the danger to American lives and interests. Perhaps, if American leaders had dealt with Middle Eastern realities rather than with Communist ghosts, they could have come, at a minimum, to understand the region's profound stirrings as indigenous rather than imported, and might have devised a patient, sensitive, and tolerant policy. But they did not, because they had become Cold Warriors, hyperbolic in their depiction of the Communist threat.

10

Bearing the Burden: John F. Kennedy and the Communist Menace

One question quickly jumps out in front in any discussion of the foreign policy of President John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s: Why were there so many serious, potentially catastrophic contests and crisis? The foiled Bay of Pigs invasion, deadlock at the Vienna summit, Berlin crisis, Laotian crisis, escalation in Vietnam, blunt bickering with France's Charles de Gaulle, Congo crisis, missile race, space race, and the Cuban missile crisis—all cascaded through world affairs in just 1000 days. How do we explain this frightening set of confrontations, this competition and brinkmanship that seemed at times to court nuclear cremation?

Getting at the well-springs of the Kennedy foreign policy requires overcoming some heady obstacles. Many of the records for the Kennedy years remain security-classified and hence closed to researchers. We must do our reconstructing without all of the parts; some papers, such as those generated by the CIA, may never be released to historians. Very slowly and incompletely this difficulty is being reduced as the John F. Kennedy Library and federal agencies open documents for research under the mandatory review process and the Freedom of Information Act.

Another obstacle stems from the adulatory, best-selling memoirs and biographies penned by Kennedy's aides. They cover his blemishes with the cosmetic cream of hero worship, perpetuating a Kennedy legend. But that legend now wobbles in the face of a fuller documentary record. The books and fawning messages of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth O'Donnell, Pierre Salinger, and Theodore Sorensen have been subjected to searching study, and the Kennedy who emerges appears less and less to be the cool-headed, far-sighted crisis manager they have depicted.

We must also grapple with the question of rhetoric. JFK said so many grand things so elegantly. One can easily get caught up in the eloquent phrasing and noble appeals to human uplift and overlook contradictions between word and deed or the coercive components of American foreign policy. Kennedy also said so many hackneyed things so superficially, both publicly and privately. He often spoke of the "Communist offensive" or the "free world" as monoliths, ignoring complexities. Kennedy defenders like Schlesinger ask us to dismiss such statements as mere political rhetoric or as State Department "boilerplate." It seems more sensible to conclude that Kennedy said what he meant and meant what he said. Besides, what he said is what the Soviets and others heard.

Ambiguity also dogs us. Kennedy's foreign policy was a mixture of sincere idealism and traditional anti-Communist fervor. The President sent Peace Corps volunteers into needy and appreciative villages in Latin America to grow food. But he also sent the Green Berets into Southeast Asia, where they helped destroy village life. We are left, then, with part hawk and part dove — an administration which had serious doubts about the cliches of the Cold War but never shed them.

The assassination poses another interpretive obstacle. Kennedy admirers have asked us not to judge him by his accomplishments but rather by his intentions, for, they have argued, had he not been removed from his appointed journey so tragically in 1963, his good intentions would have reached fruition. The first 12 to 18 months of any presidency constitute a learning or trial period, and truly successful Presidents need two terms to achieve their goals. Put another way, Kennedy

would have gained experience, been chastened by crisis, and become educated to follow a more temperate and less traditional Cold War diplomacy had he lived and won re-election in 1964. We cannot be sure, but we do know what he *did* in the thousand days of his administration to help stimulate a rash of diplomatic crises in such a very short time.

Finally, as historians we must contend with the difficulty of emphasis, of choosing between different roads that lead to an understanding of the Kennedy years. We can, for example, emphasize the world the President faced—a bellowing Nikita Khrushchev, independent-minded leaders like de Gaulle, neutralism, national liberation movements, guerrilla wars, and many newly freed, internally divided, and unstable states in the Third World. We can, in other words, stress that the crises of the early 1960s derived from external forces, perhaps beyond any man's comprehension or mastery.

Or, for a second road, we might highlight, as Schlesinger has done in his book, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, the decision-making environment in Washington, D.C., that brought troubles to the President's diplomacy. Schlesinger blames the CIA as a runaway, out-of-control agency that did not tell the President what it was doing abroad to undermine and topple governments. He chides, furthermore, conservative congressmen and senators who gave Kennedy little room to relax the Cold War, and State Department bureaucrats who obstructed imaginative change. And he censures the military—the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and warriors like Curtis Lemay, Edwin A. Walker, and Maxwell Taylor—for advocating an aggressive, hawkish foreign policy. In short, suggests this point of view, Kennedy should be praised for keeping the adventuresome hawks in check, for curbing their warmongering appetite for even more crises.

