

The Challenge of John F. Kennedy's 'Strategy of Peace' in Cold War America



President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana at the White House, March 13, 1961. Nkrumah was one of the first heads of state to visit Kennedy after his inauguration on January 20, 1961.

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As he contemplated his 1960 race for the United States Presidency, Senator John F. Kennedy told campaign staffer and later civil rights advisor Harris Wofford:

The key thing for the country is a new foreign policy that will break out of the confines of the cold war. Then we can build a decent relationship with developing nations and begin to respond to their needs. We can stop the vicious circle of the arms race and promote diversity and peaceful change within the Soviet bloc.¹

As part of his presidential campaign, Kennedy published *The Strategy of Peace* in 1960, a compilation of several of his major policy speeches detailing the candidate's publicly stated views on United States foreign policy. Kennedy believed that America needed to prepare for "at least seven peaceful revolutions ...rocking our nation and our world." He 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."² As part of this, Kennedy was committed to resolving what he called an "economic gap" that existed "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." He 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."³ After being elected president, Kennedy was so personally committed to the welfare of the underdeveloped nations that advisor

¹ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 237.

² Kennedy, "Seven Peaceful Revolutions of Our Time," speech in Seattle, Washington, June 20, 1959, John F. Kennedy, Allan Nevins, ed., *The Strategy of Peace* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 180.

³ Kennedy, "The Economic Gap: February 19, 1959," speech to the U.S. Senate, in *The Strategy of Peace*, 45-46.

Arthur Schlesinger characterized the new president as having become “in effect, Secretary of State for the third world.”⁴

But JFK faced formidable obstacles in realizing this new strategy of peace. Aside from entrenched institutional resistance to such a policy coming from the “unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, [of] the military industrial complex” which outgoing President Dwight Eisenhower had warned about in his famous farewell address,⁵ Kennedy was also confronted with a challenging domestic political predicament. How could a candidate for public office in 1960 possibly align the sophisticated concept of solving global instabilities by promoting third world nationalism and economic development with the over-simplified “black hats vs. white hats” narrative that had increasingly dominated American politics since the beginning of the Cold War?⁶

Yet, remarkably, Kennedy and his New Frontiersmen were able to effectively launch and, in many cases, succeed in important foreign policy changes toward the realization of his strategy of peace. Although the administration’s initiatives in Africa are highlighted in this report, progress was also made in U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America, South Asia, and even toward the Communist bloc. Unfortunately, any full realization of these efforts would be abruptly ended on November 23, 1963 with the young president’s assassination.

⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 509.

⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Farewell Address, January 17, 1961,” *Yale Law School*, accessed April 10, 2022. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/eisenhower001.asp

⁶ Fredrik Logevall, *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917-1956* (New York: Random House, 2020), 494, 498.

1950s Cold War politics

By the time of the 1960 presidential campaign, Kennedy had already well-established himself as an informed and serious student of U.S. foreign policy. He had first begun to earn that reputation following his whirlwind tours of Europe and Asia as a young congressman in 1951 where he had met and conversed with such leaders as Marshal Tito, Pope Pius XII, and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. During his visit to Vietnam, Kennedy had written in his diary that the United States was “more and more becoming colonialists in the minds of the people” and that instead of constantly chasing Communist monsters to destroy, the United States should instead focus on addressing the very real problems of “poverty and want” and “sickness and disease” confronting underdeveloped nations like Vietnam.⁷ According to his brother Robert, the 1951 trip had “a very, very major” influence on the thinking of the young congressman. Back in the U.S., Kennedy told a meeting of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation in Boston that, after careful thought and study, he had become convinced that military measures alone would never be able to stop the spread of Communism, especially in the developing world. Kennedy further told the crowd that the United States government would even “support and sustain corruption and tyranny to maintain a status-quo wherever we find existing regimes anti-communistic.”⁸

Beginning especially with his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1952, Kennedy’s ideas began to collide with the political dynamics of Cold War America. Confronted with a challenge that would haunt him for the rest of his career in public service, JFK faced the onerous task of communicating his revolutionary vision of American foreign policy to a public which had been

⁷ Logevall, 494.

