

DEBORAH LEFF: Good afternoon. I'm Deborah Leff, Director of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. On behalf of all of the presidential libraries and the National Archives, it is a pleasure and honor to welcome you here today to the first-ever joint presidential libraries conference. We are taking advantage of the tremendous historical resources and contacts of the presidential libraries to pull together an extraordinary group of scholars, policymakers, journalists and analysts and a president, to spend the next day and a half looking at Vietnam and the Presidency.

Benjamin Franklin once wrote, "There never was a good war or a bad peace." And while war is always wrenching, the Vietnam War tore apart this country in ways from which we have never recovered. To many, it was a loss of innocence, the event that led to what has been called a permanent, adversarial culture in the United States. The words of Michael Herr resonate with my generation. "Vietnam is what we had instead of happy childhoods."

Thirty years after the Vietnam War, many Americans question its merits. A Gallup Poll from the year 2000: "Looking back, do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" Sixty-nine percent, yes; 24%, no. A *CBS News/New York Times* poll that same year: "Looking back on the war in Vietnam, do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Vietnam? Or should we have stayed out?" The right thing, 24%; stayed out, 60%.

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Yet, surely, when presidents of the United States sank America deeper and deeper into the war in Vietnam, they believed they were doing the right thing. Why were they willing to risk so much? Should they have done it, and why did it fail to meet their goals? When did they begin to see the unanticipated consequences of their decisions and to reassess the next steps? Was the war a “noble cause,” as President Ronald Reagan characterized it in the 1980’s, or rather, as one of the historians we will hear from this afternoon has written, “The greatest policy miscalculation in the history of American foreign relations.” How can this country, as President Ford asked in 1973, stop refighting the battles and recriminations of the past?

And what is the legacy of Vietnam today? How does it affect our country’s willingness to act abroad? How does it affect the fundamental trust we have in our government and our president? What does it do to this country’s sense of common values?

These are enormous questions and we will never be able to fully address all of them. But assembled here at the Kennedy Presidential Library are a remarkable group of people, many of whom faced those decisions or the Vietnam War itself firsthand. And they will try to shed some light.

In the course of this conference you will hear from Henry Kissinger and Ted Sorensen and Jack Valenti and David Halberstam and Francis Fitzgerald and President Carter and Wesley Clarke and Alexander Haig and Chuck Hagel.

You will hear from the leading historians and the journalists of the period. And maybe, hopefully, some wisdom and new lessons will emerge.

Before we begin I would like to thank all of the presidential libraries and presidential library foundations and the National Archives. It is their hard work, collaboration and resources that made this conference possible.

[Applause]

And, actually, many of the library directors and assistant directors are here with us today. I would like them to stand just so you will have the chance to meet them later. If you could.

[Applause]

And second, let me lay out a few ground rules. To allow more time for discussion, we will not be introducing every speaker. Please refer to the biographies in your conference program. And if you don't have a program, please raise your hand and we will bring one to you.

And, last, at the end of each session and the keynote, the participants will take audience questions. On your chair you will find an index card. Please write your question and who it is directed to on the card. We will collect those. People are wearing buttons that say "staff," and we will pass them on to the moderators.

We really appreciate your coming. It is a tremendous pleasure for me and really for all of the presidential libraries to introduce the Archivist of the United States, who has really helped the cause of history in America. It is Dr. Allen Weinstein.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. And welcome to this extraordinary symposium. When you have a conflict in which 58 thousand of our fellow citizens gave their lives, in which three million Vietnamese gave their lives, on all sides, perhaps we should appropriately begin with a moment of silence.

[MOMENT OF SILENCE]

We've come to this conference for a variety of reasons. But certainly, on unifying factor is our common interest in history. History began with the study of war, the study of a very long war, the Persian Wars. And those of you in the audience, and I suspect there are many, certainly my colleagues on the platform, who(?) are(?) aware(?) of Heroditus' history on the Persian Wars, know about the extraordinary first paragraph on the purposes of history.

In which he wrote, "These are the researches of Heroditus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes in the hope of then preserving from decay the remembrance of what men had done, in short, narration, the facts. And

preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the barbarians from losing their due need of glory. Commemoration, not just of your greatness and your culture's greatness but of your adversaries' impressive qualities.

“And, finally, resolve to put on record what were their grounds of feud, analysis.” Narration, commemoration, analysis. That is why we are here, some for all three reasons. Some for only one of the three. We are beginning at the beginning of this process. And my three panelists are three very distinguished professors who have all written extensively on the war, on the Vietnam War, not on the Persian Wars.

Maybe they have written on the Persian Wars, too, I don't know. But, in any event--

MARILYN YOUNG: We are having trouble hearing, so you can say anything you want about us.

WEINSTEIN: That's good. That good. That was timely(?) of you, Marilyn. [unclear] We are going to have a conversation. But my colleagues have, as good and faithful academics, prepared presentations, brief presentations I think. Ten to 15 minutes, I'm told, each. There may be some commentary by the moderator between presentations but that is to be expected. And without further ado, talking about the origins of the war and the transition from Roosevelt to Truman, Professor Marilyn Young.

[Applause]

MARILYN YOUNG: Thank you. Not only couldn't we hear Allen, but we can't see you. And that is very disturbing because all of us, as teachers, are used to a kind of call-and-response situation. I'm going to start by thanking the Kennedy Library for hosting this conference. The ability of scholars to read and interpret the record of the past is, today, seriously threatened. There is a growing trend begun under President Clinton and increasing dramatically over the course of the current administration, towards the withholding and, also, reclassification of government documents.

The terms of the 1974 Presidential Records Act, itself a response to the efforts of President Nixon to withhold papers and tapes of his choosing, gave the public access to presidential papers 12 years after the end of his administration. On November 1, 2001, President Bush issued an executive order giving the White House and all former presidents control over the declassification of presidential papers for an indefinite period of time.

Then last month *The New York Times* revealed that since the start of the Bush administration, intelligence agencies have been sort of sweeping through the archives, reclassifying. I am very glad to say, and this happened a few days ago, that the current Archivist of the United States has actually negotiated a moratorium on this reclassification process in the beginning of a

declassification initiative. And this is an enormous victory for all of us who use the archives.

[Applause]

Last year, the Nixon Library, in conjunction with Whittier College, invited a group of scholars to participate in a conference on the subject of Nixon's Vietnam War. It was tight focused. It resembled conferences held over the years by the LBJ Library and would likely have resulted, as they did, in a significant publication. Then the Library canceled the conference, the organizers claiming, rather intolerably in my view that it was because of a lack of interest, as evidenced by the paucity of ticket sales.

The cancellation, as the dis-invited scholars wrote in a letter to Congress, raised serious doubts about the Library as a repository of documents within the presidential library system. I take the occasion of this conference to recall the cancellation of that one.

Now, let me quickly get to the subject of this morning's panel, "How We Got In: The US, Asia, and Vietnam." A corollary to the question is, when did we get in? There are many dates from which to choose. Bob begins his history of the war in 1941. I start mine in 1945. The fourth edition of George's book, which is the one I had handy on my bookshelf, opens in 1950.

Since all of us here and all of you know the horror to come, the question of the origins of the war is sometimes posed as a counter-factual, how we almost didn't get in. Putting the question that way reflects, I think, an irrational sense of hope, a sort of magical thinking whereby we are able to delay or even prevent the future by identifying a point at which things could have gone another way.

In this case, an early version of, "If Kennedy hadn't died," script, "Had FDR lived, US might have responded favorably to Ho Chi Min's request for a helping hand towards independence and none of what we now know was about to begin would have happened." It should be noted that however much Ho might have hoped for US support, he didn't expect to receive it.

As he wrote to Charles Phen, an OSS contact in August 1945, quote, "We small and subject countries have no share, or a very small share, in the victory of freedom and democracy. Probably, if we want to get a sufficient share, we have to fight." End quote. The evidence often cited for the possibility that the U.S. might have acted on behalf of Vietnamese independence, lies in FDR's frequently expressed distaste for French colonialism and his explicit pursuit of international trusteeship for post-war Indochina.