A third route we might take is to look at the man and his advisers, to delineate their ideas, their styles, their goals, for, although the world was a menacing one, it had long been so, and the noise from Moscow had not really changed in kind, but in volume. And, although Kennedy probably did restrain some militarists, there was enough activism, militancy, and zeal for Cold War victory in Kennedy himself and in his close advisers to suggest that historians need to fathom them and their reading of

the national interest to render a thorough accounting of 1960s foreign policy.

Kennedy once said that one man "can make a difference."[1] We may quibble with such an emphasis on individuals in history. It obscures the basic continuity in American foreign policy, the traditional expansionism and interventionism spawned by a liberal ideology and by the real economic and strategic needs of a large, industrial power with global interests. Kennedy did not represent a sharp break with the past or a uniqueness in the fundamental tenents of American foreign policy. Yet the different methods he chose to meet the Communist threat, the personal characteristics of his diplomacy, did matter in heating up the Cold War, threatening nuclear war, and implanting the United States in the Third World as never before.

What made Kennedy's foreign policy tick? First, the historical imperatives of experience and ideology which linked Kennedy's generation to a past of compelling lessons. Second, the conspicuous style, personality, and mood of the President and his advisers, who were determined to win the Cold War by bold action. And third, counter-revolutionary thought, best summarized by the phrases "nation-building" and "modernization," demanding a high degree of activism in the Third World. "The difference between the Kennedy and Eisenhower administrations," Special Assistant Walt W. Rostow has written, "is not one of 180 degrees. The difference was a shift from defensive reaction to initiative. . . ."[2]

The first explanation, the power of historical conditioning, derives from the truism that we are creatures of our pasts, that long-held assumptions, traditional behavior, and habits tug at us in the present. John F. Kennedy and his advisers were captives of an influential past. They constituted the political generation of the 1940s, and they often flashed back to that decade for reference points. Many of them came to political maturity during World War II and the early years of the Cold War. Kennedy himself served during the Second World War on PT 109 and was elected to Congress in 1946, just a few months before the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine. Kennedy and his advisers were members of what we might call the "containment generation," which enjoyed what they considered the triumphs of aid to Greece and Turkey, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Blockade crisis, NATO, and Point Four.

They also suffered the frustration of Jiang Jieshi's collapse in China and the stalemate of the Korean War. When asked in 1963 whether he would reduce aid to South Vietnam, the President replied that he would not. "Strongly in our mind is what happened in the case of China at the end of World War II, where China was lost. . . . We don't want that."[3] Indeed, in 1949 Congressman Kennedy had blasted President Truman for the "loss" of China and had also criticized Franklin D. Roosevelt for selling out to the Russians at the Yalta Conference.

Kennedy's "containment generation" imbibed several lessons from the postwar years of the Soviet-American confrontation: toughness against Communism works; a nation must negotiate from strength; precautions must be taken to avoid compromises or sell-outs in negotiations; Communism was monolithic; Communism was a cancer feeding on poverty and economic dislocation; Communism had to be contained through counter-force on a global scale; revolutions and civil wars were usually Communist-inspired or exploited by Communists; and a powerful United States, almost alone, had the duty to protect a threatened world. Some of these lessons were exaggerated, ill-defined, superficial, or downright mistaken, yet a generation of Americans committed them to memory in the 1940s. That generation, once in positions of governmental authority in the 1960s, constantly looked back to that earlier decade for inspiration and guidelines.

Kennedy also tapped that generation for his administration's personnel. The carry-over of ideas and public servants from the Truman period to the Kennedy era is striking. Secretary of State Dean Rusk had been an Assistant Secretary of State under Truman. McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's bright, persuasive Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, like Kennedy a little over forty years old, was Captain Bundy during World War II, had a hand in the Marshall Plan, and had developed close relations with Henry L. Stimson and Dean Acheson. Bundy revealed that "he had come to accept what he had learned from

Dean Acheson—that, in the final analysis, the United States was the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world the caboose."[4]

Bundy's forty-four-year-old assistant, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist and grand theorist Walt W. Rostow, had served in the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and had worked on postwar European reconstruction as a State Department officer. His wife once observed that the Kennedy advisers were "the junior officers of the Second World War come to responsiblity."[5] Rostow himself wrote in the early 1960s that the "first charge of the Kennedy Administration in 1961—somewhat like the challenge faced by the Truman Administration in 1947—was to turn back the Communist offensive. . . . "[6] Another White House assistant, especially concerned with Latin American affairs, was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., part of the Harvard contingent which trooped to Washington to serve the new President. As the forty-three-year-old historian declared on CBS's *Face the Nation* in 1960, the new administration "will have to come up with new initiatives and ideas comparable to the great creative conceptions of the 1940's."[7] For Schlesinger, the 1940s were active years as a member of the OSS and as a young Democratic party liberal who also worked for the Economic Cooperation Administration.