⁸ Logevall, 486-87.

increasingly bombarded with oversimplified and often inflammatory Cold War-era propaganda. This problem had become especially acute, of course, in the early 1950s with the climate of paranoia and fear created by Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee's investigation of virtually anyone and everyone as possible Communist agents and sympathizers. For example, in the 1952 U.S. presidential campaign, Republicans were able to successfully paint the Democratic Party as hopelessly soft on Communism, blaming the Truman administration for underestimating the Chinese people's support for Mao Tse-tung and his Chinese Communist Party which had seized power in 1949. Thus, "Who lost China?" became the battle cry of the powerful China Lobby and a focus of Senator McCarthy, who specifically targeted State Department officials and U.S. military leaders as being responsible for the loss of the world's largest country to the Communist menace.⁹ This became such a huge factor in Kennedy's 1952 election campaign for the U.S. Senate, that his staff firmly believed that a visit to Massachusetts by McCarthy to campaign against him on behalf of his Republican opponent Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. would result in a sure defeat for JFK. It was only the combination of Lodge's personal hatred of the Wisconsin senator with the fact that McCarthy was a personal friend of Joe Kennedy, Sr. that prevented the visit and therefore helped to secure Kennedy's election.¹⁰

Importantly, the difficulty of surmounting such political, social, and institutional pressures on policy makers in democratic societies was something that Kennedy had been studying since his days at Harvard. In his 1940 senior thesis analyzing the reasons for England's failure to effectively prepare for the Nazi assault on Europe, Kennedy wrote plainly that "In England we

⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Ride to Globalism, American Foreign Policy Since 1938* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997, 108-111.

¹⁰ Logevall, 521-26.

can see vividly where democracy failed.” The thesis, entitled *Why England Slept* (later published as a book), concluded that institutional and public sentiment in England had become so enamored with the desire for peace, that even the country’s best leaders were rendered completely ineffective in preparing for war and therefore “cannot be held responsible for the failure of the nation as a whole.”¹¹ It is difficult to imagine how the later author of *Profiles in Courage* would not have been painfully aware of the same type of political and social pressures on himself when also attempting to introduce new, bold and potentially unpopular ideas into the public arena.

Even though McCarthy was ultimately disgraced, it was still the case that no Democrat could possibly win the White House in 1960 without dispelling the idea that the party and its leaders were anything but committed anti-Communists. As election day approached, Kennedy’s pollster Lewis Harris determined that the critical margin of votes required to beat Vice President Nixon could only be obtained by an all-out assault on the Eisenhower Administration’s supposed failure in containing the Communist threat. Specifically, the campaign would need to focus on the loss of Cuba as well as an alleged “missile gap” that had supposedly developed between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Eisenhower presidency. Even though Kennedy had no hard evidence in his possession that such a missile-gap had ever occurred or was about to (which it hadn’t), American Cold War politics—at least *electoral* politics—seemed to necessitate its existence.¹² The situation with Castro and Cuba was a “hot button” issue as well, with the apparently sudden conversion of the Cuban nationalist leader to Marxism in America’s

¹¹ John F. Kennedy, *Why England Slept* (New York: Wilfred Funk, Inc., 1940)

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.32000007313341&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021>

¹² Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America’s Cold War : The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 190-92. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/empire-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3300871#>

backyard having left a blot on Nixon and the Eisenhower Administration.¹³ Thus, in the final weeks of the campaign, Kennedy hammered away at Nixon on these two Cold War issues. In one of the closest presidential races in modern history, Harris' strategy worked as many anti-Communist populist voters were successfully swayed to support and elect JFK as president in 1960.

