

John F. Kennedy and the Revisionists

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I begin by declaring my intellectual interest: I share the cold war convictions and the counterrevolutionary attitudes which Richard J. Walton attributes to President Kennedy in *Cold War and Counter-Revolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (Viking; 234 pp.; \$7.95). What he states as accusations are beliefs which I—and I think the late President—would willingly avow. Moreover, in the nearly nine years since Kennedy's death when the revisionist attacks on his presidency have steadily mounted, my own admiration for Kennedy has grown. I thought fairly well of him at the time. In the light of what has happened since his death, he seems to me an absolutely towering figure. I am either the worst or the best possible person to comment on this book.

Having made my own position clear, I shall not leave the reader in doubt about what I think of this book. Although I disagree with about three-quarters of what Mr. Walton has to say, I think it is an excellent piece of work—intelligent, fair-minded, briskly argued, in touch with the real issues. I do not have the suspicion which occurs to me when reading some revisionist books, that, if I had time to check out all the footnotes and re-read the original documents, I would find the author has “cooked” much of the available evidence.

On the contrary, Mr. Walton works from the well-known secondary sources, and anyone who has read the Kennedy books by Schlesinger, Sorensen, Hilsman *et al.* can argue the issues with the author on even terms. Since Mr. Walton's politics seem to be those of a straightforward, optimistic and, to my way of thinking, rather credulous liberal, his book

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is blessedly free of neo-Marxist economic theories and other intellectual rubbish.

This good, lively polemic does have one bit of fake piety at the outset. After telling us that the books by the Kennedy insiders are “biased”—who ever thought otherwise?—Walton declares: “It is essential, if the mortal Kennedy is to survive the mythic Kennedy, to examine these same events with other eyes.” But rescuing the “mortal” Kennedy is not his real objective. Mr. Walton is out to do a hatchet job, and if a reader accepts his evaluation there is nothing much left of Kennedy, mythic, mortal or otherwise.

Mr. Walton states his argument fairly and at once:

Kennedy's admirers have written that he was free of the sterile dogmas [Who proved that they were “sterile”?] of the Cold War, that he brought a fresh approach, a new understanding of a complex world to the exercise of American foreign policy. They see him as the representative of a new generation that understood the yearnings of the underdeveloped nations of the world for rapid and substantial change as the unimaginative Eisenhower could not and the inflexible Dulles would not. . . .

This is the Kennedy the world prefers to remember, but is that the Kennedy who was President? Or was there an ambivalent Kennedy, one who sometimes spoke the conciliatory words of peace but at other times invoked the harsh words of the Cold War? This ambivalence was demonstrated in his [Inaugural Message]. . . . If one hand held out the olive branch, the other brandished the sword. Which tendency would dominate, or would the two continuously contend, with first one, then the other dominant?

With evident sincerity, Mr. Walton develops this theme throughout the book. On almost every major issue he concludes that the “ambivalent” Kennedy came down on the “wrong” side, the side of cold war and counterrevolution. But his statement of the theme is misleading. In my view, to say that Kennedy was ambivalent is to say that he was a politician, an exceptionally shrewd, gifted and imaginative one.

In the late 1950's Americans yearned, as they do today, for peace. But they also had a well-founded concern about the motives and intentions of the Communist nations. I remember writing in 1959 of the Eisenhower Administration that its chief failure is that "it has not effectively deployed America's resources—military, economic, political, moral—in the worldwide struggle with the Communists."

My attitude in the late 1950's was not unique. Kennedy or any other politician who did not take into account the fears as well as the hopes of the American people could hardly have expected to win national leadership. Responsible statesmen were deeply concerned that the U.S. was falling behind the Soviet Union in the race for world leadership. That was the viewpoint of Nelson Rockefeller which prompted him to commission the Rockefeller Brothers Fund reports on a wide range of issues. It was widely recognized at the time that the themes of John Kennedy's 1960 campaign speeches were largely lifted from those Rockefeller reports.

