

# JFK's Embrace of Third World Nationalists

**Exclusive:** The intensive media coverage of the half-century anniversary of John F. Kennedy's murder was long on hype and emotion but short on explaining how revolutionary JFK's foreign policy was in his extraordinary support for Third World nationalists, as Jim DiEugenio explains.

By Jim DiEugenio

Most knowledgeable people understood that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of President Kennedy would be marked by an extraordinary outpouring of media programming commemorating his life and death. But the volume probably exceeded expectations.

There were even programs aired that were not announced in advance, e.g., "The Assassination of President Kennedy" produced by Tom Hanks and his Playtone production company, which featured an aged and very ill-looking Vincent Bugliosi, author of *Reclaiming History*, one more defense of the Warren Commission's report.

Perhaps the longest 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary program was the two-part, four-hour "JFK" on the PBS series "American Experience." It was largely based on the work of historian Robert Dallek, who has written two books about Kennedy, *An Unfinished Life* and *Camelot's Court*. Combined, the books amounted to over 1,100 pages of biography and analysis.

Although Dallek did much work on Kennedy's medical records, there were some commentators who wondered if the historian was actually diligent enough in informing his readers about Kennedy's policies, especially his foreign policy initiatives. In fact, in the introduction to the second book, Dallek suggests that he wrote the second tome because he couldn't understand why an intervening poll showed President Kennedy as, far and away, the most admired of the last nine presidents. Dallek mused: Did I miss something?

Having read both of Dallek's books, I would venture to say that, yes, he did miss something. Actually, more than just something. He missed a major part of the story that the general public however vaguely, however inchoately somehow *does* understand about President Kennedy. Namely this fact: There is as much a battle over who JFK was, as over the circumstances of his assassination.

Those two continuing controversies who was Kennedy and who killed him would lead some to ask if there may be a relationship between the two questions. In other

words, was Kennedy killed because of the policies he tried to enact as president, particularly in the foreign policy sphere? However, in Dallek's quest to discount this angle, he once wrote an article for *Salon* about Kennedy that was titled, "Why do we admire a President who did so little?"

But is that really the case? There is a growing body of scholarship that holds that, even though Kennedy was cut down after less than three years in office, he achieved quite a lot and was trying for even more. Authors like Irving Bernstein, Donald Gibson, Richard Mahoney, John Newman, James Bill, Philip Muehlenbeck and Robert Rakove have all tried to detail the serious achievements and goals Kennedy had while in office.

### **A Foreign Policy Revolution**

Further, most of these authors have tried to demonstrate two foreign policy shifts that Kennedy set in motion but that his assassination reversed. The first were the series of changes that Kennedy made in the policies which preceded him, those of President Dwight Eisenhower and his foreign policy team, consisting largely of the Dulles brothers and Richard Nixon.

The second series of changes occurred after Kennedy was killed and Lyndon Johnson took office. These changes essentially returned to the *status quo ante* established by the Dulles brothers. Because the subject of Kennedy's entire presidency would take a book to review, let us concentrate here just on a few segments of his foreign policy that still resonate today.

To understand the import of President Kennedy's foreign policy ideas, one needs to contemplate the photo of Kennedy getting the news of the murder of Patrice Lumumba. The black African revolutionary leader of Congo was shot to death on Jan. 17, 1961, just three days before Kennedy was to take office, although his death was not confirmed for several weeks.

Eisenhower would not have reacted with the distress shown on Kennedy's face because, as the Church Committee discovered, Lumumba's murder was linked to the approval of a plan by Eisenhower and CIA Director Allen Dulles to eliminate him. (William Blum, *The CIA: A Forgotten History*, pgs. 175-176) Former CIA officer John Stockwell wrote in his book *In Search of Enemies* that he later talked to a CIA colleague who said it was his job to dispose of Lumumba's body. (Stockwell, p. 50)

To fully understand the difference between how Kennedy viewed Africa and how Eisenhower, the Dulles brothers and later Lyndon Johnson did, one must appreciate why Eisenhower and his national security team felt it necessary to eliminate Lumumba. As Philip Muehlenbeck has noted in his book *Betting on the*

*Africans*, Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles essentially ignored the tidal wave of decolonization that swept through Africa in the Fifties and Sixties. Nearly 30 new nations emerged in Africa during this time period.

Even though most of this transformation occurred while Eisenhower was president, the United States never voted against a European power over a colonial dispute in Africa. Neither did Dulles or Eisenhower criticize colonial rule by NATO allies. Not only did the White House appear to favor continued colonial domination, but with the nations already freed, they looked upon the emerging leaders with, too put it mildly, much condescension.

At an NSC meeting, Vice President Nixon claimed that, "some of these peoples of Africa have been out of the trees for only about fifty years." (Muehlenbeck, p. 6) And, of course, John Foster Dulles saw this epochal anti-colonial struggle through the magnifying glass of the Cold War. As Muehlenbeck writes, "Dulles believed that Third World nationalism was a tool of Moscow's creation rather than a natural outgrowth of the colonial experience." (ibid, p. 6) Therefore, to Eisenhower and his team, Lumumba was a communist.

