

CHAPTER VII

FOREIGN POLICY

“The great mistakes of the Kennedy Administration, like the Bay of Pigs invasion, were due to under-reliance on intellectuals--and over-reliance on the established bureaucracy. “ - Arthur Schlesinger Jr.¹

At the end of the first week of the New Frontier, Arthur Schlesinger received his first t assignment. George McGovern would be touring South America to set up the Food for Peace program. The President asked Schlesinger to accompany McGovern, in order to spread the word to South American intellectuals that the United States was no longer a reactionary, materialistic power, and to sound out Latin leaders on Fidel Castro.² Although Schlesinger had shown little previous interest in development economics, he had followed Latin America politics for a long

During the war, I became interested with the O.S.S. job (in) Latin American Affairs...In 1950 I joined the founding meeting in Havana (of) the Inter-American Association for freedom and Democracy, and I met a lot of people there. I visited Costa Rica when Figueres was President there in the 1950s, so I had, though I couldn't speak Spanish and wasn't a Latin American specialist, an association with some of the leaders, and knew Figueres and Betancourt and Munoz Marin and so on. Also Kennedy was a great believer in generalists, and I was a friend of Adolf Berle, who was chairman of his task force for Latin America.³

On the day before Schlesinger left, he was informed that President Kennedy was considering carrying through a plan begun under Eisenhower for a refugee invasion of Cuba. Schlesinger sent Kennedy a memo warning that such an invasion would destroy the newly-created goodwill about America.⁴ But the invasion had not given final approval, and Schlesinger believed there would be time to discuss when he returned.

On the plane to Buenos Aires, McGovern and Schlesinger began a life-long friendship. But Schlesinger did notice that, “Like everyone else (it seemed) in the Kennedy administration, he was five years younger than I--a fact which continued to disconcert one who had long been accustomed to regarding himself as youngest man in the room.”⁵ McGovern and Schlesinger found the Argentine President skeptical about Food for Peace, and unwilling to offer specific suggestions about stopping Castro. Schlesinger considered Argentina a stagnant society, and was relieved to move on to more dynamic Brazil.⁶ But a tour of the rural northeast part of the nation reminded the two Americans of the chasm between wealth and poverty in the region. President Quadros was non-committal about Castro.

McGovern returned to the United States, while Schlesinger continued on to Bolivia and Peru. Schlesinger told Bolivia's new President, Paz Estenssoro, that the United States had no objection to social revolution, so long as the revolution did not

¹ “Interview,” *Playboy* (May 1967), 208.

² Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 160.

³ Interview 1/14/82.

⁴ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 225.

⁵ *ibid*, 167-168.

⁶ *ibid*, 168.

lead to dictatorship or foreign intervention.⁷ In Peru Schlesinger met with Victor Haya de la Torre, the strongly anti-Castro leader of the democratic liberal APRA party. But the young Peruvian intellectuals Schlesinger talked to dismissed the APRA as outdated. Venezuela was a more pleasant experience. In Caracas Schlesinger visited the continent's great democratic leader, President Romulo Betancourt. Betancourt and Schlesinger talked for eight hours, screened a film, and smoked cigars.

Back in the United States, Schlesinger warned in a memo that time was running out for the democratic left in Latin America, and that the administration should move rapidly to support democracy in the Southern hemisphere.⁸

While Schlesinger had been in Latin America, planning for the exile invasion of Cuba had continued. Kennedy felt that in case the invasion did go ahead, the world should know that the United States did not propose a return to the Batista regime, so he asked Schlesinger to write a White Paper on Cuba. The paper Schlesinger produced acknowledged past errors in American policy towards Cuba, but accused Castro of betraying the revolution. Although the State Department objected to the passages admitting that American support for Batista had been a mistake, the passages stayed in, with Kennedy's support.⁹

On March eleventh, Schlesinger attended a meeting in the Cabinet room at which the entire national security apparatus--the top officials in the Pentagon and the CIA--argued forcefully for the plan. Impressed, all of Kennedy's staff accepted the proposal. Except Schlesinger. Judging from his O.S.S. days, he thought the intelligence estimates of potential armed resistance to Castro within Cuba to be exaggerated.¹⁰ But not wishing to appear a gadfly, and himself awed by the unanimous weight of the national security staff, Schlesinger did not voice his objections strongly¹¹

