

John F. Kennedy's Vision of Peace

On the 50th anniversary of JFK's death, his nephew recalls the fallen president's attempts to halt the war machine.

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Rolling Stone (December 5 issue)

21 November 2013

<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/john-f-kennedys-vision-of-peace-20131120>

On November 22nd, 1963, my uncle, president John F. Kennedy, went to Dallas intending to condemn as "nonsense" the right-wing notion that "peace is a sign of weakness." He meant to argue that the best way to demonstrate American strength was not by using destructive weapons and threats but by being a nation that "practices what it preaches about equal rights and social justice," striving toward peace instead of "aggressive ambitions." Despite the Cold War rhetoric of his campaign, JFK's greatest ambition as president was to break the militaristic ideology that has dominated our country since World War II. He told his close friend Ben Bradlee that he wanted the epitaph "He kept the peace," and said to another friend, William Walton, "I am almost a 'peace at any price' president." Hugh Sidey, a journalist and friend, wrote that the governing aspect of JFK's leadership was "a total revulsion" of war. Nevertheless, as James W. Douglass argues in his book *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*, JFK's presidency would be a continuous struggle with his own military and intelligence agencies, which engaged in incessant schemes to trap him into escalating the Cold War into a hot one. His first major confrontation with the Pentagon, the Bay of Pigs catastrophe, came only three months into his presidency and would set the course for the next 1,000 days.

JFK's predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, had finalized support on March 17th, 1960, for a Cuban invasion by anti-Castro insurgents, but the wily general left its execution to the incoming Kennedy team. From the start, JFK recoiled at the caper's stench, as CIA Director Allen Dulles has acknowledged, demanding assurances from CIA and Pentagon brass that there was no chance of failure and that there would be no need for U.S. military involvement. Dulles and the generals knowingly lied and gave him those guarantees.

When the invasion failed, JFK refused to order airstrikes against Castro. Realizing he had been drawn into a trap, he told his top aides, David Powers and Kenneth O'Donnell, "They were sure I'd give in to them and send the go-ahead order to the [U.S. Navy aircraft carrier] Essex. 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 all wrong." JFK was realizing that the CIA posed a monumental threat to American democracy. As the brigade faltered, he told Arthur Schlesinger that he wanted to "splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds."

The next confrontation with the defense and intelligence establishments had already begun as JFK resisted pressure from Eisenhower, the Joint Chiefs and the CIA to prop up the CIA's puppet government in Laos against the communist Pathet Lao guerrillas. The military wanted 140,000 ground troops, with some officials advocating for nuclear weapons. "If it hadn't been for Cuba," JFK told Schlesinger, "we might be about to intervene in Laos. I might have taken this advice seriously." JFK instead signed a neutrality agreement the following year and was joined by 13 nations, including the Soviet Union.

His own instincts against intervening with American combat forces in Laos were fortified that April by the judgment of retired Gen. Douglas MacArthur, America's undisputed authority on fighting wars in Asia. Referring to Dulles' mischief in Southeast Asia during the Eisenhower years, MacArthur told JFK, "The chickens are coming home to roost, and [you] live in the chicken coop." MacArthur added a warning that ought to still resonate today: "Anyone wanting to commit American ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined."

About six months into his administration, JFK went to Vienna to meet Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev with high hopes of beginning a process of détente and mutual nuclear disarmament. Khrushchev met his proposals with bombast and truculent indifference. The Joint Chiefs and the CIA, which had fulminated about JFK's notion of negotiating with the Soviets, were relieved by the summit's failure. Six weeks later, military and intelligence leaders responded by unveiling their proposal for a pre-emptive thermonuclear attack on the Soviet Union, to be launched sometime in late 1963. JFK stormed away from the meeting in disgust, remarking scathingly to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "And we call ourselves the human race."

