

JFK Foreign Policy Studies:  
A Review of John F. Kennedy's  
1960 *The Strategy of Peace*

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“The world-wide struggle against imperialism, the sweep of nationalism, is the most potent factor in foreign affairs today. We can resist it or ignore it, but only for a little while; we see it exploited by the Soviets, with grave consequences; or we in this country can give it hope and leadership, and thus improve immeasurably our standing and our security.”

-Senator John F. Kennedy to the U.S. Senate, July 1957 <sup>1</sup>

John F. Kennedy's 1960 *The Strategy of Peace* is a compilation of several major policy speeches given by Kennedy as a United States Senator presenting the presidential candidate's ideas and plans for a rejuvenated United States foreign policy. Despite frequent medical absences throughout his two terms in the U.S. Senate, Kennedy's activities and knowledge gained as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its various subcommittees were not insignificant. Timed to coincide with the 1960 presidential campaign, the book is edited by American historian Allan Nevins and contains several useful notes by the famed historian including the book's introduction expressing a general disappointment with the Eisenhower Administration's "lack of imagination and thrust in world affairs" and a genuine admiration of Kennedy's unique "vision and ...system of ideas."<sup>2</sup> In his own introductory remarks on "The Global Challenge," Kennedy blamed this lackluster American foreign policy on the lack of a long-term "strategy for peace which is relevant to the new world in which we live." Kennedy criticized the Eisenhower Administration for lacking such a larger, future-oriented strategic

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Speech to the U.S. Senate, July 8, 1957" in *The Strategy of Peace*, John F. Kennedy, Allan Nevins, ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Nevins, "Introduction: A Believer in the American Mission," in *The Strategy of Peace*, xiv-xv.

vision instead relying upon crisis management methods of jumping from one “fire” to the next to quell potentially harmful situations to U.S. foreign policy interests from getting out of control.<sup>3</sup>

Understandably, an overwhelming concern of Americans in 1960 was the so-called “missile gap” between the United States and the Soviet Union, especially after the successful Sputnik satellite launch and orbit in late 1957. By 1960, Soviet advancements in both nuclear weapons development and missile technology threatened to overturn the central thrust of America’s Cold War strategic and foreign policy doctrine that had been developed by Eisenhower Administration Secretary of State John Foster Dulles—that the “containment” of the Soviet Union could be successfully achieved by the constant threat of a “massive retaliation” by America’s superior nuclear arsenal. Further, Dulles believed that this threat of nuclear annihilation could be deployed in specific situations by bringing events to the brink of war (i.e., “brinkmanship”) as a means of backing down the enemy.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, John F. Kennedy was a strong supporter of building up America’s defenses to close the gap and in fact was one of the first to actually expose its existence publicly on the floor of the Senate in 1958.<sup>5</sup> But Kennedy contended that merely closing the missile gap and increasing the U.S. defense budget was only a part of guaranteeing world peace and achieving America’s true foreign policy interests, including checking Soviet imperial ambitions. According to JFK, two additional ingredients were required: First, the United States must greatly expand its participation in fostering the real economic growth of both underdeveloped and developing nations. Weapons and armies were no substitute

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<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, “The Global Challenge,” in *The Strategy of Peace*, 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 133-34.

<sup>5</sup> Nevins notes that Kennedy’s exposure of the missile gap on the floor of the U.S. Senate was so detailed that one senator threatened to have the galleries cleared on the grounds that the speech was disclosing classified information. (Kennedy, “The Missile Gap; Speech to the U.S. Senate, August 14, 1958,” in *The Strategy of Peace*, 33fn.)

for securing economic security for America's current or would-be allies. Second, the United States must increase its commitment to engage in more constructive negotiations and peaceful collaboration with the Soviet Union. Kennedy was specifically focused on a nuclear test ban agreement and joint efforts in space exploration in this regard, as well as others.

### **The “Economic Gap”**

In *The Strategy of Peace*, Kennedy asserted that the United States was not only suffering from a missile gap, but had been wholly delinquent in addressing the “critical challenge” of another, more immediate “gap”:

I am talking about the economic gap—the gap in living standards and income and hope for the future—the gap between the developed and underdeveloped worlds... between the stable industrialized nations of the north, whether they are friends or foes, and the overpopulated, underinvested nations of the south, whether they are friends or neutrals.<sup>6</sup>

John Kennedy saw the rapid development of the newly independent nations “long dormant under colonial rule” as a movement which the United States “should be marching at the head of” instead of having “allowed the Communists to evict us from our rightful estate at the head of this world-wide revolution.” Kennedy proposed using the Development Loan Fund and similar agencies to carry out a “long-term program of productive loans to underdeveloped areas from a fully capitalized central fund.”<sup>7</sup> Kennedy's belief that an American commitment to such long-term real economic growth was vital in gaining actual allies among emerging nations (including

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<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, "The Economic Gap: February 19, 1959 Speech to the U.S. Senate," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 45-46.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 51-53.

those not aligned to either the U.S. or Soviet Union at the time) is an idea that comes up again and again in speeches throughout the book.

