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James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang, and David A. Welch. *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived: Virtual JFK*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009. Pp. xv, 421. ISBN 978-0-7425-5699-7.

Koji Masutani, dir. *Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived*. New York: New Video Group, 2008 [in theaters], 2009 [DVD]. Eighty mins.

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It is a tantalizing historical conundrum: What if Lee Harvey Oswald had missed? Leaving aside the conspiratorial controversies surrounding the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy (did Oswald act alone? was the mafia behind it? Castro and the Cubans?), his sudden departure left lingering questions, foremost among them Vietnam. When Kennedy became president, he inherited from Dwight D. Eisenhower a relatively limited advise-and-support commitment to South Vietnam. By November 1963, the American role had grown exponentially, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to the brink of taking over control of the war from South Vietnam. Kennedy knew that US policy towards Indochina had reached a major crossroads and that he must make decisions to either deepen or lessen Washington's commitment to South Vietnam's survival. But those decisions fell to his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson.

As James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang, and David A. Welch [BL&W] rightly say in their provocative, stimulating, fascinating, but also often frustrating and flawed book, *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived*—accompanied by an equally riveting documentary, *Virtual JFK*—asking what would have happened in Southeast Asia had Oswald failed is one of the most intriguing<sup>1</sup> counterfactual questions in US history. A lot hangs on the answer—personal and historical reputations, national morality, the trajectory of US, Vietnamese, and world history—especially if one agrees with the authors that Kennedy would have withdrawn American forces and left South Vietnam to its fate. Little wonder, then, that the topic provokes such passionate debate.

Undaunted, BL&W tackle the issue directly in an innovative and, at times, highly effective manner. They employ a procedure, “critical oral history,” that Blight and Welch first used in their pioneering study of the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>2</sup> Blight then followed this up, sometimes with Welch, in further critical oral history investigations of the Missile Crisis, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and the origins of the Vietnam War.<sup>3</sup>

Critical oral history gathers former policymakers and academic specialists together in the same venue for several days of intense discussions, during which the conveners, in this case BL&W, present both groups with original documents to supplement fading memories and stimulate discussion. The presence of the documents does not settle debate conclusively, but it does keep the discussion on track and correct long-held misapprehensions. Historians of the Cold War, myself included, are deeply indebted to the authors for developing this method, which has provided much fresh material and new insights into old and divisive historiographical questions.

To examine “Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived,” BL&W invited three former policymakers—Chester Cooper, a CIA analyst and NSC staffer; Thomas Hughes, the director of the State Department's in-house intelligence

1. Yet by no means unique. Consider two other questions strikingly similar to the Kennedy counterfactual in American history: did the chance of a successful Reconstruction die with Abraham Lincoln? and, would there have been a Cold War had Franklin Roosevelt completed his fourth term? (Indeed, the FDR question has an even greater magnitude than Kennedy's, for, absent the Cold War, there would almost certainly have been no war in Vietnam.) Lincoln, FDR, and Kennedy each had an ironic sensibility, died at a moment of extraordinary historical sensitivity and fluidity, and was replaced by a Southerner with a much blunter manner and less nuanced worldview.

2. *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1989; 2nd ed. NY: Noonday, 1990).

3. Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (NY: Pantheon, 1993), James G. Blight and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *Politics of Illusion: The Bay of Pigs Invasion Reexamined* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), Robert S. McNamara, with James Blight et al., *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (NY: PublicAffairs, 1999)—Welch participated in this project but not as editor or author.

office, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research; and Bill Moyers, deputy head of the Peace Corps and a White House aide to Lyndon Johnson—and academic specialists known to believe strongly that Kennedy either would or would not have withdrawn from Vietnam (“radicals” and “skeptics,” respectively).

BL&W, with director Koji Masutani, have also produced and written a documentary that mirrors the book but does not directly accompany it. Here, they are reprising their role as historical consultants on the critically acclaimed film *The Fog of War*, which won an Academy Award for Best Documentary in 2003 and for which Blight and Lang wrote an accompanying book.<sup>4</sup> Instead of critical oral history, *Virtual JFK* deftly uses stock newsreel footage and photographic stills from the early 1960s to contextualize Kennedy’s Vietnam policy; it is entertaining and informative in equal measure and is an ideal teaching tool. Although BL&W and Masutani share credit for writing the script, Blight is the only scholar to appear on screen. The film is based on six “episodes” during the Kennedy presidency: the Bay of Pigs (1961); the Laos crisis and negotiations (1961–62); the Berlin crisis and building of the Berlin Wall (1961); the first push to send US ground troops to South Vietnam (1961); the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962); and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s plan to begin withdrawing US military advisers from South Vietnam in the fall of 1963. Although only two relate directly to Vietnam, BL&W use each to illustrate that Kennedy’s foreign policy followed a general pattern—cautious and skeptical of military solutions to geopolitical and diplomatic problems—that had obvious implications for Vietnam.