### **Kennedy's Anti-Colonialism**

To Kennedy, however, Lumumba was a nationalistic leader who was trying to guide his country to independence, both politically and economically. Lumumba wanted Congo to be free of economic exploitation from foreigners. Kennedy agreed with that idea. As his Under Secretary of State for Africa, G. Mennen Williams, succinctly stated, "What we want for the Africans is what the Africans want for themselves." (ibid, p. 45) The Kennedy administration's policy deliberately made European interests secondary.

The crisis in Congo was exacerbated by the fact that Congo's Katanga province contained abundant natural resources, including gold, copper and uranium. Therefore, when the Belgians abruptly left, they ensured that their departure would leave behind enough tumult so that certain friends in Katanga, like Moise Tshombe, would ask for their return. The problem was that Prime Minister Lumumba had no desire to ask.

So, in July 1960, Lumumba went to Washington to seek help in kicking the Belgians out. When Lumumba arrived, Eisenhower remained on a golfing trip in Newport, Rhode Island. (Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 38) And, it was clear from Lumumba's discussion with other officials that America was not going to help him expel the Belgians. Then, Lumumba turned to the Russians, who did supply military assistance. (ibid, p. 40)

This development played into the hands of CIA Director Allen Dulles, who declared that the "communist" Lumumba must be removed. He was killed on Jan. 17, 1961, apparently by a firing squad organized by Belgian officers and Katangan authorities (although his fate was covered up for several weeks).

There are some writers, like John Morton Blum and the late Jonathan Kwitny, who did not believe the timing of Lumumba's murder to be a coincidence, just three days before Kennedy's inauguration. It may have been done then because the CIA suspected that Kennedy would side with Lumumba, which, when his new plan for Congo was formulated, was clearly what JFK was going to do. (Mahoney, pgs. 65-67)

Kennedy decided to cooperate with Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold at the United Nations to try and save the country's independence. Kennedy wanted to neutralize any East-West competition, to stop the creation of an economic puppet state in Katanga, and to free all political prisoners. Not knowing Lumumba was dead during the first weeks of his administration, Kennedy meant to restore Lumumba to power. If Lumumba's death was accelerated to defeat an expected policy change by JFK, in practical terms, it was successful.

### **Who Was Gullion?**

The man Kennedy chose to be his ambassador to Congo was Edmund Gullion, who was the one who had altered Kennedy's consciousness about Third World nationalism. There are some writers who would maintain that perhaps no other person had as much influence on the evolution of Kennedy's foreign policy thinking as did Gullion. Yet, Gullion's name is not in the index to either of Dallek's books on Kennedy.

Edmund Gullion entered the State Department in the late 1930s. His first assignment was to Marseilles, France, where he became fluent in the French language and was then transferred to French Indochina during France's struggle to re-colonize the area after World War II.

Kennedy briefly met Gullion in Washington in the late 1940s when the aspiring young politician needed some information for a speech on foreign policy. In 1951, when the 34-year-old congressman flew into Saigon, he decided to look up Gullion. In the midst of France's long and bloody war to take back Indochina, one that then had been going on for five years, Gullion's point of view was unique among American diplomats and jarringly candid.

As Thurston Clarke described the rooftop restaurant meeting, Gullion told Kennedy that France could never win the war. Ho Chi Minh had inspired tens of thousands of Viet Minh to the point they would rather die than return to a state

of French colonialism. France could never win a war of attrition like that, because the home front would not support it.

This meeting had an immediate impact on young Kennedy. When he returned home, he began making speeches that highlighted these thoughts which were underscored by the Viet Minh's eventual defeat of the French colonial forces in 1954. In criticizing the U.S. Establishment's view of these anti-colonial struggles, Kennedy did not play favorites. He criticized Democrats as well as Republicans who failed to see that the United States had to have a positive appeal to the Third World. There had to be something more than just anti-communism.

For instance, in a speech Kennedy gave during the 1956 presidential campaign for Adlai Stevenson, the then-Massachusetts senator said: "The Afro-Asian revolution of nationalism, the revolt against colonialism, the determination of people to control their national destinies. In my opinion, the tragic failure of both Republican and Democratic administrations since World War II to comprehend the nature of this revolution, and its potentialities for good and evil, had reaped a bitter harvest today, and it is by rights and by necessity a major foreign policy campaign issue that has nothing to do with anti-communism."

Stevenson's office then sent a wire to Kennedy asking him not to make any more foreign policy speeches for the campaign. (Mahoney, p. 18) Considering that Stevenson was the darling of the liberal intellectual set, this handwringing may come as a surprise, but his campaign's worries reflected the political realities of the day.

