optimism about Saigon's progress in the war. The Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam, which top U.S. military officials devised in early 1963, rested on no more than the supposition that the Communist insurgency would be "under control" by the end of 1965 (103). White House officials, as well as U.S. diplomats and uniformed officers in Saigon, paid insufficient attention to contrary evidence. They seemed more concerned, for example, with denying, countering, or halting critical news reports about South Vietnamese military deficiencies than with investigating whether those alleged problems were real.

Selverstone also demonstrates that advocates of both plans embraced them for a variety of purposes, not all of them mutually compatible. The plan to defeat the insurgency within three years was a way to reassure the government of Ngo Dinh Diem of U.S. resolve and reliability, while withdrawing 1,000 advisors was aimed at pressuring Diem to prosecute the war more vigorously. Curtailing the number of U.S. troops and eventually bringing them home could allay congressional criticism of foreign aid, including those who worried about unending commitments to developing nations. At the same time, a short-term withdrawal that underlined the administration's careful use of available resources might somehow translate into long-term congressional support for helping Saigon eventually to defend itself. For McNamara, both plans were ways of achieving his cherished if illusory goal of systematizing defense planning and providing it with predictability and precision. As Selverstone asserts, "The Kennedy withdrawal thus emerged as a highly elastic approach to a broad range of administration objectives" (244).

The withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. advisors occurred during the first days of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency. But Selverstone explains that it was more an accounting maneuver than a reduction of the U.S. presence. The Kennedy administration was evasive in disclosing the number of U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam, since the total exceeded limits established under the Geneva accords of 1954. Never did this phantom withdrawal "lower the absolute number of advisory troops serving in Vietnam." Many of the uniformed troops who returned home at the end of 1963 did so according to the "normal turnover cycle" (210). The Kennedy withdrawal, then, was a reality that was an illusion. When JFK took the presidential

oath there were 685 troops in the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group. At the end of 1963, there were 16,300.

Even though he found few of Kennedy's fingerprints on withdrawal planning, Selverstone is brilliant at analyzing how Kennedy shaped U.S. policy in Vietnam. He portrays JFK as a pragmatist, deeply concerned with retaining the freedom to make decisions about Vietnam on his terms. His goal was "to win the war," not advance democracy or protect human rights (180). For JFK, the symbolic was substantive; perception, reputation, and credibility mattered more than interests. Vietnam itself had little intrinsic value, except for its effects on U.S. Cold War policy. Although he still insisted that the war was Saigon's to win or lose, Kennedy remained determined to avoid defeat. The answer to how he would have done so died with him in Dallas.

The roundtable reviewers, all distinguished scholars of U.S. involvement in Vietnam or of presidential diplomacy, consider Selverstone's book a triumph. Tizoc Chavez praises Selverstone for his "rich, nuanced picture of the administration's planning and decision-making." Philip E. Catton lauds his "detailed and engaging narrative" and his "forensic" analysis of withdrawal planning. Jessica Elkind asserts that Selverstone's "brilliant book contributes significantly not only to the . . . withdrawal planning during Kennedy's presidency but also to . . . our understanding of the American war in Vietnam."

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For Jessica M. Chapman, however, "Selverstone's laser focus on withdrawal planning veers into tunnel vision." She and Elkind would have preferred more attention to North Vietnamese political dynamics and their influence on Kennedy's policies. Chapman also wishes that Selverstone had provided a more balanced analysis of the U.S. relationship with the Saigon government, one that incorporated more Vietnamese perspectives. Despite these shortcomings, Chapman recognizes that "it would be folly to excoriate him for not writing a different book, when the one he gave us is so valuable."

Even though he meticulously analyzed a mountain of evidence, including government documents, personal papers, oral histories, and White House tapes, Selverstone is still unable to answer some significant questions about the Kennedy withdrawal. How much did some major U.S. officials, including National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, know about the first fifteen months of withdrawal planning? The documents don't say. How did critical language about the timetable for withdrawal become part of an important White House statement on October 2, 1963? The record is uncertain. How can one reconcile McNamara's optimistic public declarations with his private forebodings about the war's perils? Even an historian as astute as Selverstone is unsure.

And what about "the great what if?" Any certain answer is impossible. We have only what Bobby Kennedy said in 1964 about what his brother would have done if faced with the imminent collapse of the South Vietnamese government: "We'd face that when we came to it" (18). But for those who revel in Camelot counterfactuals, there will always be more to say.

Note:

1. *JFK*, directed by Oliver Stone (Warner Bros., Burbank, CA, 1991).

Review of Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam*

Jessica M. Chapman

Marc Selverstone concludes his new book, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam*, with a thoughtful discussion of popular and historiographical thinking about the counterfactual question: What would Kennedy have done in Vietnam, had he not been gunned down on the streets of Dallas in November 1963? What the rest of his book makes clear is that entrants into that debate have devoted far more attention to answering this counterfactual question than Kennedy ever did to his administration's Vietnam policy.

"Kennedy's engagement with Vietnam," writes Selverstone, was "episodic at best" (158). The so-called "Kennedy withdrawal," it seems, had remarkably little to do with Kennedy, as he engaged with its planning—indeed, learned of its existence—only late in the game. As Selverstone notes, Vice President Lyndon Johnson learned specific details of withdrawal timetables no later than mid-August 1962, but Kennedy's knowledge "is hard to discern" (88). This was apparently a direct function of the president's lack of interest in Vietnam as anything more than a domestic political liability and a potentially significant threat to U.S. credibility, which he considered essential to the successful prosecution of Cold War foreign policy.

In the final months of his life, when he did engage with plans to withdraw troops from Vietnam, Kennedy did not focus on strategic planning to win the war. In fact, he rebuffed suggestions that he take a look at the October 1963 McNamara-Taylor Report, which spelled out plans for phased withdrawals to be completed by 1965. Instead, he expressed "a desire to play it safe" (191). He proposed implementing aid cuts and troop withdrawals in a "'low key' fashion" to avoid publicity (186). In effect, he was "hedging his bets." His goals were to minimize domestic political backlash and to retain maximum flexibility to change course in the future (176).

Despite Kennedy's disinterest in the particulars of American involvement in Vietnam, Selverstone traces a "serious and systematic effort to schedule the removal of U.S. servicemen from Vietnam" that was undertaken by the administration between the spring of 1962 and the fall of 1963 (242). He frames his account of the administration's withdrawal planning as an effort "to trace its history, focusing more on its meaning at the time than on whether Kennedy would have carried it out" (18). Yet his conclusion about Kennedy's intentions—that "the matter is ultimately unknowable" (18) and that the meaning of withdrawal planning for Kennedy himself "remains obscure" (245)—does not prevent him from speculating.

"In November 1963," Selverstone notes, "the president seemed very much committed to remaining in the fight" (203). He claims that to the extent that Kennedy participated in planning for withdrawal, he never wavered in his assessment that Vietnam was of central importance to U.S. national security on the grounds that a loss there—or the optics of abandoning a longstanding ally—could damage U.S. credibility, with catastrophic consequences for U.S. policy around the globe. Moreover, he writes, "while Kennedy had become increasingly uncomfortable with the depth and implications of the U.S. commitment, his fealty to the broader dynamics that expanded it . . . would likely have generated cognitive dissonance were he to abandon it" (245). Indeed, the president's willingness to entertain plans for withdrawal always hinged on the premise that they

would serve political and diplomatic objectives without harming the overall war effort and that the substantial troop reductions planned for the future would take place *only* once optimistic projections about military progress on the battlefield were met.

