

KENNEDY LEADERSHIP: A CRITIQUE

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John F. Kennedy has long enjoyed one of the most favored images in the public mind among recent American Presidents. Much of this can be attributed to personal qualities and the tragic nature of his abortive Presidency. For the better part of a decade, many historians reinforced this favorable evaluation, beginning with that substantial but flawed study by an 'insider' and highly esteemed historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in A Thousand Days. Even though the promise was never able to be completely fulfilled, except for the "Bay of Pigs" episode, Kennedy's leadership and performance in the White House has been generally lauded and held up as a model worthy of emulation.

In recent years, however, the pendulum is starting to swing the other way. If not yet a rising tide, it has the appearance of being a groundswell of dissenting opinion and at the very least seems to reveal a much more critical mood in assessing the Kennedy years.

What is the nature of this "new criticism?" Mainly, it is part of a larger 'revisionism' relating to the origins of the cold war and U.S. post-World War II foreign policy, emphasizing the 'responsibility' of American leadership for misjudging Soviet intentions in the immediate post-war period and more or less masking a calculated economic imperialism under the guise of 'containing Communism' and accepting responsibility for the defense of 'democracy' wherever in the world it appeared to be in peril, sometimes referred to as American 'globalism.' In respect to the Kennedy

Presidency, this new historical school of so-called 'radical revisionists' has been focusing upon what they believe is the underside of the celebrated Kennedy handling of Khrushchev in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the relationship between Kennedy rhetoric and initiatives regarding the escalating Southeast Asia crisis in the early 60's.

The best one can do in a brief essay is to alert the reader to some recent studies that are helping to push the pendulum toward a less favorable assessment of the Kennedy performance and leadership.

Richard J. Walton's Cold War and Counterrevolution: the Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy is an impressive and well-documented, if at times over-stated and tendentious interpretation of the discrepancies between Kennedy's reputation as a sophisticated, knowledgeable, flexible-minded evaluator of the American national interest vis a vis 'cold war' problems and his actual conduct, which reveals him to have been a committed "cold warrior" not much different from the seemingly discredited Dulles-Eisenhower 'holy war against Communism' syndrome that JFK in other respects seemed anxious to repudiate and change.

Mr. Walton claims that Kennedy betrayed his own stated principle enunciated in a press conference held on April 12, five days before the Bay of Pigs 'invasion,' where he said:

The basic issue in Cuba is not one between the United States and Cuba. It is between the Cubans themselves. I intend to see that we adhere to that principle and as I understand it this administration's attitude is so understood by the anti-Castro exiles from Cuba in this country.

In Mr. Walton's view, not only was Kennedy more anti-Castro than Nixon in the famous pre-election TV debates, his approach to Castro and Cuban Communism was both simplistic and mistaken in

coupling Cuban Nationalism and Communist aggression. His decision to adopt a 'tough stance' in the face of contrary facts led logically to the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban missile crisis flirtation with brinkmanship and nuclear war.

Both Robert Kennedy in his small but evocative personal evaluation of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis in Thirteen Days and Ted Sorenson in Kennedy underscore the duplicity and aggressive intent of the Russians in planting 'offensive weaponry' on Cuban soil less than a hundred miles from American borders, as well as the superb and masterful way Kennedy handled the 'problem', causing Khrushchev to 'back down,' and pull away from a 'big power confrontation' that could well have led to 'nuclear holocaust.' Mr. Walton's view, reflecting a growing chorus of anti-Kennedyism, is that the American government overreacted, partly due to Khrushchev's probably 'staged' bluster and threats regarding the Berlin situation at the June 1961 Vienna summit meeting and Kennedy's feeling that a 'get tough' policy was necessary in future dealings with Khrushchev, coupled with domestic political pressures that made Kennedy vulnerable to the charge of 'being soft on communism.' In other words, contrary to 'conventional wisdom,' Kennedy was as much at fault as Khrushchev for the perilous week of confrontation over Cuba, and in some respects was both foolhardy and irresponsible in his approach to the crisis. The possibility of a diplomatic settlement of the differences between Russia and the United States over Cuba existed months before the week of confrontation via statements made by the Cuban ambassador at the U.N. that all Cuba wanted were 'assurances' the U.S. would not try to invade Cuba. The real motivation behind Khrushchev's decision to place offensive missiles in Cuba was the Bay of Pigs episode and the "fear

