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It's a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal

On October 2, 1963, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell D. Taylor submitted a report to President John F. Kennedy affirming their belief that the United States would soon be able to withdraw the bulk of its troops then serving in Vietnam. Their report, which was based on a recent fact-finding trip to Indochina, indicated that continued support for and improvements in the South Vietnamese armed forces (RVNAF) should allow the United States to remove most of its soldiers by the end of 1964 and virtually all of them by the end of 1965. To begin the process of phasing out what was then a U.S. military advisory effort, McNamara and Taylor suggested that the United States recall one thousand troops by the end of 1963. Kennedy endorsed this schedule and authorized a public statement to that effect following a series of White House meetings that same day.[1]

Kennedy's decision to accept the McNamara-Taylor recommendation has been the subject of considerable debate, with scholars and former administration officials arguing over whether the president was firmly committed to its particulars—whether Kennedy would have pulled out of Vietnam by the end of 1965, come what may, or whether he would have revised that decision if faced with a deteriorating military situation. The secret tape recordings Kennedy made during his time in the White House are helping to clarify his intentions. The following conversation snippet from the president's October 2 meeting with McNamara, Taylor, and other senior advisers, for example, seems to indicate Kennedy's willingness to postpone a departure date for U.S. forces:

> **Maxwell Taylor:** I will just say this: that we talked to 174 officers, Vietnamese and U.S., and in the case of the U.S. [officers], I always asked the question, "When can you finish this job in the sense that you will reduce this insurgency to little more than sporadic incidents." Inevitably, except for the Delta, they would say, "'64 would be ample time." I realize that's not necessarily . . . I assume there's no major new factors entering [*unclear*]. I realize that—

1. "Memorandum from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense to the President," October 2, 1963, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United State, 1961–63: Vietnam, August–December 1963*, ed. Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC, 1991), 4: 336–46 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*); *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1963* (Washington, DC, 1964), 759–60.

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Figure 1: President Kennedy meets with General Maxwell Taylor and Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara after their trip to Vietnam. Photograph by Abbie Rowe, White House, in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. AR8153-A, October 2, 1963.

President Kennedy: Well, let's say it anyway. Then '65, if it doesn't work out, we'll get a new date.

Taylor: '65, we'll get another.[2]

While the matter is, ultimately, impossible to resolve, several questions about the withdrawal plan—When did work begin on it? What was the military context out of which it arose? Why was it announced in October 1963? Who knew about it?—are central to Kennedy's thinking about the matter at the time of his assassination.

What seems to be missing from the writing on Kennedy and troop withdrawal, however, is a sense of how such planning fit within the broader context of administration policymaking. To wit: while the withdrawal plan became actionable in Fall 1963, it began to take shape in Spring 1962—a time when the administration was shelving its ad hoc approaches to the counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam as well as to the tasks of federal and Defense Department budgeting, imposing more rational, comprehensive, and systematic approaches to all three. When viewed against the backdrop of these developments, the timetable for a Vietnam troop withdrawal seems to have emerged not just from the findings of the McNamara-Taylor trip, nor even from spillover effects of the conflict in neighboring Laos, nor from domestic political pressures building against a continued commitment to Saigon, but from the innovative and more

2. Meeting Tape 114/A49, October 2, 1963, President's Office Files (POF), Presidential Recordings Collection (PRC), JFK Library, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter JFKL); http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/clips/1963_1002_jfk_withdrawal_combined/index.htm/ (accessed March 6, 2009).

general bureaucratic and budgeting processes adopted by the Kennedy administration. Indeed, the specific timetable for a U.S. troop withdrawal—a schedule that McNamara, apparently more so than Kennedy, was committed to implementing—seems to have been an outgrowth of those processes as much as a response to the dynamics of the war itself.

Although there is no proof that Kennedy initiated the planning for troop withdrawal, it is hard to conceive of such a policy without presidential input into its general outlines. Former administration officials, in fact, have claimed that Kennedy directed McNamara to plan for a gradual withdrawal. Likewise, scholars have maintained almost uniformly that the planned withdrawal emanated from a specific presidential instruction.[3] Support for this claim is shaky, however, since no documentary evidence of a Kennedy directive has ever been discovered, either by historians of the war or by those who compiled the Pentagon Papers.[4] McNamara himself maintained that he initiated planning for withdrawal based upon inferences he drew from the administration's public and private statements.[5] Whatever the circumstances of its origin, the notion that the United States might complete its military mission in three years' time first arose in May 1962, during a conference in Saigon with key military and civilian officials. Almost three months later, at meeting with many of those same individuals in Honolulu, McNamara formally directed General Paul D. Harkins, head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to draw up formal plans for the withdrawal of U.S. troops.[6]