Other members of the "containment generation" took new posts in Washington to help Kennedy: Chester Bowles, John Kenneth Galbraith, Roger Hilsman, Robert McNamara, Adlai Stevenson, and Maxwell Taylor. Other more experienced hands like W. Averell Harriman, Clark Clifford, A. A. Berle, Charles Bohlen, and Robert Lovett came back. Paul Nitze, author of NSC-68, became Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Even the ultimate in Cold Warriors, the inveterate Dean Acheson, advised Kennedy on European affairs. In 1959, when Acheson was vociferously attacking George F. Kennan for the latter's proposals for disengagement from Central Europe, Walter Lippmann complained with insight that Acheson and his rigid types were "like old soldiers trying to relive the battles in which they won their fame and glory. . . . Their preoccupation with their own past history is preventing them from dealing with the new phase of the Cold War."[8]

Reflecting on some of the foreign policy mistakes of the 1960s, Clark Clifford, White House aide to Truman and later Secretary of Defense under Lyndon Johnson, admitted that "I am a product of the Cold War. . . . I think the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO saved the free world. I think that was one of the proudest periods of our history. But I think part of our problem in the early nineteen-sixties was that we were looking at Southeast Asia with the same attitudes with which we had viewed Europe in the nineteen-forties. . . . The world had changed but our thinking had not, at least not as much as it should have."[9]

The ideas of the generation of the 1940s were molded not only by their immediate experience with the early Cold War but by their inherited assumptions from the 1930s—assumptions which blended with and explained Cold War crises. The lessons of the 1930s were widely shared: aggression cannot go unchallenged; military force had to be used decisively; economic depressions breed totalitarianism and war; there was little difference between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia or between Hitler and Stalin (see "Red Fascism" in Chapter 1); and fanatical dictators, to maintain their power at home, become aggressors and cannot be moved by reason. John F. Kennedy submitted a senior thesis to Harvard and published it in 1940 as *Why England Slept*. Its theme was direct: The English revealed weakness before the Nazi threat and should have employed force. For Kennedy's generation, the Munich agreement became the Munich "syndrome" or lesson, a vivid example of the costs of softness. In his televised address to the nation on October 22, 1962, in the terrible throes of the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy summoned that historical legacy for a rationale: "The 1930's taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war."[10]

The Kennedy team, then, came to office with considerable historical baggage. They felt, too, that the Eisenhower Administration, unimaginative and stale in the 1950s, had let American power and prestige slip and had thereby permitted the lessons of the 1930s and 1940s to slump from underwork and passivity. "We have allowed a soft sentimentalism to form the atmosphere we breathe," charged Kennedy. "Toughminded plans" were

required.[11] They craved triumphs like those over Nazism and Stalinism. They charged, with remarkable exaggeration, that Eisenhower was unwilling to enter the new battleground of the Cold War, the Third World—that he was consigning it to Communism without a fight. "I think it's time America started moving again," proclaimed John F. Kennedy.[12] "Our job was to deal with an automobile with weak brakes on a hill," recalled Walt Rostow, with his usual exaggeration. "It was slowly sliding backward. If we applied enormous energy, the car would begin to move forward and in time, we would get it up to the top of the hill."[13]

The presidential campaign of 1960 demonstrated the ingrained nature of the Cold War's history. Richard Nixon and Kennedy differed little in foreign policy views. Nixon, too, was part of the "containment generation," also elected to Congress in 1946. Throughout the 1950s, Kennedy had proven his Cold War credentials, calling for larger military appropriations than Eisenhower wanted. In 1956 Kennedy considered Vietnam the "finger in the dike" of Communism.[14] In 1960 his Cold Warriorism surfaced as he and Nixon escalated their claims to the inherited wisdom of the past. Although Eisenhower had just suffered a set of diplomatic blows with the U-2 affair, the collapse of the Paris summit meeting, Castro's rise in Cuba, accelerated war in Indochina, an adverse balance of payments, and the forced cancelation of a trip to Japan, Kennedy had to admit when pressed on *Face the Nation* in April 1960 that he endorsed most of Eisenhower's policies, except the apparent neglect of developing nations. As David Halberstam has correctly concluded, the Kennedy people "were not dissenting from the assumptions of the Eisenhower years, but pledged to be more effective, more active, to cut a lot of the flab off."[15]

In his campaign speeches, Kennedy, who said he did not mind being called Truman with a Harvard accent, hammered away on the issue of Cuba and the Cold War. He urged pressure on Castro and aid to Cuban rebels to overthrow him. "I wasn't the vice president who presided over the communization of Cuba," he declared. "I'm not impressed with those who say they stood up to Khrushchev when Castro has defied them 90 miles away."[16] In August, he announced: "I think there is a

danger that history will make a judgment that these were the days when the tide began to run out for the United States. These were the times when the Communist tide began to pour in."[17] A month later he embellished his rhetoric: "The enemy is the Communist system itself—implacable, unceasing in its drive for world domination. For this is not a struggle for the supremacy of arms alone—it is also a struggle for supremacy between two conflicting ideologies: Freedom under God versus ruthless, godless tyranny."[18] John Foster Dulles could not have said it better.