### **The Algerian War**

In 1957, Kennedy found the perfect time and place to launch a rhetorical broadside against the orthodoxies of both parties on colonialism and anti-communism. By that time, France had inserted 500,000 troops into Algeria to thwart a bloody, terrifying and debilitating colonial war. But because the Algerians fought guerrilla-style, using snipers, explosives and hit-and-run tactics, the war degenerated into torture, atrocities and unmitigated horror.

When the grim facts on the ground were exposed in Paris, the Fourth Republic fell and World War II hero Charles DeGaulle returned to power. When Sen. Kennedy rose in the Senate to address the painful subject of Algeria, the war had been going on for three years. As yet, no high-profile U.S. politician had analyzed the issue with any depth or perspective for the public.

On July 2, 1957, Kennedy started the speech with an understanding tone, observing that many American leaders had chosen not to say anything since this was an internal French matter and France had been America's first ally. Kennedy

then switched gears, noting that a true friend of France would not stand by and watch France tear itself asunder in a futile war, one that would only delay the inevitable. He then got to his real point:

“Yet, did we not learn in Indochina that we might have served both the French and our own causes infinitely better had we taken a more firm stand much earlier than we did? Did that tragic episode not teach us that, whether France likes it or not, admits it or not, or has our support or not, their overseas territories are sooner or later, one by one, inevitably going to break free and look with suspicion on the Western nations who impeded their steps to independence?”

I have read this fascinating speech several times, and there is one part of the speech that today stands out like a beacon in the night for today’s world. Kennedy understood the history of North Africa. That is, its conquest by the Ottoman Empire and the resultant fact that many, many native Algerians were Moslem. Therefore, he added the following:

“In these days, we can help fulfill a great and promising opportunity to show the world that a new nation, with an Arab heritage, can establish itself in the Western tradition and successfully withstand both the pull toward Arab feudalism and fanaticism and the pull toward Communist authoritarianism.”

This acute perception that America needed to do everything possible to moderate emerging Arab nationalism so that it did not degenerate into “feudalism and fanaticism” is something Kennedy would act upon once he gained the White House.

As historian Allan Nevins wrote, no speech by Sen. Kennedy had attracted more attention than this one, and much was negative. Naturally, those he criticized harshly attacked Kennedy: John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower and Nixon. But again, as in 1956, Stevenson and another fellow Democrat, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, also attacked him. Kennedy’s staff collected the many newspaper editorials the speech generated: 90 of the 138 responses were negative.

(Mahoney, p. 21)

### **The World’s Reaction**

But the reaction abroad was different. Many commentators in France were impressed by Kennedy’s insights into the conflict. And in Africa, Kennedy became the man to see in Washington for visiting African dignitaries. The Algerian guerrillas hiding in the hills were exhilarated by Kennedy’s breadth of understanding of their dilemma. They listened excitedly as the results of the 1960 presidential election were tallied.

Many books and films have been written and produced about what Kennedy did while in office in the foreign policy sphere. Most books concerning his assassination

deal almost exclusively with Vietnam and Cuba. In the second edition of *Destiny Betrayed*, I tried to make the argument that, to understand Kennedy's view of the world, it was necessary to broaden the focus.

In fact, the first foreign policy crisis that Kennedy reviewed once in office was neither Cuba nor Vietnam. It was the conflict in Congo. And as we can see from his reaction to both African crises, Kennedy had learned his lessons from Gullion well, to the point that he was willing to endanger relations with European and NATO allies in order to support Third World nationalism.

But there was another case where Kennedy did the same, the giant island archipelago of Indonesia, which the Netherlands had colonized since the late 1500s. After World War II, a guerrilla war challenged a restoration of colonialism and Indonesia won its independence in 1949. But, as with Katanga in Congo, the Dutch decided to keep control of the eastern island of West Irian because of its wealth.

In 1958, the Dulles brothers tried to overthrow Achmed Sukarno, the nationalist president of Indonesia, but the coup attempt failed. The shoot-down of American pilot Allen Pope exposed the coup as being organized and run by the CIA. Sukarno kept Pope imprisoned after the change of administrations.

President Kennedy invited Sukarno to the U.S. for a state visit. He wanted to discuss the release of Pope, so he asked CIA Director Allen Dulles for the report on how Pope was captured. Dulles gave him a redacted copy. But even in this form, Kennedy discerned what had happened. He exclaimed, "No wonder Sukarno doesn't like us very much. He has to sit down with people who tried to overthrow his government." (DiEugenio, *Destiny Betrayed*, p. 33)

Because of Kennedy's different view of the issues at hand, he was able to achieve a much improved relationship with Indonesia. He secured the release of Pope, put together a package of non-military aid for Indonesia, and finally, with the help of Robert Kennedy and veteran diplomat Ellsworth Bunker, West Irian was released by the Netherlands and eventually returned to Indonesia.