Alone with the President, he stated his forebodings more pointedly. On April fifth, he sent Kennedy a memo putting the case against the invasion on practical, not moral grounds. The memo argued: 1) Even if all the troops used were Cuban, the United States could not dissociate itself from the effort, and America's image, recently bolstered by John Kennedy's progressive image, would suffer greatly; 2) Because the invasion would probably not spark a mass uprising, the invaders would only be able to establish a beach-head. Public opinion demand that the Marines be sent in, and the United States would find itself in another Spanish Civil War.¹²

Asked if he would have supported Bay of Pigs if he thought it had strong chance of working, Schlesinger replied, "Probably. But I don't see how it ever could have had a strong chance of working. I probably would have supported it at the time. In retrospect I would have been wrong to do so even if it had worked. The atmosphere of the time when I was arguing against it wasn't going to work."¹³ Schlesinger now believes that the invasion was wrong "on constitutional grounds. I don't think Presidents should have the authority to take that kind of action by themselves...I think that rather than (objecting) it wouldn't work I should have been more sensitive to the constitutional implications."¹⁴

⁷ *ibid*, 173.

⁸ *ibid*, 178.

⁹ *ibid*, 178.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 231-232.

¹¹ *ibid*, 239.

¹² *ibid*, 237-238.

¹³ Interview 1/14/82.

¹⁴ Interview 4/23/82.

On Saturday, April eighth, Schlesinger and fellow White House liberal Richard Godwin went to see Secretary of State Rusk. Although Rusk shared some of their concerns about the invasion, the President had already made up his mind that day to go ahead with the invasion.¹⁵ That afternoon, Schlesinger flew to New York, and along with Harlan Cleveland, Clayton Fritchey, and Tracy Barnes briefed Stevenson about the invasion. The briefing was especially timely, because Cuban allegations of U. S. harassment would be coming up soon on the UN agenda. Schlesinger remembered:

We told him we were training them, supplying them. I'm not sure we told him there would be U.S. planes, but we told him there would be no U.S. combat troops involved. We told him that the Cubans were armed by us and that the money had come from the United States, and it was going to take place. But there was a failure of communication. I fear we left him with the impression that it would not take place until the General Assembly adjourned. It was set up so it could be called back. Maybe I hoped it would be called back. We gave Stevenson no date. We knew it would go ahead in the next week or ten days, but no date had been set yet.

Although Stevenson opposed the whole adventure, he promised, in Schlesinger's words, to be "a good soldier" and go along.¹⁶

The next Monday, Schlesinger dutifully submitted a nine-page memo entitled, "Cuba, Political, Diplomatic, and Economic Problems," that detailed the public relations difficulties the President would face as a result of the invasion. The memo worried that world opinion would perceive the United States as a Goliath attacking David, and would remember America's long history of gunboat diplomacy. Even much of the American press would tie the invasion to the United States, the Soviet Union and Castro would score major propaganda coups. Schlesinger gave suggestions for coping with several facets of the public relations problem. At the UN, Stevenson would explain:

(a)that Castro is threatened, not by Americans but by Cubans justly indignant over his betrayal of his own revolution; (b) we sympathize with these patriotic Cubans, and (c)that there will no American participation in any military aggression against Castro

If our representative cannot evade in debate of the question of whether the CIA actually helped the Cuban rebels, they will presumably be obliged, in the traditional pre-U-2 manner, to deny any such CIA activity....

Another portion of the memo dealt with the image of the President:

10. Protection of the President. The character and repute of President Kennedy constitute one of our greatest national resources. Nothing should be done to jeopardize this invaluable asset. When lies must be told, they should be told by subordinate officials. At no point should the President be asked to lend himself to the cover operation. For this reason, there seems to be merit in Secretary Rusk's suggestion that someone other than the President make the final decision and do so in his absence--someone

¹⁵ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 240-241.

¹⁶ Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 624.

whose head can later be placed on the block if things go terribly wrong.¹⁷

The memo went on to detail the questions the President would have to face from the press, and possible answers, such as:

Q. Mr. President, can you tell us something about the reported invasion of Cuba this morning?

A. We are doing our best to get the exact facts. So far as I can tell at present, a number of opponents of the Castro regime have landed on Cuba. I understand that the Revolutionary Council is trying to make contact with these people.

The rest of the memo maintained that the United States should not give diplomatic recognition to the Provisional government until “they have a better than even chance of winning under their own steam.”