It was even the attitude of a pure liberal—Adlai Stevenson (whom Mr. Walton and I both greatly admire). He was warning in the late fifties that Russia's economic growth and Eisenhower's recurrent recessions meant that eventually the Soviet Union would outperform this country economically. It was the viewpoint of Admiral Rickover who, in the aftermath of Russia's triumph with Sputnik in 1957, gained a nationwide hearing from worried Americans for his argument that the Soviet Union's rigorous educational system would produce more scientists and engineers than America's sloppy, permissive style of education. William Benton and other propaganda experts were constantly warning that Radio Moscow was outperforming the Voice of America in the war of words to influence the ill-informed people of Asia and Africa. Experts on Latin America were warned that if the United States Government continued to neglect Latin America—and Milton Eisenhower had criticized his brother's Administration for just such neglect—the oil companies and banana companies would persist in their stupid, shortsighted ways and Castro-style dictatorships would eventually emerge all over the Hemisphere.

In other words, John Kennedy's winning campaign in 1960 and the early years of his presidency did not occur in a vacuum. They were responsive to and reflective of the *zeitgeist*. It is a fundamental flaw of Mr. Walton's book that he does nothing to recreate the politico-intellectual context of 1958-63. Instead, he looks through the wrong end of the telescope and judges men and issues as if 1960 were 1972.

Walton is so far out of touch with the dominant currents of opinion in the period he is analyzing that he actually writes: "Though middle-aged liberals may find it difficult to remember, as I did until I sought out the record,

Kennedy's campaign had been dominated by a hard-line, get-tough attack on communism. Perhaps we did not remember because we did not really listen."

I listened, I remember them perfectly well, and I agreed with them. If John Kennedy had run any other kind of campaign he would not have defeated Richard Nixon. It is also my belief that if Robert Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1968 he would have waged much the same "ambivalent" campaign and would likewise have defeated Richard Nixon. But that is another story.

Once in office, John Kennedy made good on his promise to organize a many-sided response to the Communist peril. (I list the following Kennedy efforts in no particular order.) He organized the Peace Corps to put the idealism of American youth to constructive use. He appointed Edward R. Murrow to give the Voice of America new visibility and heighten the morale of the nation's overseas propaganda team. He proclaimed an "Alliance for Progress" to restore focus and idealism to the nation's Latin American policy which had been lacking since the death of Franklin Roosevelt and his "Good Neighbor" policy. He undertook a major reorganization of the foreign aid agencies and went to the U.N. to call for a "Decade of Development."

He organized the "Food for Peace" program to make some constructive use of the nation's agricultural surpluses. He withdrew American diplomatic support in Africa from Portugal and South Africa and backed up Stevenson in his aggressive campaign to win the friendship of African countries. He appointed many unorthodox ambassadors, such as newspaperman William Attwood who, in Guinea, had some ephemeral success in influencing that well-known hysteric, Sekou Touré. Kennedy lobbied for British entry into the Common Market in the sensible belief that a stronger, more united Western Europe could better cope with the Soviet Union. Kennedy engaged in a protracted, private letter-writing exchange with Colonel Nasser in an effort to undo the damage of Dulles's cancelling U.S. aid for the Aswan Dam and to blunt growing Soviet influence in the Middle East.

Walton does not really disagree with these many constructive initiatives, although he omits any discussion of some and lumps his praise for others (the Peace Corps and the African policy) into a grudging and diffuse last chapter. He downplays these "good" policies because he mistakenly sees them as the alternatives to the "bad" policies on which he concentrates—the Bay of Pigs, the Berlin crisis of 1961, the military buildup of 1961-62, the Cuban missile crisis and Vietnam. But in my view of the world, and I think in Kennedy's, these "good" and "bad" policies did not reflect the fatal "ambivalence" which the author detects in President Kennedy. They were complementary policies, not antithetical.

In a phrase still true but no longer fashionable,

the Communists seek to control "the great globe itself." Russia and China, whatever differences they may have between them, reach out unceasingly to encircle, divide and weaken the free countries of the globe. They have no choice except to do so, because the rulers of closed totalitarian societies can never feel secure in their tyranny as long as their subjects know that there are free societies where life is better and to which, if they were only lucky enough, they might someday escape. Hence, every totalitarian country has its equivalent of the Berlin Wall and kills those of their people who try to escape. (The only exception is Cuba where Castro, until he recently changed his mind, believed it was simpler to let potential opponents go to Miami than to kill them.)

Every Communist—Lenin, Stalin, Chou En-lai, Ho Chi Minh, Castro—is an enemy of mankind and of human progress. Each is out to destroy those liberties—to talk freely, to write one's own books or read what one likes, to worship God, to raise one's children according to one's own ideas, to decide what to do with one's own talents—which comprise the human spirit and distinguish men and women from animals. Whenever I hear of a society going Communist (as Chile may be sliding toward communism today) I feel the way I would upon learning that an impoverished working girl had become a prostitute—she may be materially better off but it means the death of her soul.