Was all of this mere hyperbolic, campaign rhetoric? It cannot be dismissed so easily. Such utterances, heard over and over again from the lips of the Kennedyites, represent the historical imprint upon a generation of Americans. History was not so much a way of learning, as a soothing way of making sense out of complex events. The historical imperative helped compel them to try to move the Cold War from stalemate to American victory. Theirs was a Trumanesque, NSC-68 view of the world. History both tugged at them and pushed them.

The style, personality, and mood of the Kennedy team joined the historical imperatives to compel a vigorous foreign policy. "All at once you had something exciting," recalled Don Ferguson, a student campaigner for Kennedy in Nebraska. "You had a young guy who had kids, and who liked to play football on his front lawn. He was a real human being. He was talking about pumping some new life into the country . . . just giving the whole country a real shakedown and a new image. . . . Everything they did showed that America was alive and active. Family ski trips . . . , Jackie with her new hair styles. . . . To run a country," Ferguson concluded, "it takes more than just mechanics. It takes a psychology."[19] Call it psychology, charisma, charm, image, mystique, or cult, Kennedy had it. He moved Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians out of the White House and brought Mozart in. Photogenic and quick-witted, he became a media star. Observers marveled at his speed-reading abilities. Decrying softness in the American people, he challenged their egos by launching a physical fitness program.

Handsome, articulate, witty, ingratiating, dynamic, energetic, competitive, athletic, cultured, bright, self-confident, cool, ana-

lytical, mathematical, zealous—these were the traits universally ascribed to the young President. People often listened not to what he said but how he said it, and he usually said it with verve and conviction. He simply overwhelmed. "It is extraordinary," W. W. Rostow remarked to a friend, "how the character of the President's personality shapes everything around him. . . ."[20] Dean Rusk remembered Kennedy as an "incandescent man. He was on fire, and he set people around him on fire."[21] For Schlesinger, JFK had "enormous confidence in his own luck," and "everyone around him thought he had the Midas touch and could not lose."[22]

Style and personality are important to how diplomacy is conducted; how we behave obviously affects how others read us and respond to us, and our personal characteristics and needs shape our decisions. Many of his friends have commented that John F. Kennedy was driven by a desire for power, because power ensured winning—that he personalized issues, converting them into tests of will. Everything became a matter of crises and races. His father, Joe Kennedy, demanded excellence. As James Barber has pointed out in his book, *The Presidential Character*, old Joe "pressed his children hard to compete, never to be satisfied with anything but first place. The point was not just to try; the point was to win."[23] John developed a thirst for victory, a self-image as the vigorous man. Aroused in the campaign of 1960 by the stings of anti-Catholic bias, by complaints that he lacked enough experience in foreign affairs to stand up to Khrushchev, by misplaced right-wing charges that he was "soft on Communism," and by his narrow victory over Nixon, Kennedy seemed eager to prove his toughness once in office. "Tough" and "soft" became two of the words most often uttered by the President and his assistants. A "cult of toughness" developed.[24]

Kennedy took up challenges with zest, relishing opportunities to win. Soon Americans watched for box scores on the missile race, the arms race, the space race, and the race for influence in the Third World. Even the program supposedly carrying the least Cold Warriorist character, the Peace Corps, became part of the game. When JFK learned in 1961 that both Ghana and Guinea had requested Peace Corps volunteers, he

told Rusk: "If we can successfully crack Ghana and Guinea, Mali may even turn to the West. If so, these would be the first Communist-oriented countries to turn from Moscow to us."[25] Peace Corps Director Sergeant Shriver placed a sign in his office: "Good Guys Don't Win Ball Games."[26] To the missile expert Wernher von Braun, Kennedy wrote: "Do we have a chance of beating [them] by putting a laboratory in space, or by a trip around the moon and back with a man? Is there any space program which promises dramatic results which we could win?"[27] McGeorge Bundy expressed the administration's general frustration over having gained few decisive victories in 1961: "We are like the Harlem Globetrotters, passing forward, behind, sideways, and underneath. But nobody has made a basket yet."[28] They were eager to score and win.