In this cheerful version of what might have been, little attention is paid to the larger ideology within which FDR's detestation of French colonialism rested. Where he was as convinced as the French about the basic inferiority

of the Vietnamese. The problem with the French, as FDR saw it, was that they had not done for the Vietnamese what the United States had done for the Philippines, namely prepare them for independence.

Nor, given their appalling record in China, could they be trusted to do so in the future. Hence the opposition to the restoration of French sovereignty. Though in the months before his death, he seemed ready to transform an international trusteeship into one run by the French alone. In any case, by the spring of '45, Roosevelt was dead and so was the notion of a trusteeship of any kind.

Hence forward, despite occasional protests from the Far Eastern desk of the State Department, the state of Vietnam was in the hands of the European desk, whose support for the return of French sovereignty, based on their reading of America's geopolitical requirements in Europe, was firm and clear-eyed.

Another element in the imagining of a kinder, gentler past history, rests on the notion that local OSS and State Department observers understood as Washington did not, that the Viet Minh was a powerful nationalist movement with Ho Chi Minh as its hero. Had Washington listened to its local agents, the reasoning goes, it would have responded favorably to Ho Chi Minh's request for support of Vietnamese independence against the French.

But the documents show that the difference between OSS field operatives and Washington has been, in fact, exaggerated. And positive assessments by the OSS of Ho Chi Minh rested on the assumption that his Communist past was largely irrelevant to his national present. When we take into account the racist underpinnings of even the most benevolent US assessment of Vietnam in the 1940's, and acknowledge the extent to which whatever its self image, the US was comfortably in tune with contemporary European colonial views. It begins to seem unlikely that the US would ever have supported Vietnamese independence against the French.

And if we add to our account that Ho Chi Min did not find his commitment to Communist-led social revolution in Vietnam at odds with his nationalism and might not have been inclined to make the switch to an American form of liberal capitalism, it is even more unlikely that a benign US policy could have emerged. Nevertheless, and I really want to stress this, we can imagine how it could have been different.

And it is important that we do so. Else one's sense of historical contingency and history become nothing more than a working out of flat inevitabilities. However in tune with European colonial attitudes Roosevelt and the State Department might have been, at the same time they believed that they and their country were fundamentally different from Europe and especially from France. More honorable, more competent in the preparation of their colonial possessions for independence, less hostile to Asian nationalism and more committed to the process at least of de-colonization.

Ho Chi Minh had endorsed this ideal image of America, that it was the last, best hope of mankind. In 1919, after all, he had appealed to the Versailles Peace Conference on the basis of Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination for all nations. In 1945, he used the US Declaration of Independence as the basic text for his own declaration of the end of French colonialism.

He wrote in English a series of moving letters of appeal to President Truman and offered specific economic inducements to America capitalists. Suppose it had been FDR receiving those letters or suppose Truman had supported the idea of an international trusteeship or taken seriously the pleasures of the Atlantic Charter or answered any of those letters.

Practical, nationalist revolutionary that he was, Ho Chi Minh might have gone along with the notion of trusteeship, and within it, perhaps, been able to carve out the liniments of a genuinely independent Vietnam.

For a brief period, post 1945, how brief, America historians continue to debate, there was a certain flexibility to US policy that yielded only slowly to definitions of a rigid new-world order in which Communism replaced Fascism as the enemy of all that was good. Mark Lawrence's recent book, *Constructing Vietnam and the Making of the Cold War in Southeast Asia*, explores those years and sees that and describes those western officials who

opposed the application of simplistic Cold War thinking, in his words, in complicated colonial settings.

And for a time, they held their adversaries at bay. It is even possible, although I admit it's a stretch, that the administration in Washington could have supported an independent Vietnam, led by a Communist-dominated coalition, could have in short, declared Ho an Asian Tito. The threat of a democratic republic of Vietnam a threat to the US about as grave as Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

Alternately, had the French accepted the various compromises Ho Chi Minh offered and come to terms with the Viet Min, the US would have undoubtedly supported them. Instead, under pressure from domestic conservatives and European allies, the Truman administration, while continuing to proclaim its anti-colonial intentions, yielded to the French definition of its war in Indochina. Not the squashing of a movement for national liberation, but rather a struggle to the death against Red colonialism.

And the US moved decisively to fund the French war and, ultimately, to inherit it. What most predicted for the war the US would conduct in Vietnam, was a blindness to how other countries experienced US policy. There is a wonderful moment in a conference so many people here may have attended when Vietnamese and American policymakers and historians met in Hanoi long after the war.

Nicolas Katzenbach, who had worked in Vietnam in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, explained to the Vietnamese, quote, “It should have been clear to everyone that the US was opposed to colonialism after World War II-- Even if some of the policies of the US tended to support the colonial powers in some parts of the world”--

Yet, he complained his Vietnamese interlocutors seemed to think the US was pro-colonial, “even though everything we did and said opposed colonialism in most part of the world.” Most of the US said, but little that it did, opposed colonialism. And by the early 1950’s this was evident, not just to Vietnamese but to the Chinese, Koreans, Iranians, and Guatemalans.

Some European colonial powers could rely on the US for support: the French in China and the British in Malaya but not the Dutch in Indonesia. All of the post-1945 America administrations, much of the America public believed and believes that the interests of the United States are inherently consonant with the interests of the world in general. What is striking is the lack of a structural understanding by both supporters and critics of a distinct and interested United States.

Instead of observing a play of independent interest, those of the United States in play with those of Vietnam or France or China, the US, thus a nation among nations, there are assertions of morality by both supporters and critics, one side insisting the US does great good. The other, that it does harm.

Both supporters and critics put the problem in moral rather than political terms, because, in a sense, they do not recognize that the conflicts are political, that they are conflicts over conflicting interests. The US in pursuit of its policies in the world does not negotiate over interests because it insists, “We are the world.” The fighters in Iraq who are dubbed “foreign,” in official and press reports, are all from Arab countries.

In Vietnam, the only troops described as foreign are from North Vietnam itself. American troops seemed never to be termed foreign, as if Americans were everywhere indigenous. It is thus possible for policymakers, historians, journalists and the public to imagine that the US acts always and everywhere on behalf of others as it would on its own behalf for the freedom and well being of whatever country to which it has brought a war.

The conviction of its own good intentions, of its overall beneficence in the world, shields American politicians from taking responsibility for the disasters they create and persuades the electorate that the wars in which they have been led are all, at least at that start, just. The central mechanism of the US policy in the 1940s, as today, the pivot around which all the rest rotates, is the conviction that the particular national interests of the United States are identical with the transcendent, universal interests of humanity.

The increasingly evident falsehood of this claim produces what Che Guevara once hoped for, “two, three, many Vietnams.” Thank you.

[Applause]

WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you, Professor Young. Before turning to Professor Herring, who will also deliver prepared remarks, in order to try to make this into at least a bit of a conversation, which was our goal to begin with, a few points. First, the archivist of the United States did not negotiate a moratorium on reclassification. He announced a moratorium. [Laughter]

[Applause]

YOUNG: That's great. That's even better.

WEINSTEIN: Second, I'm pleased to say that one of the 12 presidential libraries supporting this conference with funds and other support is the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace. Whatever one's views of the Vietnam War, every presidential library has its hands on this phenomenon as we do at NARA. I'm very pleased to say that as well.

Finally, the issue of how anti-colonialist or colonialist the United States was in going from the Roosevelt to the Truman administration, we are not going to settle here today. I'm glad Professor Young has raised some of these issues. I would hope that even as one looks at distributing her paper that one of the things that intrigued me was the fact that at times I thought she was

arguing in favor of a stronger American anti-colonialist position using evidence to support America colonialism.

For example, the Philippines came in but didn't really come in for much mention. Yet the Philippines became independent during this period. Why? Because we went through that process. So this is an argument that will continue. It is by no means settled. What Professor Young's paper shows is that the Vietnam War is alive and well as an issue of debate in America history and American public policy.