If the invasion did topple Castro, Schlesinger pointed out, the United States would have to make sure that the new Cuban government did not fall into the hands of *Batistianos*. Accordingly, the new American Ambassador should be, “a man sufficiently astute, aggressive, and influential (to) make sure that the new regime gets off on a socially progressive track.”¹⁸

Although Schlesinger offered advice for the facilitating the invasion, he was still known to oppose it. At Ethel Kennedy’s birthday party the next day, the Attorney General pulled Arthur aside and told him, “You may be right or you may be wrong, but the President has made his mind up. Don’t push it any further. Now is the time for everyone to help him all he can.”¹⁹

On Thursday, April 13th, Adolf Berle and Schlesinger flew to New York to talk with the Cuban Revolutionary Council, the governing body of Cuban exiles. Kennedy’s instructions, Schlesinger told the President of the Council, Miro Cardona, that American recognition of the Council as the government of Cuba after the invasion was not guaranteed. Perhaps refusing to accept harsh realities, Cardona did not believe that the United States would lend less than total support.²⁰

As the invasion drew nearer, it became an open secret in Miami. *The New Republic*’s Gilbert Harrison sent Schlesinger a galley proof of an article detailing recruitment of Cubans in Miami, and asked Schlesinger if there were any reason not to publish the piece. Schlesinger gave it to the President, who told Schlesinger to request Harrison not to run it. “Harrison accepted the suggestion without question--a patriotic act which left me oddly uncomfortable,” wrote Schlesinger.²¹ Unbeknownst to Schlesinger, the author had independently decided to withdraw the story.²²

On Saturday, April 15th, air strikes hit Cuban air force fields, and on Monday April 17th, the first troops landed. Participating in the air strikes were American

¹⁷ In *A Thousand Days*, Schlesinger called the Rusk proposal “curious.” Since Rusk would presumably be the one whose head would be chopped off, his proposal seems more unselfish than Schlesinger admitted publicly.

¹⁸ Ronald Radosh, “Historian in the Service of Power,” *The Nation* (Aug. 6, 1977), 106-109. Given the record at the time of the inability of America to force even regimes wholly dependent on American beneficence for survival, such as South Korea and South Vietnam, to operate democratically, Schlesinger’s hope for progressive post-Castro Cuba seems more than a little optimistic.

¹⁹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 243.

²⁰ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 247-248.

²¹ *ibid*, 244.

²² Lewis J. Paper, *The Promise and the Performance: The Leadership of Kennedy* (New York, 1975), 255.

planes repainted in Cuban air force colors and piloted by exiles, which took off from Nicaragua. One of them was hit by anti-aircraft fire, and low on gas, made an emergency landing in Florida. Believing the CIA's cover story that the plane was piloted by a defector from Castro's air force, Stevenson repeated the story to the UN General Assembly on the Monday of the invasion.

When evidence began to accumulate that the pilot was no Cuban defector, Stevenson realized that his cherished integrity had been compromised. The President himself was unhappy that Stevenson's formidable reputation for honesty had been damaged. Schlesinger blamed himself.²³

That same day, Schlesinger told the *New York Times* that only 200 to 300 men had landed (1700 actually had) and that the only purpose of the landing was to get supplies to the Cuban underground. Asked in 1965 about the story, Schlesinger answered, "Did I say that?...Well I was lying. This was the cover story. I apologize for having been involved in passing the story."²⁴ The night of the invasion, Schlesinger had a gloomy dinner with his friend Jose Figueres of Costa Rica. How could the United States expect cooperation from its allies, Figueres asked, if America did not even bother to tell them about its plans?²⁵

The invasion itself was a disaster. While the invaders were being bottled up on the beachhead, the CIA put the Cuban Revolutionary Council into hiding, both to protect the Council, and to prevent its members from making rash statements.

Arriving home exhausted late Tuesday night, Schlesinger was summoned back to the White House with a call from McGeorge Bundy. At the White House, Bundy told Schlesinger, "The Revolutionary Council is very upset. Some of its members are threatening extreme action."²⁶ Kennedy dispatched Schlesinger and Berle to find out what was wrong. The two professors took a military transport down to Miami, and, after some clandestine travel that made Schlesinger feel "like a character out a Hitchcock film," arrived at the Council's hide-out.

Outraged at being kept virtual prisoners, and betrayed by the CIA's extravagant promises, the Council demanded air strikes and reinforcements. Most members wanted to go to the beaches themselves, to topple Castro or die trying.