Kennedy and his advisers, it seems, thought Khrushchev and the Russians were testing them as men. In early 1961, when they discussed the possibility of a summit meeting with Khrushchev, Kennedy asserted that "I have to show him that we can be as tough as he is. . . . I'll have to sit down with him, and let him see who he's dealing with."[29] And a White House aide explained the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961: "Nobody in the White House wanted to be soft. . . . Everybody wanted to show they were just as daring and bold as everybody else."[30] During those tense hours when the news about the disaster at Cuba's Playa Girón reached the White House, Robert F. Kennedy exploded, claiming that Moscow would think the Kennedy Administration weak unless the mission succeeded. Something had to be done. Walt Rostow quieted him with this counsel: "We would have ample opportunity to prove we were not paper tigers in Berlin, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere."[31] John F. Kennedy and his aides, as somebody has put it, feared to be thought fearful.

With these psychic needs and with their high intellectual talents, the Kennedy officers swept into Washington, "swashbuckling" and suffering from "auto-intoxication," commented one observer.[32] Cocky, thinking themselves the "right" people, they were, complained a skeptical Chester Bowles, "sort of looking for a chance to prove their muscle." They were "full of belligerence."[33] Schlesinger captured the moment this way:

"Euphoria reigned; we thought for a moment that the world was plastic and the future unlimited."[34] In early 1961 the former Harvard historian advised the President on Latin American policy and declared that "the atmosphere is set for miracles."[35] Bustle, zeal, energy, and optimism—along with toughness—became bywords. How upset Kennedy became at a luncheon for Texas publishers when one of them audaciously stood up and said: "Many Texans in the Southwest think that you are riding [your daughter] Caroline's tricycle, instead of being a man on horseback."[36] Soon friendly journalists were called in and asked to help counter this suggestion of a weak President.

The Kennedy people considered themselves "can-do" types, who with rationality and careful calculation could revive an ailing nation and world. Theodore H. White tagged them "the Action Intellectuals."[37] They believed that they could manage affairs, and "management" became one of the catchwords of the time.

With adequate data, and they had an inordinate faith in data, they were certain they could succeed. It seemed everything could be quantified. When a White House assistant attempted to persuade Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the "whiz kid" from Ford Motor, that the Vietnam venture was doomed, the efficiency-minded McNamara shot back: "Where is your data? Give me something I can put in the computer. Don't give me your poetry."[38] The problem, of course, was that some of the data on Vietnam was inconclusive or false. "Ah, *les statistiques*," said a Vietnamese general to an American official. "We Vietnamese can give him [McNamara] all he wants. If you want them to go up, they will go up. If you want them to go down, they will go down."[39] With its faith in formulas and the computer, the Kennedy "can-do" team brought a freshness to American foreign policy, if not in substance, at least in slogans: "The Grand Design" for Europe; the "New Africa" policy; "Flexible Response" for the military; the "Alliance for Progress" for Latin America; and the "New Frontier" at home.

The Kennedy style was evident in the President's alarmist Inaugural Address. Its Cold War language was matched by the pompous phrasing that "the torch has been passed to a new generation." He paid homage to historical memories when he

noted that that generation had been "tempered by war" and "disciplined by a hard and bitter peace. . . ." Then came those moving, but in hindsight rather frightening words: "Let every nation know that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."[40] No halfway measures here. Kennedy and his assistants thought they could lick anything. They were impatient. As Schlesinger recalled, the Kennedy Administration "put a premium on quick, tough, laconic, decided people. . . ."[41] But Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson grew disenchanted. As he told a friend: "They've got the damndest bunch of boy commandos running around . . . you ever saw."[42] Robert Kennedy himself later thought about the decisions of his brother's administration. He wondered "if we did not pay a very great price for being more energetic than wise about a lot of things, especially Cuba."[43] Schlesinger later agreed that "the besetting sin of the New Frontier . . . was the addiction of activism."[44]

The Cuban missile crisis provided an opportunity for exercising management skills and for establishing the credibility of containment and the President's toughness. What is most telling about Kennedy's response to the reckless Soviet installation of missiles in Cuba is that he suspended diplomacy and chose a television address, rather than a direct approach to Moscow, to inform Khrushchev that his flagrant intrusion into the Caribbean would not be tolerated. Kennedy practiced public rather than private diplomacy and thereby significantly increased the chances of war. Why?