Selverstone qualifies these insights by noting the paucity of sources that speak directly to Kennedy's outlook, a remarkable commentary given his exhaustive consultation of Kennedy administration materials, including the White House tapes, which reveal some of the few hints into Kennedy's thinking that do exist. I cannot help but wonder, then, why Selverstone did not make more of Kennedy's February 1963 meeting with Senator Mike Mansfield, where the president articulated the imperative of winning reelection before contemplating troop withdrawals.

If at this point Kennedy was "souring on the commitment" even as he expressed "the need to remain steadfast, at least in public," perhaps we should consider seriously the possibility that he saw the implications of the credibility imperative—and thus his approach to Vietnam as a component of his global strategic outlook—differently in the context of a second term (107–8). While Selverstone is right to note that we will never know Kennedy's intentions, he seems to have missed an opportunity here, and throughout the book, to assess the role of Vietnam within the larger context of the president's domestic political strategy. Similarly, the implications of the Civil Rights Movement enter into the narrative only fleetingly.

Selverstone's lack of attention to Kennedy's overarching domestic political strategy stems from his laser focus on the administration's planning for withdrawal, a focus that generates novel and important insights. Most importantly, he makes it clear that it was Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara who initiated plans to withdraw troops in response to a constellation of factors, including domestic political pressure, congressional efforts to rein in foreign aid, and— his personal pet project—the revamping of defense planning to enhance long-range strategy while curbing spending. Notably, these driving factors all stemmed from internal U.S. politics, only intersecting with Cold War national security considerations and South Vietnamese political and military realities as U.S. officials contemplated the development, refinement, and implementation of an internally motivated withdrawal strategy.

McNamara's advocacy of troop withdrawals, in which he was joined by other administration officials, depended entirely on optimistic projections of success on the battlefield in Vietnam and on the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) ability to assume responsibility for the fight against the National Liberation Front (NLF). By repeatedly pointing to this optimism without interrogating it, however, Selverstone's laser focus on withdrawal planning veers into tunnel vision.

The book contains very little discussion of the evolving military situation in Vietnam. Readers encounter the GVN only through the eyes of those American officials who were contemplating troop withdrawals on grounds that seemingly had little to do with Vietnam per se. And North Vietnam enters into the picture hardly at all until the final chapter, which is devoted to Johnson's reversal of withdrawal planning. Perhaps this is because events in Vietnam were of little import to those Kennedy administration officials who planned for withdrawal, but a deeper dive into to the disconnect between optimistic military projections and bleaker realities on the ground could enhance our understanding of the policymaking process, of disputes that emerged between civilian and military officials, and of the Johnson administration's eventual abandonment of withdrawal plans in favor of military escalation.

Greater attention to Kennedy's overarching domestic political outlook, more nuanced engagement with U.S. military intelligence relative to events on the ground in South Vietnam and decision-making in Hanoi, and a more balanced treatment of the U.S.-GVN relationship might have strengthened Selverstone's narrative. However, it would be folly to excoriate him for not writing a different book when the one he has given us is so valuable. As he lays out so clearly in his conclusion, the historiography of Kennedy's Vietnam policy evolved from the "Camelot" school that maintained—on the basis of firsthand accounts—that it was his intention to get out to a more critical revisionist perspective in the 1970s and 1980s that questioned that assumption on the basis of his overall hawkishness. It finally circled back in the 1990s to the withdrawal thesis, this time on the basis of greater documentation.

In my view, Selverstone's unrivaled use of archival materials and presidential recordings from the Kennedy administration puts this lively debate to rest by demonstrating that it has been focused all along on the wrong question. *The Kennedy Withdrawal* shows that the president's "precise role remains elusive" because his role was minor, his engagement fleeting, and his intentions unmoored in the particulars of Vietnam (243). Kennedy did not have a plan for Vietnam, and when it threatened his other plans, he simply aimed to mitigate its negative effects. This may tell us something about what he would have done had he lived, but nothing that would revolutionize our understanding of the U.S. path to war in Vietnam.

What Selverstone's in-depth evaluation of the origins, process, and logic of the Kennedy administration's planning for withdrawal does reveal is the extent to which those plans rested on assumptions about military progress in Vietnam that amounted to little more than wishful thinking. He provides ample evidence that at no point did anyone involved in that planning process undergo any significant reevaluation of the strategic assumptions underpinning the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. Within the administration, an acceptable retreat from the Vietnam conflict always required victory, by some ill-defined measure. Ultimately, "as much as it signaled an eagerness to wind down the U.S. assistance effort, the policy of withdrawal—the Kennedy withdrawal—allowed JFK to preserve the American commitment to Vietnam" (246).

In this sense, Selverstone makes a case for an underlying continuity between the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that goes beyond personnel. Johnson's rapid move away from troop withdrawals appears to have been rooted in emotions, assumptions, and political calculations similar to those that informed the Kennedy administration's withdrawal planning, save one: optimism.

Review of Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal*

Tizoc Chavez

In his 1965 State of the Union address, Lyndon B. Johnson said that "a President's hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right."[1] His predecessor, John F. Kennedy, would no doubt have agreed, and perhaps no policy area during both men's presidencies was harder to figure out than Vietnam. Continuing to fight the communists there meant spending increasing amounts of money, materials, and manpower with no guarantee of success. But leaving, they believed, would be a major Cold War defeat that would harm, perhaps irrevocably, America's international standing and security. In *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam,* Marc J. Selverstone documents the Kennedy administration's debates on withdrawal from Vietnam and produces a rich, nuanced picture of the administration's planning and decision-making.

Selverstone frames his book around the "great what if."

What if Kennedy had lived? Would he have taken the nation deeper into the quagmire of Vietnam like Johnson? Or would he have cut America's losses and pulled out all U.S. troops? As Selverstone notes, it is an impossible question to answer, though many have tried. Those in the "Camelot" or "Kennedy exceptionalism" school argue that JFK would have removed U.S. troops or taken a less forceful path than LBJ, while those in the "Cold Warrior" camp highlight the continuities between Kennedy and Johnson. *The Kennedy Withdrawal s*ituates itself between these two views.

Did Kennedy have doubts about America's military presence in Southeast Asia? Absolutely. Throughout the book, we see JFK questioning America's deepening commitment to South Vietnam and its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem. He evinced a particular aversion to the idea of sending combat troops. South Vietnam needed to fight its own battles. But whether it could actually perform was always the concern. At the same time, despite his skepticism and growing unease, Kennedy "never relinquished his interest in brushfire wars, nor did he dampen his rhetoric about their necessity" (245). He remained a firm believer in the domino theory and "never disowned the strategic logic" of America's commitment to South Vietnam (246).