Although BL&W are generally fair-minded in evaluating the competing claims about “virtual JFK,” in the end they side unambiguously with the radicals: “[the] evidence on virtual JFK is in our view overwhelming. JFK was not going to Americanize the war in Vietnam.... There would have been no American war in Vietnam if Kennedy had lived because this view is far more consistent with the relevant evidence than the alternative” (241).

At this point, I should make it clear that I myself am a skeptic, and have considered elsewhere, and explicitly rejected, the theory that Kennedy had either already planned to withdraw or was likely to do so.<sup>5</sup> I should also confess up front that nothing in *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived* has made me change my mind. However, though the evidence BL&W present is much less conclusive and more ambiguous than they appreciate, they do make a good case that JFK was temperamentally more inclined than Johnson towards the option of withdrawal.

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As BL&W note, the question of what Kennedy would have done in Vietnam is fraught with the methodological controversy typical of counterfactual history. Unfairly derided by some scholars as a silly, trivial game of “What If?” (What if Cleopatra’s famously elongated but alluring nose had been shorter? What if Napoleon had had tanks at Waterloo?), counterfactual history, exactly as advertised, requires us to imagine what history would have been like had one or more factors changed (for example, if Kennedy had lived). Most historians implicitly envision counterfactual history when they write “factual” history: that is, they weigh some factors more heavily than others and, in a sort of mental experiment, ask whether things would have been much different without the influence of a certain factor. But going beyond such an informal intellectual exercise is frowned upon as too inherently subjective—after all, by definition the results of such experiments lack any basis in fact. For a discipline already neurotic about objectivity, using counterfactual history as anything more than a private musing is often anathema.

For their part, social scientists have no such qualms. (Not coincidentally, BL&W are not historians but are trained in the behavioral and social sciences.) By employing a method known as regression analysis, they routinely engage in counterfactual experimentation. For instance, in trying to trace the root cause of an economic downturn, an economist consults a wide range of relevant data (unemployment figures, interest rates, balance of payments surpluses or deficits, consumer demand, etc.) and asks “What caused the re-

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4. James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

5. See my *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2006) 130–32.

cession?” He then crunches the numbers repeatedly, each time removing a single factor to see if the outcome changes much. If, for example, removing data on interest rates alters nothing in the overall results, then they were probably not a primary cause. But if everything changes when our economist removes, say, the collapse of housing prices in California, then that likely was a major causal factor.<sup>6</sup> Political scientists and international relations theorists proceed similarly, and their rigorous use of counterfactuals is indispensable to the study of world politics.<sup>7</sup>

The point of writing a plausible counterfactual history is not necessarily to change one factor and then plot out a fanciful alternative history but to stress contingency over determinism and agency over structure in historical causation. This forces historians not to assume events unfolded in the only way possible, and to acknowledge that they might well have turned out very differently.<sup>8</sup>

This is fascinating stuff that many historians would not hesitate to debate, yet BL&W spend a large amount of time and energy—in truth, too much—to explain that they are not practitioners of counterfactual history, which they dismiss as superficial and trivial because of its tendency to lead historians into speculative and unverifiable fantasies. In their final chapter, they even label such counterfactual speculation as “bullshit” (241–49). Instead, borrowing a term coined by Niall Ferguson, they explain that their book is an exercise in “virtual history.” The actual differences between “counterfactual history” and “virtual history” are never quite clear—as Fredrik Logevall<sup>9</sup> points out in the book’s foreword, what BL&W advocate “is merely counterfactual history properly done” (x). Instead, they deride counterfactual history as a form of “entertainment or performance art” and an “irrational” and “silly” exercise that is “demeaning to historians who take the history of the war in Vietnam seriously” (229). By contrast, virtual history is portrayed throughout as rational, logical, commonsensical, and scholarly rigorous.

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According to BL&W, proponents of virtual history would not dare predict what Kennedy would have done in situations he did not live to face, for example, the Gulf of Tonkin crisis in August 1964 or the Vietcong attack on the US base at Pleiku in February 1965. Since these incidents, the authors argue, arose as a result of LBJ’s actions, they are too remote from the facts we know about JFK to be of any heuristic value.