But what about Spain or Greece or South Vietnam? Aren't their governments also enemies of the human spirit? They are indeed, but Greece suffered under the Metaxas dictatorship before World War II and Spain suffered under the de Rivera dictatorship of 1923-30, and yet both knew subsequent periods of freedom. Similarly, non-Communist dictatorships in Turkey, in Africa and in Latin America have voluntarily relinquished power and permitted other kinds of government to hold office for periods of time. But unless post-Tito Yugoslavia evolves into a free country, it remains an historical rule that no country once gone Communist has ever regained its liberty. For that reason, a prudent man must judge communism to be the most sinister and persistent threat to liberty in this century.

Such a firm analysis of world affairs in terms of good and evil has come to be condemned as a Manichean heresy; critics suggest that its logical implication is a military war to eradicate the evil forces of communism. But that does not follow. Sophisticated people know that life has many gray areas, that sometimes in diplomacy the only realistic options are between greater and lesser evils, and that in politics one often must pursue the good obliquely rather than directly. We also know that mankind has been coexisting with evil since the world began. Nonetheless, when evil political forces are loose in the world, it is surely helpful to recog-

nize in the privacy of one's own mind what is good and what is bad, what one would like to see happen and what one would not like to see happen. Having made those firm judgments and distinctions, one then ventures forth to deal with the real world as it is, peopled with leaders like Nasser and Sukarno and Khrushchev and Franco and Thieu.

I realize that these opinions differ radically from the conventional wisdom of the early 1970's. A post-Vietnam America wants desperately to believe in a post-cold war era of world politics. To reassert one's opposition to the evil and danger of communism and its conspiracies seems now as anachronistic as preaching the virtues of the single tax. But it is necessary to restate this structure of belief, not only because it includes much hard-earned wisdom but also because it was the intellectual world in which John Kennedy made his decisions.

Mr. Walton, for example, uses "counter-revolutionary" as an epithet. But to those who shared John Kennedy's dream of a better world, it could be a badge of honor. I, for one, would have been delighted if the Bay of Pigs invasion had overthrown Castro and his commissars and torturers and had brought to power Manuel Ray and the other decent liberal men who made up the putative government-in-exile. One is also alerted to an intellectual double standard. Would Mr. Walton and other Kennedy critics be so finicky about Cuba's "sovereignty" if Kennedy had armed and trained a group of gallant exiles to overthrow Franco or the Greek colonels?

These same critics are eager to label America's client states—Taiwan and South Korea and South Vietnam—as corrupt colonial dependencies, but what of Cuba, which after thirteen years of Castro rule is in deepening economic misery and kept afloat by a Russian subsidy of \$400 million a year?

Mr. Walton asserts that the Bay of Pigs led directly to the Cuban missile crisis because it alarmed Castro and impelled him to seek Russian missiles for protection. But, since Kennedy would not invade Cuba with American armed forces in April, 1961, there is no reason to suppose he would use them eighteen months later.

The author also insists that the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 could easily have been solved without a naval blockade of Russian shipments. It could have been accomplished, he argues, either by negotiating directly with Cuba or by telling the Russians we would withdraw our missiles from Italy and Turkey if they withdrew theirs from Cuba. Negotiations with Communist states, however, have a way of dragging on for months and years. Once the Russian missiles were fully deployed in Cuba, who is to say that Castro would have ordered them out in exchange for a mere territorial guarantee from the U.S.? Or that Khrushchev would have withdrawn them in exchange for the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Italy and

Turkey? After all, he knew as well as Kennedy that those missiles in Italy and Turkey were obsolete and already scheduled for withdrawal.

The Khrushchev-Castro objectives, as Kennedy recognized but Walton does not, were political. Within the Hemisphere, their objective was to humiliate the U.S. and enhance Castro's prestige in the eyes of the other Latin Americans. In the world, their objective was to trade the withdrawal of Russian missiles from Cuba for a pro-Russian settlement in Berlin. Khrushchev and Kennedy might equally recognize that Soviet missiles in Cuba did not add one whit to the practical military danger to the U.S. beyond that already posed by the missiles pointed at us from Russia itself. Both leaders also recognized that missiles in Cuba would be an intolerable domestic political embarrassment for an American President. Therefore they would constitute a political bargaining counter whose value was out of all proportion to their military worth. A U.S. President might pay a high price to be rid of them.