With that, Professor Herring. And I'm keeping my fingers crossed that my two remaining colleagues will keep their presentations as brief as possible so we will have as much time for questions and comments from the audience as we can. And even for a little bit of conversation from your moderator.

Thank you.

GEORGE HERRING: Thank you, very much for the opportunity to be here. I would like to begin by expressing some of the same concerns that Marilyn did on a slightly different context. When I started work on *America's Longest War* in 1976, I thought, well, the first obvious, obligatory thing to do is to visit all the presidential libraries. And so I did that, planning long weeks away from my family in Independence and Abilene and other exciting places in the Midwest.

And I really didn't expect to find a great deal. And I must say I was pleasantly surprised. I had struggled as the historian of World War II with the declassification process in the sixties dealing with World War II. And I really didn't expect much on Vietnam at that early date. And in every case-- I even visited the Kennedy Library. I forgot to mention Waltham. I think I'm pronouncing it correctly. My visit was there.

I was pleasantly surprised in every instance and I must say shocked in the case of the Johnson library to find as much material as I did and as much good material as I did. Far from everything-- Everything is not out there now. But I felt at the time and I feel now that certainly for that early time, there was enough material to produce a reasonably well-documented study.

Frankly, for reasons the Marilyn stated, I'm not so optimistic that that will be the case at least in the immediate future. The cancellation of the conference last spring was disturbing. The atmosphere seems very much in favor of secrecy now. The lunacy of reclassifying stuff that is in print out there-- And I'm glad to know that things have been done. All of these things are disturbing for those of us who try to produce history about contemporary events that have some base in documentation.

So I plead with all of you who are involved in this process, to do everything you can to see that the presidential libraries continue to be out front on these issues, making material available long before the ordinary declassification process takes place.

Let me say, secondly, that I'm a little bit troubled by focusing on presidencies for some of the similar reasons Marilyn expressed. I think Vietnam is a national commitment. It is something that happens over the time. It is too easy to say that if something had happened here or there or somebody else had been in power, that things might have gone differently.

Having said that, and since Marilyn sort of started on the early years and Bob wanted to work on Kennedy, I kind of took Eisenhower by default. I'm happy to do that because it's an area that I worked with a lot in the eighties and nineties. And I think it is very important. A lot of focus has been on what Johnson did do. There has been a lot of attention given to what Kennedy might have done. And I think it's important that the Eisenhower commitments be considered as well.

And I will try to do that briefly. And try in the process to extrapolate what I think are some broader themes that run through the course of American escalation in Vietnam. It has been fashionable at times among conservatives to blame liberals for the mess in Vietnam. That the conservatives then, according to the story had to come and clean up--

It's important to note, and I think the Eisenhower decisions of '53, '54, and '55 are crucial decisions in this process. In fact, I would suggest that given the mechanism of the Geneva Conference, which was out there, this may have been the last time when the United States could have chosen to stand

by and do nothing or do little and history might have taken its course in that area and it would have been very different.

But, of course, that is not what happened. Three decisions were made that deepened the American commitment. And at least two of these decisions, I think, suggest some things that fit into the larger process. The first of the decisions is in 1953, shortly after the administration takes office. And that is the decision to put increased pressure on the French to step up their commitment, and as a price for that, for the United States to step up its commitment in terms of aid.

And this suggests something that occurs, I think, over and over again: the importance of the electoral cycle. What happens over and over again is that just as an administration is wearying of the problem and on the verge of despair with the problem in Indochina or Vietnam, a new administration comes in, with new ideas, new energy, new optimism, a “can-do” attitude.

Maybe they believe their own campaign rhetoric about the ineptitude of the people who had come before them. Certainly they bring to the task the notion that we can succeed where those other folks failed. This happened first in 1953. The Truman administration had experienced three years of frustration, four years of frustration at this time in dealing with the French in Indochina, in Vietnam. Dean Acheson especially was wearying of it, eager to get on to other things.

Whether they would have dropped it, whether they might at some point have pressured the French as they did the Dutch, is not clear. Probably not. But there seems at least the likelihood here that they would not have drastically stepped up the commitment. What happens, of course, is the new administration comes in. It does step up the commitment. It puts great pressure on the French to take a more offensive attitude towards the war, which presumably is the solution.

It expands aid to the point of 1953-54. We are paying basically 70-80% of the cost of the war. Greatly expands the US commitment, the depths of its involvement. And this repeats itself over and over and over again all the way, I would add, up to 1969 and the Nixon administration, when despite the really impossible tangle that Johnson left Nixon, there is still a belief, an optimism that, as is stated frequently, that this thing can be resolved in a favorable sort of way in six months.

The second decision is 1954. And it's a decision not to intervene militarily in support of the French in Dien Bien Phu, for which Eisenhower has often gotten a lot of praise. Now, I must confess here that I've studied the record that exists on this for years over and over. Looked at everything I could find. And I still don't have a clue what Eisenhower may have planned during this time. Either, as his defenders argue, he was so skillful in covering his tracks or he didn't know.

And I think the latter. I think in fact in many cases, presidential decision-making he was making it up as he went along. But I think also that there was a willingness on the part of Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to enter the war at that particular time if the right conditions could be met. One of them was Congressional assent could have been secured, I think, under different circumstances.

Another was British assent. That was not going to come. But the real stumbling block, interesting in terms of recent events, was France. Because the administration, what the administration wanted France to do, was to pledge to continue fighting the war-- Let the Americans take it over in terms of management, provide air and naval support-- But then agree that the goal should be the independence of Vietnam.

And these are conditions, obviously, that the French weren't going to meet. So think there was a willingness there to enter the war. And I think praise for Eisenhower staying out may be overstated. I do not also subscribe to the notion that all of the activity in March, April, on into May, indeed into June was simply a bluff, a skillful, brilliantly skillful bluff on the part of the Eisenhower administration to keep the Chinese at bay, to keep the hard right at home at bay, while keeping America's hands clean.

Now, the third decision are political decisions, or decisions taken in 1954 and '55. If Eisenhower was not willing to militarily intervene ultimately in 1954, conscious decisions were made in 1954 and then, again, in 1955 to

intervene politically. And these I think are the really crucial decisions. And these are the decisions that are often overlooked or not given their proper weight in this process of looking at presidential decisions, literally from 1945, '45 on.

It stands, I think, as much more important ultimately than his decision not to intervene militarily in the spring of 1954. And what really strikes me in looking closely at this decision is his willingness to commit to an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam headed by Ngo Dinh Diem, despite indications from numerous different sources that the prospects for success were very, very, very low.

I won't go into details here but simply say that British Intelligence, American Intelligence, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense-- John Foster Dulles himself, in his optimistic moments, he rated the odds of success one in three, pessimistic, one in ten. The crucial question seems to me then is why, despite these rather pessimistic estimates, the administration made a limited, to be sure, but still a very important decision to try to sustain an independent, non-Communist government in defiance of the Geneva Agreements in South Vietnam.

Obviously, you can say they couldn't see the future. True, it seemed a low risk, high payoff sort of gamble that might-- And the idea that it might evolve into an enormously costly and destructive venture was simply not there. The other thing that I think plays into it is that recent success in

similar, low-risk kind of payoff initiatives, in Iran in 1953, in Guatemala in 1954, created a sort of hubris or a sense that success could be achieved even if the odds were against it.

“It would be a mistake,” John Foster Dulles told a group of senators, “to act only where it is 100% chance of success.” Vietnam was one of those places where it is right to put up, Dulles’ words, “A good stout effort, even though it is by no means certain we will succeed. In Iran and Guatemala we kept a stout heart, kept our courage up. And then, all of a sudden, things began to get better. And that is a possibility in Vietnam.”

Above all there is the conviction so basic to us as a people, perhaps, that we could succeed because we were Americans. The purity of our motives and the skill of our methods would bring success even though the odds seem very high. “In the lands of the blind,” Eisenhower told members of his National Security Council on October ’54, in defending the commitment to South Vietnam, “one-eyed men are king.” Obviously, in his view, we are that one-eyed man.