Ever since the Bay of Pigs muddle, the Kennedy team had nurtured a sense of revenge. In the wake of the invasion's failure, Kennedy blamed the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for faulty intelligence and execution, but he never questioned his own policy of attempting to overthrow a sovereign government—only his methods for doing so. In his April 20, 1961, speech just a few days after the Cuban tragedy, he seemed emboldened rather than contemplative or contrite. "Let the record show that our restraint is not inexhaustible." He pledged to take up the "relentless struggle" with Communism in "every corner of the globe." Employing once again the theme of

toughness vs. softness, the President declared that the "complacent, the self-indulgent, the soft societies are about to be swept away with the debris of history. Only the strong . . . can possibly survive."[45] Privately Kennedy wondered how he could have let such a flawed operation go forward. One foreign policy analyst explained how, in a letter to the journalist Walter Lippmann. Louis Halle wrote from Europe:

> I can imagine how the President got such bad advice from such good advisers. The decision on which they were asked to advise was presented as a choice between action and inaction. . . . None of the President's advisers wants to have it said of him by his colleagues . . . that he . . . loses his nerve when the going gets hot.
>
> The Harvard intellectuals are especially vulnerable, the more so from being new on the scene. They are conscious of the fact that the tough-minded military suspect them of being soft-headed. They have to show that they are he-men too, that they can act as well as lecture. . . . We have learned that, in foreign relations, the ability to wait may be as important as the ability to act.[46]

"The Castro regime is a thorn in the flesh," Senator J. William Fulbright once told the President, "but it is not a dagger in the heart."[47] JFK disagreed. He worked to expunge Fidel Castro and his revolution from the Western Hemisphere. The administration increased CIA aid to Cuban exile groups and commando squads based in Miami, orchestrated the ouster of Cuba from the Organization of American States, and pressed Latin American countries to break diplomatic relations with Havana. The economic blockade was tightened, and America's European allies were lobbied to restrict their trade with the island. The Kennedy Administration also launched Operation Mongoose. This program of "dirty tricks" sought to sabotage property in Cuba and stir up anti-Castro feelings. It destroyed and maimed, but it did not dislodge Castro. And the CIA, told by the Kennedy brothers in vague but emphatic terms to get rid of Castro, continued the plot begun under Eisenhower to assassinate the Cuban leader. "My God," muttered the CIA's Richard Helms, "these Kennedys keep the pressure on about Castro."[48]

McNamara recalled that "we were hysterical about Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs and thereafter."[49] Had there been no Bay of Pigs, no Mongoose, no sabotage through hit-and-run raids, no campaign to isolate Cuba politically and diplomatically, no assassination attempts—had there been no concerted effort to cripple the Cuban Revolution and murder its leader, the Cuban missile crisis probably would not have occurred. The Russian military build-up on the island in 1962 came in response to United States pressure. Castro may very well have called in the Soviet missiles to deter further American hostile acts, including an American invasion the Cubans so feared. Khrushchev would never had had the opportunity to stage his dangerous missile show if Kennedy had not been working to knock Castro off his perch.

When the missiles were discovered in Cuba in October 1962, Kennedy was poised for boldness, for another test of will, for a cleansing of the Bay of Pigs insult. It was an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, and remember, said Rusk, the Russians blinked first. During the crisis, A. A. Berle recorded the following in his diary: "This is reprise on the Bay of Pigs business and this time there will be no charges that somebody weakened at the crucial moment."[50] Kennedy himself put it this way in a letter to Prime Minister Harold Macmillan of Great Britain: "What is essential at this moment of highest test is that Khrushchev should discover that if he is counting on weakness or irresolution, he has miscalculated."[51] Personality and style alone did not determine the American reaction in the Cuban missile crisis. There were obvious strategic calculations. But the *way*, the *manner* in which Kennedy responded was molded by the "action intellectuals'" style and mood. The President's desire to score a victory, to recapture previous losses, and to flex his muscle accentuated the crisis and obstructed diplomacy. Public statements via television are not calculated to defuse a crisis; Kennedy gave Khrushchev little chance to withdraw his mistake or to save face. He left little room for bargaining, but instead issued a public ultimatum. The members of the Executive Committee which advised the President were bright and energetic, Robert Kennedy recalled, but "if any one of half a dozen of them were President the world would have been very likely plunged in a catastrophic war."[52] "We

were in luck," John Kenneth Galbraith later commented, "but success in a lottery is no argument for lotteries."[53]

The result? Russia was humiliated publicly. Having its own pride, recognizing its nuclear inferiority, and being harangued by the Chinese as "capitulationist," Moscow launched a massive arms build-up. "Never will we be caught like this again," concluded the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister.[54] The American lessons for the Cuban missile crisis were, on the other hand, that "force and toughness became enshrined as instruments of policy." Indeed, "the policy of toughness became dogma to such an extent that non-military solutions to political problems were excluded."[55] The 1962 "victory" in Cuba also may have encouraged the Kennedy Administration to take firmer action in Vietnam.

