

The Kennedy Dynasty: Posting for Week Three ***Cold Warriors*** (Mick Chantler)

To this day, Cold War scholars are divided on the subject of the Kennedys' true position on the global confrontation between America and the Communist threat. Many see the Brothers K as the embodiment of the martial spirit calling for bold resistance to the creeping "Red Menace." Think of Jack's Inaugural Address: "We will pay any price, bear any burden, etc." This camp argues that it was JFK who led us down the primrose path to utter catastrophe in Vietnam. Such critics also maintain that the Kennedy brothers waged a shameful terrorist campaign against the Castro regime in Cuba, virtually forcing the Russians to install the dreaded "missiles of October" which nearly brought the world to disaster. These skeptics point out that Kennedy often bragged that he had doubled the number of America's strategic nuclear weapons, and launched a wasteful and pointless crash program to put a man on the moon, merely to show the Russians that we could outdo them. Jack was enamored with the theory of counterinsurgency warfare, and was the intellectual godfather of the Green Berets. Their conclusion: the Kennedys were not much different from any other garden variety Cold War "Hawk."

But as in so many facets of the Kennedy administration, there is another point of view. Kennedy-friendly observers argue that Jack—and eventually Bobby too—were actually working hard at diffusing Cold War tensions, and slowly but surely laying out a path for peace. These defenders of "Camelot" take the position that JFK had no choice but to mouth all the platitudes about resisting Communist aggression everywhere on the globe. The irrational hysteria surrounding Communism had gripped the country so firmly that Jack was forced to go along with the prevailing national mood, at least publicly. Had he come out openly for a form of détente in 1959-60, he never would have received the Democratic nomination for the presidency. In fact, it is doubtful that he could have even kept his Senate seat if voters began to think of him as "soft on Reds." So naturally, Jack and his brother had to sound the alarm over a non-existent "missile gap" in 1960, ramp up the nation's defenses to wartime levels in 1961, and take the country to the brink of Armageddon in October 1962. Similarly, he was trapped by the times into calling for an open ended commitment to defend South

Vietnam, and conducting covert warfare against the Communist regime in Cuba. But, the “Secret Kennedy” hypothesis contends, Jack never really believed in all these measures. They were regrettable but necessary political ruses, designed to win high office so he could undertake what he really desired: disarmament and ultimately an end to the Cold War. According to this interpretation, Kennedy firmly intended to wind down the war in Southeast Asia once he had won re-election in 1964. It was Lyndon Johnson who betrayed Jack’s policies by escalating the war far beyond anything Kennedy had envisioned.

Another slightly different but related hypothesis is that the Kennedys in fact had been ardently militant anti-communists during the ‘50s and for the first year and a half of their administration. But the Cuban Missile Crisis had sobered their minds wonderfully, causing them to reassess their whole posture toward the Cold War. Jack realized that he had come within a hair’s breadth of incinerating the world in 1962, and he recoiled in shocked dismay from the abyss. Hence, during his remaining 13 months of life he launched a number of initiatives designed to bring about a rapprochement with the Soviets and sought avenues of escape from the morass in Vietnam. Only his tragic death prevented the advent of a golden age of peace for America, and indeed the entire world. This, in a nutshell, is the Oliver Stone School of Revisionist Thought on the Cold War.

So, who is right in this debate? We will try to come to some conclusions during this talk, although by definition we will never really know what Jack was thinking at the time of his death: “the Secret Kennedy” went to his grave along with the public one on November 22, 1963.