This too, I think, tend to repeat itself over and over again. I’m not of the belief that administrations went ahead, knowingly that the best-- The Ellsberg idea of a stalemate machine-- I believe that in the back of their minds there was always this notion that because we were Americans we could pull it off. These, again, I think are very, very important decisions.

The Geneva Accords provided a mechanism for letting things work their way out in Vietnam. This was a chance to let history take its course. This did not happen because deliberate decisions, choices were made to defy the odds, to fulfill what were considered important policy goals in Vietnam. Thank you.

[Applause]

WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Professor Herring. In the land of C-Span, the one with the microphone is king. And you have given a very eloquent presentation of the problems of the Eisenhower administration. One disagrees with scholars as versed as these three in the early years of the Vietnam experience, the US experience in Vietnam with some trepidation.

But the fact of the matter is, it would have been interesting to hear a few words on the role of General Ridgeway, General Gavin and others, who came to Eisenhower as military colleagues, having prepared, in Ridgeway's case as I understand it, a devastating report detailing the possible military cost of intervention. In short, was Eisenhower responding in 1954 (We can get into this in the questions later.) in his decision not to support an air strike in Dien Bien Phu, which various other key figures in the administration wanted.

Was this based upon a more realistic reading of military intelligence and for that matter, does he deserve credit for that, for not having gone to war? It

seems to me that he is being portrayed here in a somewhat, well, in a way that the evidence doesn't fully support. But I'm not a scholar of that period. Let's find out what others think. Professor Schulzinger, it's your microphone.

ROBERT SCHULZINGER: Thank you. Before my father died in 2001, he spent his last years in a Jewish nursing home in Cincinnati. And some of the staff wore tee shirts with the question, "What would Jesus do?" I don't know what the answer was, but dad did get very good care in his last days.

And for at least 40 years, people could have been wearing shirts, "What would JFK have done?" And nowhere is that question more compelling than when it comes to Vietnam. And there is a simple answer to this question and I will give it here. Maybe I should stop because Allen Weinstein has asked me to be brief. And the answer is, no one knows.
[Laughter] [Applause]

But I'm not going to stop. History only happens one way. But there are many other ways that it could have turned out. Now the contours of the answer to the "what would JFK have done" question were set as early as 1966, when misgivings grew about the growing commitment of the US in Vietnam. And on the one hand were some of the slain president's most bereft supporters who claimed that he had grown ever-more skeptical about the answers for success of the government of South Vietnam and was preparing a way for a graceful exit after the 1964 election.

And on the other hand were Lyndon Johnson's most loyal supporters who claimed that everything that Johnson did regarding Vietnam in the months and first year after he became president was in accordance with Kennedy's ideas and intentions. Embedded in the question is what Kennedy's advisors would have done. And here the answer, I think, is much clearer.

Johnson depended on Kennedy's advisors in the first year. And almost all of them believed it was essential for the US to keep the government of Vietnam afloat. About the only one who disagreed was Under Secretary of State George Ball. And his dissent was less important than the encouragement to support, first General Minh and then General Kahn coming from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and, to a lesser extent, Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

But to say that Kennedy's advisors thought the stakes were high in Vietnam begs a lot of other questions. How did Presidents Kennedy and Johnson use their advisors? How confident were the two presidents in their own independent judgments? What difference did it make that Kennedy was dealing with Vietnam with the benefit of the burden of nearly three years of experience in the presidency, while Johnson dealt with Vietnam first thing?

Kennedy's experience in those three years made him less reliant on the views of advisors. Or, to put it more accurately, he was more confident in his own judgment after the successes, and, even more important, his

administration's foreign policy failures. Of course, the Bay of Pigs made him less reliant on expert military and Intelligence advice.

And when it came to Vietnam, 1963 had been horrible. By October of that year the growing unpopularity of Diem's government, the at-best stalemate in the war, presented a situation with few good outcomes. Yes, it was true Kennedy's advisors thought the future of Vietnam was vital. So did he. But that didn't mean he knew what to do. And the facts, the fact that his advisors were in agreement that Diem had to go and a new government of Vietnam had to wage the war more aggressively, didn't mean that they knew what to do either.

Kennedy's attitudes towards advisors and their advice in the fall of '63 was skeptical. He might not have been all the different from Harry Cohn the great movie producer of the 1930s. He used to scream whenever his aides would tell him that this or that project was a sure hit and another one was a guaranteed flop, "Nobody knows anything," which is a good maxim for an executive in dealing with her lieutenants.

And here the tapes of Kennedy with his advisors is most instructive. The events for which we have tapes, civil rights, Cuban missile crisis, and occasionally Vietnam, the view that emerges of Kennedy is quite kind and supportive to him. He is engaged, participates in the give and take, and fairly confident in his own judgment and ability to make up his own mind. He welcomes disagreement rather than demands consensus.

Johnson came to office vowing to determine what Kennedy would have done and then do it. But that was almost impossible when it came to Vietnam because Kennedy didn't know what he was going to do. He certainly didn't know with any precision. Beyond that, he surely didn't know how quickly he had to make decisions. The complexities of what the United States should do in Vietnam were all the more intense because the first three weeks of November, the three weeks after Diem's death, saw a radically changed situation in Vietnam.

Kennedy and his advisors knew that the United States had to do something other than they had been doing. But most certainly they didn't know they had to make decisions by November 22nd. If they had a deadline in mind it was the next November, 1964. And this election deadline influenced Johnson, too. The transition between Kennedy and Johnson over Vietnam has much in common with the transition from Lincoln to Johnson over reconstruction and what we have heard about before.

Between Roosevelt and Truman over the growing Cold War, in general, and Vietnam in particular-- In each of the two previous cases, the dead president had vast experience, had learned to do things differently over the course of a difficult war, was consonant of his ability to manage advisors, and, maybe most of all, avoided deciding until he had to decide.

Johnson was different. He deferred to Kennedy's holdover advisors, when his predecessor had no trouble taking his own path. Johnson thought they knew what they were doing and that their advice carried weight. Maybe most of all, he wanted them to agree.

Here, of course, was one of the most paradoxical aspects of Johnson's attitude toward the Vietnam decision-making. He was probably more skeptical, if possible, than even Kennedy was about the chances of success in Vietnam. He knew the human cost and he anguished about it. The common view is correct that LBJ worried that the increasing cost of the war would overwhelm the Great Society.

Yet it is not entirely true that he deferred to Kennedy's advisors. One of them in particular, Henry Cabot Lodge, he thought had made things much worse in Vietnam by insisting on the coup to oust Diem. It is better to say that Johnson deferred to Kennedy's advisors whom he thought were the most accomplished. That is what we are going to hear later, the best and the brightest.

So why did Johnson go along a path that he had grave doubts about? The Cold War context explains much of it. Vietnam was important. Nearly everyone agreed because of the competition with the Soviets, credibility mattered with adversaries, with allies and maybe most of all what the non-aligned thought of America's credibility.

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Memory of the recent past played the greatest role in the decisions Johnson made. Here it is difficult with our early 21st sensibilities fully to comprehend the sense of accomplishment with post World War II America. We look back at the last 40 years through the lens of the failure in Vietnam and nowadays with the similarities between Vietnam and Iraq. Now so in the years '63 to '65--

Yes, planners did look back at Korea. But there were other reasons for the end of the Democratic Party's hold on the White House after 20 years than the Korean War. When Johnson escalated in Vietnam he kept Korea in mind insofar as he wanted to avoid Chinese intervention. Including Korea. There was nothing in the period 1941 to 1965 that prepared planners to believe that war in Vietnam would tear American society apart the way it did. For the architects of the Vietnam War to have truly weighed the cost of the war, they would have had to have gone through Vietnam itself.