But this campaign tactic also committed the new administration to pursue certain programs and policy agendas required to maintain its strong anti-Communist profile, especially when contemplating an upcoming 1964 election campaign for a second term.¹⁴ The missile gap claim compelled the administration to launch an unprecedented nuclear arms buildup, although Kennedy also promoted a substantial increase in U.S. conventional forces which he believed was necessary as part of a policy of "flexible response" to meet global crises as they developed without resorting to the catastrophic use of nuclear weapons.¹⁵ Kennedy's relentless attacks on Nixon and the Republicans for "losing" Cuba during the 1960 campaign likewise made the Castro issue a constant source of anxiety for the new administration, especially when considering the idea of facing a 1964 re-election campaign if yet another Caribbean or Latin American nation were to fall to Communism.¹⁶ Obviously, this was only exacerbated by the disastrous outcome of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961.

In addition to these domestic political pressures, there were also daunting Cold War situations which had developed over the past decade that had to be dealt with. These included the tense situation in Berlin where Nikita Khrushchev had upped the ante in 1959 by insisting

¹³ Ambrose and Brinkley, 216-23.

¹⁴ Craig and Logevall, 222.

¹⁵ Dallek, 346.

¹⁶ Stephen G. Rabe, *John F. Kennedy, World Leader* (Dulles: Potomac Books, Inc., 2010), 79-80.

that the Western powers pull out of the city once and for all, even delivering an ultimatum (although later rescinded) to the Eisenhower Administration in 1959 to that effect. This had become further complicated by the failed Eisenhower-Khrushchev summit during the summer of 1960 after the downing of the CIA's U-2 spy plane and its pilot Gary Powers over Russian territory. The U-2 incident and Eisenhower's refusal to admit that it even happened before the Soviets went public with it had left Khrushchev personally insulted and hell-bent on political reprisals—not exactly the easiest situation for a new president to walk into. Like Eisenhower, Kennedy was committed to a policy of détente with the Soviet Union, including a nuclear test ban agreement between the two powers. But Khrushchev's erratic and sometimes irrational behavior often made this difficult to achieve, especially as the Soviet leader seemed to be more driven by a desire to save face rather than by actual strategic or military concerns.¹⁷ So exasperated had Kennedy become with Khrushchev's behavior after their June 1961 summit, that he complained to adviser Walt Rostow "That son of a bitch Khrushchev ... won't stop until we actually take a step that might lead to nuclear war!"¹⁸ Only after the successful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 did relations between the two nuclear powers thaw out enough to make some actual headway in the desired détente process.

Housecleaning for the strategy of peace

U.S.-Soviet problems notwithstanding, the more immediate task for the new administration after being elected in 1960 was to uproot the entrenched foreign policy bureaucracy and national security apparatus which had been built up over a decade of Cold War geopolitics—an institutional change without which JFK's strategy of peace initiatives would be

¹⁷ Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, "MAD, not Marx: Khrushchev and the nuclear revolution." *Journal of strategic studies*, 2018-02-23, Vol.41 (1-2), p.223-26.

¹⁸ Dallek, 347.

virtually impossible to accomplish. Well before the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961, Kennedy and his New Frontiersman had therefore decided to launch an all-out assault on this over bloated national security bureaucracy typified by the N.S.C. apparatus and its Operations Coordinating Board (OCB). “Something over forty-five interdepartmental committees died with the [abolition of the] OCB... and the White House killed another forty in the next few weeks,” reported State Department intelligence head Roger Hilsman on the dismantling process.¹⁹ Arthur Schlesinger characterized the process by comparing Kennedy National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to a butcher who “promptly slaughtered committees right and left”²⁰ Kennedy’s intention, however, was to simply restore United States foreign policy back to the State Department and therefore back to the presidency. In the age of thermonuclear weapons and Cold War conflict, this was of special concern to JFK who wanted to ensure that *he alone* would have the ability to make critical and informed policy decisions, unencumbered by a flurry of confused reports and conflicting analyses coming from an army of nameless and faceless bureaucrats, many of whom had been appointed by the former administration.

