

JFK: Cold Warrior

Debunking Oliver Stone's Mythology

Jack Straw

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"I shall never be able to forget where I was standing on that dramatic day when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy nearly killed me. It was during the nuclear confrontation that arose out of his war on Cuba."

—Christopher Hitchens in *The Nation*, Feb. 3, 1992

John Kennedy has been described as a popular president who stood up to powerful business interests and was ready to pull U.S. troops out of Vietnam. His assassination, assert many, including Oliver Stone in his latest film JFK, resulted from his impending shift of Indochina policies; it marked the end of democracy in the U.S. and the beginning of a military dictatorship dominated by military-oil interests and executed by the CIA.

All this is bad history, reflecting an ignorance of the history of class relations in America. The Kennedy Administration fits perfectly well into an historical trajectory of increased centralization of power as state and individual businesses more and more openly consolidate into one megamachine. And the Kennedys are one of the families, few in number, that control the buttons; they are bona-fide members of the one percent of wealthiest Americans who control over 40% of the net wealth in the U.S. and even more of financial/industrial resources. We're doing it all for them. The military-industrial complex is just one of their institutions.

From the beginning, the rich and powerful dominated the government. Many of the "Founding Fathers," like Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, openly stated their desires to ensure rule by the elite through the adoption of the Constitution. Voting was extended to non-property owners, in fact, only decades later, when the elite's rule was secured through centralized control of industrial and financial institutions.

U.S. businesses had a multinational bent even before 1776. One reason for the Revolution, after all, was British restriction on "trade" with the West Indies. Thomas Jefferson sent the Marines to Tripoli to safeguard "trade." Woodrow Wilson sent troops into Mexico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic to secure "interests." FDR took the U.S. into World War II only after "our interests" in Latin America and Asia were threatened. During the war, the U.S. took steps to ensure its global dominance, such as taking over the Middle East oil fields. The "I" in IBM and ITT never stood for "Internal."

In the early twentieth century, as the American empire began this expansion, the federal government began taking a more direct role in the management of the economic-financial structure, as well as the regulation of daily life. This was often done under the guise of reform by self-described liberals such as Woodrow Wilson, but the end result was always the growing power of a federal government increasingly intermeshed with big business. With U.S. entry into World War One came blatant attacks on anti-war and anti-capitalist organizations, which continued (and even accelerated) after the war, with the Palmer Red Raids. We also got prohibition.

In the '30s came the "New Deal," which openly sought to save Capitalism through co-optation of the labor movement and increased state-business cooperation. Prohibition was succeeded by "pothibition" and other drug witch-

hunts, and the anti-“subversive” witch hunts began with repressive laws like the Smith Act. The anti- red hysteria intensified as the Cold War started after World War II.

When in Congress, Kennedy was a Cold Warrior who accused President Truman of “losing” China to the commies, and who frequently supported Senator Joe McCarthy’s Congressional witch-hunts. JFK came into the White House after the 1960 campaign in which one of his main contentions was that the U.S. lagged behind the Soviet Union in missile technology and deployment, and could not fight a conventional war due to overdependence on nuclear weapons. As President, he sought to remedy this quickly; “defense” spending increased by 20% during his first fourteen months in office. Lots of missiles were built. Conventional weaponry was bolstered even more. The Green Berets were founded for the purpose of conducting counter-insurgency operations throughout the empire. Their headquarters in Fort Bragg, North Carolina is named the “John F. Kennedy Special Forces Center.”

This military build-up coincided with an aggressive U.S. foreign policy. Even official history remembers the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the world went to the nuclear edge. Not so well remembered were moves to solidify U.S. dominance of Europe and Latin America. Kennedy went all-out to secure the world for the multinationals. He pressed for the Common Market in Europe in order to streamline U.S. investments in that continent. Similarly, he initiated the Alliance for Progress—in Latin America—to further U.S. regional business interests (Oliver Stone thinks the Alliance was one of Kennedy’s greatest accomplishments). Part and parcel of this policy was the formation with the help of the Green Berets of paramilitary organizations we know today as death squads. In June 1963, the Shah of Iran held on to power through an army massacre of thousands, with Kennedy’s complete blessing.