Would Kennedy have behaved differently than Johnson in '64? I'm doubtful. Because like Johnson he would have wanted to keep the issue of Vietnam out of the election debate. That means doing what was necessary to keep the government in power. Would he have prepared a Tonkin Gulf resolution and responded with air strikes against North Vietnam? It is likely that he would have. Johnson did so to keep Goldwater at bay and to appear to be the more reasonable of the two candidates.

Furthermore, and here we really get into the realm of speculation, it's probable the election of 1964 would have been a closer race had Kennedy lived and the grief he willed up after his murder not provided the Democrats such sympathy. It's hard to say and I think that in Bob Dallek's recent biography of Kennedy, it is just packed with fact. Some of the most interesting is the polling data from the fall of 1963, which shows that Kennedy was far, far ahead.

It is still doubtful, though, that had he won the election he would have had the overwhelming Congressional majority that Johnson did in 1964. But the most difficult question to answer is whether Kennedy would have Americanized the war the way Johnson did in '65. Here the evidence about Kennedy's skepticism and about the chances for success cast the scales in favor of doubting that he would have made it as American a war.

A Kennedy, safely reelected with four years of experience of dealing with the world's difficulties, would have made an American exit from Vietnam seem far less traumatic than it did for Johnson. Kennedy, by the time of his death, was looking for ways to end the Cold War. The imperative to reduce tensions with the Soviet Union rather than end the Cold War would have been even higher in a second term.

And the speculation doesn't need to end with the decision to Americanize the war in '65. What would have happened had it been Americanized and the turmoil of 1966 occurred? Johnson added troops even after some of the

original proponents of the war, notably McGeorge Bundy and McNamara, had changed their minds. He did so even after Senators Fulbright, McGovern, and Church had broken with his policy.

He did so even after the Republicans picked up 47 seats in the House in the '66 election. The LBJ who continued to escalate the war in '66 and '67 was a far different man than the confident LBJ who took over the country in 1966. With Walt Rostow as National Security Advisor after February '66, Johnson made no pretense of soliciting differences of opinion on escalation. By that time he equated dissent with disloyalty.

Kennedy would very likely have been much more surefooted politically than Johnson in 1966 and 1967. And Kennedy-- In combination with Kennedy's confidence in his ability to make his own decisions in important parts of the world, it is very likely that his decisions in '66 and '67 would have been different than Johnson. He would not have raised the stakes as high and he would have looked sooner for a graceful exit. That would have been very hard by '67.

It is difficult to know what he would have done and what the consequences would have been. But it is also difficult to believe that they would have been much worse than the way it actually happened.

[Applause]

WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Professor Schulzinger. I think it is my turn.

Let's see. There seems to be a broad measure of consensus among the three of you that there seems to have been no turning point, no divergence from a policy that seems to accumulate more and more complexities and difficulties, but that was of a piece from the Truman administration, certainly, on through at least the Kennedy administration, or even into the Johnson administration that Professor Schulzinger has talked about.

Do any of you see the possibility of a turning point? Do any of you see a moment in history when, for example, either the United States would have backed away or adopted a different policy or endorsed Ho Chi Minh, whatever the option might have been? Or are we witnessing something, the logic of which moved from presidency to presidency? And if we could keep our answers brief, we will have time for more questions. Thank you.

HERRING: There were numerous forks in the road but none were taken. I mean it is just as complicated and just as simple as that as far as I can see it. There are many points. 1945 as Marilyn mentioned, 1950, 1954, 1961, 1964-65 where there were opportunities or forks in the road as I put it before. But at no point do I see, and maybe my colleagues might differ, do I see people even looking, the key people looking hard in those directions. I just don't see that.

YOUNG: Yeah. I agree. I also think it is important to note the people who disagreed as Bob did. So you have a sense of the choices being made. It is

not like everybody agreed. There was real dissent in the government as out. And it goes all the way back to the Truman administration as well. And that is important. Because otherwise, as I said before, any sense of contingency is lost and you are gripped in an iron logic.

There were other possibilities. Then you explain, as both of my colleagues have, why they weren't taken. But they existed.

HERRING: But dissenters are few in number and relatively low in status. And even George Ball, who was so eloquent on this, is a sort of domesticated dissenter. I mean Johnson knows that Ball is going to say his piece and Johnson knows that he is going to ignore it. And he knows that George Ball is not going to go public with it and not challenge.

YOUNG: Yes. But when Johnson is speaking to Russell on the telephone in tapes, right? And the Senator is saying, "You are not going to do Korea, again, please." And he doesn't mean China. He means the bombing. He means the death. That's what he means. And Johnson says, "No. No." And then he quotes that insurance guy from Texas who says, "Oh, the America people will never stand for your leaving, for cutting and running."

WEINSTEIN: This is the same Johnson who listened very carefully to the advice of his generals ten years earlier about, in '54 at least, about not getting involved in Dien Bien Phu. This is the same Johnson who turned

down the advice of his Vice President and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff--

HERRING: But the big difference there is the French, you see. It's in 1954 when Lyndon Johnson and other senators, and the senators are the ones who are brought into the process, oppose it. What they can easily oppose, Kennedy is the most outspoken, is going into Vietnam and Indochina in support of France. That's what is crucial there.

SCHULZINGER: There is a new book by Gareth Porter called *The Perils of Dominance*, who argues that certainly there were alternatives. There were turning points. His argument for why the United States got involved in Vietnam was somewhat different from mine, not because they see it as a great-- The peril or the threat from the Soviet Union but because the United States was in a position of such overwhelming power.

And here I do agree with him. That the consequence of getting out is seen as higher than continuing on the path because, as I pointed out, even those who predicted that it is not going to work very well, don't predict the domestic turmoil, how bad it is going to be. The advocates of the war think it is going to be, I wouldn't say easy, but do-able. Because everything the United States had done since 1945 had been done.

You know, we go to the moon not because it's easy, but because it is hard. Well, embedded in that, is we are going to get to the moon.

WEINSTEIN: There is another element, though, that merges from that as well, Professor Schulzinger. He pointed out the fact that by and large there is a benign Washington media from '63 to '65 after the Kennedy assassination, in the first years of the Johnson administration. And this is a person who had the right to expect that he would be supported by the media in his policies, foreign and domestic. And the election victory confirmed that feeling perhaps.

And I wonder if we can steer that into a discussion of what role, if any, you felt the media had in either reinforcing or helping to define America policy toward Indochina and then Vietnam from '45 on through '65?

SCHULZINGER: Johnson had a complex relationship with the media. I guess Johnson had complex relationships with everybody. When the media supported him he liked it. But he thought it was because he had manipulated them into supporting him. When they opposed him they thought that somebody else was manipulating them more than he was and the manipulation was coming out of Moscow.

So Walter Lippman begins warning against the escalation against the war in Vietnam in April of 1965. Johnson's reaction is either he has gone senile or he is in the pay of the Russians. Well--

WEINSTEIN: Let me understand, though. Would you not say for a president who did not have Franklin Roosevelt's or John F. Kennedy's ability to co-opt the media as effectively as they did, the media didn't particularly like Johnson as a person? They adored Roosevelt. They adored Kennedy. And that made a huge difference in the coverage, in my view.

SCHULZINGER: I think you could say the same about Johnson as his advisors. He didn't co-opt them so much as he bullied them. Some of them didn't like him very much. And he didn't have a lot of respect for them, especially when they voiced disappointment. So, yes, it's as difficult I think for us today to imagine the Washington media pre-Vietnam as it is to imagine the country pre-Vietnam. But the planners who were getting the United States into the war, that's the world they lived in. They were shocked by the opposition of the media. They were shocked by the demonstration against the war.

WEINSTEIN: It is an interesting concept, pre-Vietnam. We talk about the country pre-9/11. We talk about the country pre-Depression, the Great Depression of the thirties. We talk about the country pre-World War II. Define the differences as you see the United States pre-Vietnam and post-Vietnam. Your papers have talked about that. It might be nice to make them explicit.