### **Embracing Nationalism**

What is clear from these examples is that Kennedy was a proponent of nationalism: the belief that native peoples living in areas emerging from colonialism and imperialism should have control of their own natural resources. This concept challenged the system of European imperialism that the United States also joined after the Spanish-American War at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Dulles brothers, with their strong ties to the Eastern Establishment and, through banker David Rockefeller, to the Council on Foreign Relations, had been

a part of this imperial system. One way was through their service to giant American international conglomerates at the Wall Street law firm of Sullivan and Cromwell. John Foster Dulles had joined the firm in 1911 and became the managing partner at a relatively young age. Later, he brought his brother Allen into the firm where he made senior partner in just four years.

But, beyond that, the Dulles brothers were born into power. Their grandfather, through their mother, was John Watson Foster, Secretary of State under President Benjamin Harrison in 1892. Their uncle, Robert Lansing, served in that same office under President Woodrow Wilson.

After World War I, through Wall Street financier Bernard Baruch, the Dulles brothers gained entry to the Treaty of Versailles. There, from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, they were instrumental in setting up the mandate system in the Middle East. This made it easier for their corporate clients, which included the Rockefeller family trust, to set up oil exploration deals in these European-supervised principalities.

This is one reason the Dulles brothers favored the monarchical system in the Middle East. After all, if Arab nationalism advanced, it ran the risk of handing the oil riches of the Middle East to the people who lived there rather than to British and American petroleum companies.

The best-known example of the Dulles brothers' strategy was the 1953 CIA-backed coup in Iran that ousted nationalist leader Mohammad Mosaddegh and returned the Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, to power. The Shah then amassed an appalling human rights record by deploying his CIA-trained security service, the SAVAK, against his political enemies.

As author James Bill notes in his book, *The Eagle and the Lion*, the Kennedy brothers disdained the Shah's monarchical rule. At one stage, they commissioned a State Department paper on the costs and liabilities of returning Mosaddegh to power. To counter the negative image held by the Kennedys, the Shah launched a series of economic and social reforms called the White Revolution but they were unsuccessful.

After Kennedy's death, the pressure on the Shah was relaxed due to the closeness of presidents like Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter to the Rockefellers. But history would see Kennedy as prescient for his 1957 warning about how neo-colonialism could lead to "fanaticism." The prime example was the Iranian revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979.

### **Working with Nasser**

In contrast to the Eisenhower administration, President Kennedy had a much more

favorable view of the nationalist leader of Egypt, Gamel Abdel Nasser, who held a special place in the geography of Middle East and African leaders. Because of the Suez Canal and his charismatic leadership of Arab nationalism and pan-Arab unity, Nasser emerged as a central figure in both regions.

Under Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles had poisoned the American relationship with Nasser by trying to pressure him into joining a U.S. military pact against the Soviet Union. Nasser replied that such an arrangement would cost him his standing with the Egyptian people. (Muehlenbeck, p. 10)

Keeping with his non-aligned status, Nasser also decided to recognize China's communist government. John Foster Dulles with his myopic "you're either with us or against us" attitude cut food shipments to Egypt and cancelled support for the Aswan Dam project.

This provoked Nasser's occupation of the Suez Canal and the subsequent tripartite invasion of Sinai by England, France and Israel. But this blatant reassertion of European colonialism was too much for Eisenhower who joined with the USSR at the United Nations in demanding that the invaders leave. But much damage between Egypt and the West had already been done. The Russians stepped in to supply the necessary loans to construct Aswan.

The next chess move by Dulles looks even worse today than it did then. Realizing that these events had built up Nasser even further in the eyes of the Arab world, Dulles turned toward King Saud of Saudi Arabia and tried to use him as a counterweight to Nasser's nationalism. Dulles arranged to have Saud do what Nasser would not: sign onto the Eisenhower Doctrine, a treaty which would, if needed, forcibly keep the Russians out of the Middle East.

Many saw this as a clever geopolitical tactic to keep Nasser in check. But it was perceived in the Middle East as Dulles allying himself with royalty and against nationalism. (ibid, p. 15) It was a repeat of what the Dulles brothers and Eisenhower had done in Iran in 1953.

Kennedy wanted to reverse this perception of the United States aligning itself with the old order. He told National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy that rebuilding the American relationship with Egypt would be a priority focus of his administration. He was determined that Egypt would stay non-aligned, but he also wanted to end the idea that the United States was close to the Saudis.

To Kennedy, charismatic and influential moderates like Nasser represented the best hope for American foreign policy in the Middle East. In a reference to what Dulles had done with the Aswan project, Kennedy said: "If we can learn the lessons of the past, if we can refrain from pressing our case so hard that the

Arabs feel their neutrality and nationalism threatened, the Middle East can become an area of strength and hope.” (ibid, p. 124)

### **Repairing Egypt Ties**

Kennedy tried to patch up the U.S.-Egypt relationship by doing something that seems rare today. He chose his ambassador to Egypt on pure merit, Dr. John S. Badeau, who headed the Near East Foundation and probably knew more about the history of Egypt than any American.