Berle and Schlesinger faced the dilemma, "How could we notify the Cubans that there was no hope, that their sons were abandoned for captivity or death--and at the same time dissuade them from public denunciation of the CIA and the United States government?" Schlesinger called the White House, and asked Rusk if the Cubans could have a personal meeting with Kennedy. The next day they all flew to Washington. Kennedy could offer little but sympathy, apologies, and platitudes.²⁷

The aftermath of the invasion was not a happy time. Schlesinger did at least have the comfort of having opposed the scheme. The President told his staff, "Arthur wrote me a memorandum that will look pretty good when he gets around to writing his book on my administration. Only he better not publish it while I'm alive...and I have a title for his book, *Kennedy: The Only Years*."²⁸ On a trip to Europe soon after, Schlesinger found the representatives of most European liberal parties angry and disillusioned about the invasion.²⁹

²³ Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 628.

²⁴ "Schlesinger Says He Lied to Times," *New York Times* (Nov. 25, 1965), 8:4.

²⁵ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 257.

²⁶ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 260.

²⁷ *ibid*, 261 -266.

²⁸ *ibid*, 271.

²⁹ *ibid*, 271-273.

To many, no event better symbolized the corruption of the intellectuals in government than their participation in the Bay of Pigs. Angry leftists accused Schlesinger and other White House intellectuals of colluding with a reactionary government. C. Wright Mills wrote, “Schlesinger and company have betrayed us intellectually and morally.”³⁰

In defense of Kennedy and his intellectuals, one should remember that Castro was no reformist social democrat, that the democratic leaders of Latin America--Betancourt, Figueres, and Haya de la Torre--all believed that Castro had betrayed his revolution, and the regimes Castro initially aimed to overthrow were not dictatorships, but democracies, such as Betancourt’s Venezuela.³¹ “Bundy and I had not performed with distinction,” Schlesinger later admitted, but he did see some good from the invasion in President Kennedy’s decision to rely on the White House staff more and the national security bureaucracy less.³²

The UN was one of Schlesinger’s major White House assignments. The first major crisis Stevenson handled at the UN was the Congo. Kennedy, finding new information about the U. S. position in the *New York Times*, angrily complained that Stevenson was making policy. Stevenson had not been, but from then on, Schlesinger, Bundy, or Harlan Cleveland always sent Kennedy a bed-time memo summarizing UN developments likely to make the morning’s headlines.³³

After some mix-ups in communication between the White House and the American delegation at the UN, President Kennedy asked Schlesinger in July 1961 to follow the UN for the White House.³⁴ Because tension between President Kennedy and Ambassador Stevenson was always a problem, Schlesinger’s role as UN liaison was one of his most important and difficult jobs. Asked about Kennedy-Stevenson relations, Schlesinger explained:

Well, they were sort of strained. Stevenson was never at his best with Kennedy for some reason. He seemed more prim and prissy than he was characteristically. Kennedy had been strongly for Stevenson in 52 and 56, and valued him at the UN, but found him hard to talk to. Robert Kennedy didn’t like him at all. Stevenson didn’t like Robert Kennedy at all. Stevenson felt that his whole generation had been skipped over, between Eisenhower, who was older than Stevenson, and then suddenly jumped 30 years to Kennedy, and I think he had an unconscious resentment that Kennedy was President. On the other hand, there were many things about Kennedy that he did admire. It wasn’t a bad relationship, but it wasn’t a close personal one.³⁵

During the fall and early winter, rumors began to spread that Stevenson would leave the UN to run for the Senate from Illinois. Some people suspected that Kennedy was trying to ease Stevenson out of the UN, but Kennedy was not. When Stevenson discussed resignation with the President, Kennedy forcefully reminded Stevenson that he would have far more influence as UN Ambassador than as a Senator. With Clayton Fritchey’s help, Schlesinger worked out the details of statements by Stevenson and Kennedy stating that Stevenson would happily remain at his present job.³⁶

³⁰ *ibid*, 268.

³¹ *ibid*, 210.

³² *ibid*, 277-278.

³³ Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 614

³⁴ *ibid* 427.

³⁵ Interview, 1/14/82.

³⁶ Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 676-677.

During discussions about resignation, Stevenson and Kennedy had agreed about some of the problems with the UN liaison: Kennedy was often not informed of UN votes; and Stevenson's point of view, when different from the State Department's, was often not presented at the White House.

