

Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2022. 325 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam is the latest book on the early Cold War by American historian Marc J. Selverstone. The author revisits plans by President John Kennedy, who was assassinated in November 1963, to remove American military personnel from South Vietnam. He argues Kennedy was neither a Hawk nor a Dove, but a distracted and conditional advocate of what became known as Vietnamization. Distractions came from other perceived crises at home and abroad, and the dominant condition for withdraw set by the White House was progress against communist forces supported by North Vietnam. Kennedy and his aides, led by Robert McNamara, were not willing to see Saigon fall on their watch even though the president recognized the limits of American power. The White House never resolved the fundamental contradiction between private skepticism about the American military role and public commitments to defend South Vietnam.

Selverstone's introduction and epilogue provide a history of the Camelot narrative, and accurately frame his book as unfriendly to Kennedy mythology, assassination conspiracy theories, and casual analogies to the post-2001 Middle East. The author incorporates academic studies and contemporary media about Vietnam for context, but his primary evidence consists of archival documents and audio tapes analyzed in eight concise chapters. The book also includes useful notes on abbreviations and a thorough index.

The factual core of *Kennedy* is a reconstruction of White House struggles to define “withdraw” or necessary conditions for such a withdrawal. Selverstone traces the idea to 1961, followed by shorter intervals of policy formulation based on internal debates, public statements, congressional briefings, fact-finding trips to South Vietnam, military-civilian summits in

Honolulu, and a lurch forward in the month before Kennedy died. A post-assassination removal of 1,000 troops began in December 1963 to signal progress in the war and American intent to not usurp South Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, assassinated in Saigon by mutinous generals, weeks before Kennedy, had shared these goals. The removal of troops, however, did not actually reduce the total number of American advisers (p. 210). President Lyndon Johnson then retired Kennedy's aspiration to remove all but advisers by 1965 as impractical given battlefield setbacks.

The author painstakingly tracks White House deliberations, which is essential given the volatility of Kennedy as a research topic. This method gathers more than enough evidence to support the main arguments. What he finds inside the "black box" of the state should temper social science aspirations for the rationality of state behavior and academic interventions in foreign policy. True to historical reputation, McNamara did call South Vietnam a "laboratory" (p. 61) for counterinsurgency. The version of applied social science at work inside the White House required advisers to pin troop withdrawals on statistical measurements of security and expect progress in months or weeks. Selverstone heaps scorn on analysts who assumed the enemy would not change strategy or tactics. His frustrations with Camelot surface when, for example, he describes Kennedy's impatience as "Need for Speed" (p. 88, 121) and withdrawal as a "shell game" (p. 135). Based on Selverstone's research, it is hard to determine whether participants found these methods legitimate or expedient given Kennedy's wish to draw down.

The primary caveats to *Kennedy* come from our knowledge of how the Vietnam War ended. It would be a mistake to extrapolate that policy failures necessarily result from ambivalence and confusion, or that successful outcomes always reflect commitment and clarity. Yet the author writes with restraint. He implies that Kennedy would have reconsidered given the

same information as Johnson but does not speculate that Kennedy would have authorized something like Rolling Thunder or deployed Marines to Da Nang.

Camelot will always possess the ultimate deniability because Kennedy was not alive when those escalations occurred. True, continuity between Kennedy and Richard Nixon regarding Vietnamization makes Johnson the outlier, but none supported the “bug-out” of the kind that befell Saigon in 1975 or Kabul in 2021. In addition, the most decisive assassination of November 1963 may have been not Kennedy but Diem. Diem’s assassins finally acted after the October 1963 U.S. declaration of the withdrawal policy. Such chaotic outcomes *should* undercut exaggerations of American power central to Camelot and conspiracies.

In conclusion, it is easy to recommend *Kennedy* to scholars, journalists, and citizen historians. Selverstone makes a significant and positive contribution to our understanding of policymaking, the Vietnam War, John Kennedy, and Camelot, and exemplifies how to conduct research on controversial topics and charismatic leaders.

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