As JFK's relationship with his military-intelligence apparatus deteriorated, a remarkable relationship with Khrushchev began. Both were battle-hardened war veterans seeking a path to rapprochement and disarmament, encircled by militarists clamoring for war. In Kennedy's case, both the Pentagon and the CIA believed war with the Soviets was inevitable and therefore desirable in the short term while we still had the nuclear advantage. In the autumn of 1961, as retired Gen. Lucius Clay, who had taken a civilian post in Berlin, launched a series of unauthorized provocations against the Soviets, Khrushchev began an extraordinary secret correspondence with JFK. With the Berlin crisis moving toward nuclear Armageddon, Khrushchev turned to KGB agent Georgi Bolshakov, a top Soviet spy in Washington, to communicate directly with JFK. Bolshakov, to the horror of the U.S. State Department, was a friend of my parents and a frequent guest at our home. Bolshakov smuggled a letter, the first of 21 declassified in 1993, to JFK's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, in a folded newspaper. In it, Khrushchev expressed regret about Vienna and embraced JFK's proposal for a path to peace and disarmament.

On October 27th, Gen. Clay made an unauthorized armed threat to knock down the Berlin Wall using tanks equipped with dozer plows, seeking to provoke the Soviets into some action that would justify a nuclear first strike. The Kremlin responded with its own tanks, which met Clay's forces at the border crossing known as Checkpoint Charlie. A 16-hour face-off ensued. Through my father, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and Bolshakov, JFK promised that if Khrushchev withdrew his tanks within 24 hours, the U.S. would pull back 20 minutes later. Khrushchev took the risk, and JFK kept his word. Two weeks later, with tensions still running, Khrushchev sent a second letter to JFK: "I have no ground to retreat further, there is a precipice behind [me]." Kennedy realized that Khrushchev, too, was surrounded by a powerful military and intelligence complex intent on going to war. After the confrontation, Gen. Clay railed against JFK's unwillingness to "face the risk of nuclear war" against the Soviets.

One year later, on October 16th, 1962, Kennedy saw aerial photographs proving that the Soviets had installed nuclear missiles in Cuba capable of reaching much of the eastern U.S. seaboard.

The next 13 days were the most perilous in mankind's history. From the outset, the Pentagon, the CIA and many of JFK's advisers urged airstrikes and a U.S. invasion of the island that, as a Soviet military commander later revealed, would have triggered a nuclear war with the Soviets. JFK opted for a blockade, which Soviet ships respected. By October 26th, the standoff was de-escalating. Then, on October 27th, the crisis reignited when Soviet forces shot down a U.S. reconnaissance plane, killing its pilot, Maj. Rudolf Anderson. Almost immediately, the brass demanded overwhelming retaliation to destroy the Soviet missile sites. Meanwhile, Castro pushed the Kremlin military machine toward a devastating first strike. In a secret meeting with Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, my father told him, "If the situation continues much longer, the president is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power." U.S. marshals appeared at our house to take us to government bunkers in western Virginia. My brother Joe and I were anxious to go, if only to see the setup. But my father, who'd spent the previous six nights at the White House, called to say that we needed to be "good soldiers" and show up for school in Washington. To disappear, he told us, would cause public panic. That night, many people in our government went to sleep wondering if they would wake up dead.

On Monday, October 29th, the world moved back from the brink. An artfully drafted letter my father wrote with Ted Sorensen pledging that the U.S. would not invade Cuba -- plus JFK's secret agreement with Khrushchev to withdraw obsolete Jupiter missiles from Turkey -- persuaded the Kremlin to back down.

My father was not exaggerating to Dobrynin the fragility of White House control over the military. During the 13 days, the president's hold on power became increasingly tenuous as spooks and generals, apoplectic at JFK's reluctance to attack Cuba, engaged in dozens of acts of insubordination designed to trigger a nuclear exchange. CIA spymaster William Harvey screamed at the president and my father during a White House meeting: "We wouldn't be in such trouble now if you guys had some balls in the Bay of Pigs." Defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg, who years later leaked the Pentagon Papers, reported, "There was virtually a coup atmosphere in Pentagon circles." Incensed brass were in a state of disbelief at what they considered bald treason by the president. Spoiling for a war to end all wars, Gen. Curtis LeMay, the man who pioneered the use of napalm against civilians in Tokyo during World War II, found consolation by allowing himself to believe all was not lost. "Why don't we go in there and make a strike on Monday anyway?" LeMay said, as he watched the crisis subside.

Khrushchev said afterward that Kennedy had won his "deep respect" during the crisis: "He didn't let himself become frightened, nor did he become reckless.... He showed real wisdom and statesmanship when he turned his back on the right-wing forces in the United States who were trying to goad him into taking military action against Cuba."