The initial energy for this schedule thus emerged in the spring and summer of 1962, a time when the U.S. military mission in Vietnam was still largely an improvised affair. MACV itself had been created in just February of that year, and the influx of men and material associated with Project Beef-Up were the

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3. See, for example, Roswell L. Gilpatric Oral History, May 5, 1970, 97, JFKL; Roswell L. Gilpatric Oral History, November 2, 1982, 6, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum, Austin Texas (hereafter LBJL); Roger Hilsman Oral History, August 14, 1970, 21, JFKL; William C. Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, 1961–1964*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ, 1986), 125; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), 34; Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York, 2003), 189; Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 168.

4. Author interview with Leslie H. Gelb, July 11, 2007; author interview with General Paul F. Gorman (ret. USA), December 15, 2009. For the relevant passage in the *Pentagon Papers*, see *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Gravel Edition, vol. 2 (Boston, 1971), 175. David Kaiser addresses the absence of such documentation, yet maintains that the impulse to scale back U.S. military involvement originated with the president himself. Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 140, 519, fn. 67.

5. Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995), 48–49.

6. George W. Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago, 2001), 149–50; "Record of the Sixth Secretary of Defense Conference," July 23, 1962, *FRUS, 1961–63: Vietnam 1962*, ed. David M. Baehler and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, DC, 1990), 2: 548–50.

result of related, piecemeal steps the administration had taken in late 1961. The effects of those developments were still unfolding when McNamara commented on the haphazard nature of the U.S. assistance program in July 1962. The Kennedy administration had "been concentrating on short term crash-type actions," he observed at a Secretary of Defense Conference in Hawaii, "and now we must look ahead to a carefully conceived long-range program for training and equipping RVNAF and phase out of major US combat, advisory and logistic support activities."[7] McNamara requested that General Harkins draw up such a program; by January 1963, Harkins and his immediate superior, Commander in Chief, Pacific Command Admiral Harry Felt, had transformed McNamara's directive into the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam (CPSVN), the first fully integrated effort to stanch the Communist insurgency. Over the spring and summer of 1963, Pentagon officials would rework its particulars, which included a schedule for completing the U.S. military advisory mission by 1965, before McNamara accepted its final version in early September 1963.[8]

While that multiyear timetable was central to McNamara's vision of a more coordinated approach to Vietnam, it also reflected broader dynamics at work within the Defense Department. The impetus to change the nature of the counterinsurgency program from one of makeshift responses to that of a systematic approach took shape alongside efforts to conceive of the entire Pentagon budget according to more long-range estimates. Unsatisfied with the practice of devising and proposing budgets on a yearly basis—the approach employed by the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower—McNamara had sought to lengthen the time horizon for the application of defense plans and the allocation of expenditures. He accomplished this reversal via the Planning-Programming-Budgeting System, a methodology that sought to harmonize virtually all management and planning operations at the Pentagon. Budgetary decisions would now be based on a Five-Year Defense Plan (FYDP)—a projection of costs and manpower devised alongside and commensurate with a projection of forces eight years out—with a reevaluation and refinement of those estimates taking place continually within a five-year window. Discussions about instituting the FYDP began in 1961 with an eye toward realizing its first iteration by July 1962, roughly the same moment that McNamara would be meeting with his Vietnam advisers in Honolulu.[9]

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7. "Record of the Sixth Secretary of Defense Conference," 548.

8. The CPSVN also informed the goals of the National Campaign Plan—the first effort to coordinate all military activity against the Communists. See U.S. Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967*, IV, B. 4, Bk. 3, 6–15; Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC, 2006), 75–85.

9. William W. Kaufman, *The McNamara Strategy* (New York, 1964), 173–78; Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961–1969* (New York, 1971), 48; Lawrence S. Kaplan, et. al., *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense: The McNamara Ascendancy, 1961–1965*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC, 2006), 72–78. According to Enthoven and Smith, McNamara and his staff did not apply the machinery of the PPBS to Vietnam. *How Much Is Enough?* 267.

