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1963 Vietnam Withdrawal Plans



President Kennedy meeting with Secretary of Defense McNamara and General Taylor in October 1963 after their fact-finding mission to Vietnam.

Was there a Vietnam withdrawal plan in 1963? The answer is yes. What is at issue is not whether such plans had been created and initiated, but whether they were “serious,” i.e., whether the withdrawal would have continued in the face of a worsening situation in South Vietnam.

On October 11, 1963, Kennedy signed NSAM 263, initiating a withdrawal of 1,000 troops out of roughly 16,000 Americans stationed in Vietnam. Other documents, including planning documents from the spring of 1963, show that this was the first step in a planned complete withdrawal.

The controversy surrounds the fact that military reporting of the war effort in 1963 was decidedly rosy, and Kennedy made statements indicating that the positive outlook made withdrawal possible. Following the November deaths of South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem and President Kennedy, reporting of the military situation in Vietnam took a turn for the worse. Does this then mean that Kennedy would have done as his successor LBJ did, and escalate the war in response?

John Newman’s landmark 1991 book *JFK & Vietnam* argues that Kennedy knew that the military reporting was skewed, and intended to withdraw anyway. Other analyses by Peter Dale Scott and James Galbraith (son of Kennedy advisor John Kenneth Galbraith), and recent books including one by no less than Robert McNamara himself, support this view. On the other side are many Vietnam historians and also social critic Noam Chomsky, whose *Rethinking Camelot* is largely a rebuttal of this view.

RESOURCES:

Essays

Exit Strategy, by James K. Galbraith.

On Vietnam, by Noam Chomsky, plus a response by James K. Galbraith.

'Fog of War' vs. 'Stop the Presses', by Errol Morris and Eric Alterman.

The War Room, by Fred Kaplan.

Documents

Report of McNamara/Taylor Mission to Vietnam

JCS Official File: Record Eighth Secretary of Defense Conference, 6 May 1963. This document, declassified in 1997, contains spring 1963 planning documents for a phased withdrawal from Vietnam.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III: Vietnam January-August 1963

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume IV: Vietnam August-December 1963

Related Starting Points

Kennedy-Johnson Transition in Vietnam Policy
Vietnam War Timeline

Multimedia



Peter Dale Scott, author of the first scholarly article arguing that the Kennedy-LBJ transition was not one of continuity, discussing the conflict among historians on this issue (running time: 3:51).

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Peter Dale Scott discusses Robert McNamara’s memoirs *In Retrospect* and the avoidance of Kennedy’s Vietnam withdrawal plans by many historians (running time: 2:53).

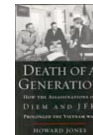
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Peter Dale Scott addresses the current debate over what JFK would have done in Vietnam had he lived (running time: 2:33).

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Books of Interest



Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War

Howard Jones
Oxford University Press, 2003



JFK & Vietnam

John M. Newman
Warner Books, 1992



Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture

Noam Chomsky
South End Press, 1993



Pentagon Papers, Vol. V

Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, ed.
Beacon Press, 1972

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