The core of *The Strategy of Peace* is the middle section entitled “Areas of Trial.” Here, Kennedy and Nevins have compiled a series of the Senator’s speeches all addressing specific crisis situations being dealt with at the time. For the sake of both comprehension and brevity, I’ve chosen to list the various “areas” as they appear in the book and identify relevant sections of the speeches contained in each:

**Indochina:** Kennedy was emphatic that it had been a great mistake for the United States to ally with French colonialism in Indochina. Included in this section is a 1954 speech to the U.S. Senate warning that without a U.S. guarantee of “political independence of the associated states,” a military solution in Indochina would be “virtually impossible” as it would be perceived as yet another “war of colonialism” by those in the region. Kennedy also warned that the U.S. “volunteer fire department” approach will ultimately not work in Indochina and that “warning of the evils of Communism and the blessings of the American way of life are not enough in a country where ...poverty and hunger are not enemies across the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel but enemies within their midst.” Instead, The United States must be involved in economic development programs to “supply capital to replace that drained by centuries of colonial exploitation [and] technicians to train those handicapped by deliberate policies of illiteracy.”<sup>8</sup>

**Algeria:** Similar to Indochina, Kennedy blamed an excessive reliance of U.S. foreign policy on “the sorry latter-day course of Western colonialism, and particularly French colonialism” for driving North Africa “into the flames of Arab xenophobia and anti-Westernism.”<sup>9</sup> Included in

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<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, "Speech to the U.S. Senate, April 6, 1954," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 60-64.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, "Algeria," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 66-66.

this section is Kennedy's famous (and controversial) July 2, 1957 speech condemning modern-day imperialism (including Soviet imperialism) as the greatest threat to "man's eternal desire to be free and independent." A week later, Kennedy called for the Senate to pass his resolution supporting the independence of Algeria and for the United States to play a more active role in securing its political and economic success.

**Poland and Eastern Europe:** Importantly, Kennedy equated the "remnants of imperialism in the West" to the "far more formidable problem of the Soviet empire." But Kennedy was highly critical of the Eisenhower Administration's "liberation policy" toward Soviet bloc nations as "nothing but empty oratory." Instead, Kennedy again argued that concrete assistance by the United States to alleviate Poland's *economic* woes constituted a true path toward allowing her to escape further Soviet domination. In a August 21, 1957 speech before the Senate, Kennedy delineated Poland's economic requirements in great detail and offered a six point program for American assistance to the Polish government of Wladyslaw Gomulka. This was a controversial position at the time, as many saw such aid to Poland as simply increasing the power of the Communist bloc. Kennedy's rebuttal was: "To deny them help because they have not been able to shake off total Communist control would be a brutal and dangerous policy, either decreasing their dependence on Russia ...or causing them to despair of ever gaining their freedom."<sup>10</sup>

**Middle East and Israel:** Kennedy asserted that the United States foreign policy in the Middle East had failed simply because it tended to "deal with this area almost exclusively in the context of the East-West struggle" instead of addressing "their own issues of nationalism [and] of economic development." Kennedy contended that "We must talk in terms that go beyond the

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, "Speech to the U.S. Senate, August 21, 1957," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 62-98.

Cold War—terms that translate themselves into tangible values and self-interest for the Arabs as well as ourselves.”<sup>11</sup> In a direct attack on the Eisenhower Doctrine, JFK stated bluntly that “It is not enough to talk only in terms of guns and money.” Instead, the United States must help forge long-term solutions to concrete problems in the Arab world including the Suez situation, refugees, and boundary conflicts. But, again, Kennedy insisted that “mutual economic benefit is the key” to any long-term solutions and proposed a Middle East Regional Resources Fund to assist in resource development and other infrastructure projects in the region.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, Kennedy also saw the future security of Israel as bound to this idea of regional development and, in a later speech to the B’nai Zion organization in New York City, further developed the idea of a “Middle East Development Authority to pool technical and capital aid in the area” allowing for Joint Arab-Israeli cooperation in economic development projects.<sup>13</sup>

**Sub-Saharan Africa:** In what has now become a very familiar theme to readers of *The Strategy of Peace* speeches, Kennedy warned that the United States must “never assist Africa merely because we are afraid of Russian assistance in Africa ...that we are interested in them only as pawns in the Cold War.” Instead, Kennedy understood that the entire continent was in the process of a nationalist revolution after centuries of Western colonial exploitation. As with Algeria, his view was that the role of the United States as the most powerful economy in the world was to not only support those independence movements, but to do everything possible to assist in the economic development of the emerging African nations:

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<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, "Speech at the Eastern Oregon College of Education, November 9, 1959," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 107-08.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, "Speech at the Annual Banquet of the Histadrut Zionist Organization, November 27, 1956," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 117.

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, "Speech at the Golden Jubilee Banquet of B’nai Zion, February 9, 1959," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 122-23.

It is in this area of economic development that a new policy toward Africa must begin ...[The] people of Africa are more interested in development than they are in doctrine. They are more interested in achieving a decent standard of living than in following the standards of either East or West.