In wading into the "great what if" question, Selverstone keeps a tight focus, centering his narrative on the Kennedy administration's plans for troop withdrawals from Vietnam and walking the reader through each stage in the process. For those in the Kennedy exceptionalism camp, the fact that planning occurred is clear evidence that JFK wanted out of the mess in Southeast Asia. Yet, as Selverstone deftly demonstrates, there was more to this planning than met the eye, as it "was conceived and implemented in the service of more complicated ends" (3). Military, economic, and domestic political objectives all influenced the administration's thinking on withdrawal (79–86, 244). Most interestingly, and perhaps counterintuitively, rather than provide irrefutable evidence of JFK's desire to extricate the United States from Vietnam, withdrawal planning enabled the nation to continue its efforts in Southeast Asia (246).

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Vietnam began to weigh heavily on Kennedy soon after he moved into the White House, and during his first year in office he spent some time crafting a policy to reverse the deteriorating situation there. The result was National Security Action Memoranda number 111, which deepened America's assistance efforts. Kennedy approved sending military advisers to train South Vietnamese forces, but he stopped short of sending the combat troops some of his advisers had recommended. He remained wary of Americanizing the war and refused to declare the conflict a vital national interest.

Wary or not, in late 1961, Kennedy increased the numbers of American troops and the amount of materiel flowing into South Vietnam. Yet at the very moment the U.S. commitment was expanding, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara began to ponder withdrawal. As Selverstone shows, withdrawal planning was McNamara's "brainchild" (3). He was most likely responding to Kennedy's well-known desire to reduce U.S. involvement when feasible, but the planning "bore few of Kennedy's fingerprints" (3). Instead, it was the defense secretary who took the lead.

What eventually emerged from the planning process were two withdrawals: a thousand-man reduction scheduled for 1963 and a more comprehensive withdrawal to take place in 1965. Most of the DoD planning had been done in secret, at least until October 1963, when McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor submitted their report on Vietnam to JFK. The depth of the White House's knowledge about this planning is thus unclear, though the president appeared to be aware of its outline (175). Such plans seem to prove Kennedy's desire to reduce America's involvement in Vietnam.

As noted, however, Selverstone shows that when one digs into the dynamics behind the administration's planning, the notion that JFK was committed to drastically altering American activities in Southeast Asia becomes exceedingly difficult to maintain. As he left for Dallas in November 1963, "the president seemed very much committed to remaining in the fight" (203). In fact, on the day of his death, he had planned to deliver a speech advocating for a continued U.S. presence in South Vietnam.

If all *The Kennedy Withdrawal* did was weigh in on the "great what if" question and further our knowledge of the Kennedy era and his Vietnam policy, that would be enough. But the book does much more. As it authoritatively walks the reader through each stage of the administration's planning (making excellent use of tape recordings from the Kennedy and Johnson White Houses), it also illustrates specific dynamics of the policymaking process that confront presidential administrations across time, including today.

One of the book's great strengths is how it highlights the role of domestic politics in foreign policy. Selverstone furthers our understanding of the nexus between the two by frequently showing that partisan concerns were never far from Kennedy's mind. During his first year in office, as his administration deepened America's commitment to South Vietnam, JFK was leery of sending U.S. troops but felt he had to do something because it was "politically necessary at home and abroad" (44). The result was a closer partnership with the South Vietnamese government, despite concerns about its leadership. The United States gave South Vietnam increased air, reconnaissance, and economic support and sent eight thousand U.S. troops to act in an advisory capacity and train security forces. Ever wary of public reaction, Kennedy said little publicly about this enhanced effort because he believed a low-key approach would help him control the narrative (50).

However, controlling the narrative was never a simple task for the administration. It often felt that the press painted an overwhelmingly negative picture of the conflict—one that was at odds with reality. Thus, even as dynamics in Vietnam changed throughout Kennedy's time in office, "the need to tell a better story" to the American public remained a top concern (105).

Electoral anxieties were front of mind as well. As Kennedy's doubts about America's commitment to South Vietnam grew in early 1963, he decided he would not pull U.S. forces out, as he feared the political backlash. Speaking to Vietnam skeptic Senator Mike Mansfield in the spring of 1963, JFK said that he shared the majority leader's concerns but could not remove troops until after he was reelected in 1964. Otherwise, he said, "we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm reelected" (108).

But if Kennedy did not believe he could pull all American forces out until he had secured reelection, a token withdrawal did have political value for the administration. With the economy lagging early in his presidency, he saw a threat to both his public standing and national security. To spur growth, he pushed for a tax cut. But he had other concerns. The cost of stationing U.S. troops abroad was high and contributed to the outflow of gold, thus weakening the nation's currency. Additionally, the cost of foreign aid was coming under bipartisan attack, as many members of Congress doubted the wisdom of providing assistance—not only to South Vietnam but to other nations as well—at the levels the Kennedy administration requested. Against this

backdrop, a targeted withdrawal provided the opportunity to reduce spending on foreign aid and military assistance, help silence critics, and show that there were limits to American support (110–112).

Kennedy also made conscious decisions to help deflect criticism of himself. For example, when Secretary of State Dean Rusk suggested Republican Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. be the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, the president "apparently jumped at the chance." Not only did it provide "bipartisan cover," but the president saw the opportunity to make Lodge the scapegoat for the situation in Southeast Asia (141).

Similarly, in September 1963, when JFK decided to send Robert McNamara and Maxwell Taylor on another fact-finding mission to Vietnam, it served the purpose of not only giving the president a firsthand, on-the-ground assessment of what was going on but, more importantly, "the trip allowed Kennedy to make the case to Congress for continued prosecution of the war" (159). And after the trip, as the administration sought to publicize McNamara and Taylor's policy recommendations, Kennedy "was most interested in hedging his bets and deflecting [criticism] from himself" (176). He wanted to distance himself to some degree from McNamara and Taylor's report and make it clear that its recommendations were theirs, not his. Doing so would provide him with "political cover," which was essential, "given the state of the Saigon regime" (179).

The book also nicely highlights the psychological dimensions of policymaking. Selverstone shows that during the Cold War, other nations' perceptions of the United States' resolve to stand up to communist forces and honor commitments to allies were of utmost concern.

Selverstone repeatedly shows the political utility Kennedy saw in a troop withdrawal. The 1964 thousand-man withdrawal, for example, was always "an exercise in public relations" (194). Thus, though troop withdrawal was supposed to be condition-based, it became unconditional in large part because of domestic politics. Since the troops scheduled to come home did not substantially affect military operations, their withdrawal provided JFK with the "political capital" his administration needed as it fought off attacks on its Vietnam policy and foreign aid plans (173).

The book also nicely highlights the psychological dimensions of policymaking. Selverstone shows that during the Cold War, other nations' perceptions of the United States' resolve to stand up to communist forces and honor commitments to allies were of utmost concern. America's reputation, or "credibility," was paramount in Kennedy's foreign policy decisions and a driving force in his approach to Vietnam (6). Credibility concerns influenced all Cold War presidents, but Kennedy was particularly sensitive to images of strength and vitality and their effect at home and abroad.

Being seen as weak or lacking resolve was difficult for the young president, and he believed such notions had real-world ramifications. On the one hand, the perception of weakness encouraged enemies. This concern was evident after the Bay of Pigs, which Selverstone describes as "shattering" for Kennedy. "For a president so cognizant of the power of images, the perception of him as a paper tiger posed great dangers" (23). Thus, despite difficulties with Diem, setbacks in the war effort, and doubts about how vital Vietnam was to U.S. interests, JFK considered backing down in Southeast Asia dangerous. It would have global ramifications and weaken the United States in its battle against the Soviet Union. And as an adherent of the domino theory, he believed that communist power in the region would spread if American resolve faltered, and he issued public warnings to that effect (148). Selverstone demonstrates that even as Kennedy grew frustrated by the war's progress, he remained committed to the cause, fearing not only the military implications of withdrawal but the psychological ones.