The Kennedy administration also proceeded to drastically escalate U.S. operations in Vietnam. Besides dispatching the Green Berets, he sent 15,000 “advisers,” some ‘of whom were flying combat missions by 1962. They were also directing a policy which involved the conversion of much of the countryside into a free-fire zone, forcing the inhabitants from their villages into “strategic hamlets,” little more than concentration camps.

In October 1963, after pursuing for almost three years a brutal war against the people of Vietnam, Kennedy announced an intent to pull out a thousand troops, a decision he attributed to progress in the U.S. war effort. Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and “Defense” Secretary Robert McNamara recommended to JFK that he make such an announcement as a propaganda move for home-front consumption. In the meantime, Kennedy and his advisers went ahead with preparations for the overthrow of the brutal Diem Government, which was giving the war effort an “image” problem.

After the November 1 coup which eliminated President Diem, Kennedy stated that the war effort could now proceed better. On the day of his assassination, Kennedy delivered a speech in Fort Worth, and had one prepared for Dallas. Both speeches emphasized the importance of the military to U.S. policies.

National defense, he said, “requires sacrifices by the people of the U.S. But this is a dangerous and uncertain world... Without the U.S., South Vietnam would collapse overnight... Our assistance can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task.” Not a hint of even a slight shift in policy; the man died still a Cold Warrior.

Four days before his assassination, Kennedy spoke to the Florida Chamber of Commerce in Tampa. He reminded the audience that “corporate profits were at an all-time high,” and congratulated his administration for “...liberalized depreciation guidelines, reduced transport taxes, an increased role of American businesses in the ‘development’ of less-developed countries, and proposals in Congress for sharp reductions in corporate taxes and deregulation of transportation.” The people’s champion, eh?

Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of “Defense” under Kennedy, stated during the Cuban Missile Crisis that “government has an inherent right to lie.” Presumably, it also has an inherent “right” to snoop, manipulate public opinion, and crush dissent. Here you have the roots of COINTELPRO, Watergate, Iran-Contragate and Gulf War news management. These are a continuation of Kennedy policies, not a break with them.

Kennedy’s complete team of advisers, including his close friends William and McGeorge Bundy, the Rostow Brothers (Walt and Eugene) and George Ball, as well as McNamara, Taylor and Dean Rusk, went on to manage the Vietnam escalation associated with President Johnson. It’s nothing short of ludicrous to say that they were merely carrying out policies formulated by Johnson or the CIA, and that Kennedy would have headed in a different direction.

The death of John did not mark the end of Kennedy participation in elite policy-making. Robert, who organized covert actions (including assassinations) for John, acted as a loyal system man in the Senate. His total support of the state of Israel was what led his admitted assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, to kill him. Ted has for years pushed for revisions in the Federal Criminal Code, revisions which basically amount to the institution of an open police state (remember Senate Bill 1?). He's also been a key player in the deregulation of airlines, trucking and savings and loans. And he still supports the Israeli government. In 1982, in the aftermath of the Beirut refugee camps massacres, he "deflected" questions about Israeli policies.

The whole business of Kennedy nostalgia is rather disturbing. Many who were not alive then know JFK entirely from his media images as a young, caring and "hip" person who was assassinated by dark forces. I don't believe the official story on the assassination; I think it was related to a squabble within the Mafia (Marilyn Monroe may have been killed because she became aware of JFK's mob connections). But whatever the story, I'm really angry to see the man mythologized as a hero, when in fact he was ruling-class scum! Hopefully, this article will help readers place the Kennedy administration in a context of a continuing trend toward a more blatantly authoritarian government necessitated by the international needs of the American business class.

The Vietnam information comes from *Vietnam, A History* by Stanley Karnow. Information on Kennedy and U.S. history (which I experienced personally) can be gleaned from *A People's History of the U.S.* by Howard Zinn and *Turning the Tide* and *Towards a New Cold War* by Noam Chomsky.

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