This concern also applied to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As faithful adherents to the “military industrial complex” that Eisenhower had warned of, many of the Chiefs vehemently opposed the New Frontier’s explicit moves to thaw out the Cold War with diplomacy and economic assistance rather than opting for purely military solutions, especially in relations with potential American allies among the non-aligned nations as well as in the Communist world.²¹ “The first advice I’m going to give my successor” Kennedy told Ben Bradlee in 1961 “is to watch the generals and avoid the feeling that just because they were military men their opinions

¹⁹ Hilsman, 23.

²⁰ Schlesinger, 210-11.

²¹ Dallek, 433-45, 348.

on military matters were worth a damn.”²² Needless to say, the failed Bay of Pigs operation only confirmed Kennedy’s distrust of the Chiefs with whom he had to battle in order to avoid direct U.S. military involvement in the affair. As he later told assistant Dave Powers, “[they] were sure I’d give in to them ... They couldn’t believe that a new president like me wouldn’t panic and try to save his own face. Well, they had me figured wrong.”²³

Another important area of housecleaning was rolling back the influence of the Central Intelligence Agency. During the Truman and Eisenhower years, the CIA had grown to such an extent that it often replaced the State Department in representing and implementing U.S. foreign policy in many parts of the world. In some countries, their extensive financial resources, huge manpower pool, and the ability to operate freely had made Agency operatives more established and well-known as representatives of the United States government than U.S. foreign service diplomats. “The root fear was that the CIA represented a *Staat-im-Staat*, a state within a state,” wrote the State Department’s Roger Hilsman. In the first weeks of the administration, Kennedy even sent a circular letter to all U.S. ambassadors reiterating their exclusive authority over all embassy activity as well as over “all other United States agencies which have programs or activities in [your country],” an unmistakable reference to the CIA.²⁴ Kennedy also made major moves to transfer important operational responsibilities away from the CIA to the Pentagon where he believed that Agency activities could be more readily monitored and managed under the umbrella of the Secretary of Defense and therefore of the presidency.²⁵

²² Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 152-53.

²³ Dallek, 365.

²⁴ Hilsman, 64-65.

²⁵ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1965), 630.

The Strategy of Peace in Africa

Although historically eclipsed by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, one of the first foreign policy tests of the administration actually revolved around a crisis in the newly independent African nation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The plight of Africa and its nationalist leaders striving for independence had been a special concern of John F. Kennedy. His controversial July 1957 speech on the floor of the Senate promoting Algerian independence and condemning all modern-day imperialism (including Soviet imperialism) had caught the attention of many of Africa's new nationalist leaders. Kennedy's harsh criticism of "the sorry latter-day course of Western colonialism, and particularly French colonialism"²⁶ was roundly denounced by both the Eisenhower administration as well as by Democrats like Adlai Stevenson and Dean Acheson, not to mention by the French government. Although the Washington establishment's panning of the speech became yet another example of the hazards of embracing the cause of developing nations while challenging the Cold War status quo, for Africa's new and aspiring leaders, the speech had made Senator Kennedy the man to meet in Washington, D.C.²⁷ During 1959 and 1960, Kennedy made thirteen official speeches on Africa and even asked former ambassador to the Soviet Union Averill Harriman to travel to Africa on a fact-finding mission for his presidential campaign. Additionally, Kennedy made Africa a major issue in the 1960 campaign accusing the Eisenhower Administration of having "lost ground in Africa because we have neglected and ignored the needs and aspirations of the African people."²⁸ It's worth noting that one of the first heads of

²⁶ John F. Kennedy, "Algeria," in John F., Allan Nevins, ed. *The Strategy of Peace*, 66-67.

²⁷ Mahoney, 20, 22.

²⁸ Thomas J. Noer, "The New Frontier and African Neutralism: Kennedy, Nkrumah, and the Volta River Project," *Diplomatic History* 8, no. 1 (1984): 65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44254244>.

state to visit the Kennedy White House in March of 1961 was Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, the widely acknowledged leader of the Pan-African movement.