If Kennedy worried about dominoes falling in the future, he also worried about mistakes of the past. Different historical events imparted different lessons. As JFK crafted his approach to Vietnam during his first year in office, he refused to commit the United States to preserving an independent, non-communist Vietnam, despite the advice of top U.S. officials. His determination resulted partly from an assessment of France's experience in Indochina, which "likely haunted him, both in what it said about militarizing a political struggle and fighting a limited conflict in Asia" (44).

At the same time, a different historical analogy made Kennedy see the necessity of helping South Vietnam. Like many postwar presidents, JFK looked to the 1930s and the lessons of appeasement. When the European nations gave in to Hitler's territorial demands, it led only to further aggression and conflict. For Kennedy, then, the need to support South Vietnam against communist forces arose from "the need to halt aggression in its tracks, lest the psychological dominoes begin to topple" (54).

Lastly, *The Kennedy Withdrawal* is a reminder of the challenges that inconsistencies cause for both policy creation and implementation. For example, as the administration began to formulate withdrawal plans, it was riddled with conflicting assessments: "Optimists and pessimists alike populated all the key agencies and rendered contradictory judgments about the war" (95). This pattern continued throughout Kennedy's time in office, illustrating the challenges for a president trying to craft an approach to the world.

These differences of opinion were not the only inconsistencies to afflict administration planning. Throughout the conflict, Kennedy's team was never able to reconcile the dire rhetoric forecasting the consequences of South Vietnam's defeat with the desire for a limited commitment (70).

Conflicting views did not just exist within the U.S. government but also between the United States and South Vietnam (115). Repeatedly, the administration struggled to get the Diem government to pursue the war more vigorously and implement political reforms to enhance stability. At the same time, Diem was expressing doubts about U.S. assistance. American disillusionment was clearly evident in the administration's consideration of a coup in August 1963, which Kennedy was willing to support as long as it was likely to succeed. Though eventually Diem would be overthrown, the August plotting fizzled, leaving the administration still grasping for ways to get better performance, "tied to a partner it acknowledged as expendable" and "openly doubting the value of the partnership" (146).

Even as withdrawal planning accelerated in Kennedy's final months in office, the administration still did not have a plan to achieve that objective. There were lots of proposals, but none had overwhelming support. American opinion was split between applying pressure on Diem's government and maintaining the status quo (156). Perhaps the greatest evidence that ties between the United States and South Vietnam were limited was that fifteen months into withdrawal planning, the United States still had not told the South Vietnamese government about it (160).

The Kennedy Withdrawal is a reminder that myriad factors influence policy planning and that presidents often confront the same challenges their predecessors did. Indeed, as Selverstone notes in the Epilogue, when Barack Obama took office and was confronted with the challenge of Afghanistan, "The parallels in policymaking between Afghanistan and Vietnam were evident not only to the

chattering classes, but to government officials formulating policy" (240). He spent months formulating a policy, desperately grasping for the right approach. In the end, his policy had "contradictions . . . starker than Kennedy's" (241). Obama once said that every day "I get a thick book full of death, destruction, strife, and chaos. That's what I take with my morning tea."[2] With a daily briefing like that, it is not difficult to see what LBJ meant when he said a president's hardest job is "to know what is right." In describing the challenges the Kennedy administration faced in withdrawal planning, Selverstone helps us see why.

Notes:
1. Lyndon Johnson, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," January 4, 1965, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/241819.
2. "Barack Obama: The *Vox* Conversation," Vox, January 23, 2017, https://www.vox.com/a/barack-obama-interview-vox-conversation/obama-foreign-policy-transcript.

Review of Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal*

Jessica Elkind

Ever since John F. Kennedy's tragic assassination in November 1963, Americans have imagined how the trajectory of the country might have been different if the young president's life had not been cut short. Marc Selverstone's *The Kennedy Withdrawal* addresses one of the central hypothetical questions that historians, pundits, and the American public have debated since the mid-1960s: What would Kennedy have done about Vietnam had he lived?

Selverstone tackles this "what if" by reconstructing the evolution of the Kennedy administration's plans for withdrawing from Vietnam. Delving into an impressive array of oral histories, official documents, and media accounts, as well as JFK's secret White House tapes, he arrives at a nuanced assessment of Kennedy's intentions. According to Selverstone, although JFK had become deeply uncomfortable with the U.S. assistance program to Vietnam by the eve of his assassination, he and his key advisors believed that they had to sustain their commitment to South Vietnam until the communist insurgency had been defeated.

The Kennedy Withdrawal traces the arc of JFK's presidency and then suggests why Lyndon Johnson reversed course in Vietnam during the first six months after Kennedy's assassination. Selverstone provides a highly detailed account of administration officials' deliberations, at times offering a day-by-day or even hour-by-hour analysis. Despite his focus on the minutiae of bureaucratic decision-making, he delivers an engaging narrative and a clear and compelling thesis.

As Selverstone explains, at the outset of his presidency, Kennedy did not consider Vietnam a top foreign policy priority. Real or potential crises in Berlin, Cuba, and Laos appeared far more pressing, as did the arms race and the ongoing rivalry with the Soviet Union. In addition, Kennedy hoped to focus on his own domestic initiatives in health care, education, and social justice. However, during his first year in office, the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated. Anti-government insurgents brazenly attacked South Vietnamese officials, troops, and law enforcement. The communist-led National Liberation Front (NLF) controlled significant swaths of territory, particularly in rural areas of the country. Meanwhile, Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in Saigon squandered popular support by imposing draconian and repressive policies in a futile effort to maintain order.

During his first year in office, Kennedy tried to bolster South Vietnamese defenses by drastically increasing the number of American military advisors and expanding their responsibilities. This escalation had little effect, however; the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) appeared less capable of defending the population or preventing a communist takeover than it had at the end of Dwight Eisenhower's second term. After some of Kennedy's top advisors made high-profile visits to Vietnam and reported their findings back home, the American press adopted their pessimistic assessments about the clear challenges posed by the conflict. To make matters worse, the ongoing civil war in neighboring Laos threatened to destabilize Vietnam further.

By the spring of 1962, Kennedy had become preoccupied with South Vietnam and sought to form a "contingency plan" that might involve the introduction of U.S. combat troops to prevent a communist victory. At the same moment, however, some of Kennedy's advisors began searching for a way to minimize the American commitment and resist escalation. They hoped to shift the burden of fighting to South Vietnamese forces, while also reassuring leaders in Saigon that the United States would not abandon them to a communist takeover. As Selverstone explains, "just as Kennedy was asking about plans to introduce U.S. forces into Vietnam, he was learning of proposals to move in the opposite direction" (64).

Over the next several months, the administration followed these competing impulses and pursued a complicated policy. The president augmented U.S. troop levels, and members of his cabinet joined him in publicly declaring optimism about the course of the war and in speaking in apocalyptic terms about the necessity of defending South Vietnam. Behind closed doors, however, those same men expressed concern about the scope of the American commitment and admitted that defeating the insurgency would require many years of fighting. Thus, Kennedy's advisors started looking for a way out of Vietnam and began systematic planning for a U.S. withdrawal. By early 1963, those discussions had coalesced into a comprehensive plan that included a short-term reduction of a thousand troops and a flexible end-date of 1965 for direct U.S. military involvement.