McNamara's thinking about Pentagon operations also dovetailed with a broader, administration-wide philosophy toward federal budgeting. The brainchild of Budget Director David Bell, this approach, which Kennedy endorsed in April 1961, marked yet another break with the previous administration. As Bell put it, the Eisenhower team had addressed federal budgeting more as accountants than planners; Bell thought the proper function of the Budget Bureau was to assist the president in rationalizing his programs over a multiyear period, a position that found a ready ear in the new, activist chief executive. Such extended planning, which sought to incorporate five-year projections, would commence with the preparation of the FY 1963 budget, which meant that Bell would begin to map out budgetary targets in Spring 1962.

For all the emphasis the administration put on planning, however, economy became the watchword of the day. Not long after becoming defense secretary, McNamara began to formulate a "Defense Department Cost Reduction Program," part of a broader effort to rein in wasteful spending at the Pentagon.[10] In line with the five-year budgeting guidelines instituted by Bell, this cost reduction program established a series of objectives that McNamara sought to realize over a five-year time span. He sent these proposals to Kennedy in July 1962—again, at the very moment the Pentagon was moving toward a more integrated approach to stemming the insurgency in Vietnam.[11]

One target for Defense Department cost-cutting was the Military Assistance Program (MAP), which had been a staple of U.S. defense policy, especially in Southeast Asia. To be sure, McNamara placed a premium on MAP funds for Indochina and was adamant that cost consciousness not damage the program's effectiveness. He was determined to give Saigon whatever it wanted to fight the Viet Cong; money, as he put it, would "pose no problem."[12] But McNamara was also committed to scaling back the duration of MAP support for Vietnam, even in light of the challenges then posed by the Communists. This impulse reflected a broader fear about making long-term, open-ended commitments to the developing world. For McNamara, the object lesson was South Korea, which the United States had been supporting with substantial amounts of aid since the end of the Korean War. In May 1963, McNamara told Kennedy that the Pentagon

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10. Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert S. McNamara* (Boston, 1993), 100–01, 112; Kaplan, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, 450, 453–54; Richard W. Stewart, ed., *American Military History: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917–2005*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC, 2005), 273–74.

11. Bell to McNamara, April 3, 1962, Enthoven Papers, box 9, Budget Guidance and Planning Memoranda, 1962–1967, LBJL; Sidney Hyman, "Our Head Budgeteer: A Close-In View," *New York Times Magazine*, August 20, 1961, 15; David E. Bell Oral History, 48, 73–77, JFKL; Kaplan, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, 78, 95, 453–55.

12. See Draft NSC Record of Action, "Guidelines for the Military Aid Program," January 13, 1962, Vice President's Security File, box 5, Supporting Data on NSC Discussion of Military Aid Program, LBJL; McNamara to Felt and McGarr, November 28, 1961, *FRUS 1961–63: Vietnam 1961*, ed. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, DC, 1988), 1: 679–80; Kaplan, *The McNamara Ascendency*, 274–77, 421–38, 446; Allen, *None So Blind*, 146.

was reviewing U.S. support for Korea in an effort to calibrate the security risk of reducing the American commitment to Seoul. "When I look at what's happened to Korea in the way of U.S. aid and how difficult it's going to be to scale that aid down," he said to the president, "we certainly don't want to let another Korea develop in South Vietnam and we're well on the way to doing that." McNamara's interest in ramping up American aid to Vietnam, therefore, was influenced by his broader desire to scale it back down—the more money the United States threw at fighting the Viet Cong in the near-term, the less it would have to shell out over the long haul.[13]

While McNamara delivered his warning to Kennedy about the Koreanization of U.S. Vietnam policy in private, planning for troop withdrawal took place much more openly. Officials within MACV and the Pacific Command were steeped in its particulars as far back as May 1962. Several members of the State Department, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Undersecretary for Political Affairs Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman, and Ambassador to SouthVietnam Frederick Nolting, were aware of it from at least April 1963, roughly three months after Admiral Felt had submitted the CPSVN to the Pentagon.[14] By May 1963, when McNamara intensified the planning for a U.S. troop withdrawal, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Defense Department's Office of International Security Affairs had become central to its operation.[15] Pentagon spokesman Arthur Sylvester had even commented publicly in May 1963 on the possibility of bringing home U.S. troops in three years' time, the first administration official, apparently, to leak news of the withdrawal planning then under way.[16] Nor was the specific proposal to withdraw 1,000 troops by the end of 1963 a closely guarded secret among the president and his most senior advisers. Numerous officials—several of whom were hardly among the president's closest aides—were privy to its contours.[17]

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13. Meeting Tape 65, May 7, 1963, POF, PRC, JFKL. Draft transcript by author, http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/clips/1963_0507_vietnam/index.htm (accessed March 6, 2009). See also Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee, *Foreign Operations Appropriations for 1963*, 87th Cong, 2nd Sess., part 1, March 27, 1962, 479, 484–87; *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Together with Joint Sessions with the Senate Armed Services Committee (Historical Series)*, vol. XIV, 87th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1962 (Washington, DC, 1986), 156. Secretary of State Dean Rusk also feared that U.S. support for Vietnam might come to resemble another Korea-type commitment; see Bundy to Kennedy, November 15, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–63*, 1: 613.