Today it's fashionable to view the quagmire of Vietnam as a continuum beginning under Eisenhower and steadily escalating through the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations. But JFK was wary of the conflict from the outset and determined to end U.S. involvement at the time of his death.

JFK inherited a deteriorative dilemma. When Eisenhower left office, there were by official count 685 military advisers in Vietnam, sent there to help the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem

in its battle against the South Vietnamese guerrillas known as the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese soldiers deployed by Communist ruler Ho Chi Minh, who was intent on reunifying his country. Eisenhower explained that "the loss of South Vietnam would set in motion a crumbling process that could, as it progressed, have grave consequences for us." Ho Chi Minh's popularity in the south had already led Dulles' CIA to sabotage national elections required by the Geneva Accords, which had ended France's colonial rule, and to prop up Diem's crooked puppet government, which was tenuously hanging on to power against the Communists. Back at home, Republican militarists were charging JFK with "losing Laos" and badgering him to ramp up our military commitment.

In JFK's first months in office, the Pentagon asked him to deploy ground troops into Vietnam. JFK agreed to send another 500 advisers, under the assumption that South Vietnam had a large army and would be able to defend itself against communist aggression. He refused to send ground troops but would eventually commit 16,500 advisers -- fewer troops than he sent to Mississippi to integrate Ole Miss -- who were technically forbidden from engaging in combat missions. He told New York Times columnist Arthur Krock in 1961 that the United States should not involve itself "in civil disturbances created by guerrillas."

For three years, that refusal to send combat troops earned him the antipathy of both liberals and conservatives who rebuked him for "throwing in the towel" in the Cold War. His critics included not just the traditionally bellicose Joint Chiefs and the CIA, but also trusted advisers and friends, including Gen. Maxwell Taylor; Defense Secretary Robert McNamara; McNamara's deputy, Roswell Gilpatric; and Secretary of State Rusk. JFK's ambassador to South Vietnam, Frederick Nolting Jr., reported a "virtually unanimous desire for the introduction of the U.S. forces into Vietnam" by the Vietnamese "in various walks of life." When Vice President Lyndon Johnson visited Vietnam in May 1961, he returned adamant that victory required U.S. combat troops. Virtually every one of JFK's senior staff concurred. Yet JFK resisted. Saigon, he said, would have to fight its own war.

As a stalling tactic, he sent Gen. Taylor to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission in September 1961. Taylor was among my father's best friends. JFK was frank with Taylor -- he needed a military man to advise him to get out of Vietnam. According to Taylor, "The last thing he wanted was to put in ground forces. And I knew that." Nevertheless, Taylor was persuaded by hysterical military and intelligence experts across the Pacific, and had angered JFK when he came back recommending U.S. intervention. To prevent the fall of South Vietnam, Taylor suggested sending 8,000 U.S. troops under the guise of "flood relief" -- a number that McNamara said was a reasonable start but should be escalated to as many as "six divisions, or about 205,000 men." Later, Taylor would say, "I don't recall anyone who was strongly against [sending troops to Vietnam] except one man, and that was the president."

Frustrated by Taylor's report, JFK then sent a confirmed pacifist, John Kenneth Galbraith, to Vietnam to make the case for nonintervention. But JFK confided his political weakness to Galbraith. "You have to realize," JFK said, "that I can only afford so many defeats in one year." He had the Bay of Pigs and the pulling out of Laos. He couldn't accept a third. Former Vice President Richard Nixon and the CIA's Dulles, whom JFK had fired, were loudly advocating U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, while Asian dominoes tumbled. Even The New York

Times agreed. "The present situation," the paper had warned, "is one that brooks no further stalling." This was accepted wisdom among America's leading foreign-policy gurus. Public sympathies in the summer of 1963 were 2-to-1 for intervention.

Despite the drumbeat from the left and right, JFK refused to send in combat troops. "They want a force of American troops," JFK told Schlesinger. "They say it's necessary in order to restore confidence and maintain morale. But it will be just like Berlin. The troops will march in, the bands will play, the crowds will cheer, and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off and you have to have another."