YOUNG: Well, pre-Vietnam also means--

WEINSTEIN: I know it's an idiot's question, but--

YOUNG: It's a very good question. It is just that it takes an entire semester's course to answer it.

[Laughter]

YOUNG: But it is a very good question. And I think part of it is the way in which the United States changing pre-Vietnam and quite apart from Vietnam. And that is really from the late fifties on. It's hard to remember but that beat generation was treated with something of the same wonder and contempt and fear as the counter-culture at a later period.

But the civil rights movement is really important in all of this, I think, because what the civil rights movement did was to introduce younger generations of Americans to the notion that there was something radically wrong with the United States. And that had to do with the way in which, with how unequal it was, North and South.

And in addition, there was the experience of mobilization in protest and of actually defying police forces in the South and, in some cases, in the North. And acting in the world. You can date it back even before that, the anti-nuke movement, and the way in which pressure against nuclear testing was tremendously important. So you have groups of people who have the experience of mobilization and action, and participation in the American

polity in an entirely different way, I think, or a somewhat different way in the 1950's.

WEINSTEIN: Unlike the labor protests of the 1930s?

YOUNG: No, much like the labor protests of the-- Exactly so.

WEINSTEIN: So there is a history. There is a [simultaneous conversation]

YOUNG: It is overcoming the dead hand of the 1950s.

WEINSTEIN: So Vietnam brings the protest movement back from your perspective but it is certainly not--

HERRING: It becomes the focal point. It is often conveniently blamed for those who don't like the changes of the sixties. But those things would have happened, anyway. They would have happened.

WEINSTEIN: My point simply, I suppose, is we are prone as a culture to look for markers that may not be as full as we would like them to be. Pre-Vietnam and post-Vietnam, pre-9/11, post-9/11, most people are beginning to recognize that a great many things are quite continuous with what they were pre-9/11.

YOUNG: Oh, sure.

HERRING: And certainly they are never quite as sharp as we think they are at the time.

SCHULZINGER: We do have a relatively contemporary example of what things were like pre-Vietnam. That's the United States 1999. A word reemerged in the 1990s that hadn't been used since Vietnam, consensus. There was something called the Washington consensus. It went across party lines. It went across international lines. It was using the United States to expand trade, expand markets, globalization and democracy. And there was absolute agreement on that. It sounds so long ago.

WEINSTEIN: Well, the terms change, but the Washington consensus term was used, the policies were in effect long before then, as you are well aware of many of those policies. Professor Young actually brings up one point that you said it would take a semester to do this, probably. You may be right. There is a story that I've always loved about the great historian Charles Beard, who was walking with a friend, George Cowan, the president of Teachers' College, down Riverside Drive in New York one day, one Sunday.

And Cowan said to Beard, "Beard, what have you learned from history? What are the lessons of history?" And Beard said, "Don't be ridiculous. It would take me years for me to tell you what I've learned from history." And

as they walked, years became months, months became days, days became hours, hours became minutes.

And finally Beard said, “You know, I learned three things from history, three things. First, those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. Second, that the mills of the gods grind slowly. They grind exceedingly small. And third, that the bee fertilizes the flower it robs.” Well, obviously, Cowan was not happy with any of this, went home, and thought that was the end of it. And about three in the morning the following morning he had a phone call and he picked it up.

And it was Beard. And Beard said, “George, I’ve learned a fourth thing from history. I just realized that.” I should probably add the date was Monday, December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor. “What have you learned, Charles?” “I’ve learned that when it gets dark enough you can see the stars.” That’s a silly little story, but I don’t think it takes any of us a full semester on that. Let me ask you another question. [Laughter]

How much of an effect did American domestic politics have on the war early on, before ’64? Would you say-- At what point does Vietnam suddenly start to become a salient question to the American electorate?

YOUNG: You have Rusk talking about it in the fifties, the importance of Vietnam. And its, of course, its importance is keyed into what is happening in the war in Korea, that is, America’s war in Korea. So there is a constant

attention to the domestic scene, with Rusk saying, “We really have to explain to the people that we are not helping French colonialism, we are defeating Soviet imperialism. And once they understand that, they will support what we are doing.”

So there is a very close attention to domestic politics. And also an effort to distinguish between the war in Korea and France’s war in Indochina. It got very, very complicated, but always in terms of domestic politics, for sure.

HERRING: The French mantra was always, “One war. One war.” And the United States, of course, always, emphatically denied this.

[Simultaneous conversation] domestic politics.

SCHULZINGER: Yeah. They talk about the long 1964, which goes from November 22, 1963 until April, if not longer, 1965. And Vietnam is an important issue, not just in the minds of policymakers but in terms of the articulate public. I guess you can start it before November ’63. Kennedy appointed Henry Cabot Lodge to keep Vietnam off the table as a partisan issue.

Go to the end of that period. Exactly 41 years ago today or this week was the first teach-in at the University of Michigan. Johnson is a shock and outrage-- All these liberal professors who supported him just four months before are getting up there bashing him on not understanding the

complexities of Asian nationalism. And so it's there and not as big of an issue as it would become in 1966 and certainly 1968. But Vietnam is an issue while these decisions to Americanize the war were being taken.

HERRING: You can take it, as Marilyn said-- You can go back to 1950 because keep in mind, China and the aftermath in 1949, the fall of China, that is very present in the minds of those who are making those decisions. Actually, the first money that goes to Vietnam, if I'm not mistaken, is money that was taken from a fund to support China. The view certainly is that if a Vietnam and/or Indochina were to fall in the immediate aftermath of what had happened in 1949, it would exacerbate an already serious, domestic political problem.

WEINSTEIN: I have a bunch of audience questions. I'm just going to take them in order. For Dr. Young. Ho Chi Minh, nationalist first and then Communist first, or Communist first?

YOUNG: For him, he didn't see a contradiction and I don't see why I should. [Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: Touché. If Congress did not--

YOUNG: Did you want to add to that? I don't mean to shut discussion.

WEINSTEIN: No. That is all right. Do you want to answer that one, too?

HERRING: No. I totally agree. I think we were the ones made that distinction and made sort of the assumption that a Communist could not be a nationalist.

WEINSTEIN: Can a nationalist be a Communist? And can a nationalist be a Communist and be a Communist first?

HERRING: Absolutely.

WEINSTEIN: Dr. Young said no. There is no contradiction.

SCHULZINGER: As it develops you could. Trotsky didn't think so. But he was out by this time. He [simultaneous conversation]

YOUNG: The last people who were totally convinced of proletarian internationalism lived in Washington. [Applause]

WEINSTEIN: What happened to the domino theory? Anybody want to talk about the domino theory?

YOUNG: It starts to fall the other way.

WEINSTEIN: It is not necessarily the view you get in Asia, though.

YOUNG: Sure.

WEINSTEIN: There are a lot of countries today that take the--

YOUNG: No. I was being facetious.

WEINSTEIN: I know.

YOUNG: I think it is still alive and well.

HERRING: I'm sorry, what was the question?

YOUNG: The domino theory.

HERRING: What was the question?

YOUNG: What happened to it?

HERRING: Well, yeah. It is still taken quite seriously, is it not? There is a Middle East sort of domino theory working now. Or even a reverse domino theory that if we could topple Iraq then others might follow. We could be the perpetrators of falling dominos.

SCHULZINGER: For years after he left office, Walt Rostow argued that the domino theory really worked. That the reason the United States fought

as hard as it did in Vietnam from '65 to '68 was to give breathing room for the other Asian economies. And they were then fortified. So that enabled the dominoes to stop falling.

The problem with that argument as you look at it more closely is, first he didn't make it at the time in '66 when he became National Security Advisor. It was after the fact justification. So this was the question about credibility. Had there been the Communist victory in Vietnam as the CIA predicted in 1965, what difference would that have made in the rest of Asia?

For Rostow it would have made a huge difference. The rest of Asia would have been so demoralized that indigenous revolutionaries would have succeeded. Well, if you look at the history post '75, that wasn't the case. Within 15 years we were talking about the Asian tigers throughout that region.