Leaving aside for the moment the overwhelming likelihood that Kennedy would have faced a series of Vietnamese-driven crises beyond his control almost precisely as LBJ did, the authors’ definition of counterfactual history is highly problematic. There is more than a touch of the straw man here, for serious, carefully constructed counterfactuals do not spin fantastical alternative historical scenarios based on a change in the facts; rather, they posit different but logical outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, despite their protestations BL&W do in fact speculate on what might have happened in the short term had things been slightly different. How could they not? Without at least some speculation about an alternative future, there is little point—indeed, none at all—to counterfactual history, or virtual history, or whatever we want to call it. So, while they admonish their readers not to conjecture what Kennedy would have done about Tonkin or Pleiku, they do ask them to “simulate” what virtual JFK

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6. For a clear, concise, and entertaining explanation, see Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (NY: Morrow, 2005) 161–63.

7. Good places to start include Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy, eds., *Explaining War and Peace: Case Studies and Necessary Condition Counterfactuals* (NY: Routledge, 2007) and Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2010).

8. For useful guides to historical counterfactuals, see Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997; rpt. NY: Basic Books, 1999) and his *The Pity of War* (1998; rpt. NY: Basic Books, 1999).

9. Logevall, who participated in the “Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived” event, is himself a leading counterfactualist. See his landmark *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1999) 395–400 and “Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been,” in *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited*, ed. Mark J. White (NY: NYU Pr, 1998) 19–62.

10. Interestingly, Blight and Lang themselves are well aware of this, because elsewhere, in an article on Jimmy Carter and the collapse of détente, they have used critical oral history to create a speculative, alternative unfolding of a history that never happened. See their article “When Empathy Failed: Using Critical Oral History to Reassess the Collapse of U.S.-Soviet Détente in the Carter-Brezhnev Years,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12 (2010) 70–72.

would have done regarding Vietnam, had he lived and been reelected. Would JFK have gotten in, gotten out, or something in between?" (28). Note that they assume Kennedy's reelection in November 1964—surely an impermissible supposition under their own ground rules of virtual history. Yes, Kennedy's reelection was probable, but it was not guaranteed, because it lay in the unknowable future. The early front-runner in a presidential election campaign could conceivably squander his advantage and lose the race (as in the 1948 and 1992 elections). Note too that they assume conditions in Vietnam in November 1964 would have differed little from those of a year before, a highly improbable if not strictly impossible eventuality. Without this assumption, those conditions would likely have mirrored the ones Johnson actually faced.

The point merits emphasis because it rests at the heart of the entire virtual history enterprise and furnishes the rationale for *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived*. It is crucial to remember that Kennedy, not Johnson, authorized the coup of Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963, three weeks before his own assassination. The Diem coup ushered in a period of political instability and internal insecurity—this was already apparent before Kennedy's death. Had he lived to run for reelection, he, like LBJ, would have faced a rapidly deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, quite apart from any policy or action in Washington.<sup>11</sup> Thus it is worth asking how Kennedy would have fared in a crisis like Pleiku, for he would have faced something very like it at some point. As McGeorge Bundy said at the time, "Pleikus are like streetcars"; in other words, they happen with great regularity, as if on schedule.<sup>12</sup> When Johnson's streetcar arrived, he opted for war. It is of course an open question what Kennedy would have done, but he certainly would have met his own streetcar, too.

As much as BL&W highlight the differences between Kennedy and Johnson, they were actually incredibly similar, especially in their approach to Vietnam. Unfortunately, *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived* makes no use of the new historiography on Lyndon Johnson, a rich body of work that demolishes the tired myths repeated here (267–68)—that LBJ, ignorant of the wider world, uninterested in diplomacy, and unskilled in foreign policy, was a brash Texan who confidently swaggered his way into the Big Muddy.<sup>13</sup> Neither Kennedy nor Johnson wanted to commit the United States to war—that much is clear. For every conflicted statement Kennedy uttered about Vietnam, Johnson probably uttered three or four. And though Johnson ultimately took the nation to war, he did so at a snail's pace, reflecting the same degree of caution as Kennedy. He did not jump on the first streetcar to pass his way. Just over a month before Pleiku there was the Christmas Eve bombing of a US officers' quarters at the Brinks Hotel in Saigon, and before that the November 1964 attack on the US air base at Bien Hoa. Johnson did not want or seek war, yet felt he had no option but to do so. Would Kennedy, who felt much the same, have acted the same?