Curiously, Mr. Walton recognizes their significance because he several times writes: "Given the political realities, Kennedy had to get the missiles removed." Yet he fails to draw the harsh conclusion from those realities. Instead of blaming Kennedy for leading the world to the nuclear brink unnecessarily, Mr. Walton might have contemplated the price Khrushchev would have tried to exact. Kennedy, after all, was negotiating with a ruthless enemy, not with a civilized old gentleman and ally like Macmillan.

Cuba is peripheral to Russia's strategy; West Berlin and West Germany are central. It is easy for critics to deride Kennedy for enhancing American military strength in 1961 and for responding to Khrushchev's deadline for a Berlin settlement by calling up reservists and brandishing U.S. military power. According to Mr. Walton, all Khrushchev wanted was an agreement to discuss Berlin. Once Kennedy agreed to such a discussion, the 1961 Berlin crisis evaporated. But had Kennedy's response been soft, would Khrushchev have abandoned his deadline? The question is unanswerable. If all Khrushchev wanted was to have Berlin talks, why did he want them? Mr. Walton leaves the reader to believe that Khrushchev just wanted talks for the sake of talks—as if in their absence Andrei Gromyko would have joined the ranks of the technologically unemployed. It seems to me more likely that Khrushchev abandoned his deadline and settled for talks because he reluctantly concluded that he could not bluff anything more out of the young American President.

There remains the issue of Vietnam. Here the author not only makes the now familiar indictment but wildly overstates it: "The Vietnam war, and all its terrible consequences [my italics], are Kennedy's responsibility, for he launched America on the course of war. Johnson is responsible

for escalating the war and Nixon for widening it, but it was John Kennedy who started it."

A mere statement of the facts demonstrates the absurdity of that judgment. When Kennedy died there were American military advisors in Vietnam, but the actual fighting was exclusively a Vietnamese affair. Fifteen months after Kennedy died, President Johnson began massive bombing and began to introduce 500,000 American troops. It was Mr. Johnson's war and Mr. Johnson's responsibility. It ill becomes Mr. Walton or anyone else to falsify history in order to slander a dead man.

Mr. Walton offers the usual unpersuasive rationale that Kennedy is to blame because President Johnson acted upon the counsel of advisors he inherited from Kennedy: "Kennedy had always reposed great trust in McNamara, Taylor, Bundy, Rusk, Rostow, *et al.*" In part, this is factually inaccurate. Walt Rostow was a second-rank figure under Kennedy; his rise to great influence came under Johnson. Kennedy had lost confidence in Rusk and planned to replace him as Secretary of State after the 1964 election. Much more significant are the two names which are omitted—Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen. They were JFK's most trusted and influential counselors. When the Bay of Pigs went wrong, they were the two men he brought in from the sphere of domestic affairs and asked to get themselves involved in foreign policy-making. Aside from any expertise which Robert Kennedy and Sorensen did or did not have about Vietnam, they were his only foreign affairs counselors who also advised JFK on domestic politics. They had his complete program in view; they were totally dedicated to his political success and to his place in history. There would have been some very long, earnest skull sessions in the White House in the winter of 1964-65 between the Kennedy brothers and Sorensen before they decided to pour President Kennedy's great re-election victory of 1964—assuming he had defeated Barry Goldwater—into the bottomless pit of Vietnam.

Moreover, Sorensen and the Kennedys were skillful at cutting their losses by an act of cold realism while covering a retreat with warm, blood-stirring rhetoric. That, for example, was the purpose of the speech President Kennedy delivered to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April, 1961, the day after the Bay of Pigs debacle—a speech which Mr. Walton totally misinterprets. Having just suffered a sharp defeat in Cuba, fearing a damaging backlash from disappointed public opinion at home, John Kennedy went before the nation's editors and made a ringing address which sounded as if he were shaking his fist under Khrushchev's nose and threatening him with another bad licking. (A few more such lickings and Khrushchev would have won everything in sight.) It was a political *tour de force*, the editors were disarmed, Kennedy's standing in the public opinion polls actually rose—and eleven years

later Walton takes this defensive rodomontade with utter seriousness. If John Kennedy could make the retreat from the Bay of Pigs sound like a victory, he could have pulled out of Saigon and made it sound like the death rattle of Asian communism!