YOUNG: May I say something about credibility?

WEINSTEIN: Sure.

YOUNG: In the United States there is an assertion in each administration in which there is a war. There is an assertion that American credibility is at issue. The assertion is made that in Washington. It is often contradicted that by other countries that say, "No. No. No. You are credible if you stop

doing whatever it is you are doing.” The insistence, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy over and over again.

And even people who oppose wars to begin with say, “Oh, now that we have said”-- It is like a child’s game. “Now that we have said we are going to do it, we have to do it no matter how foolish or even criminal it might be.” I don't know if you--

HERRING: Looking at the domino theory, I think it has taken most seriously in the late forties and early fifties and maybe given the turmoil in Southeast Asia at that time. I mean I don’t believe there is a basis for it but maybe there is a reason to take it more seriously at that time. I think by the early sixties, I think there is a lot of questioning within the Kennedy administration as to whether the domino theory is really valid or whether it is going to operate.

But the notion of credibility is sort of-- [simultaneous conversation] take it over and dominates through the Johnson administration and beyond. And beyond--

WEINSTEIN: I spent an interesting few hours some years ago with Li Quan Yu, listening to Li Quan Yu discuss a variant to the domino theory, which depending on which day he was concerned with, Monday, Wednesday, Friday we were the subject of concern. Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday the Chinese were.

For Professor Herring. Among the options considered for an air strike in Dien Bien Phu was a nuclear strike. How seriously was this option considered?

YOUNG: How serious was the ...(inaudible) about doing nukes in Dien Bien Phu? In the discussion of intervention--

HERRING: Oh, yes.

YOUNG: --How serious was the nuclear option?

HERRING: It was certainly at a planning stage. There was planning and talk about it. I don't find-- I have not seen anything to suggest that during the actual crisis it was-- I mean it really became a sort of decision to be discussed at the top. There is the old business about the Georges Bidault, Dulles offering him two nuclear weapons, "Just use these things if you want. We will give them to you," which seems-- is quite incredible I think. It really doesn't work.

Now what happens is that even after Dien Bien Phu had fallen, there was very serious-- There was planning in Washington and prolonged, sustained discussion between the French and the United States about possible military intervention. This goes on into, as I recall, and it has been a while, late June of 1954. And during this point, again, at the planning level-- And what they

are talking about is not simply saving but a much broader southern Asian war.

And there is discussion of the possible use of nuclear weapons as part of the planning of those operations. But did they ever come close to using it? No. My answer, my short answer would be no.

WEINSTEIN: Let me read a quote to the three of you, without mentioning who the quote is from, and get your reactions to it.

YOUNG: This is like a test. My father once did this to me with scotch and I failed. [Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: If you brought the scotch, I've got the glasses.

YOUNG: Later.

WEINSTEIN: "War is an ugly thing but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling, which thinks nothing is worth a war is worse. When the people are used as mere human instruments for firing cannon or thrusting bayonets in the service of the selfish interests and purposes of the master, such war degrades a people.

"A war to protect other human beings against tyrannical injustice, a war to give victory to their own ideas of right and good, which is their own war

carried on for an honest purpose by their free choice, is often the means of their regeneration. A man who has nothing he is willing to fight for, nothing that he cares about more than he cares about his personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.”

Any comments?

YOUNG: Bob, do you want to--

SCHULZINGER: Sounds like Theodore Roosevelt. But I’m not-- Don’t hold me to that. The question is, are wars ever justified? I’m no pacifist. I think some wars are justified. Do I think the war in Vietnam, the American war in Vietnam, was justified? The answer is no. That gets back to another question. One of the books that has engaged in this discussion of 1964 is by Fred Logevall entitled, *Choosing War*, in which he says, “The Johnson administration chose to escalate the war in Vietnam.”

Well, the idea of a war of choice is much in discussion over the last three years ever since the war with Iraq. And critics said, “Well, this is the first war of choice,” which raised my eyebrows. Most wars are wars of choice. You could go so far as saying all wars are wars of choice, even if you are attacked you have a choice to respond or not respond. I think that statement, whether it was Theodore Roosevelt or not is at such a level of generality that

I don't know if it is very useful in deciding to do this day or that day when confronted with or when making a concrete situation.

YOUNG: So, who said it?

WEINSTEIN: Do you want to respond to that?

YOUNG: No. I want to know who said it? [laughter]

HERRING: Who said it?

WEINSTEIN: You didn't bring the scotch. [Laughter] That was John Stuart Mill. And it was about the American Civil War.

HERRING: It sounded 19th century.

YOUNG: Well, he got the century. He got something.

WEINSTEIN: Okay. If Congress had not passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, would the US involvement have diminished and eventually ended before it did?

HERRING: No.

YOUNG: No.

WEINSTEIN: Just that? Just no? [laughter] I say maybe.

HERRING: McGeorge Bundy said of Pleiku in early 1965 that Pleikus are like streetcars. One comes along every ten minutes or so. And I think the Tonkin Gulf in a sense-- It was very handy from the standpoint of the election campaign. It was a gift from the gods in a sense for Johnson because he got to prove his metal, as it were. He got to show his toughness when he was under fire for that. And it is certainly one of the factors that contributed to his overwhelming victory.

But would war have come anyway? Yes. Yes. Everything was geared up. Everything was geared up. The plans-- I mean sort of a series of events, steps to be taken, were in the process of being developed. So it made it easier in a sense. But there is no doubt in my mind that it would have come.

WEINSTEIN: I would like to ask a particular question. Would any of the presidential library directors who are key figures in the room, care to comment on this? To come up to the stage and take a place by the microphone? So much of this has been predicated on various scholars' perspectives, often drawn from documents at the libraries. I just wondered whether any of you have anything you would like to contribute to this? I'm catching dead silence there.

Come on up, Bill. Roosevelt is responding. And while Bill gets up here, we will comment on the distinction of Ambassador vanden Heuvel and his great service to this country over many years. Welcome, Bill.

[Applause]

WILLIAM VANDEN HEUVEL: Thank you, Allen. And thank these three distinguished participants for their very significant contribution to our understanding of that period. I would like to make a brief comment in relationship to three presidents in the context of personal involvement. Not that I knew Franklin Roosevelt, but I have certainly been personally involved with him in the context of our wonderful library at Hyde Park.

I don't think there is any doubt that the president's death, as Professor Young has suggested, played a crucial role in the changing of America's role in the world, especially in relationship to Asia. Franklin Roosevelt, not only during the war where his dissatisfaction with the French involvement and the Vichy government was well known, and his dissatisfaction with the autocratic style of General de Gaulle was well known--

But before the war, he had made it very clear to the French ambassador and to Jean Monet, for example, in private conversations that he felt that the age of colonialism was over. And that the world had to recognize it and that the western powers had to recognize that those nations that had been held in colonial thrall, that that period was going to end.

And he was very specific about Indochina. Of course, one of the interesting things as we discussed Indochina is how little Americans ever knew about it in the context of going to war. How few Americans knew that there were three countries so totally different, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, North and South Vietnam, how different they were. How few Americans knew the history of the relationship of Vietnam to China, for example.

In any event, I would just like to restate in the context of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that his experience, for example, in Casablanca, where he insisted on having the Sultan of Morocco dine with him, much against the French attitudes, because he wanted to make it very clear that Morocco belonged to the Moroccans as he believed Indochina belonged to the Indochinese.

So I think that the death of the president in April, 1945 was a significant turning point because the president who then succeeded had to face the crisis of the beginning of the Communist challenge. And the Europeanists, I think, who dominated the State Department, made it very clear that they thought that France was in jeopardy and that a Communist control might well take over if, in fact, the Americans opposed the return of the French imperial legacy.

The second thing I would like to say is, I was in Saigon when Dien Bien Phu fell. I was executive assistant to William J. Donovan, Wild Bill Donovan and spent the last six years of his life with him. And in the context of that

had a very clear understanding of his attitude, certainly, and of the OSS attitude. And they certainly say Ho Chi Minh differently than as he was seen in Washington. They saw him, yes, as a Communist, but dominantly as a nationalist.