Badeau already knew Nasser and the Speaker of the National Assembly, Anwar El Sadat. This, plus the way Kennedy changed American policy in Congo, helped to tone down Nasser’s anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric. Kennedy then went further. After Syria left the United Arab Republic in 1961, Kennedy made hundreds of millions of dollars in loans to keep the Egyptian economy afloat.

In Kennedy’s view it was important for America to favor men like Nasser and Sadat over the monarchies of the Middle East because it was the nationalists, and not King Saud, who could capture the popular support of the public and channel it in a positive and progressive way. Or, as author Philip Muehlenbeck writes, “For Kennedy the Saudi monarchy was an archaic relic of the past and Nasser was the wave of the future.” (ibid, p. 133)

Like the Shah, Saud exemplified brutality, corruption and civil rights abuses. So, Kennedy did something symbolic to demonstrate the new U.S. attitude. In 1961, King Saud was in a Boston hospital for a medical condition. Kennedy did not visit him, even though the man was in his hometown. Instead, Kennedy went south to Palm Beach, Florida. After constant badgering from the State Department, Kennedy did visit Saud afterwards when he was in a convalescent home. But he couldn’t help registering his disgust by telling his companion in the car, “What am I doing calling on this guy?” (ibid, p. 134)

During the civil war in Yemen, Nasser backed Abdullah al-Sallal against the last Mutawakkilite King of Yemen, Muhammad al-Badr. Saudi Arabia supported the king to stop the spread of Nasser’s influence and prevent the rise of nationalism. To demonstrate his alliance with Nasser over Saudi Arabia, Kennedy recognized al-Sallal, even though the leaders of England and Israel criticized Kennedy about it. (ibid, p. 135)

As historian Muehlenbeck notes, this conflict ended with a truce only because of the mutual trust and admiration between Kennedy and Nasser. Kennedy was so sympathetic to Nasser and Algerian leader Ahmed Ben Bella that the Senate passed an amendment limiting his aid to the two leaders.

Kennedy’s policies, at the very least, delayed the rise of anti-Americanism in

the region. At best, they showed why future presidents should not forge ties to the reactionary monarchy in Saudi Arabia, which essentially has contributed to terrorist groups to preserve its power. Like no president before or since, Kennedy risked relations with traditional allies over the issue of nascent nationalism.

### **Portugal and Africa**

Due to Prince Henry the Navigator's success in expanding Portuguese interests into Africa in the 1400s, Portugal became the first country to develop the African slave trade and retained considerable colonial possessions in Africa over the next five centuries.

Just two months after Kennedy was inaugurated, Liberia sponsored a United Nations motion to begin a reform program so that Angola could gain its independence from Portugal. Kennedy had his UN representative Adlai Stevenson vote for Liberia and against Portugal, France and England.

Further underscoring this sea change in U.S. policy, American was now voting *with* the Soviet Union. Even the *New York Times* understood something big was afoot, calling it a "major shift" in traditional foreign policy by Kennedy. (ibid, p. 97)

Kennedy understood that he had to embrace anti-colonialism in order to compete with Russia in the non-aligned world. As he learned from Gullion in Vietnam, America could not be perceived as a counter-revolutionary country. If the U.S. went against the powerful emotions of nationalism, there would be little alternative but to support fascist dictators or even send in American combat troops, which Kennedy considered counter-productive and didn't want to do.

Therefore, when the Angola vote was cast, Kennedy was trying to show the developing world that the USSR was not the only great power in the Caucasian world to oppose colonialism. (ibid, pgs. 97-98) In other words, for Kennedy, this was not just the right thing to do; it was the practical thing to do. And it was another clean break with Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers. The best they would do in these types of situations was to abstain from voting.

To say the Angola vote was not popular with Establishment forces is putting it mildly. Acheson again criticized Kennedy. Portuguese demonstrators in Lisbon stoned the U.S. embassy. But Kennedy understood that it would send a clear signal to the leaders of the developing world, a reversal of an earlier era of disdain for African nationalists. A few years before, when Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika went to New York to lobby for such a UN resolution, he was limited to a 24-hour visa and an eight-block travel radius.

But Kennedy went beyond just supporting a UN resolution. He offered to raise U.S. foreign aid to Portugal to \$500 million per year for eight years if Portuguese President Antonio Salazar would free all of its African colonies. Since aid to Portugal was very minimal at the time, this was a staggering amount of money. Today it would be about \$16 billion. After Salazar turned down the offer, Kennedy sent aid to the rebels in Angola and Mozambique. (ibid, pgs. 102,107)

Kennedy was even willing to risk relations with a major ally France over the issue of colonialism. In theory, French President DeGaulle had granted many of the former states of the French colonial empire freedom in 1960. But, after analysis, it was clear that DeGaulle planned to keep optimum influence in these states, a process called neocolonialism.