The presidential style, the historical imperatives, and now the third generator of John F. Kennedy's foreign policy: counter-revolutionary thought. Rostow has instructed us that for Kennedy "ideas were tools. He picked them up easily like statistics. . . . He wanted to know how ideas could be put to work."[56] And the intellectuals in the Kennedy court fed the new President a steady diet of ideas. The key concept was "nation-building." Through "modernization" (what Kennedyites called "peaceful revolution"), developing nations would be helped through the stormy times of economic infancy to economic (and hence political) maturity. The Kennedy team understood the force of nationalism in the Third World; rather than flatly opposing it, the "action intellectuals" sought to use it or channel it.

The governing notion was that evolutionary economic development would insure non-Communist political stability. The Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps sought to fulfill this concept. "Economic growth and political democracy," Kennedy proclaimed, "can develop hand in hand."[57] Washington thus tried to induce what Schlesinger called "middle-class revolution." Land reform, industrialization, tax reform, and public health and sanitation programs had to be undertaken, Schlesinger informed the President, or "new Castros will infallibly arise across the continent."[58] "Modern societies must be built," Rostow told the 1961 graduating class of the Special Warfare

School at Fort Bragg, "and we are prepared to help build them."[59]

Kennedy liked to quote Mao's statement that "guerrillas are like fish, and the people are the water in which fish swim. If the temperature of the water is right, the fish will thrive and multiply."[60] Kennedy sought to affect the temperature of the water through modernization. Counter-insurgency became his chief means. Whether or not Khrushchev had issued his January 1961 proclamation that Russia would support movements of national liberation, the Kennedy team would surely have undertaken counter-insurgency operations. They were committed before Moscow ever uttered its alarming pledge. Insurgencies were destablizing movements, assumed to be Communist-inspired. Bold action was called for to stop the Communist menace.

Counter-insurgency took several forms, all reflecting the "can-do" philosophy. Popular were the training of native police forces and bureaucrats, flood control, and transportation, communications, and community action projects. Most dramatic, and something in which the President took a keen interest, were the American Special Forces units or the Green Berets. Kennedy did not create this elite corps of warriors, but he personally elevated their status and supervised the choice of equipment for them. They would apply America's finest technology in Vietnam to succeed where the French had failed after a ten-year effort. In late March 1961, Rostow urged a "counter-offensive" in Indochina by using "our unexploited counter-guerrilla assets." As Rostow advised JFK, "in Knute Rockne's old phrase, we are not just saving them for the Junior Prom."[61] Kennedy ordered a five-fold increase in the size of the Special Forces and gradually enlarged the number of American military personnel in Vietnam from 685 to more than 16,000 by the end of 1963. As Kennedy's favorite general, Maxwell Taylor, put it, Vietnam became a "laboratory" in counter-insurgency techniques.[62]

The arrogance and bias of these ideas are conspicuous. No matter how one cuts them, they meant significant American interference in the affairs of other nations. They were grand in theory, so pragmatic and humanitarian at the same time. But something went wrong. The nation-building concept simply did

not pay proper attention to the world's diversity and complexity, the multitude of indigenous forces, the varied traditions of other cultures, the entrenched position of native elites, and the persuasive appeals of insurgent, nationalistic leftists. It is remarkable how blindly ignorant Rostow and other officials were of foreign cultures when they chose to project the American experience onto others. They ultimately found out that economic growth and democracy do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, that the middle class could be selfish or did not exist at all, that some nations had no tradition of liberal politics, that not all insurgencies were Communist, and that rebels, close to their nation's pulse, believed deeply in their cause and would suffer great sacrifices to gain success. In a revealing question, somebody once asked why "their" Vietnamese fought better than "our" Vietnamese?

The nation-building concept also over-estimated the power of the United States to shape other nations. It assumed that young men and women from Oregon, Iowa, Connecticut, and North Carolina could manage "natives" abroad, much as they had done in the Philippines at the turn of the century or in Latin America through the early twentieth century. But unable to force reform on others, they often ended up violating American principles by supporting the elite or the military or by trying to topple regimes, such as that of Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam. Strategic hamlets, part of counterinsurgency in Vietnam, proved to be disruptive of village life. Villagers bitterly resented resettlement. The Vietcong appeared to be Robin Hoods. The concept assumed further that the United States had an obligation to cope with insurgencies everywhere. It made few distinctions between areas key and peripheral to American national interest. It did not define the "threat" carefully; it tried to do too much; it was globalism gone rampant.