Also, by that time, we haven't mentioned, there was the phenomenon of Tito. We had seen the situation where a government, Communist government, had broken away from Soviet control. And we had recognized Tito as an alternative and gave him great assistance. In the deliberations of Dien Bien Phu, as I always understood it, Admiral Radford(?) was a major advocate of military intervention. And perhaps more than just straight military intervention as was Vice President Nixon.

HERRING: That would have involved from Radford's standpoint, possibly war with China as well as intervention in Vietnam.

VANDEN HEUVEL: That is certainly true. And the question of President Kennedy. I remember working with President, talking to Senator Kennedy then, in 1958 when he was one of those who formed the American Friends of Vietnam. What happened in the mid-fifties was an astonishing thing. France was prepared to abandon Indochina, Vietnam, in particular.

The United States was not prepared to get involved. Pierre Mendes France had taken over as the Prime Minister of France who had come with a new outlook for France. And in the Geneva Agreements of 1954 there had been,

as I understand it, an understanding for an election that would take place in 1957, an election that was forestalled by John Foster Dulles and that had it been held would have given the United States an opportunity to come out.

But in 1955, over a million Vietnamese refugees came from North to South. That also is a dramatic and important event. The South Vietnamese government that we dealt with in subsequent years was really a North Vietnamese government. People who had come from the North and who had had that hostility-- Ngo Dinh Diem was chosen because he was a national figure, had spent years of his life in the prisons of France. And was recognized as someone who had, with great courage, stood up.

And as everyone was prepared to abandon him in 1954 and '55 as I recall it, he scored a spectacular victory against the dissident forces and showed that he could, in fact, lead. So that the American leadership then began to think, "Well, maybe it is worth a chance." They had already had the experience of Korea. Nobody was prepared to go back for a land war in Asia. I think General Ridgeway was certainly one of those and General MacArthur himself was opposed to the United States participating in the land war.

But if we could, in fact, succeed in keeping South Vietnam free, we had the possibility of what we see in Korea. Had we not succeeded in saving South Korea, think of the totality of Communist destruction that would have taken place there. But instead of that we saw in Vietnam the possibility and a very significant and powerful leader in Ngo Dinh Diem.

Unfortunately, tragically, subsequently, a government corrupted in large part by his brother and his family. But at that time in 1950, strong and prepared. I always remember John F. Kennedy's interview with Walter Cronkite in September of 1963 where it made it explicit and plainly clear that this was a war that that people of Vietnam had to win. That this was not a war that we could take over and make our own, that we could never win it as successors to the French presence in Vietnam.

So, yes, of course, none of us know what John Kennedy would have done. But it is fair to say on the day of his death, there were no combat forces of America in Vietnam. And that the 17 thousand Americans who were there were there as advisors. What would have subsequently would have happened, who knows.

But he was a man who had shown in the Cuban missile crisis that he was his own leader and that he didn't take the advice of Lyndon Johnson and General Taylor and many others who were recommending the invasion of Cuba. And who stood on his own and resisted and found a way to get out of it.

And one other point that I think I would make is, he would have been much more hospitable to internationalizing the conflict and giving the United Nations a role that would have allowed us to come out of it in the sixties as he had been president. Thank you.

[Applause]

WEINSTEIN: Thank you very much Ambassador vanden Heuvel. I'm going to give our three panelists a chance to respond briefly with some final comments because we must move on. At which point I will have a moment or two and then there will be time for our next session. Who would like to start?

YOUNG: Yeah. Just only-- It was a very rich presentation. And I'm not going to take all of it on. But on the issue of Ho Chi Minh as Tito-- That was something explicitly explored from '46 to '49. Washington kept sending queries to people in the field, "How Communist is he?" And they kept coming back and saying, "Well, we don't see Moscow calling the shots. He is Communist but Moscow is not calling the shots." And no one could come up with evidence that Moscow is directing Ho Chi Minh.

And Acheson told them to keep looking in a model of the use of Intelligence with which we have become familiar. The State Department Office of Intelligence Research explained the lack of evidence. Finally, they said, "Look. There is no evidence. So it must be the Vietnamese didn't really need to be told what to do. Because there is no evidence"-- In the echo of our current defense, it's interesting.

And by '49 Acheson decides, literally, all Communists-- This is the way his memorandum went out. All Communists in colonial countries were by definition Stalinists, full Stalinists. And if you look at Melvin Laird's piece in *Foreign Affairs* he said, "Gee, if we had known he was Communist, we could have-- If we had known he was nationalist we could have derailed his Communism."

The inability to understand the possibility of an independence that is not hooked in to a military alliance with the United States, to a form of government, which we decree, that blindness is part of what I was talking about, or cut out of my talk in the interest of collegiality, [Laughter] leaving more time for everybody to ask questions.

HERRING: I want a quick response to that. And Bob and others have begun to persuade me a little bit on the Kennedy issue. But I still think we really have to look at not what he might have done but what he did. And what he did was to create a problem, significantly different than the one he had inherited. And this happens time after time after time. It's a big difference between a couple of hundred advisors who are advising and 16 thousand who are fighting.

And the rhetorical commitment to South Vietnam, whatever his ultimate intentions, the more he said it's important, between '61 and '63 publicly, the more important it becomes.

SCHULZINGER: I mentioned it in a sentence in my remarks. And it's a sentence that could expand into a book. Maybe I will do it. I just finished one. So maybe I will do this. And about the three transitions: Lincoln to Johnson, Roosevelt to Truman, and Kennedy to Johnson. And they are very similar in the case that you have the first, with this vast experience, much more subtle, much more nuanced, willing to accept ambiguity.

That's the case for, had any one of them lived, the outcome would have been different. But let's reverse that. In each case, something happened afterwards, such as the end of reconstruction or the end of the push for racial equality, that lasted for at least 40 years and maybe 100 years. Truman came on. The Cold War lasted for 50 years. Johnson came. The war in Vietnam lasted for 12 years.

So maybe there were deep tendencies in a certain direction that went in that direction regardless of who happened to occupy the office, no matter how subtle the grasp of political nuance or how bull-headed the successor turned out to be.

WEINSTEIN: Thank all three of you. Let me say, in conclusion that this has been a lively panel. I think Ambassador vanden Heuvel has joined an argument here that I wish we had another hour to discuss in this stage in the game, over scotch, of course. But the fact of the matter is, as I sat and listened to your final statements, your final measured statements, I might say--

I was struck by something that I think all of us know about the great of the French historian Marc Bloch, who in his wonderful book, little book, *The Historian's Craft*, talks about the concept of the generation. And defines that, in part, as people who are, basically who are-- how does he put it?-- to be excited by the same dispute, even on opposing sides, is to be alike. And this common stamp deriving from common age, for Bloch says, comprises a generation.

If you want to see Vietnam in operation today, then I suggest you come to Washington and visit the Vietnam War Memorial on any given day. I take all our visitors to Washington from abroad there. And come at any hour of the day or night, you can come at four in the morning, or you come in the middle of the day. I have all three. You will see people who went to Canada. You will see decorated Medal of Honor heroes.

You will see people who are just plain grunts but loved the experience. People who hated it over there. You will see a cross section of America going to the wall, looking for the names of buddies, looking for-- Or just wanting to be there and wanting to talk about their experiences. And the manner in which this country has been cauterizing that experience in very personal ways is something for the world to behold and does when it comes to visit there.

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But I urge the experience on you because it offers a dimension obviously far from the one we are talking about this morning and this afternoon, which is the dimension of how it began. How it ended is yet a story to be written.

But do go there.

And before concluding, I want to thank the three panelists. And I wonder if you could give them an appropriate--

[Applause]

And I want to thank all of you for being with us at the John F. Kennedy Library today. But I want to thank all of you watching on C-Span, who will be watching and debating this issue all across the country and the world. Thank you all. Have a good day.

[Applause]