Schlesinger felt partly to blame, but, as later wrote, "Cleveland and I did our best to see that the UN interest was represented in policy discussion, but we were often not in the room ourselves."³⁷ Part of the conflict stemmed from the fact that Kennedy, like Schlesinger, believed "if developments did not generate institutions, no amount of institution-building could generate developments."³⁸

In December 1961, Washington state Senator Henry Jackson made a major speech attacking Stevenson's role at the UN. Jackson believed that the UN Ambassador should consider himself just another ambassador, should not over-emphasize the role of the UN, and should not make policy. Upset, Stevenson asked Schlesinger request a public signal of support from the President. Kennedy told Schlesinger tell Stevenson that there was no need for a statement from the White House since nobody listened to Scoop Jackson anyway.³⁹

In August 1962, Stevenson attended a dinner party at Schlesinger's Georgetown home. Abe Chayes and Schlesinger were both morose.⁴⁰ They felt that the springtime of the administration was over, and that changing things had proved more difficult than they had hoped. But problems more serious than the pace of change were looming.

On October 19th, Adlai Stevenson, with the President's permission, told Schlesinger that reconnaissance planes had spotted Soviet nuclear missile installations in Cuba.⁴¹ The role Schlesinger played in the Cuban Missile Crisis was minor; he is not even mentioned in Robert Kennedy's book *13 Days*. Schlesinger's job was to help write speeches for Adlai Stevenson at the UN. Just before Schlesinger left Washington for New York, Robert Kennedy told him, "We're counting on you to watch things in New York. That fellow is ready to give everything away. We will have to make a deal in the end; but we must stand firm. Our concessions must come at the end of negotiation, not the start."⁴²

As tension mounted, Schlesinger received an urgent telephone call from Averell Harriman, who believed that Khrushchev was signaling that he wanted to negotiate. If allowed a face-saving exit, Khrushchev would remove the missiles, but if backed into a corner, he would fight, Harriman observed. Harriman had been trying to explain his viewpoint to the State Department, but found the Department unwilling to listen. Schlesinger sent Harriman's ideas to the President, who talked with Harriman the next morning. The advice, Schlesinger thinks, reinforced Kennedy's decision to avoid a military confrontation.⁴³

Ignoring the counsel of the military, President Kennedy refused to order an airstrike against the Cuban missiles, and was able to work out a solution with Khrushchev.

But Cuba would produce one more problem. On December first, Kennedy called Schlesinger into the Oval Office to warn him that the *Saturday Evening Post*

³⁷ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 429. Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 678..

³⁸ *ibid*, 431.

³⁹ *ibid*, 697.

⁴⁰ Abram Chayes was a fellow liberal, currently serving as Legal Advisor to the State Department.

⁴¹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 740.

⁴² Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 556. The second sentence of the quote was omitted from *A Thousand Days*, presumably to protect Stevenson's reputation.

⁴³ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 750-751.

would be carrying an attack on Stevenson in the next issue. The article, written by the President's newspaper friend Charles Bartlett and Stewart Alsop, claimed that Stevenson had favored a Caribbean Munich, swapping Turkish, Italian, and British nuclear bases and Guantanamo for Cuban ones. Kennedy denied telling Bartlett anything about the ideas Stevenson had suggested to Ex-Comm, the executive committee dealing with the missile crisis.

Although the article was distorted, Stevenson had been far more dovish than other Ex-Comm members; the White House could therefore not offer a convincing denial by stating what Stevenson *had* said.⁴⁴

As the newspapers picked up the story and attacked Stevenson, Stevenson began to believe the rumors that Kennedy was trying to ease him out the UN. Schlesinger asked Kennedy if he wanted Stevenson to go, and reminded Kennedy that a Bartlett article had been used to get rid of Chester Bowles. Kennedy cursed, and explained at length why he wanted Stevenson to remain.⁴⁵

But although newspapers across the nations were excoriating Stevenson for his allegedly pacifist stand, Kennedy refused to take public action.⁴⁶ He asked Schlesinger "Why should Adlai get so upset? This is one of those forty-eight hour wonders. Just tell him to sit tight and everything will subside." Kennedy told Sorenson to write a personal letter to send Stevenson, but would do no more. At Schlesinger's urging, Kennedy strengthened the letter, and allowed it to be leaked to the press.⁴⁷

President Kennedy felt that his greatest single accomplishment was the Test-Ban Treaty he and Soviet Premier Khrushchev negotiated, which banned atmospheric nuclear testing. The battles within the White House over the test-ban highlighted the conflict between the idealists and the professionals in the administration. When President Kennedy took office, the United States and the Soviet Union had both placed an unofficial moratorium on nuclear testing. Over the summer, Schlesinger prepared a White Paper setting forth the United States negotiating position on a permanent ban. Hope for a treaty was jarred on September first, when Russia began testing. Although pressure from the military and public opinion to resume American testing was heavy, President Kennedy, with the support of Sorenson and Schlesinger among others, delayed an American response. But as the Russian tests continued, pressure from the military to resume became overwhelming. The President, with Schlesinger's reluctant acceptance, ordered resumption of American tests. Perhaps after Russian scientists found out what they wanted to know, Khrushchev reversed his position, and negotiations began which led to the first nuclear arms limitation treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁴⁸

As Schlesinger and Kennedy discovered, Premier Khrushchev was sometimes more open to reason and new ideas than was the American State Departments. Spending most of his time on foreign relations, Schlesinger felt as acutely as any Kennedy staffer the conflict between the Administration's activist and progressive inclinations, and the State Department's torpor. Although Schlesinger sometimes used the State Department as a scapegoat for the Kennedy administration's caution and narrow-mindedness, there can be no doubt that the State Department was a

⁴⁴ Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 740-743.

⁴⁵ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 765.

⁴⁶ The *Daily News* ran the headline "ADLAI ON SKIDS FOR PACIFIST STAND ON CUBA."

⁴⁷ Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 741-747.

⁴⁸ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 417-425, 450-456.

retrogressive force. Schlesinger detailed his role as Special Assistant:

We tried to become the President's eyes and ears through the whole area of national security, reporting to him things he had to know and this would sometimes include things the department involved did not wish him to know until it had decided for itself what it wanted him to do....On occasions too frequent to record, the staff would have to say that State or Defense were not doing the things in one area they had been directed to do; and Kennedy would patiently pick up the phone and renew the pressure.⁴⁹

The Department of State's policy, according to Schlesinger, was to seek security by doing things the way they had always been done. As Schlesinger had predicted in *The General and the President*, McCarthyism had produced a foreign service whose main talent was never to advance far ahead of public opinion; being wrong by being too anti-Communist was far safer than being wrong by being too dovish. Ambassador Galbraith wrote a pseudonymous book entitled *The McLandress Dimension*, in which one character explained, "Few things more clearly mark the amateur in diplomacy than his inability to see that even the change from the wrong policy to the right policy involves the admission of previous error and hence damaging to the national prestige."⁵⁰

Department speeches and position papers were mostly poorly-written anti-Communist clichés. One paper was entitled, "The Communist Totalitarian Source of International Tension in the Americas."⁵¹ A long-time believer that Communist China was beginning to chart its own course in foreign policy, Schlesinger fought a futile battle with the Department to try to end the use term, "Sino-Soviet Bloc."⁵² Attempts to force the Department to do away with what Schlesinger termed the "portentous and sleazy" phrase "The Free World" fared no better.⁵³ Patrick Anderson, a student of the role of Presidential appointees, noted that the more influential intellectual advisors, like McGeorge Bundy, husbanded their strength and influence, rather than engaging in battles over diction.⁵⁴

In a sense, the whole problem boiled down to the Department's unwillingness to what President Kennedy called "a world of diversity"--a world of many different systems of government, all of which the United States could live with, so long as no nation upset the balance of power. Although President Kennedy made it clear that neutrals were free to pursue their own course so long as they preserved their national independence, the Foreign Service was reluctant to abandon John Foster Dulles' moralistic condemnation of neutrality. While the State Department felt it wiser to ignore a conference in Belgrade of non-aligned nations, Schlesinger convinced Kennedy to send a friendly cable.⁵⁵

European policy was a particular interest of Schlesinger's, and one where he had some influence. The President himself was familiar with Europe, and therefore willing to trust his own judgment over the bureaucracy's. Schlesinger believed that American policy too often favored the conservative parties in Europe; he wanted the

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 391-392.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *A Thousand Days*, 384.

⁵¹ *ibid*, 387-388.

⁵² *ibid*, 385.

⁵³ *ibid*, 564.

⁵⁴ Anderson, *President's Men*, 218

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 479.