There is more than this somewhat fanciful analogy between the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam. I suspect—although I cannot prove it—that President Kennedy regarded the South Vietnamese as like the anti-Castro Cuban exiles, except on a larger scale. If by giving them arms, training them and advising them he could help score a victory over a Communist power, he would try it. But he had no intention of fighting a full-scale war on their behalf.

In his own way, Kennedy was as cautious as the Russian leadership. He did not send in the Marines or the Air Force to save the Cuban invaders at the Bay of Pigs. He talked tough about Laos but settled for a rather mushy compromise. He deplored the Berlin Wall (“Ich bin ein Berliner!”) but he did nothing to tear it down. In the Cuban missile crisis he rejected the advice of the Air Force generals and of Senator Richard Russell who wanted a “surgical air strike.” Instead, he settled for a naval blockade, an old-fashioned gesture which, even if it had led to fighting with the Russians, would have begun at a conventional, not a nuclear, level. In the same way, I think it plausible—though obviously it cannot be proved—that Kennedy’s caution would not have deserted him in 1965 if he had to decide to send 500,000 troops to the mainland of Asia.

In this connection, Mr. Walton, like certain other revisionist writers, inaccurately contrasts Mr. Kennedy’s supposedly dangerous activism with President Eisenhower’s allegedly wise torpor. But if Kennedy tried to overthrow Castro, Eisenhower did overthrow the government of Guatemala. Eisenhower took a provocative line toward the Chinese Communists over the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu. And, strangest of all, he sent 20,000 U.S. troops to Lebanon in the summer of 1958. It was a mission which no one understood very well and from which he was lucky to extricate them without casualties—and without involvement in a Middle Eastern morass deeper than Vietnam.

A final word about Kennedy’s “ambivalence.” In a sense that Walton does not appreciate, John Kennedy was ambivalent. As President he was the first Catholic, the youngest to be elected, his margin of victory was paper-thin, and his party lost seats in the House despite his victory. In short, he felt himself politically insecure and somewhat beleaguered. He had a liberal program and he knew what he wanted to do at home, but he knew he did not have the votes to do it. He had always to guard his flanks and to talk a better game than he knew he could perform if his domestic political enemies pinned him

down. Having fought his way to the White House ahead of rivals—Stevenson, Johnson, Symington—nearly a generation older than himself, he knew the importance of sheer will and of creating the *appearance* of impending, inevitable victory. With comparatively weak political assets, he strove constantly in his three years in office to maintain a credible, effective balance between the realities of congressional power and the appearance of presidential leadership. I often criticized him at the time for what I deemed his excessive caution and for underestimating his true strength among the people. But I never doubted his political skills.

What was true in domestic affairs was equally true abroad. He knew where he wanted to lead the world, but he well realized that he could not dictate to his allies, much less to his adversaries. He had to deploy every kind of American strength in order to keep a huge, unwieldy alliance moving and to keep the enemy powers off balance. If he had more military strength than they, he knew that they could move with secrecy, subversion and ruthlessness—factors that can often make up for disparities in substantive power, as Hitler and Mussolini proved against the democracies in the 1930’s. He was therefore determined not only to have America militarily and economically stronger but also, as America’s leader, to show himself a man of strength, courage and cool nerve, never to be bullied or daunted. These were not unworthy aspirations for a President of the United States.

He was planning to visit Japan and Russia in the spring of 1964. If he had been overwhelmingly re-elected in 1964 with large Democratic majorities in Congress—as he surely would have been—he would have had the political assets to make good on his liberal programs. If, as I think he would have, he had cut his losses in Vietnam, he would have been free to make further gains in strengthening the free world, drawing Japan and Western Europe closer to this country. With his sensitivity to young people, the tone of American life in the sixties would have been vastly different. Without suggesting that he is of the same historic size as Lincoln, I find these speculations as poignant as those engaged in by the generation of Americans who a century ago mourned Lincoln’s loss and lived to see Reconstruction so badly bungled.

He was, Mr. Walton writes, “an entirely conventional politician.” Either Mr. Walton did not know Kennedy or does not know any conventional politicians. John Kennedy’s enduring legacy is not Cuba or Berlin or Vietnam. It is the memory of an intelligent, imaginative, brave, sensitive and dignified leader who did honor to his high office and to the hopes of men and women everywhere who cherish freedom or strive to gain it. Would that America had a leader of his quality today.