The main cause of the Congo crisis was one that would be replayed many times over in other newly independent nations of the underdeveloped world, namely the reluctance of European colonial powers to relinquish full control over their "former" colonies. Although granting independence on paper, many were unwilling to surrender the control over raw materials and other economic interests that they had gained in these countries. In the case of the Congo, this took the form of the attempted secession of Katanga Province from the newly formed DRC government in Leopoldville. At the time, Katanga could just as well have been known as the "Province of Union Minière," the huge Belgium/British controlled raw materials firm which mined 60 percent of the entire world's supply of cobalt, as well as a large portion of zinc, manganese, gold and silver, interests that its shareholders were unwilling to relinquish.²⁹ Typical of the mindset was that of a Belgium military commander who had informed his troops stationed in the Congo just days after its independence: "*Avant Indépendance = Après Indépendance*" (Before Independence = After Independence).³⁰ Accordingly, Union Minière had no problem finding a willing "partner," one Moïse Tshombe, to lead a movement for "Katangese independence" from the new Democratic Republic of the Congo in order to secure their interests.

To complicate matters further, Congo had also become a target of extensive Cold War operations of the CIA which had been actively engaged in assassination attempts against the country's fiery nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba, who according to CIA Director Allen Dulles had been "bought by the Communists."³¹ The complex situation in the Congo thus became a

²⁹ Mahoney, 91.

³⁰ Mahoney, 36.

³¹ Mahoney, 38.

perfect test case for Kennedy and his new team in their mission to prevent Cold War geopolitical dynamics from allowing a peaceful, neutral solution to the crisis. Upon hearing of his election to the presidency, Congo's embattled Patrice Lumumba sent Kennedy a long congratulatory telegram expressing his admiration for the new president's support of African independence and urging him to restore peace in the Congo through U.N. intervention. Just forty-eight hours before Kennedy was inaugurated, Lumumba was assassinated while in the custody of his Belgian-CIA supported enemies.³²

Anguished by Lumumba's death, Kennedy became absolutely committed to preventing a bloody civil war in the Congo resulting from the Katanga secession precisely through the means that had been suggested to him by the slain leader: United Nations action supported by a coalition of African and other nations. The obstacles to this were formidable. First, there was the continuing problem of the local CIA station chief and staff who were all essentially opposed to any peaceful settlement of the crisis, illustrated by their ongoing attempts to assassinate Lumumba, among many other things.³³ Secondly, Eisenhower's appointed ambassador to the Congo, Clare Timberlake, was constantly attempting to take matters into his own hands, including an outrageous move to deploy a U.S. Naval Task Force to intervene into the crisis completely behind the back of the president. Timberlake was summarily fired by President Kennedy and replaced in June 1961.³⁴ Finally, there again were the nagging pressures of American Cold War politics. At the prompting of representatives of Belgian business interests, fervent American anti-Communists (who mistrusted third world nationalist movements in general) decided to promote Katanga separatist leader Moïse Tshombe as an "anti-Communist

³² Mahoney, 59, 70.

³³ Mahoney, 69-71, 77, 81.

³⁴ Mahoney, 79-80.

freedom fighter” who, according to their narrative, was courageously combatting the “pro-Communist” DRC leaders in Leopoldville. Worse, the leader and American sponsor of this “save Congo from Communism” movement was Democratic Senator Thomas Dodd, who even traveled to Katanga to hold high-profile propaganda press conferences with Tshombe.