U. S. to support the *Europe des Peuples* instead of the *Europe des Peres*. Reading the President's prepared speeches just before he left for Europe, Schlesinger commented that they were dull and unoriginal. Kennedy agreed, junked the State Department drafts, and told Sorenson to write some substitute speeches emphasizing America's commitment to progress.⁵⁶

In retrospect, Schlesinger feels that the decision on which he personally made the greatest difference was the one to have the United States support an opening to the Left in Italy. In the summer of 1961, Schlesinger convinced Kennedy that the center-left coalition that might be forming in Italy, the *apertura sinistra*, should come to power with the acquiescence of the American government. A two year running battle with the State Department began. Despite the wishes of the President, the Department had no intention of giving the Socialist Pietro Nenni its support. The bureaucratic battle "was an endless struggle. Meetings would be called, decisions reached, cables sent; then the next meeting would begin with same old arguments. One felt entrapped in a Kafka novel." Not until Averell Harriman became Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the Spring of 1963 did the State Department finally give up.⁵⁷

The success of Kennedy's progressive European policy must be balanced against the administration's failure in Southeast Asia. Years later, Schlesinger would explain that much of the failure derived from a misunderstanding of the nature of Communism. By the late 1950s, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the "crusading anti-Communist" of the post-war years, realized that the nature of the Communist challenge had changed. Communism was plainly no longer the "wave of the future"; the Soviet government was coming more and more to resemble just one more bureaucracy.⁵⁸ The zeal of fanaticism was gone from the Soviet Union, as "Soviet youth today are Communists--in somewhat the sense that the youth of Europe and America today are Christians." The prediction that the dynamics of totalitarian Communism would require increasing repression, Schlesinger admitted, had been wrong. "We supposed for a moment after the war that Soviet Russia was even more pure and absolute a totalitarian state than Nazi Germany; but since the death of Stalin it has been divesting itself of much of the irrationality which we considered its essence." A tour of Russia, Poland, and Yugoslavia confirmed Schlesinger's belief that monolithic Communism was a thing of the past. As Schlesinger had predicted, the Communist world had fragmented, with each nation, and especially China, following its own course. Although China still lingered in a dogmatic, Stalinist stage of development, the nation at least was no longer under the influence Russia.⁵⁹ According to Schlesinger, the "dualistic world" of the early cold war had been replaced by a "polycentric world."

Although Schlesinger saw a divided Communist world in Asia, most of the State Department did not. The first problem in Indochina confronting the administration was Laos, where a civil war between Communist guerillas and an ineffectual military dictatorship was going on. The Eisenhower administration had supported the military's coup against the neutralist civilian government. Kennedy continued the Eisenhower policy until March. Then he switched course, and along with Khrushchev, helped set up a neutral coalition government. Laos, Schlesinger

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 806-808.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 801-805.

⁵⁸ Schlesinger was no doubt influenced by Galbraith, who in 1967 would set down his ideas about the inevitability of bureaucratization in *The New Industrial State*.

⁵⁹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Variety of Communist Experience," reprinted in *Politics of Hope*, 265-292.

observed, was not “a dagger pointed at the heart of Kansas.”⁶⁰ Although the President agreed privately with Schlesinger that Laos was strategically unimportant he told the nation, “(Laos’s) own safety runs with the safety of us all.”⁶¹ The gulf between the President’s private feelings and his public statements about a Communism helped cement America’s involvement in Indochina.

The Asian policy was based on the premise that firm resistance to Communism was necessary to convince China that armed aggression would be futile. The sophisticated version of the Chinese containment theory did look toward future negotiations and admission into the UN, but only after China had accepted that it could not conquer Asia. But the notion that the conflict in Vietnam was mainly an expression of Chinese imperialism was shaky. It ignored the thousands of years of Sino-Vietnamese hostility, as well as Ho Chi Minh’s nationalistic motivations. Not understanding the Sino-Soviet split, too many American officials saw Vietnam as a place like Korea, where the aggression from Moscow had to be halted. Asked if Kennedy was aware of the polycentric nature of Communism, Schlesinger replied:

He was quite aware of it. At the beginning I think he was much more aware of it than the Department of State. The Department of State kept talking about the “Sino-Soviet bloc” and so on, though it became apparent in the early 1960s that there were divisions between China and the Soviet Union. But Kennedy believed that nationalism was the most powerful political emotion in the world, and he saw that nationalism had already begun to erode the Communist bloc, so that he would have been quite prepared for a polycentrist world.⁶²

Whatever Kennedy thought privately, his public rhetoric continued to refer to Communism as a “monolithic and ruthless conspiracy.”⁶³

With only a few exceptions, the entire Kennedy administration felt that some effort to support South Vietnam would be worthwhile. Even Schlesinger agreed that Eisenhower’s public commitment to the Diem regime had tied the hands of the United States. “Whether we had a vital interest in South Vietnam before 1954,” explained Schlesinger, “the Eisenhower letter had created those interests.”⁶⁴ Kennedy’s options were limited: “by 1961, choices had been fatally narrowed.”⁶⁵ Willing to accept limited American involvement, Schlesinger, like Kennedy, remained skeptical about introduction of combat troops.