For instance, DeGaulle favored the states that would stay aligned with France with large amounts of aid. Those that decided to go their own way were given paltry sums. So, Kennedy targeted those countries ignored by DeGaulle, giving them more than \$30 million by 1962. (ibid, p. 161) DeGaulle also backed the Belgian lackey Moise Tshombe in the Congo crisis.

Viewing these strategies as a continuation of European imperialism in Africa, Kennedy decided to compete with France, even if it meant weakening his relationship with DeGaulle. As Muelhenbeck notes, in November 1963, Kennedy commissioned a study of methods to compete with France and to formulate countermeasures designed to undermine the French grip in Africa.

### **Worrying About Laos**

Before Eisenhower left office, he had two meetings with President-elect Kennedy. Contrary to what most might think, he did not tell Kennedy that the most looming and important foreign policy area was Vietnam, Congo or Cuba. He told him it was Laos. (Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 163)

Eisenhower and his advisers painted the picture in stark Cold War terms, warning against any kind of coalition government that would include communist representation. The talk got so stark and martial that Kennedy ended up asking how long it would take to put a division of American troops into the area. (ibid)

On Jan. 3, 1961 Eisenhower said that "if the communists establish a strong position in Laos, the West is finished in the whole southeast Asian area." (David Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 32)

As historian David Kaiser later noted, the Eisenhower-Dulles definition of what a communist was often included people who, by objective standards, were actually

neutralists. Later on, as Kennedy would show, if properly handled, these neutralists could actually become American allies.

But in the Dulles-Eisenhower Cold War meme as with Egypt's Nasser you were either in the U.S. camp or against it. As Kaiser noted, it was this attitude that had left Indochina in such a highly agitated, militaristic state by the end of Eisenhower's term in office. In fact, Eisenhower had approved war plans for Indochina as early as 1955. (ibid, p. 34)

The Dulles brothers never pursued a diplomatic resolution in Indochina, just as they never pressured France to the bargaining table in Algeria. Fitting their globalist and imperialist views, the Dulles brothers dismissed the idea of rapprochement over both large and small issues. All their energies seemed to be expended in political offensives and plans for war, hence this presentation to Kennedy on Laos.

But Kennedy did not take the advice. He reversed the policy again and parried an attempt to insert American troops by asking for estimates of how many men the North Vietnamese and Chinese could place into this conflict in their neighboring area. The estimates came back at 160,000 men within 30 days. (ibid, p. 40)

On the same day those estimates were returned, at his first press conference, Kennedy stated that he wished to establish in Laos "a peaceful country, an independent country not dominated by either side but concerned with the life of the people within the country." (ibid)

Dissatisfied with the military option, Kennedy then went to the State Department and called upon Ambassador Winthrop Brown, who told the President that the Laotian army was simply not capable of fighting a civil war on its own. Kennedy asked him what he would propose instead. Brown said he would offer up a neutralist solution with a coalition government, noting that this is what U.S. allies in Europe favored. In fact, the allies thought that this was the only solution, and they felt the communist Pathet Lao should be included. (ibid)

Kennedy, who Isaiah Berlin once called the best listener he ever met, signaled to the Soviets a willingness to arrange a peaceful settlement. Kennedy would use the military option only as a bluff to strengthen his hand at the bargaining table. (ibid, p. 41) Although his military advisers continued to push for the introduction of combat troops, and even the use of atomic weapons, Kennedy continued to brush this advice aside.

In fact, Kennedy gave a press backgrounder where he himself argued against the military option from his 1951 experience with Gullion. Kennedy argued that if the Laotian government fell and the U.S. had to intervene, U.S. troops would

likely be opposed by China and the Viet Minh. Kennedy added, "The French had 400,000 men and could not hold. I was in Hanoi in 1951 and saw for myself." (ibid, p. 47)

After telling the Russians to get the Pathet Lao to stop their offensive in May of 1961, a truce was called. A conference was then convened in Geneva to hammer out conditions for a neutral Laos. By July 1962, a new government, including the Pathet Lao, was constructed.

Kennedy later explained his position to rival Richard Nixon: "I just don't think we should get involved in Laos, particularly where we might find ourselves fighting millions of Chinese troops in the jungles. In any event, I don't see how we can make any move in Laos, which is 5,000 miles away, if we don't make a move in Cuba which is only 90 miles away." (Schlesinger, p. 337)

### **Onward to Vietnam**

So, there was a context of anti-colonialism and diplomacy in understanding President Kennedy's resistance to the pressure from his military advisers when they pushed for sending combat troops to Vietnam. As with Laos, Kennedy bucked that advice and never dispatched combat troops, although he increased the number of U.S. military personnel advising the South Vietnamese army from about 900 under Eisenhower to about 16,000 by 1963.