In 1967, Daniel Ellsberg interviewed my father. Ellsberg, a wavering war hawk and Marine veteran, was researching the history of the Vietnam War. He had seen the mountains of warmongering memos, advice and pressure. Ellsberg asked my father how JFK had managed to stand against the virtually unanimous tide of pro-war sentiment. My father explained that his brother did not want to follow France into a war of rich against poor, white versus Asian, on the side of imperialism and colonialism against nationalism and self-determination. Pressing my father, Ellsberg asked whether the president would have accepted a South Vietnamese defeat. "We would have handled it like Laos," my father told him. Intrigued, Ellsberg pressed further. "What made him so smart?" Three decades afterward, Ellsberg would vividly recall my father's reaction: "Whap! His hand slapped down on the desk. I jumped in my chair. 'Because we were there!' He slapped the desk again. 'We saw what was happening to the French. We saw it. We were determined never to let that happen to us.'"

In 1951, JFK, then a young congressman, and my father visited Vietnam, where they marveled at the fearlessness of the French Legionnaires and the hopelessness of their cause. On that trip, American diplomat Edmund Gullion warned JFK to avoid the trap. Upon returning, JFK isolated himself with his outspoken opposition to American involvement in this "hopeless internecine struggle."

Three years later, in April 1954, he made himself a pariah within his own party by condemning the Eisenhower administration for entertaining French requests for assistance in Indochina, predicting that fighting Ho Chi Minh would mire the U.S. in France's doomed colonial legacy. "No amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy that is everywhere and at the same time nowhere.... [or an enemy] which has the sympathy and covert support of the people."

By the summer of 1963, JFK was quietly telling trusted friends and advisers he intended to get out following the 1964 election. These included Rep. Tip O'Neill, McNamara, National Security adviser McGeorge Bundy, Sen. Wayne Morse, Washington columnist Charles Bartlett, Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson, confidant Larry Newman, Gen. Taylor and Marine Commandant Gen. David M. Shoup, who, besides Taylor, was the only other member of the Joint Chiefs that JFK trusted. Both McNamara and Bundy acknowledged in their respective memoirs that JFK meant to get out -- which were jarring admissions against self-interest, since these two would remain in the Johnson administration and orchestrate the war's escalation.

That spring, JFK had told Montana Sen. Mike Mansfield, who would become the Vietnam War's most outspoken Senate critic, "I can't do it until 1965, after I'm re-elected." Later that day, he explained to Kenneth O'Donnell, "If I tried to pull out completely from Vietnam, we would have another Joe McCarthy Red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm re-elected." Both Nelson Rockefeller and Sen. Barry Goldwater, who were vying to run against him in 1964, were uncompromising Cold Warriors who would have loved to tar JFK with the brush that he had lost not just Laos, but now Vietnam. Goldwater was campaigning on the platform of "bombing Vietnam back into the Stone Age," a lyrical and satisfying construct to the Joint Chiefs and the CIA. "So we had better make damned sure I am re-elected," JFK said.

The Joint Chiefs, already in open revolt against JFK for failing to unleash the dogs of war in Cuba and Laos, were unanimous in urging a massive influx of ground troops and were incensed with talk of withdrawal. The mood in Langley was even uglier. Journalist Richard Starnes, filing from Vietnam, gave a stark assessment in *The Washington Daily News* of the CIA's unrestrained thirst for power in Vietnam. Starnes quoted high-level U.S. officials horrified by the CIA's role in escalating the conflict. They described an insubordinate, out-of-control agency, which one top official called a "malignancy." He doubted that "even the White House could control it any longer." Another warned, "If the United States ever experiences a [coup], it will come from the CIA and not from the Pentagon." Added another, "[Members of the CIA] represent tremendous power and total unaccountability to anyone."

Defying such pressures, JFK, in the spring of 1962, told McNamara to order the Joint Chiefs to begin planning for a phased withdrawal that would disengage the U.S. altogether. McNamara later told an assistant secretary of defense that the president intended to "close out Vietnam by '65 whether it was in good shape or bad."