John Kenneth Galbraith, closer to the situation, had a more dovish perspective. He sent back lucid cables, contradicting the State Department, and arguing that Diem had no popular support. Schlesinger and Galbraith discussed Vietnam often; Schlesinger thinks that he “should have listened to Ken more carefully.”⁶⁶ When Galbraith was asked if he guided Schlesinger’s development in thinking about Vietnam, Galbraith replied:

I wouldn’t say so. I don’t have a strong recollection of our conversations, but

⁶⁰ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 465.

⁶¹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 116.

⁶² Interview 1/14/82.

⁶³ Richard Walton, *Cold War and Counter-revolution*, (New York, 1972), 55.

⁶⁴ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 496-497.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 910.

⁶⁶ Interview 1/14/82.

do think we were in agreement from the beginning about the unwisdom of our involvement there. I was in a position where I could articulate it more strongly than he could because I was Ambassador in the area, involved in the problems of the area, and therefore I had access to the cables--which is the way you spread your views around Washington.⁶⁷

In April 1962, after Jacqueline Kennedy had returned from a triumphant tour of India, the Kennedys, the Galbraiths, and the Schlesingers took a weekend at Glen Ora to watch the television special of the trip. Schlesinger and Galbraith put the case for neutralization to Kennedy.⁶⁸ Although Kennedy listened with interest, he remained on the professionals' course. When Kennedy's successor took office, his options were far narrower than Kennedy's had been.

David Halberstam blames Kennedy's Vietnam escalation on the mood of "pragmatism" and consequent emphasis on short-term solutions that prevailed in the Kennedy years.⁶⁹ Galbraith disagrees:

That was partly true. The much greater problem was just the weight of tradition that was inherited from the Dulles years, and the pride and bureaucratic power of the military, and also the criticism that descends on anybody who is thought to be soft on Communism. I have said many times that there are two classes of people: those who fear Communism, and those who fear to be thought soft on Communism. And the main problem was--the overwhelming problem--was the pressure of the military. I'll put it again. There were three problems: there was the inheritance; there was the bureaucratic dynamic; there was the political outcry that was felt from being soft on Communism and there was also at that time the perception of Chinese and Russian unity, which seemed to be a formidable thing and seemed to have a great expansive dynamic, and Vietnam was considered the selected target at the time.⁷⁰

The liberals like Galbraith, Schlesinger, Chester Bowles, Richard Goodwin, and George Ball who saw a polycentric world, or had reservations about combat troop commitments could not match the State Department and Pentagon "experts." As with the Bay of Pigs issue, the "experts" won. As Galbraith put it:

We knew that their expertise was nothing, and it was mostly a product of a certain kind of education...but it made no difference; they had their mystique, and it still worked and those of us who doubted it, Goodwin, Schlesinger, myself and a few others, were like Indians firing occasional arrows into the campsite from outside⁷¹

Asked why Kennedy listened to the Rostows and Taylors more than the Galbraiths, Schlesinger answered:

I think the momentum of the situation, a sense that he could limit American involvement. A feeling that he sort of made a deal with the national security establishment that in exchange for neutralization of Laos he would

⁶⁷ Interview 12/8/81.

⁶⁸ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 477-478.

⁶⁹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 128.

⁷⁰ Interview 12/8/82.

⁷¹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 77.

countenance some kind of effort in Vietnam. And the military odds in Vietnam seemed very much in our favor. I forget what the figures were ... 20: 1 in favor of the troops for the Saigon government.⁷²

But one must remember that Kennedy's decision to listen to the "experts" was his own. As David Halberstam points out, Kennedy sent Walt Rostow and Maxwell Taylor, not Arthur Schlesinger and Chester Bowles, to tour Vietnam for the White House.⁷³

The influence of Schlesinger and the rest of the intellectuals on Kennedy's foreign policy was positive but limited. Efforts to re-orient American foreign policy in a more mature direction succeeded when Kennedy felt himself expert enough to trust his own judgment, and failed when Kennedy trust the Establishmentarians.

[This is a chapter from David B. Kopel, *The Highbrow in American Politics: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the Role of the Intellectual in Politics*. Honors Thesis in History, Brown University, May 1982. Awarded Highest Honors, and the National Geographic Society Prize for best History thesis. Other chapters are available on-line at <http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm>.](http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm)

⁷² Interview 1/14/82.

⁷³ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* , 188. Schlesinger called Rostow "Chester Bowles with machine guns." *ibid*, 192.