The declassified files of the Assassination Records Review Board further illuminate this story of tension and intrigue over Vietnam policy, first highlighted to the American public by Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK*. As it turned out, Kennedy was not just fighting his military advisers on the Vietnam issue. He was opposed by many of his civilian advisers, too.

In April 1962, Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith volunteered to get a message to North Vietnam through Indian diplomats about a possible truce in return for a phased withdrawal of American forces. Almost everyone at senior levels of the Kennedy administration opposed Galbraith's venture. The one man who liked the idea was Kennedy, who instructed Assistant Secretary of State Averell Harriman to follow up on the proposal.

Apparently, Kennedy did not understand that, although Harriman was in charge of the Laotian talks, he was not in favor of the same solution in Vietnam. Thus, Harriman subverted Kennedy's intentions on this assignment. In the wire to Galbraith, Harriman struck out the wording of the language on de-escalation with a heavy pencil line. It was changed into a threat of American escalation in the war if North Vietnam refused to accept U.S. terms. When Harriman's assistant tried to reword the cable to stay true to Kennedy's intent, Harriman changed it

back again. He then simply killed the telegram altogether. (Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, pgs. 158-59)

In 2005, Galbraith confirmed to *Boston Globe* reporter Bryan Bender that he never received any instructions about his proposal from President Kennedy.

By 1963, as confirmed by Assistant Defense Secretary Roswell Gilpatric and Defense Department analyst John McNaughton, Kennedy had decided that he was going to use Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara as his point man to go ahead and implement a withdrawal from Vietnam. McNamara's instructions to begin planning the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel had been relayed to Saigon in summer 1962.

At a key meeting in Hawaii in May 1963, McNamara was presented with an update on the planning for the withdrawal. He deemed the plans too slow and asked them to be speeded up. (James DiEugenio, *Destiny Betrayed*, pgs. 366-367) But the point was that the plan was in place. Kennedy activated it in October 1963 by signing National Security Action Memorandum 263, stating that the withdrawal would begin in December of 1963 and be completed in 1965.

In other words, Kennedy's plan for a military withdrawal wasn't just some vague notion or, as New York Times executive editor Jill Abramson recently wrote, a belief among his admirers "rooted as much in the romance of 'what might have been' as in the documented record."

In a letter to the New York Times in response to Abramson's JFK article, James K. Galbraith, a professor of government at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas and son of the late John Kenneth Galbraith, challenged Abramson's characterization of Kennedy's withdrawal plan.

Galbraith wrote, "The record shows that on Oct. 2 and 5, 1963, President Kennedy issued a formal decision to withdraw American forces from Vietnam. I documented this 10 years ago in Boston Review and Salon, and in 2007 in The New York Review of Books.

"The relevant documents include records of the Secretary of Defense conference in Honolulu in May 1963; tapes and transcripts of the decision meetings in the White House; and a memorandum from Gen. Maxwell Taylor to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Oct. 4, 1963, which states: 'All planning will be directed towards preparing RVN [South Vietnamese government] forces for the withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by the end of calendar year 1965.'"

### **Kennedy on Cuba**

The last major area of foreign policy that Kennedy was changing was Cuba. After

the Missile Crisis in October 1962, Kennedy and Fidel Castro opened up a back channel through three intermediaries: ABC reporter Lisa Howard, State Department employee William Attwood, and French journalist Jean Daniel.

This attempt at secret communication and a détente between the two countries was in high gear in the fall of 1963. In his last message relayed to Castro through Daniel, Kennedy made one of the most candid and bold statements ever to a communist head of state. He said to Castro, "In the matter of the Batista regime, I am in agreement with the first Cuban revolutionaries. That is perfectly clear." (ibid, p. 74)

When Castro got this message, he was overjoyed. He exuberantly told Daniel that Kennedy would go down in history as the greatest president since Abraham Lincoln. Three days later, Castro got the news that Kennedy had been shot. He was thunderstruck. He put down the phone, sat down and repeated over and over, "This is bad news this is bad news this is bad news."

A few moments later, a radio broadcast announced that Kennedy was dead. Castro stood up and said, "Everything is changed, everything is going to change." (ibid, p. 75)

As it turned out, Castro was not just speaking for himself. It's true that Lyndon Johnson did not continue the Cuban back-channel negotiations, and that promising diplomatic attempt died along with Kennedy. But Castro was probably not aware that all the ventures described above were about to change back, more or less, to where they were under Eisenhower.

Kennedy's attempt to withdraw from Vietnam was first stopped, and then reversed in three months. With NSAM 288, in March 1964, President Johnson signed off on battle plans for a huge air war against North Vietnam. In other words, what Kennedy refused to do for three years, LBJ did in three months. Less than 18 months after Kennedy's death, Johnson inserted combat troops into Vietnam, something Kennedy had never contemplated and specifically rejected eight specific times. This would result in the deaths of over 2 million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans.