Still, Kennedy and his team tenaciously stood by the principles of the strategy of peace initiative. Working through the United Nations and with the support of other African nations, the “Secretary of State for the third world” diligently maintained a direct, hands-on role in resolving the crisis. Finally, on January 16, 1963, Moïse Tshombe informed the United Nations that he was effectively ending the Katanga secession.³⁵ The Kennedy Administration had successfully prevented a bloody civil war and guaranteed the continued existence of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this case, the administration’s institutional housecleaning had paid off, despite the often hazardous and tragic events that had occurred during the Congo crisis, not the least of which was the loss of U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, killed in a suspicious plane crash over Rhodesia while he had been mediating the crisis firsthand.³⁶

Although smaller in scale by comparison, Kennedy’s commitment to aid the successful development of Ghana must also be cited here as a strategy of peace success. The central issue involved the construction of Ghana’s Volta Dam project, a critical component of the future economic development of the newly independent West African nation. During Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah’s visit to the White House in March 1961, Kennedy had promised him that the United States would play the major role in financing and building the project. Kennedy’s relationship with Ghana was particularly difficult due to Nkrumah’s overt economic

³⁵ Hilsman, 271.

³⁶ Mahoney, 103-04.

and political collaboration with the Soviet Union. After Nkrumah's two month visit to the U.S.S.R. and allied Communist countries in the summer of 1961, the idea was even floated within the National Security Council that Nkrumah was really nothing but a new "African Castro" and should simply be cut off from U.S. support.³⁷ Nkrumah's outspoken criticism of United States policies and the continued CIA operations against him certainly complicated the situation, as did Attorney General Robert Kennedy's opposition to the aid. Yet, despite these obstacles, Kennedy again stuck to his strategy of peace. JFK personally oversaw every detail of the Ghana affair ensuring that, in the end, U.S. assistance to build the Volta Dam proceeded as planned. Writing to his friend British economist Barbara Ward, Kennedy asserted that, "We have put quite a few chips on a very dark horse but I believe the gamble is worthwhile."³⁸ Interestingly, upon being handed a copy of the Warren Commission Report a few months after Kennedy's assassination, Nkrumah opened the report and, pointing to the name of Allen Dulles handed the report back to U.S. ambassador William Mahoney saying, "whitewash."³⁹

Finally, there was the very difficult case of the ongoing struggle for independence in the Portuguese colony of Angola. The Angolan crisis had erupted just two weeks after Kennedy was inaugurated. Angolan nationalist organizer Holden Roberto had been one of the African leaders visiting Kennedy in Washington after his 1957 Algerian speech.⁴⁰ Throughout the entirety of his aborted administration, Kennedy became engaged in relentless political and diplomatic combat with Portuguese dictator António Salazar over the independence of the Southwest African colony. But again, the situation had become complicated by Cold War geopolitics, in this case

³⁷ Noer, 71.

³⁸ Mahoney, 178-79.

³⁹ Mahoney, 234.

⁴⁰ Mahoney, 23.

the United States' reliance on the military base in NATO member Portugal's Azores Islands. Although Kennedy was temporarily pressured to pull back from his all-out confrontation with Salazar over Angola, the 1962 resolution of the Cuban missile crisis thawed tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union enough for him to renew his commitment to fight for Angolan independence. In September of 1963, Kennedy had Under Secretary of State George Ball write directly to Salazar explicitly warning the Portuguese leader that American foreign policy is "inspired not by a narrow self-interest but by an anxiety to preserve the values of our civilization ...experience has amply shown the inexorable strength of the drive for self-determination. It can be frontally opposed only at an excessively high price—and a price that, once paid, tends to go higher."⁴¹

India, Latin America and....China

Of course, the strategy of peace initiatives were not limited to the African continent. In a major speech to the U.S. Senate on the subject of India in 1958, JFK had developed an extremely detailed and convincing argument that India's successful, in-depth economic development with American assistance ought to serve as a pole to which other non-aligned developing nations could gravitate toward instead of Mao's Communist China.⁴² Despite the reticence of the aging Nehru, Kennedy stuck to his commitment to aid India's Five Year Plan, including personally intervening to ensure continued American aid in constructing India's state-owned Bokaro steel mill.⁴³ Kennedy also made sure that India was a major recipient of America's "Food for Peace" program which ended up feeding over 10 percent of India's population. The Kennedy-created

⁴¹ Mahoney, 243.