Again, he suggested that the Development Loan Fund could be used as the mechanism for such assistance.<sup>14</sup>

**Latin America:** Senator Kennedy was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Special Subcommittee on Latin American Affairs and, as such, proposed an Inter-American Capital Development Bank to provide the underdeveloped nations of Latin America with the investment capital required for “the development of their transportation, power, and other basic needs.” Kennedy was also quick to criticize America’s support for Latin-American dictators as a means of suppressing revolutionary and potentially Communist upsurges against *status quo* governments. Instead, Kennedy proposed to “take the long-delayed positive measures that are required to enable the revolutionary wave sweeping Latin America to move through relatively peaceful channels and to be harnessed to the great constructive tasks at hand.” Perhaps easier said than done, but Kennedy again insisted that determining U.S. foreign policy for Latin America merely according to Cold War parameters was certainly *not* the answer:

The objective of our aid program in Latin America should not be to purchase allies—but to consolidate a free and democratic Western Hemisphere, alleviating those conditions

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<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, "Speech to the Second Annual Conference of the American Society of African Culture, June 28, 1959," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 124-30.

which might foster opportunities for Communist infiltration, and uniting our peoples on the basis of mutual confidence, stability, and constantly increasing living standards.<sup>15</sup>

**India and China:** Kennedy was convinced that the United States had a vested interest in fully supporting the success of India's Second Five Year Plan. In a major speech on the subject to the U.S. Senate in 1958, JFK developed an extremely detailed and convincing argument that India's successful, in-depth economic development with American assistance could serve as a pole to which other non-aligned developing nations could gravitate toward instead of Communist China. Further, Kennedy did not consider it a problem that India had also turned to the Soviet Union for scientific and technical assistance and instead saw such a development as "an extraordinary opportunity to match systems with the Soviet Union on favorable terms to show our true concern for economic development..."<sup>16</sup>

### **"Mutual Self-Interest in Survival"**

Kennedy's view of the possible benefits to be derived from a healthy competition with the Soviet Union in India's economic development attests to a more general belief that he held regarding future collaboration with the Soviet Union. Like President Eisenhower, Kennedy was a strong proponent of increasing diplomatic engagement with the Soviet Union ("It is far better that we meet at the summit than at the brink"<sup>17</sup>). But Kennedy also believed that certain concrete steps should be taken to "end the current phase—the frozen, belligerent, brink-of-war phase—of the Cold War," steps that would focus on "certain basic interests or objectives which the United

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<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, "Speech to a Democratic Dinner in San Juan, December 15, 1958," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 134-39.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, "Speech to the U.S. Senate, March 25, 1958," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Kennedy, "Speech on the Khrushchev-Eisenhower Visits," speech at the University of Rochester, October 1, 1959 in *The Strategy of Peace*, 10.

States and the U.S.S.R. have in common.” Undoubtedly, in the era of Cold War conflicts and potential nuclear war, the greatest common interest was simply that of “each other’s national recognition in our mutual self-interest in survival.” Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union wanted a nuclear war or, for that matter, the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Neither side was also particularly happy about a continued nuclear arms race and Kennedy, among others, was firmly committed to attempting to negotiate a nuclear test ban agreement with Khrushchev. But JFK also envisioned a more positive future collaboration with the Soviet Union mooted the idea that the two powers might collaborate under an “agreement to explore space jointly under United Nations auspices, perhaps through a world space agency.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps surprising to many at the time, Kennedy even went so far as to propose joint economic and scientific collaboration in general where both the United States and the Soviet Union “would benefit by a much greater exchange and pooling of goods, ideas, and personnel between our two nations.”<sup>19</sup> It certainly could be argued that Kennedy’s welcoming of a healthy U.S.-Soviet competition in India pointed in that direction.

But perhaps most interesting overall was John F. Kennedy’s view that in 1960, America needed to prepare for “at least seven peaceful revolutions ...rocking our nation and our world.” Kennedy considered the ongoing revolutions in population growth, agricultural production, and technological advancement, coupled with the nationalist revolutions and economic potential of the underdeveloped nations to be “the real issues of the 1960 campaign.”<sup>20</sup> Even though a complete road map of policy proposals addressing all of these revolutions is not presented in *The*

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<sup>18</sup> Kennedy, "Disarmament," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, "On the Khrushchev-Eisenhower Visits," speech at the University of Rochester, October 1, 1959 in *The Strategy of Peace*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, "Seven Peaceful Revolutions of Our Time," speech in Seattle, Washington, June 20, 1959 in *The Strategy of Peace*, 180.

*Strategy of Peace*, Kennedy's intentions to address the rapidly changing world of 1960 with a revamped American foreign policy based on addressing real human and economic needs definitely shines through, especially in his concluding essay "Are We Up to the Task?" in which his identification with FDR is unmistakable:

In 1960, as in 1932, the American people can, as I hope they will, turn from the party of memory to the party of hope ... From the lessons we have learned in two world wars, one world depression, and the Cold War, as well as from the history of this republic, the American people will now, I trust, be granted the vision of a new world. This is the vision without which our people will perish.<sup>21</sup>

How successful the aborted Kennedy Administration was in ultimately carrying out those intentions is, of course, another matter for another study.

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<sup>21</sup> Kennedy, "Are We Up to the Task?" in *The Strategy of Peace*, 202.