The Kennedy administration had numerous reasons for supporting withdrawal, many of which derived from political considerations. Selverstone offers a sophisticated analysis of the domestic, Vietnamese, and international factors that shaped their thinking. He shows how those factors informed policymaking, especially in the critical period from April 1962 to October 1963.

On the domestic front, proposed troop reductions would mute congressional leaders' demands for budget cuts and streamlined military operations. Promises of withdrawal would counter criticism from the media and the American public that Kennedy was too invested in a region of peripheral strategic value and not focused enough on domestic issues such as the civil rights movement. Fewer troops in Vietnam would also limit American casualties and prevent another drawn-out conflict like Korea, with its burdensome and far-reaching financial obligations.

Perhaps equally important, withdrawal also offered benefits for the flagging U.S.-South Vietnamese partnership. The large American presence tarnished Diem's reputation as a nationalist leader and provided fodder for claims by the NLF and Hanoi that the United States was merely another imperialist occupation force. And the Kennedy administration also hoped that the promise—or threat—of withdrawal might compel Diem to make meaningful political reforms, particularly in the aftermath of the spring 1963 Buddhist crisis.

Selverstone deftly weaves together all of these threads to show how and why the administration invested so much time and energy in preparing for a scheduled withdrawal

from Vietnam. As he explains, withdrawal planning was "a strategic response to the Communist challenge in Southeast Asia, a bureaucratic response to economic challenges at home and abroad, and a political response to policy and administrative challenges in Washington and Saigon" (244).

Ironically, one of Selverstone's central arguments about the Kennedy withdrawal is that the president's "precise role remains elusive" (243). Indeed, the portrait of Kennedy that emerges from this account is that of a pragmatic, patient, and cautious leader who was deeply concerned about maintaining credibility. On Vietnam and other important issues, he "seemed reluctant to act" and showed "a reticence that signaled his desire to avoid any course that narrowed his options" (158). Despite the clear evidence that Kennedy generally supported reductions in American troop levels and even inspired the original planning, Selverstone concludes that we actually know very little about his particular imprint on the policy or his intentions just before his fateful trip to Dallas in November 1963.

What we do know is that the chief architect and proponent of withdrawal was Robert McNamara, Kennedy's secretary of defense. He declared in an October 1963 meeting with the president and his top national security advisors that "we need a way to get out of Vietnam." He later made the case to Kennedy directly, arguing that "we must have a means of disengaging from this area. We must show our country that means" (170–71). According to Selverstone, McNamara championed withdrawal planning because he, like others in the administration, was "under no illusion about the duration of the war in Vietnam" (53). Moreover, withdrawal reinforced McNamara's overarching interest in "cutting costs and achieving efficiencies through systematic fiscal and project planning" in defense and national security policy (243). Selverstone's interpretation of McNamara's role represents an important historiographical intervention. While many scholars have treated McNamara as one of the primary forces behind the war—and at one point, the secretary saw himself that way as well—few have emphasized either his restraint or his desire to minimize the American commitment.

The bulk of *The Kennedy Withdrawal* focuses on the specific details of policymaking during the early 1960s, including Johnson's abandonment of the plan in early 1964. However, Selverstone's fascinating and lengthy epilogue considers the mythology and mystique that developed around Kennedy after his death. Selverstone explains how members of Kennedy's family, politicians, and a grieving American public embraced this mythology in an effort to come to terms with the assassination and the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. He highlights how questions about Kennedy's intentions infused popular culture, notably Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK*. Finally, he shows how comparisons between the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as between John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama, reinvigorated debates about Kennedy's foreign policy.

Selverstone marshals a great amount of evidence to make his case, and the book has few shortcomings. One minor shortcoming lies in his meager treatment of North Vietnam. While he effectively highlights the complicated nature of the South Vietnamese-American alliance, he offers scant information about political dynamics in North Vietnam and how those influenced American policymaking. He might have included further analysis of how the Kennedy administration viewed Hanoi and understood North Vietnamese capabilities and intentions. He could also have relied on scholarship by historians such as Pierre Asselin and Lien-Hang Nguyen, among others, to compare American and North Vietnamese deliberations and strategy during this critical period before the introduction of U.S. combat troops. Doing so would have provided a more complete picture of the context in which American officials were operating.

Ultimately, *The Kennedy Withdrawal* offers an authoritative and convincing account of the administration's deliberations about Vietnam. Selverstone subtly rejects both the "Cold Warrior" camp that emphasizes continuity between Kennedy's and Johnson's policies and the exceptionalist school that contends Kennedy would not have escalated the war. Instead, he shows how, despite Kennedy's personal misgivings about the commitment to South Vietnam, he never abandoned the underlying logic that led to that commitment; nor did he pledge definitively to end U.S. military involvement. Selverstone's brilliant book makes a significant contribution not only to the particular yet understudied topic of withdrawal planning during Kennedy's presidency but also to the history of JFK's foreign policy more broadly and to our understanding of the American war in Vietnam.

Review of Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam*

Philip E. Catton

As an exchange student at George Washington University in the mid-1980s, I recall listening with rapt attention as historian John Newman, a guest speaker in one of my classes, contended that, by the time of his death, President Kennedy had laid plans to pull US troops out of Vietnam. As Newman later wrote in his 1992 *JFK and Vietnam,* "Kennedy was headed for a total withdrawal – come what may" when he made his fateful visit to Texas, but this goal died along with the president, "snuffed out on November 22, 1963."

In his talk and subsequent book, Newman also speculated about whether Kennedy's determination to exit Vietnam was connected with his death in Dallas, an explosive charge most spectacularly advanced in Oliver Stone's bombshell movie *JFK*.[1] For an undergraduate student and history neophyte, the idea that Kennedy would not have taken the United States to war, and the whiff of conspiracy surrounding his death, was electrifying.

At the time, I did not appreciate that I was joining a long-running conversation about the aborted withdrawal plan and JFK's intentions in Vietnam. As Marc Selverstone observes in the introduction to *The Kennedy Withdrawal*, the arguments began soon after the conflict's escalation in 1965 and have continued down to the present, re-ignited in recent years by concerns about how the United States could extricate itself from new brushfire wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Selverstone notes that the "great 'what if?'" debate – what if Kennedy had not died in Dallas and had gone on to win a second term? – has divided scholars and commentators into two basic camps: one that regards JFK as a quintessential "Cold Warrior" who was committed to the preservation of an independent South Vietnam, even if that had required the kind of full-scale conflict sanctioned by his successor, Lyndon Johnson; and the other, the "Camelot" school, which believes Kennedy had soured on the commitment to Vietnam and would have withdrawn if he had lived and won re-election in 1964.

In his forensic examination of the administration's planning for a withdrawal, Selverstone takes a position somewhere between these two camps. On the one hand, his analysis makes it clear that the planning process, which was spearheaded by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, was real and serious. From early 1962 onward, he writes, "the Kennedy administration undertook a sustained and systematic effort to schedule the removal of American servicemen from South Vietnam and turn the war over to the government in Saigon" (1). The goal was to wind up most of the advisory program by the end of 1965. In part at least, this effort reflected JFK's concern about the scale and

nature of the growing American presence in Vietnam. In that sense, it accords with the "Camelot" interpretation of the president's desire to avoid an open-ended commitment.