The concept also possessed a pro-capitalist, private-enterprise bias, because it favored "private" development. But in the Third World that method was traditionally identified with exploitation, and developing nations were bent upon gaining control over their own natural resources. Finally, nation-building did not estimate the strain that would be placed on American resources and patience in this long-term, global role as policeman, social worker, and teacher. It tended to take for granted

the American people and the constitutional system, including congressional prerogatives in policymaking. Overall, then, the revered, clinical concepts of the Kennedy Administration bumped up against a host of realities. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., came to regret the administration's fascination with counterinsurgency—"a mode of warfare for which Americans were ill-adapted, which nourished an American belief in the capacity and right to intervene in foreign lands, and which was both corrupting in method and futile in effect."[63]

The Kennedy Administration, propelled by Cold War history, by its own bumptious "can-do" style, and by its grandiose theories for world revival, bequeathed a dubious legacy in foreign policy. Would JFK have changed had he lived? It seems unlikely. He would have had to fire the hard-line advisers who persistently clung to their theories. The Cold War was too ingrained in Kennedy's own experience to permit much adjustment. It is not likely that he would have shed his penchant for personalization or boldness. And, like all people who must make decisions they need to justify, he would probably have persisted in defending his mistakes with the distortions necessary.

He temporarily quieted the crisis in Laos and followed a cautious policy in the Congo, and just before his death Kennedy had doubts about Vietnam and about the rigidities of his Cold War stance. His June 1963 address at American University is often cited as the example of his change of heart, for therein he expressed an uneasiness with high weapons expenditures, called for a re-examination of American Cold War attitudes, suggested that conflict with the Soviet Union was not inevitable, and appealed for disarmament. It was a high-minded speech and suggested a willingness to negotiate—one product of which was the Test Ban Treaty. Still, "one speech is not enough," as Kennan has remarked.[64] This speech was not typical of Kennedy or his advisers, many of whom stayed on to work with President Lyndon B. Johnson.

More typical are other elements of the Kennedy legacy: an arms race of massive proportion and fear, reflected in the bomb shelter craze that Kennedy encouraged; a tremendous enlargement of the American nuclear arsenal, even after Kennedy discovered that there was no "missile gap"; neglect of traditional diplomacy, as in the Cuban missile crisis; escalation in

Vietnam; a globalism of overcommitment. Kennedy showed a distinct impatience with the philosophy of "doing little or nothing." As Anthony Hartley has concluded: "The style of the Kennedy diplomacy excluded the attentive watching and patient waiting which are the secret of a successful foreign policy."[65] Kennedy also continued concentration of foreign policy decision-making in the White House and fed the "imperial presidency." Congress was not even informally informed, for example, that the United States intended to attack a sovereign nation at the Bay of Pigs.

The Kennedy team exaggerated the threat posed to the United States by insurgencies and the Soviet Union, clouded distinctions between Communists and insurgents by espousing the "domino theory," and adhered to the simple "zero-sum game" view of world politics that a victory for Communists anywhere represented a loss for the United States. An increasingly critical but still good-humored Galbraith wrote the President in March 1962: "Incidentally, who is the man in your administration who decides what countries are strategic? I would like to have his name and address and ask him what is so important about this real estate in the space age. What strength do we gain from alliance with an incompetent government [in Vietnam] and a people who are so largely indifferent to their own salvation? Some of his decisions puzzle me."[66] The Kennedy Administration, as well, continued a tired, antiquated policy of nonrecognition toward the People's Republic of China, even as the Sino-Soviet split widened.

The world was not plastic, the 1960s were not the 1940s, and Kennedy's style of toughness was more appropriate to the football field than to diplomacy. Kennedy did not act like a Cold Warrior simply because he was pressured by recalcitrant right-wingers, a Cold War Congress, or an out-of-control bureaucracy, or because he was bound by inherited—and failed—Eisenhower policies. Kennedy believed in Cold War dogmas himself and gave them a new vigor. He was thus not only a maker of history but a victim of it. Arrogance, ignorance, and impatience, combined with the familiar exaggerations of Soviet capabilities and intentions, helped make the world a more dangerous place than when he took office.

11

Questioning the Vietnam War: Isolationism Revisited

Hawks and doves alike have reckoned the costs and consequences of Vietnam—that prolonged war that seemed to have no precise beginning and no end until 1975, when Americans were driven abruptly and ignobly from their embassy in Saigon. By official count, over 58,000 Americans died in the conflict. Well over a million people in the small countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam perished. The United States spent some $200 billion to wage war in Southeast Asia, and will pay out close to that amount in future veterans' benefits. The tremendous war expenditures fueled inflation at home, wrenching the economy. And there was what economists call "opportunity cost"—potential gains never realized because resources were invested in the war. The civil rights movement and other domestic reform efforts, including President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, became crippled as the war increasingly absorbed funds and attentions. American politics became wounded too: Americans became disaffected, distrustful of leaders who, it seemed, lied to them—and would again. The political storms churned up by Vietnam persuaded Johnson to shun running for another term, and in 1968 helped defeat Hubert H. Humphrey and elect Richard M. Nixon. Watergate had Vietnam sources too: Indulging a seige mentality because of growing opposition to the war