On May 8th, 1962, following JFK's orders, McNamara instructed a stunned Gen. Paul Harkins "to devise a plan for bringing full responsibility [for the Vietnam War] over to South Vietnam." Mutinous, the general ignored the order until July 23rd, 1962, when McNamara again commanded him to produce a plan for withdrawal. The brass returned May 6th, 1963, with a half-baked proposal that didn't complete withdrawal as quickly as JFK had wanted. McNamara ordered them back yet again.

On September 2nd, 1963, in a televised interview, JFK told the American people he didn't want to get drawn into Vietnam. "In the final analysis, it is their war," he said. "They are the ones who have to win or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment. We can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam."

Six weeks before his death, on October 11th, 1963, JFK bypassed his own National Security Council and had Bundy issue National Security Action Memorandum 263, making official policy the withdrawal from Vietnam of the bulk of U.S. military personnel by the end of 1965, beginning with "1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963." On November 14th, 1963, a week before Dallas, he announced at a press conference that he was ordering up a plan for "how we can bring Americans out of there." The morning of November 21st, as he prepared to leave for Texas, he reviewed a casualty list for Vietnam indicating that more than 100 Americans to date had died there. Shaken and angry, JFK told his assistant press secretary Malcolm Kilduff,

"It's time for us to get out. The Vietnamese aren't fighting for themselves. We're the ones doing the fighting. After I come back from Texas, that's going to change. There's no reason for us to lose another man over there. Vietnam is not worth another American life."

On November 24th, 1963, two days after JFK died, Lyndon Johnson met with South Vietnam Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, whom JFK had been on the verge of firing. LBJ told Lodge, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." Over the next decade, nearly 3 million Americans, including many of my friends, would enter the paddies of Vietnam, and 58,000, including my cousin George Skakel, would never return.

Dulles, fired by JFK after the Bay of Pigs, returned to public service when LBJ appointed him to the Warren Commission, where he systematically concealed the agency's involvement in various assassination schemes and its ties to organized crime. To a young writer, he revealed his continued resentment against JFK: "That little Kennedy ... he thought he was a god."

On June 10th, 1963, at American University, Kennedy gave his greatest speech ever, calling for an end to the Cold War, painting the heretical vision of America living and competing peacefully with Soviet Communists. World peace, he proposed, would not be "a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war." He challenged Cold War fundamentalists who cast the world as a clash of civilizations in which one side must win and the other annihilated. He suggested instead that peaceful coexistence with the Soviets might be the most expedient path to ending totalitarianism.

And he acknowledged that now, "above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either humiliating retreat or nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy -- or a collective death wish for the world." In the nightmare reality of nuclear war, he said, "All we have built, all we have worked for, would be destroyed in the first 24 hours."

JFK went on to paint the picture of a world where different ideologies were allowed to flourish, supplanting the immoral and destructive Cold War with productive competition that, instead of "devoting massive sums to weapons," would divert them "to combat ignorance, poverty and disease." And, he added, "if we cannot now end our differences, at least we can make the world safe for diversity."

He concluded by proposing a blueprint for bringing the Cold War to an end. "Our primary long-range interest," he said, was "general and complete disarmament, designed to take place by stages permitting parallel political developments to build the new institutions of peace which would take the place of arms." He announced unilateral suspension of atmospheric nuclear weapons and proposed immediate disarmament talks with Moscow.

It's hard to understand today how heretical JFK's proposal for coexistence with the Soviets sounded to America's right wing. It was Cold War boilerplate that any objective short of complete destruction was cowardice or treachery. In his bestselling 1962 diatribe *Why Not*

Victory? Barry Goldwater proclaimed, "Our objective must be the destruction of the enemy as an ideological force.... Our effort calls for a basic commitment in the name of victory, which says we will never reconcile ourselves to the communist possession of power of any kind in any part of the world."

Despite opposition to the treaty from the generals and Republican leaders, including liberals like Nelson Rockefeller, Kennedy's words electrified a world terrified by the prospect of nuclear exchange. JFK's recognition of the Soviet point of view had an immediate salving impact on U.S.-Soviet relations. Khrushchev, deeply moved, later told treaty negotiator Averell Harriman that the American University address was "the greatest speech by an American president since Roosevelt."

Knowing that America's military-industrial complex would oppose him, JFK had kept the text of his speech secret from the Pentagon, the CIA and the State Department. His call for a unilateral test-ban treaty shocked his own National Security and his military and diplomatic advisers.