Cuba was in serious danger from the United States," and not as a "test of strength" to strike at the United States on a vulnerable issue. Kennedy had provoked Cuba and Russia to respond in this way by "drawing an economic and political noose tight around Cuba." Finally, in the 'settlement' that ultimately resolved the crisis, Cuba and Russia got what they had desired all along: a U.S. commitment not to invade Cuba, tacit understanding that the U.S. missiles would be removed from Turkish and Italian bases and, of course, the end of the blockade. It may be appropriate at this juncture to quote Mr. Walton more fully on this point:

I believe that his decision to go to the brink of nuclear war was irresponsible and reckless to a supreme degree, that it risked the kind of terrible miscalculation that Kennedy was always warning Khrushchev about, that it was unnecessary, and that, if one assumes minimum competence, the Kennedy administration knew it was not necessary. I argue, in short, that Kennedy, without sufficient reason, consciously risked nuclear catastrophe, with all that implied for the people not only of the United States and Russia, but of the entire world.

Another event that has precipitated much attention from 'revisionists' is the record of the Kennedy administration in the early decision-making involving American Vietnam intervention. Would Kennedy have eventually realized the folly of U.S. efforts to bolster a corrupt, autocratic and crumbling Saigon regime and pull back in time from the military escalation that ensued under President Johnson? No one will ever know, of course, the answer to this searing question. However, there are clues as to how John Kennedy might have acted if he had lived, and among 'revisionists' the answer is that he would undoubtedly have acted much as Johnson did later. The fatal flaw in this line of thinking, according to David Halberstam in The Best and the Brightest, and Irving L. Janis in Victims of Groupthink, was shared by virtually every President and Presidential advisor during the era: they prided themselves

on their pragmatism, their lack of illusions, their intelligence and intellectual sophistication, but were just as incapable of truly questioning and examining their rather narrow-based assumptions regarding the real world of international power politics and the American democratic tradition. They lost sight of the ethical dimension so crucial in uniting democratic means and ends. They prided themselves on their realistic toughness and ability to handle any challenge, including their willingness to use America's huge arsenal of military force if necessary to 'contain communism,' but in actuality were just as self-deluded and mis-calculating as their would-be antagonists. Appearance and reality clashed; shadow substituted for substance. The heart of the matter, according to Mr. Janis, is that:

...each of these decisions (i.e., Bay of Pigs, Vietnam War) was a group product, issuing from a series of meetings of a small body of government officials and advisors who constituted a cohesive group. And in each instance, the members of the policy-making group made incredibly gross miscalculations about both the practical and moral consequences of their decisions.

Then there is this passage from Halberstam's brilliant study of the American involvement in Vietnam:

And thus it was the irony of the Kennedy Administration that John Kennedy, rationalist, pledged above all to rationality, should continue the most irrational of all major American foreign policies, the policy toward China and the rest of Asia. He was aware of the change in the Communist world, he was aware of the split between the Chinese and Russians; it was, he realized, something very important. But he would deal with it later.

What is one to conclude? Is it simply the expected counterpoint to the tendency of some historians to over-rate and over-praise the Kennedy Presidency--and the truth lies somewhere between? Or is it an over-due and persuasive re-evaluation of an era in American history that has had such momentous consequences for the nation, revealing the underside of the self-congratulatory stance

that has so long permeated the American self-image and has paved the way for the 'failures of policy' that still control and hinder the prospect for a revised self-image more in accordance with contemporary realities? Clearly, if the latter view is largely correct, then the efforts of the 'new revisionists' are both valuable and welcomed, regardless of how 'balanced' or 'accurate' these same interpretations will appear in historical perspective. At the very least, it is a needed reminder that history is largely the record of human decision, human strengths, and human weaknesses. There is no greater task for the contemporary historian than to help us all separate better myths from reality, and think more clearly about the competing demands of ethics and politics.