On the other hand, Selverstone explains that the administration's planning was the product of mixed motives, not just worries about the commitment turning into a quagmire. Among other considerations was its interest in easing public and congressional worries about the US role in Vietnam and the general cost of foreign aid. Ironically, then, the plan to reduce the American footprint in-country was also intended as a way of sustaining domestic support for that presence, at least over the short-to-medium term. "As much as it signaled an eagerness to wind down the U.S. assistance effort," Selverstone observes, "the policy of withdrawal… allowed JFK to preserve the American commitment to Vietnam" (246). He argues that the president never abandoned Cold War assumptions about falling dominoes or the importance of maintaining U.S. credibility and that Kennedy conditioned any withdrawal from Vietnam on continued progress in the campaign to stamp out the communist insurgency. As the author acknowledges, this conclusion ultimately puts him much closer to the "Cold Warrior" than the "Camelot" view of events.

Focused like a laser on policymaking – and, indeed, the highest levels of decision making in Washington – *The Kennedy Withdrawal* might strike some readers as a rather old-fashioned piece of diplomatic history. Given the topic, though, the focus is entirely understandable. Moreover, Selverstone's book subjects the administration's plans to closer scrutiny than any previous study. Drawing on written documents, oral histories, and the White House tapes with which he is so familiar from his work at the University of Virginia's Miller Center, the author skillfully analyzes the evolution of the policymaking process and the various forces that shaped it. Individual interventions, competing bureaucratic interests, domestic political pressure, and looming economic concerns all make an appearance in this richly detailed and engaging narrative.

As readers already know the terrible outcome of Selverstone's story, at least in general terms, the book makes for uncomfortable reading. Its examination of high-level decision making frequently exposes the Alice-in-Wonderland-quality of the process, as officials sought to shape events in a country about which they knew so little. That the withdrawal planning assumed the guerrilla war could be reduced rapidly to a manageable level is emblematic of their pie-in-the-sky thinking.

When they conceived the plan in early 1962, at a time when there were hopes that increased US assistance to South Vietnam would turn the tide of the insurgency, officials pointed to a raft of statistics to justify the proposed drawdown of US forces: numbers of South Vietnamese troops trained, enemy weapons captured, etc. By the autumn of 1963, amid a growing sense that the security situation was deteriorating, this data appeared to be a dubious indicator of the actual state of the conflict. The administration then tied itself in knots attempting to square the drumbeat of negative news coming out of South Vietnam with its announcement that progress in the war would permit the withdrawal of a thousand military personnel by the end of 1963.

The old saying, apocryphally attributed to Bismarck, that sausages and laws are things one should not watch being made, seems an apt description of the administration's decision-making. Selverstone's analysis of the drafting of the McNamara-Taylor report offers a particularly damning example. In the autumn of 1963, Kennedy chose Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor to lead another fact-finding mission to South Vietnam to assess the increasingly volatile situation there. After a whirlwind visit, the members of the mission completed their report, with very little sleep, during the twenty-seven-hour flight back to the United States. This method was hardly conducive to the "coherence and clarity of the finished product," Selverstone writes (166).

The mission members also argued over the inclusion in their findings of clauses recommending a troop withdrawal, with the State Department's William H. Sullivan telling the mission's leaders that a promise to effectively end the US military role by 1965 was totally unrealistic. Sullivan thought he had persuaded them to remove the pledge, but McNamara and Taylor put it back in shortly after landing and just before submitting the report to the president. The drafting process seems more reminiscent of time-challenged undergraduate students rushing to complete their term papers than how one imagines the nation's leaders decide matters of critical importance. It was "'a very poor way to conduct the top business of the U.S. Government,'" one member of the mission acknowledged (166).

The book makes for uncomfortable reading. Its examination of high-level decision making frequently exposes the Alice-in-Wonderland-quality of the process, as officials sought to shape events in a country about which they knew so little. That the withdrawal planning assumed the guerrilla war could be reduced rapidly to a manageable level is emblematic of their pie-in-the-sky thinking.

Although titled *The Kennedy Withdrawal,* Kennedy does not in fact dominate the book's narrative. To be sure, the issue of the president's intentions and the "great 'what if?'" question hang heavily over Selverstone's story. Nevertheless, JFK was certainly not leading the charge on withdrawal planning. "No paper trail connects him to that planning, and his recorded conversations betray an ignorance of its progress and a skepticism of its merits," the author states (243). As Selverstone frequently reminds his readers, presidents have a lot on their plates and often deal with issues only episodically. Kennedy had a particularly full plate, with other crises both at home (civil rights) and abroad (Laos, Berlin, and Cuba). Consequently, policy toward Vietnam often simmered on the White House's backburner.

When it did come to the forefront, the president's interest in limiting American involvement in Vietnam was evident. Equally clear, though, was his commitment to the preservation of an anti-communist southern government. Although Kennedy encouraged the plan for a withdrawal, he never appeared preoccupied with it. He also conditioned its implementation on progress in beating the insurgents. Selverstone's detailed treatment of the issue strongly suggests that those who have interpreted the proposed drawdown of US forces as proof of Kennedy's reluctance to escalate further, or even of his intent to pull out of Vietnam, have read too much into the historical record, making inferences and connections that do not seem to fit the facts.

As Selverstone emphasizes, the secretary of defense, not the president, was the driving force behind withdrawal planning. Ever attentive to "His Master's Voice," McNamara "likely took" his cue to initiate the planning process "from Kennedy's interest in reducing U.S. involvement when the opportunity for doing so presented itself" (72). The scheme also reflected McNamara's desire to establish a long-term plan for South Vietnam, one matching his larger efforts to rationalize the Department of Defense's budgetary and planning procedures. He was keen to rein in the political and economic costs of an unfocused, open-ended commitment. The administration fretted about the hemorrhaging of domestic support not only for the U.S.

presence in Vietnam but also for the broader foreign aid program. It worried, too, about the impact of expensive overseas commitments on the nation's gold reserves and balance of payments. McNamara singled out the spiraling costs of continued assistance to South Korea as the example to be avoided.

Changing the title to the "McNamara Withdrawal" would probably not secure the book as wide a readership. Yet Selverstone's McNamara appears more enthusiastic about plans for a withdrawal than Kennedy and, for those seeking an alternative history, more concerned about finding an exit from Vietnam. The author argues that, as early as 1962, McNamara had begun to exhibit that political schizophrenia which came to characterize his approach to Vietnam policy: optimistic pronouncements in public and pessimistic assessments in private. By the autumn of 1963, as the situation in South Vietnam unraveled, he seemed ready to go beyond Kennedy's vague, conditional commitment to a withdrawal and set a date for wrapping up America's military involvement, regardless of the state of the conflict.