Worse, in the month leading up to the speech, he had secretly worked with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to arrange test-ban negotiations in Moscow. Khrushchev embraced JFK's proposal, agreeing in principle to end nuclear testing in the atmosphere and water, and on land and in outer space, and proposed a nonaggression pact between NATO and the Soviet satellite countries of the Warsaw Pact. Kennedy supervised every detail of the negotiation, working at astounding speed to end-run his adversaries in the Pentagon. On July 25th, 1963, JFK approved the treaty. The next day, he went on TV, telling America, "This treaty can symbolize the end of one era and the beginning of another -- if both sides can, by this treaty, gain confidence and experience in peaceful collaboration." Less than a month later, they both signed the treaty. It was the first arms-control agreement of the nuclear age. Historian Richard Reeves wrote, "By moving so swiftly on the Moscow negotiations, Kennedy politically outflanked his own military on the most important military question of the time."

Caught off guard, the military-intelligence apparatus quickly mobilized to derail the treaty, which still needed to be ratified by the Senate. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had announced months earlier that they were "opposed to a comprehensive ban under almost any terms," joined CIA director John McCone in lobbying against the agreement in the Senate. The Pentagon tried to sabotage its passage by hiding information about the ease of detecting underground tests.

The right-wing propaganda machine found plenty of arable ground in the American national consciousness to fertilize with fear. Initially, congressional mail ran 15-1 against the treaty. JFK believed the chances for passage in the Senate was "about in the nature of a miracle." He ordered his staff to pull out every stop to mobilize the population, saying that he was determined to get the treaty passed, even if it cost him the 1964 election.

By September, a monumental grassroots White House campaign had flipped public opinion to support the treaty by 80 percent. On September 24th, 1963, the Senate ratified the treaty 80-19. As Ted Sorensen noted, no other single accomplishment in the White House "gave the president greater satisfaction."

On October 10th, after signing the atmospheric-test-ban treaty, Khrushchev sent JFK the last of his personal letters. In that missive, Khrushchev proposed the next steps for ending the Cold War. He recommended the conclusion of a nonaggression pact between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact nations, and a number of steps to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and prevent their use in surprise attacks. JFK would never see the letter. State Department officials hostile toward Khrushchev intercepted it.

Khrushchev had already secretly proposed to his own government radical reductions in the Soviet military, including the conversion of missile plants to peaceful purposes. After JFK's death, Kremlin war hawks viewed Khrushchev's plan as a treasonous proposal for unilateral disarmament. Less than a year after Dallas, Khrushchev was removed from power.

JFK, at the time of his death, was planning his own trip to the Soviet Union, knowing nothing would do more to end the Cold War. Forty years later, Khrushchev's son Sergei wrote that he was "convinced that if history had allowed them another six years, they would have brought the Cold War to a close before the end of the 1960s.... But fate decreed otherwise, and the window of opportunity, barely cracked open, closed at once. In 1963, President Kennedy was killed, and a year later, in October 1964, my father was removed from power. The Cold War continued for another quarter of a century."

JFK's capacity to stand up against the national-security apparatus and imagine a different future for America has made him, despite his short presidency, one of the most popular presidents in history. Despite his abbreviated tenure, John F. Kennedy is the only one-term president consistently included in the list of top 10 presidents made by American historians. A 2009 poll of 65 historians ranked him sixth in overall presidential performance, just ahead of Jefferson. And today, JFK's great concerns seem more relevant than ever: the dangers of nuclear proliferation, the notion that empire is inconsistent with a republic and that corporate domination of our democracy at home is the partner of imperial policies abroad. He understood the perils to our Constitution from a national-security state and mistrusted zealots and ideologues. He thought other nations ought to fight their own civil wars and choose their own governments and not ask the U.S. to do it for them. Yet the world he imagined and fought for has receded so far below the horizon that it's no longer even part of the permissible narrative inside the Beltway or in the mainstream press. Critics who endeavor to debate the survival of American democracy within the national-security state risk marginalization as crackpots and kooks. His greatest, most heroic aspirations for a peaceful, demilitarized foreign policy are the forbidden debates of the modern political era.