⁴² Kennedy, "Speech to the U.S. Senate, March 25, 1958," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 156.

⁴³ Schlesinger, 531; Rabe, 145.

Peace Corps ultimately sent over 1,000 volunteers to assist in the development of India's impoverished rural villages.⁴⁴

Although achieving much less than had been wished for, Kennedy's Alliance for Progress program for Latin America also enjoyed a modicum of success for the strategy of peace. As elsewhere, Kennedy sought to address real issues of poverty and lack of economic development thus "alleviating those conditions which might foster opportunities for Communist infiltration, and uniting our peoples on the basis of mutual confidence, stability, and constantly increasing living standards."⁴⁵ But part of the problem with the Alliance was that it had originally been overzealously promoted as a "Marshall Plan for Latin America." Not only was Latin America nothing like a devastated Europe after World War II, but its long-established Iberian political and cultural traditions had been forged over centuries and were nowhere near as flexible for the type of change proposed by New Frontier economic theorists like Walt Rostow.⁴⁶ Further, a sort of Cold War "Monroe Doctrine" had dominated U.S. policy toward South America for the past decade. Many Latin American nations had essentially become addicted to the U.S. military aid that they had been receiving under the Eisenhower Administration's policy of containing Communism, a state of affairs that the new administration found difficult to roll back.⁴⁷ Then, of course, there was the ongoing fear of losing another Latin American or Caribbean nation to Communism and the implications of that for a 1964 re-election campaign. This ongoing domestic political pressure had unfortunately allowed the CIA and sections of the U.S. military establishment to get the upper hand in dealing with certain crisis situations, such as

⁴⁴ Rabe, 140.

⁴⁵ Kennedy, "Speech to a Democratic Dinner in San Juan, December 15, 1958," in *The Strategy of Peace*, 134-39.

⁴⁶ Rabe, 82-83; Schlesinger, 789.

⁴⁷ Schlesinger, 200.

supporting a military coup in Brazil that ultimately overthrew the government of João Goulart four months after Kennedy was assassinated.⁴⁸ The same dynamic also facilitated non-stop CIA operations against Castro's Cuba which put a definitive damper on many Latin American nations' desire to plunge headfirst into collaborating with the United States.⁴⁹

But despite all of this, Kennedy was extremely popular among the people of many Latin American countries. Like Franklin Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy," Kennedy's Alliance for Progress was generally seen as an effort by a new American government to address real economic issues that promoted the general welfare of people rather than simply catering to the often exploitative practices of private American businesses invested in Latin America.⁵⁰ As Columbian President Llaras Camargo told Kennedy when cheering crowds greeted him in Bogotá, "Do you know why those workers and *campesinos* are cheering like that? It's because they believe you are on their side."⁵¹

The strategy of peace even extended, albeit very cautiously, to Communist China. One week before his death in November 1963, Kennedy said to a public news conference that "We are not wedded to a policy of hostility with Red China."⁵² What shape that olive branch may have taken we will never know. Unfortunately, the considerations of a 1964 re-election campaign again mitigated against any idea that the Kennedy Administration could begin to thaw out relations with Mao's P.R.C. in any serious way, including supporting U.N. recognition of the Mainland government, a move which many other nations supported including Great Britain.⁵³

⁴⁸ Rabe, 93-95.

⁴⁹ Schlesinger, 780-81.

⁵⁰ Schlesinger, 791-92.

⁵¹ Schlesinger, 767.

⁵² Rabe, 140.

⁵³ Rabe, 133-34, 140.