Selverstone contends that McNamara was particularly disturbed by what he had seen and heard during his trip to Vietnam with Maxwell Taylor in September, and he describes the "desperate tones" in which the secretary of defense defended the withdrawal plan in a meeting following the mission's return to the United States. "'We need a way to get out of Vietnam. This is a way of doing it,'" McNamara pleaded (170). Selverstone does not speculate further about his motivations, but it is almost as if McNamara was looking to provide the administration with a "decent interval" justification for getting out of Vietnam: "Well, we completed our training and advisory mission, leaving the South Vietnamese with everything they needed to win the war, but unfortunately…"

Exhaustively researched, cogently argued, and elegantly written, *The Kennedy Withdrawal* is a fine work of history. It will probably not end the debate over the "great 'what if?'" question, but it is surely close to being the last word on the origins and evolution of the Kennedy's administration's planning for a withdrawal from Vietnam.

Note:
1. John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York, 1992), 456, 459-60.

Author's Response

Marc Selverstone

I am sincerely grateful to Phil Catton, Jessica Chapman, Tizoc Chavez, and Jessica Elkind for the time and energy they devoted to reviewing *The Kennedy Withdrawal*; to Andy Johns for thinking the book worthy of a *Passport* roundtable; and to Chester Pach for introducing the discussion and framing its particulars. I am further heartened by the reviewers' generous critiques, especially given their expertise on Vietnam and the American presidency. Although they highlight matters I might have explored in greater depth—observations I largely agree with—I am pleased that each found the book helpful in expanding our understanding of Kennedy and Vietnam, a subject that often yields as much heat as it does light.

My goal was not to write a comprehensive account of Kennedy and Vietnam but to offer a policy history of perhaps its most contentious subplot: the administration's planning to withdraw the majority of U.S. troops by the end of 1965. References to that planning or to JFK's ultimate intentions appear in virtually all accounts of Kennedy and Vietnam, but comparatively few works address the matter in great depth. Prior to my study, the most extensive efforts had come from John Newman, Howard Jones, and James Douglass, with James Blight, Gareth Porter, and James Galbraith offering further inquiries in the form of essays, book chapters, extended commentaries, and critical oral histories. Each also advanced the argument that Kennedy was committed to enacting a troop withdrawal in a prospective second term.[1]

While evidence for withdrawal planning is clear and extensive, its meaning is not—at least that was my assumption going into the project. My agenda, therefore, was to probe that meaning by situating withdrawal planning within the broader array of challenges confronting the Kennedy administration—civil rights, a sluggish economy, inequitable standards of living, the nuclear threat, the contest with international communism, and more, including efforts to reimagine planning, budgeting, and warfighting strategies at the Pentagon.

I quickly became aware that embedding a study of withdrawal within a richly textured account of Kennedy's Vietnam policy—let alone within his presidency—would far exceed the limits of the project's negotiated word count. Moreover, I thought it necessary to expand that number to account for key developments on both the front and back ends of formal planning for withdrawal, which lasted from July 1962 through October 1963. I therefore began my study by exploring the depth of Kennedy's commitment to South Vietnam through its various signifiers—presidential rhetoric; high-profile visits from military and civilian officials; administrative, economic, and military assistance; and, ultimately, the introduction of American troops—prior to the onset of withdrawal planning. I closed by charting the demise of the withdrawal policy during the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson.

In addition, I thought it necessary to comment on Cold War national security policy and pre-1961 developments in Southeast Asia, as well as Kennedy's approach to both, in the book's introduction. And as I dipped in and out of writing the book from the late 2000s through the 2010s, it became clear that the narrative of a Kennedy withdrawal was coloring real-time debates about the use of force abroad. Hence an epilogue charting those developments, as part of a broader history of that narrative, also seemed in order.

This is all to say that what I gained in depth—at least on the specifics of withdrawal—I likely lost in breadth. As Jessica Chapman notes, my "laser focus on withdrawal planning veers into tunnel vision," crowding out a deeper exploration of the military situation in Vietnam, the experiences of North and South Vietnamese—a concern raised by other reviewers as well—and the broader history of the administration. Again, these tradeoffs were apparent at the outset of the project and became more evident as it advanced.

Nonetheless, I tried to address them where possible. While I did consult key works on communist actors during this period, I found few if any reactions in them to key elements of my study, such as the administration's withdrawal announcement of October 1963. While further reference to North Vietnamese and NLF activity might have widened the aperture on the dynamics of U.S. policymaking, Kennedy officials rarely factored enemy actions into their assessments of U.S. strategy in meaningful ways. Still, greater attention to military conditions, objectives, and maneuvers, as well as to the concerns and rhetoric of additional players, would have situated the reader more effectively in the reality on the ground and in the minds of those responsible for addressing it.

In a related observation, Phil Catton notes that I offer what some might regard as old-fashioned diplomatic history, even as he gives me a pass for doing so. Indeed, the actors in this drama are primarily senior-level policymakers, and

mostly American ones at that; moreover, I consider their actions not through sophisticated methodological lenses but through a more conventional reading of traditional sources such as embassy cables, meeting memoranda, and planning documents. While British materials shed valuable light at several junctures along the way, this story is largely an American one, told through American voices.

Nevertheless—and this is where I hope the book expands the evidentiary base—those voices literally fill in blank spots in the historical record: Of the twenty-eight conversations that Kennedy secretly recorded on Vietnam, more than half provide the only account of those meetings available for research. Several add information missing from textual memoranda, while others force a reconsideration of the memoranda themselves. I am hardly the first person to rely on the tapes for insight into Kennedy's Vietnam policymaking (though aside from Brian VanDeMark, I believe I use them more comprehensively than others, particularly the conversations just prior to the September 1963 McNamara-Taylor mission).[2] And scholars surely need to interrogate the tapes as they would any other document. But in their immediacy, granularity, and ability to highlight the affective and fluid dimensions of policymaking, Kennedy's Vietnam tapes—all of which are now more accessible via the *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition*—endow these actors and their decisions—familiar as they are—with greater nuance and complexity.[3]

Aside from matters of sourcing and methodology, Chapman wonders about my reluctance to probe Kennedy's broader political strategy, particularly in advance of a prospective second term. She cites the famous Kennedy-Mansfield meeting of early 1963 as a missed opportunity for that discussion.[4] I take her point that perhaps JFK anticipated the credibility imperative weakening after 1965. It is an argument that runs through the literature, and not only about Vietnam, but about China and Cuba policy as well.[5]

Kennedy likely relished that opportunity for policy flexibility—who wouldn't?—and perhaps fancied himself withstanding "another Joe McCarthy red scare," as Kenny O'Donnell and Dave Powers frame it, should he try to pull out of Vietnam. But how much flexibility would he really have enjoyed?

Kennedy likely relished that opportunity for policy flexibility—who wouldn't?—and perhaps fancied himself withstanding "another Joe McCarthy red scare," as Kenny O'Donnell and Dave Powers frame it, should he try to pull out of Vietnam.[6] But how much flexibility would he really have enjoyed? Kennedy himself rarely speculated on the dynamics of policymaking that far out, as he recognized its contingency. That was one of the reasons his administration refrained from writing a Basic National Security Policy.