Johnson also reversed Kennedy's policy in Congo. Kennedy had stopped the attempt of Katanga to secede through a UN special military mission. But by 1964, the CIA was unilaterally flying air sorties over the country to stop a leftist rebellion. White-supremacist and right-wing South Africans and Rhodesians were called on to join the Congolese army. The pretext was that the Chinese were fomenting a communist takeover.

This rightward tilt went unabated into 1965. By then, Josef Mobutu had gained

complete power. In 1966, he installed himself as military dictator. The enormous mineral wealth of Congo would go to him and his wealthy foreign backers. (ibid, p. 373)

The same thing happened in Indonesia. Without Kennedy's backing of Sukarno, the CIA began plotting a second coup attempt. A Dutch intelligence officer attached to NATO had predicted it less than a year earlier in December 1964. He said Indonesia was about to fall into the hands of the West like a rotten apple. (ibid, p. 375)

The coup began in October 1964 and ended with General Suharto, long known for his willingness to cooperate with colonizing countries like Japan and the Netherlands, becoming the country's leader. Sukarno was placed under house arrest, never to return to power.

Suharto then led one of the bloodiest pogroms in modern history, targeting the PKI, the communist party in Indonesia, but also slaughtering many other Indonesians including ethnic Chinese. The death toll was about 500,000, with many of the victims decapitated and their bodies dumped into rivers.

Like Mobutu, Suharto became a long-ruling dictator (holding power for three decades) and becoming an incredibly wealthy man by selling out his country to foreign businesses. Again, unlike what Kennedy had envisioned, the wealth of Indonesia would not go to its citizens, but to Suharto, his cronies and foreign corporations.

This pattern repeated itself almost everywhere. Africa went back to being neglected. Kennedy's truce in Laos was shattered as the country descended into a civil war that featured heroin trading by the CIA's Air America fleet. U.S. policy toward the Middle East embraced the Shah of Iran and his oppressive policies, sowing the seeds for the first explosion of Moslem fundamentalism in 1979.

### **Mideast Blowback**

Rather than Kennedy's disdain for the corrupt and repressive Saudi monarchy, that leadership was dubbed "moderate" and given the label "Arab ally." With Saudi Arabia's oil wells and deep pockets, its power and wealth attracted the friendship and loyalty of influential Americans, including the dynastic Bush family and its closely associated Carlyle Group.

Meanwhile, as demonstrated by author Steve Coll and other investigators, the Saudis provided cover and funding for Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorists. The fanaticism that Kennedy warned about in 1957 if the United States did not break with European colonialism and neocolonialism came back to

inflict destruction on U.S. targets, including attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa and eventually on New York and Washington.

When Kennedy designed his foreign policy, he was very deliberate about his plan to move in a new direction. In 1957, he said the single most important test of America was the way it was going to separate itself from European imperialism. Though Kennedy often talked as a Cold War hardliner during the 1960 campaign and the early days of his presidency he was intent on creating a foreign policy that would shatter the confines of the Cold War.

Before the 1960 convention, Kennedy told adviser Harris Wofford that if Sen. Stuart Symington or Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson was the nominee, "we might as well elect Dulles or Acheson; it would be the same cold-war foreign policy all over again." (Muelhenbeck, p. 37)

Under Secretary of State George Ball amplified this by saying, that after World War II, America was thought of as a status-quo power, while the Soviets were thought of as being on the side of the oppressed and revolution: "The Kennedy Doctrine challenged this approach. If America failed to encourage the young revolutionaries in the new countries, they would inevitably turn toward the Soviet Union. America should therefore, stop trying to sustain traditional societies and ally itself with the side of revolution."

Authors such as Larry Sabato assert that Kennedy left no lasting legacy and that is becoming the chic conventional take on his aborted presidency. What Sabato and these others fail to note is the remarkable changes Kennedy made in the Eisenhower/Dulles imperialist foreign policy in less than three years. They also ignore how fast the policies were snapped back by the old order operating through the CIA and President Johnson. If you don't note these clear changes, then you can say they did not occur.

But the people Kennedy was aiming his policies at certainly understood what happened on Nov. 22, 1963. In Nairobi, Kenya, over 6,000 people crammed into a cathedral for a memorial service. The peasants of the Yucatan peninsula immediately started planting a Kennedy Memorial garden. Schools in Argentina were named after Kennedy. Nasser sunk into a deep depression and ordered Kennedy's funeral shown four times on Egyptian television.

In the Third World, the public seemed to instantly know what had really happened and what was about to occur. A progressive and humane foreign policy was about to revert back to something oppressive and profit-oriented. A brief three-year glow of hope was ending.

Because of the laziness and corporate orientation of the mainstream media, it

has taken many Americans 50 years to figure out what the rest of the world knew instantaneously. And despite today's conventional wisdom obsessing on Kennedy's "shallowness" and "celebrity" the discovery of what Kennedy truly represented to the rest of the world during his "thousand-day" presidency is beginning to register in America.

**Jim DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is *Reclaiming Parkland*.**

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