14. See Rusk to Embassy in Vietnam, March 12, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–63: Vietnam, January–August 1963*, ed. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington, DC, 1991), 3: 148–49; Wood to Hilsman, April 18, 1963, ibid., 243–45.

15. William P. Bundy, unpublished manuscript, March 18, 1972, William P. Bundy Papers, box 1, 8–27, LBJL.

16. "G.I. Killed By Fire of Vietnam Sniper," *New York Times*, May 8, 1963, 10.

17. See, for instance, Wood to Hilsman and Rice, April 18, 1963, Record Group (RG) 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Vietnam Working Group, 1963–1966, box 1, Honolulu Conference, Nov. 1963, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC; Memorandum of a Conversation, April 1, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–63*, 3: 193; "Minutes of a Meeting for the Special Group (CI)," April 4, 1963, ibid., 201.

But it was Maxwell Taylor who was most interested in making those plans public. Just prior to leaving with McNamara on their fact-finding trip to Vietnam in September 1963, Taylor raised the matter of a withdrawal schedule with the president and suggested that such a timetable—and particularly its end date—be communicated to South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, essentially as leverage in America's ongoing effort to have Diem institute a wave of reforms.[18] Taylor also realized that the withdrawal plan might be as useful in Washington as he hoped it would be in Saigon. Along with McNamara and Rusk, Taylor thought Congress would likely constrain further U.S. action in Vietnam and soon demand assurance that the war could be won "in a finite period." Owing to these fears, the three-year window included in the CPSVN became part of the McNamara-Taylor Report, which was written on the trip back from Saigon.[19]

Once the withdrawal schedule was inserted into the report, McNamara was the person most adamant that it remain there.[20] As he indicated to Kennedy during his posttrip debriefing, "we must have a means of disengaging from this area. We must show our country that means." Although Kennedy expressed discomfort with the inclusion of the withdrawal clauses in a public statement on the trip—an uneasiness that is clearly evident on the tape of that October 2 conversation—McNamara was able to overcome the president's apparent concern:

> **President Kennedy:** My only reservation about it is that it commits us to a kind of a . . . if the war doesn't continue to go well, it'll look like we were overly optimistic, and I don't—I'm not sure we—I'd like to know what benefit we get out [of it] at this time announcing a thousand—

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18. "Memorandum for the Record of a Meeting," September 23, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–63*, 3: 281. See also "Letter from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to President Diem," October 1, 1963, ibid., 330; Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York, 1972), 298.

19. Taylor to Harkins, September 21, 1963, RG 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Records of Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor (hereafter Taylor Papers), box 12, NARA; Rusk to Lodge, September 6, 1963, RG 218, JCS, Taylor Papers, box 12, NARA; "Telegram from White House to Embassy in Vietnam," September 17, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–63*, 4: 254. McNamara had noted the importance of such domestic pressures as early as fall 1961 and had maintained that concern into mid-1962. See "Draft Memorandum from McNamara to Kennedy," November5, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–63*, 1: 540; "Record of Sixth Secretary of Defense Conference," July 23, 1962, *FRUS, 1961–63*, 2: 549. See also William Conrad Gibbons, "Lyndon Johnson and the Legacy of Vietnam," *Vietnam: The Early Decisions*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gitinger (Austin, TX, 1997), 134–36.

20. Cooper Oral History, 49–50, JFKL. See also Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: The Full Story of U.S. Involvement in Vietnam from Roosevelt to Nixon* (London, 1970), 215–16; Bundy manuscript, 9–26, footnote. McNamara's first impulse might not have been to preserve the withdrawal schedule. According to William Sullivan, who accompanied Taylor and McNamara on the trip as a State Department representative, Taylor had originally removed the deadline from a draft version of the report on both Sullivan's and McNamara's insistence. Since the McNamara-Taylor Report retained the 1965 end date in several places, however, Sullivan may not have seen its final draft. In his oral history, Sullivan complains of learning about the inclusion of the timetable only upon hearing it included in a public statement on the mission. Sullivan Oral History, June 16, 1970, 47, JFKL.