This domestic political pressure included Eisenhower's unveiled threat that he would only re-enter politics to publicly oppose Kennedy if the administration were to allow the Mainland Chinese government to enter the United Nations.⁵⁴ That, combined with the "Who lost China?" albatross still dangling from the neck of the Democratic Party, was enough to persuade the president to table any substantial policy change toward Red China until some future time. After deciding not to send U.S. food aid to alleviate the horrific famine which had accompanied Mao's disastrous "Great Leap Forward," Kennedy bluntly told speechwriter Theodore Sorensen "let's face it, that's a subject for the second term."⁵⁵

"Not a Pax Americana"

Reflecting on the successful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis, Ted Sorensen remarked that it was "the biggest crisis of the 20th century, and the fact that Kennedy solved it with Khrushchev is absolutely important because [it meant] we're moving into a totally different world."⁵⁶ In a December 1962 interview with ABC and NBC, Kennedy stated as much, explaining that the crisis had opened up a new era in which unprecedented possibilities for a rational Soviet-American détente could now occur.⁵⁷ In June 1963, JFK detailed these possibilities in his now-famous commencement address at American University in Washington, D.C.:

What kind of peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war...not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and

⁵⁴ Schlesinger, 479-80.

⁵⁵ Sorensen, 666.

⁵⁶ *Cold War: Cuba, 1959-1962*. Produced by Martin Smith and Richard Melman. Atlanta: Turner Original Productions, Inc., 1998. DVD.

⁵⁷ Dallek, 607-08.

women—not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.... In short, both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race ...For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.⁵⁸

Indeed, on August 5, 1963, after more than eight years of difficult negotiations, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union signed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Even years-long Cold War hot spots like Vietnam now seemed to be open to re-assessment in the post-Cuban missile crisis era. Kennedy, who had never been sold on the idea of a purely military solution to the Vietnam crisis, took seriously Indian Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith's April 1963 proposal to bring in Nehru as a mediator to initiate peace negotiations between North and South Vietnam following Galbraith's visit to Saigon in March.⁵⁹ "If I tried to pull out completely now from Vietnam, we would have another Joe McCarthy scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm reelected," Kennedy told assistant Kenny O'Donnell that May after a discussion with Senator Mike Mansfield on the option of a complete U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.⁶⁰ On October 11, 1963 President Kennedy approved National Security Memorandum 263 authorizing tentative plans to withdraw 1,000 advisors from South Vietnam by the end of the year.⁶¹ What further actions JFK might have been contemplating we, of course, will never know.

⁵⁸ John F. Kennedy, "Commencement Address at American University, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963," *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed April 9, 2022. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610>

⁵⁹ Dallek, 460.

⁶⁰ Dallek, 668.

⁶¹ McGeorge Bundy, "Memo on National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 263, South Vietnam," *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed April 9, 2022. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF/342/JFKNSF-342-007>

Unfortunately, the shifting historiography of the Kennedy Presidency has increasingly portrayed Camelot's one thousand days as just another realpolitik Cold War administration with perhaps some feeble and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to tilt United States foreign policy to one more sympathetic to developing nations.⁶² In many such narratives, President Kennedy's achievements in Africa, India, to a more limited degree in Latin America, and his relentless drive for a real détente with the Soviet Union are overshadowed by apparently more gripping events dealing with nuclear weapons diplomacy and even salacious activities that bear little if any relevance to policy initiatives. To a large degree, the fact that it was JFK's vice president who unequivocally committed the United States to the calamitous land war in Vietnam often seems to abrogate Kennedy's principled and consistent commitment to *never* directly use such a deployment of American military power to resolve crises in the underdeveloped world. As we have seen, these decisions were often made contrary to enormous pressures coming from some of his own military and intelligence advisors as well as from Cold War-conditioned public opinion.

Due to his untimely assassination, more than one sympathetic Kennedy biographer has characterized John F. Kennedy's political career as "unfinished." While this is undoubtedly true, Kennedy's sixteen years of public service striving relentlessly toward his vision of a strategy of peace may very well have accomplished more than most people in political life might wish for in a lifetime.

⁶² Campbell Craig, "Kennedy's International Legacy, Fifty Years On," *International Affairs* 89 (6)(2013): 1367–78. doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12078.

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