Indeed, whether Kennedy sought to appease Mike Mansfield or disclose a coming policy reversal—or both—the episode highlights a signal truth about JFK: his aspirations would always be tempered by his pragmatism. While withdrawal might have seemed both desirable and achievable, it would await the needs of the moment. Those needs included a propitious military environment, at least for JFK. That was what he conveyed to McNamara when the two were alone in May 1963 and what he told national security officials that October. As for what Kennedy might have done if Saigon was about to fall, he and his advisers would cross that bridge, as Robert Kennedy maintained in a Spring 1964 interview, when they came to it.[7]

Intriguingly, those conditions might not have held for Robert McNamara, who evinced a greater tolerance for withdrawal without a clear path toward victory. Catton's insight about the Kennedy administration moving toward a "decent interval" solution years before the Nixon administration did so is thus particularly apt. While we cannot know whether Kennedy would have implemented withdrawal regardless of Saigon's military capabilities, we can point to McNamara as that approach's staunchest champion—a posture that grew out of the secretary's September 1963 visit to South Vietnam.

In this respect, Jessica Elkind's comment on my McNamara "intervention," in which she notes that "few have emphasized either [McNamara's] restraint or his desire to minimize the American commitment," is also on point. McNamara's remarkable plea to Kennedy in October 1963 that "we need a way to get out of Vietnam," especially in the context of his embrace of the conflict seven months later as "McNamara's War," is what drew me to the project in the first place.[8]

Finally, I would like to reframe a couple of observations and close with a thought on the great "What If"—the metanarrative at the heart of the book. Tizoc Chavez, in alluding to my arguments, writes that Kennedy "remained a firm believer in the domino theory." I'm not sure I make that case so categorically. Perhaps I'm putting too fine a point on it, but I write that JFK "never disowned the strategic logic" on which the domino theory rested.[9] To be sure, Kennedy espoused its elements both prior to and during his presidency and supported it explicitly and repeatedly in his September 1963 interview with NBC. Even Bobby, in his 1964 oral history, touted the domino theory as the very basis for JFK's Vietnam policy. Yet the president probably found its mechanistic application too pat, even as he feared the cascade dynamics informing it. Suffice it to say, the credibility imperative made domino logic compelling in the abstract, even if it warranted qualification in its particulars.

I would also recast, if only slightly, Chavez's description of Kennedy's November 1961 decision to expand the U.S. military commitment. His description of the "8,000 U.S. troops acting in an advisory capacity" conflates two elements of the proposals before JFK: (1) the 8,000 combat troops that Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor recommended to conduct military operations in support of area security and to provide relief from the recent flooding of the Mekong River; and (2) the introduction of troops intended to serve in advisory capacities and not in combat roles. While those advisers found their way into combat—with no initial ceiling attached to their numbers and more than a hundred of them dying during the Kennedy presidency—JFK drew the line at dispatching U.S. forces to serve as integrated fighting units. Whether the distinction would have mattered come 1965 and a second Kennedy term is, of course, at the heart of the counterfactual debate.

I deliberately avoid entering that debate in the book, focusing instead on where JFK was in November 1963. Although Kennedy went to Texas uncomfortable with the depth of the U.S. commitment, he was still intent on maintaining it. Support for the counterinsurgency remained operative; various measures, such as the extension of covert operations and the adoption of an enclave strategy, were within the realm of possibility, as was the deployment of additional advisers, especially if Kennedy deemed them necessary to stabilize the South prior to November 1964. Indeed, even Kennedy's admirers see him persisting in Vietnam, in whatever form that persistence might have taken, through the coming election cycle.

Nevertheless, I find it difficult to envision Kennedy adopting Johnson's eventual strategy and deploying half a million combat troops to Southeast Asia. It might even be a stretch to see him reaching for a congressional resolution, as Johnson did in August 1964, let alone launching contemporaneous air strikes on North Vietnamese positions. In the end, I remain impressed by Kennedy's repeated admonitions against the use of American combat

troops, as well as his public insistence that the war was Saigon's to win or lose. Whether he would have maintained those restrictions well into a second term and in light of a potential presidential run by Bobby involves considerations beyond what I had in mind.

What I did want to explore was the meaning of withdrawal planning as it evolved over the course of fifteen months, from the middle of Kennedy's time in office right up until the end. I conclude that its meaning was never static and that it served multiple purposes for those involved in the process. For Kennedy, given its public announcement in October 1963, its promise lay in its political value, as it allowed him to sustain as well as limit U.S. involvement—imperatives meant to address policy challenges and political realities at home and abroad, and particularly in South Vietnam. While he might one day have opted for new departures, that is not where he was in late 1963. Was he uncomfortable? Yes. Exasperated? Yes. Through with it all? No.

Notes:
1. John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power*. Rev ed. (New York, 2017); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York and Oxford, UK, 2003); James K. Galbraith, "Exit Strategy," *Boston Review Online* (October/November 2003); Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 165–79; James W. Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Maryknoll, NY, 2008); James G. Blight, janet M. Lang, and David A. Welch, *If Kennedy Had Lived: Virtual JFK* (Lanham, MD, 2008). For a snapshot of the withdrawal literature, see Andrew Preston, "Vietnam," in *A Companion to John F. Kennedy*, ed. Marc J. Selverstone (Malden, MA, 2014), 280–84.
2. Brian VanDeMark, *Road to Disaster: A New History of America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York, 2018).
3. *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* (hereafter *PRDE*) [Kennedy and Vietnam, ed. Ken Hughes and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville, VA, 2014–). https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/kennedy.
4. I am less convinced than she that the meeting took place in February 1963. The literature frequently places that meeting in the spring of 1963 without further specificity. See Kenneth O'Donnell and David Powers, *"Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye": Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Boston, 1972), 15–16; Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield: The Extraordinary Life of a Great American Statesman and Diplomat* (Washington, DC, 2003), 194–95; VanDeMark, *Road to Disaster*, 156–57. Dallek locates the meeting in May 1963, citing Newman, who locates it in the vicinity of Kennedy's March 6 press conference. Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 668; Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 322–23.
5. See, for instance, Fredrik Logevall, "Kennedy and What Might Have Been," in *Kennedy: The New Frontier Reconsidered*, ed. Mark White (New York, 1998), 19–63; Robert Dallek, "JFK's Second Term," *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 2003), 58–66; Mark A. Lawrence, "Kennedy's Cuban Dilemma: The United States and Castro after the Missile Crisis," in *John F. Kennedy and the "Thousand Days": New Perspectives on the Foreign and Domestic Policies of the Kennedy Administration*, ed. Manfred Berg and Andres Etges (Heidelberg, 2007), 159–74.
6. O'Donnell and Powers, *"Johnny,"* 16.
7. John F. Kennedy and Robert S. McNamara on 7 May 1963, *PRDE*; John F. Kennedy and National Security Officials on 2 October 1963, *PRDE*; Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (New York, 1988), 394–95.
8. "John F. Kennedy and National Security Officials on 2 October 1963," *PRDE*, "M'Namara Agrees to Call it His War," *New York Times*, 25 April 1964, 2. McNamara, of course, remains a slippery figure. Aurélie Basha i Novosejt recently explored his evolution in some depth, highlighting his understanding of loyalty and his sense of professional obligation, and we await further insight from Philip and William Taubman, who are presently writing a full-length biography. Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, *"I Made Mistakes:" Robert McNamara's Vietnam War Policy, 1960–1968* (New York and Cambridge, UK, 2019).
9. Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2022), 246.

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Confronting Saddam Hussein

*** A roundtable on Kristina Shull,**
Detention Empire

*** SHAFR election results**
and much more...