McNamara: Mr. President, we have the thousand split by units, so that if the war doesn't go well, we can say these thousand would not have influenced the course of action.

President Kennedy: And the advantage of taking them out—

McNamara: And the advantage of taking them out is that we can say to Congress and people that we *do* have a plan for reducing the exposure of U.S. combat personnel to the guerrilla actions in South Vietnam—actions that the people of South Vietnam should gradually develop a capability to suppress themselves. And I think this will be of great value to us in meeting the very strong views of Senator [J. William] Fulbright and others that we're bogged down in Asia and will be there for decades.

President Kennedy: All right. [*Unclear.*][21]

McNamara had not come to this position belatedly. According to William Bundy, the secretary of defense was at all times on the trip consumed by the question of whether the United States could reduce its advisory presence and withdraw the bulk of its advisers within the three-year time frame.[22] As McNamara later claimed, he hoped to cement the troop withdrawal clauses as elements of U.S. policy by including the withdrawal plan in his report as well as in a public statement from the White House.[23]

Given the number of officials involved in the trip and the planning for withdrawal that stretched back over fifteen months, it is safe to say that numerous people were well aware of the withdrawal schedule by the time that McNamara and Taylor discussed it with Kennedy and his national security team in October 1963. But familiarity did not translate into support, for many of these officials were alarmed at what they heard that October morning. Several agreed with William Bundy's characterization of the withdrawal plan as "extraordinarily unwise."[24] Their surprise and dismay seems to have been not so much a reaction to the plan itself—although some of them did question the inclusion of an end date for U.S. military involvement—but to the evident preparation for making it *public*. They were not alone, as voices outside the administration shared their concern. The *Washington Post* expressed that sentiment when it described the report as "groundless prophecy" and "an affront" to the "maturity and intelligence" of the American

21. Meeting Tape 114/A49, JFKL.

22. Bundy manuscript, 9–23. Indeed, National Security Council (NSC) official Michael Forrestal thought that McNamara had "talked to the President directly and privately" about his concerns. Ibid.

23. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 80.

24. Bundy manuscript, 9–26. See also Bowles to Thomson, October 15, 1963, Thomson Papers, box 8, 8/63–10/63, JFKL; Forrestal Oral History, 164, JFKL.

public.[25] What if the counterinsurgency began to falter? What *then* of the commitment to withdraw by 1965? Given the political turmoil in Saigon, the prospect of continued military success against the Viet Cong was hardly certain. As observers both inside and outside the government realized, the general optimism of both the McNamara-Taylor Report and its accompanying public statement had boxed the administration into a corner.

But what if that is precisely where the president wanted to be? As one historian recently put it, Kennedy's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam "was unconditional, for he approved a calendar of events that did not necessitate a victory."[26] According to this reading of the episode, the October 1963 meetings, in which Kennedy seemingly expressed doubt about the withdrawal plan, were exercises in "political theater," as still another scholar has described it, with Kennedy "pretending to be undecided" in his initial response to the withdrawal timetable.[27] Recent and not-so-recent studies have indeed emphasized Kennedy's duplicity in planning for a U.S. troop reduction, arguing that the president had hidden the depth of his commitment to withdraw from Vietnam from his closest advisers, save one or perhaps two, and that he needed their complicity to carry it out.[28]

If Kennedy was indeed so committed to withdrawal that he was prepared to phase out U.S. troops regardless of the military situation, then we should expect to find him communicating the finality of that commitment to Secretary of Defense McNamara—presumably the key person in on the charade—particularly in a situation where the two of them could speak about it privately. That is not, however, what appears in the documentary record. In fact, given the opportunity to express such resolve to McNamara in private, Kennedy did just the opposite. In May 1963, during a conversation recorded just after McNamara's return from a conference with the administration's principal advisers on Vietnam, Kennedy spoke about the conditions under which he was prepared to sanction a removal of U.S. troops from Indochina. At one point in the exchange, after acknowledging that "it may take two or three years" to defeat the Viet Cong, McNamara noted that,

> as I've mentioned before, that both for domestic political purposes and also because of the psychological effect it would have in South Vietnam, we ought to think about the possibility of bringing a thousand men home by the end of

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25. See also "Read Memorandum for Bundy, Subject: American press comment on the Viet-Nam Situation," NSF, box 200A, Vietnam, General 10/6/63–1/14/63, Memos and Miscellaneous; Department of State, "American Opinion Summary," October 9, 1963, Thomson Papers, box 23, 1963, American Opinion Summary, 7/63 and 10/63, JFKL; *New York Times*, "Opinion of the Week," October 6, 1963, 195.

26. Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 377.

27. Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 176.

28. See, for instance, James K. Galbraith, "Exit Strategy," *Boston Review Online*, October 22, 2003; John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York, 1992).

the year. Now I've asked them to lay out that plan, without at the present time making any decision to—

President Kennedy: That's right. [*McNamara unclear.*] Because in the case that—if it isn't in very good shape; you don't want to make—

McNamara: Absolutely.

President Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

McNamara: It would be . . . have a negative influence. But on the other hand, if we had two or three victories, this would be [*Kennedy assents*] just exactly the shot in the arm we ought to have. So they're going to do that.[29]

This May 1963 conversation helps to clarify the atmospherics of the October 2 meeting. It suggests that Kennedy's reluctance to cut troop levels in the face of a worsening military situation was a position he held sincerely, not a piece of "political theater" he would later conjure up for the benefit of more hawkish administration officials. While not sufficient in and of itself to resolve questions about Kennedy's deception, this conversation, which has yet to find its way into the scholarly literature, moves us closer toward answering them. Indeed, this is the only evidence of Kennedy and McNamara discussing both the long-term and the immediate withdrawal plans prior to McNamara's return from Vietnam in October 1963. If there is any "smoking gun" here, it is pointing not at the notion of a back-channel operation, in which Kennedy concealed his policy leanings from his most senior national security advisers, but to genuinely held concerns about the timing and even advisability of a U.S. troop withdrawal.[30]

Collectively, this exploration of Kennedy bureaucratic planning and evidence from the White House tapes suggests that the calendar the Pentagon devised for a Vietnam troop withdrawal, like all other calendars it had drawn up under Robert McNamara, was and remained a conditional one, always subject to review and revision. Its emergence as part of the CPSVN reflected the broader dynamics at work within the administration to systematize and rationalize government planning and expenditures. The CPSVN, like the broader, Five-Year Defense Plan, offered a reasoned assessment of the costs the Pentagon were likely to incur in its execution, but it was merely a road map based upon a set of assumptions about future policy options—and therefore a judgment that was always open to presidential modification. While McNamara might have wanted to cement the troop withdrawal schedule as part of administration policy, that timetable, like others he had adopted, was hardly set in stone.[31]

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29. Meeting Tape 65, JFKL.

30. For critiques of this argument, see Fredrik Logevall, "Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been," in *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited*, ed. Mark J. White (New York, 1998), 19–62; Logevall, "Review of Gareth Porter's *Perils of Dominance*," *Passport* 37, no. 2 (August 2006): 12–15.

31. Enthoven and Smith, *How Much Is Enough?*, 49–50.

To be sure, long-range planning for Vietnam was not *merely* a budgetary exercise, since the administration was still heavily committed to preserving a non-Communist South Vietnam. But such planning, conditioned by the demands of the budgetary process, forced the Pentagon to impose a trajectory on U.S. involvement in Indochina. It happened to do so beginning in the spring and summer of 1962, and then on into the fall and winter—a period of some optimism in the war. Once the administration settled on a comprehensive approach, there was always a single arc toward U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Escalation and withdrawal were part of an integrated plan to aid the South Vietnamese in a fight that Kennedy had always maintained was theirs to win.

While Kennedy most likely inspired the effort to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam, it was McNamara who devised the schedule itself, a reality that highlights the president's detachment from the plan as well as its flexibility. Kennedy was eager to restrict U.S. military involvement and to avoid the introduction of U.S. combat troops; accordingly, there is ample reason to believe that he conveyed to McNamara his discomfort with an open-ended commitment to Saigon.[32] But it was McNamara who fleshed out the president's more skeletal approach to Vietnam and, in so doing, made it very much his own. The three-year draw-down and the five-year MAP that encompassed it, both of which were emblematic of a broader administration approach to federal budgeting, bear the hallmarks of a defense secretary committed to long-range forecasting and cost containment. In light of these dynamics, McNamara's effort to devise a carefully calibrated, phased reduction of U.S. troops from Vietnam seems to have been a function of federal and departmental planning as much as a response to the war itself.

32. For a recent exploration of Kennedy's reluctance to commit combat troops to Vietnam, see James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang, and David A. Welch, *Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived: Virtual JFK* (Lanham, MD, 2009).