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Even if we grant BL&W free license to eliminate (almost) all forms of reasonable speculation from virtual history, there remains the problem of subjective assessment of the facts. "Virtual JFK" is supposed to be more rigorously historical than "counterfactual JFK," because it is based strictly on the record of the "actual JFK" up to 22 November 1963. As the authors rightly observe at the outset, few historians quibble about the historical facts regarding Vietnam between Kennedy's inauguration and his assassination. Instead, they debate the relative causal significance of these events as well as the intentions and motivations of the policymakers behind them. For BL&W, virtual history seeks greater objectivity by pondering not what might have been but what actually occurred. Thus their insistence on examining Kennedy as he really was.

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11. Curiously, the Vietnamese themselves are notably absent from BL&W's narrative; by contrast, Cubans and Vietnamese figure prominently in their previous critical oral history projects.

12. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (NY: Random House, 1972) 533.

13. See, e.g., H.W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism: Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1994), Thomas Alan Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2003), Mitchell B. Lerner, ed., *Looking Back at LBJ: White House Politics in a New Light* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005), Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (NY: Free Press, 2006), Michael Lumbers, *Piercing the Bamboo Curtain: Tentative Bridge-Building to China during the Johnson Years* (Manchester: Manchester U Pr, 2008), and Mitchell B. Lerner, "'A Big Tree of Peace and Justice': The Vice Presidential Travels of Lyndon Johnson," *Diplomatic History* 34 (2010) 357–93.

Evaluating Kennedy's personality and policies, however, is not an exact science. Consider one of BL&W's most prominent yet problematic pieces of evidence—the Bay of Pigs. To recap, Kennedy inherited from Eisenhower a plan to sponsor a secret invasion of Cuba by over a thousand disgruntled anti-communist Cuban exiles. When the poorly planned invasion ran into stiff resistance, most of Kennedy's advisers, military and civilian alike, urged him to intervene openly with US air power. Kennedy refused, Fidel Castro's forces trounced the exiles, and America, which had clearly sponsored the invasion, was humiliated.

Applying the lessons of Cuba to the problems of Vietnam, BL&W portray the Bay of Pigs as definitive evidence of Kennedy's resistance, under tremendous pressure, to his advisers' calls for military intervention. Thus, his refusal to bow to military and other internal pressure in April 1961, as a new president with everything to lose, supposedly reveals a leader skeptical of military intervention everywhere else, including Vietnam. In short, like all good social scientists, the authors extrapolate larger patterns from specific, apparently representative examples. "There is very little mystery about JFK's performance in that crisis, what motivated it, or what he learned from it," they conclude of the Bay of Pigs (231).

The evidence, to us, is unequivocal: if one focuses on the available evidence from these seminal events of April 1961, it is difficult to imagine a scenario of Third World "defeat" in the long 1964 or any other comparable period that could have elicited from JFK a large-scale military intervention in the Third World. At potentially great political cost, Kennedy was willing to pull the plug on an invasion plan he inherited from his predecessor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, occurring little more than a hundred miles from US shores, an invasion that would have been mounted against the regime of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who was, at that moment, America's most prominent and vilified Third World opponent. After the Bay of Pigs, it is fair to ask: under what circumstances was JFK likely to have invaded a Third World country? The evidence is overwhelming that JFK not just decided to say "no" to an invasion of Cuba, but also set his bureaucracy the task of never letting anything like it happen again on his watch (233).

Inarguably, the Bay of Pigs provides Kennedy counterfactual radicals a compelling precedent for a similar decision to retreat in Vietnam. It took colossal resolve for Kennedy to resist pressure to authorize a second air strike and effectively abandon the invasion to failure. Yet, as I will argue, the Bay of Pigs also provides Kennedy counterfactual skeptics with equally convincing evidence.

The legacy of the Bay of Pigs was hardly "unequivocal." BL&W's reading, certainly a logical one, underscores Kennedy's caution regarding military intervention. But, alternatively, the Bay of Pigs also showed Kennedy recklessly involving himself in a sticky situation that could only be resolved through enormous effort and controversy. Failure in April 1961 did not diminish such recklessness but encouraged it, even when it could easily have landed the United States in another confrontation. Thus, after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy authorized Operation Mongoose, an aggressive campaign to sabotage Cuba's economy and assassinate Castro. When the Cubans then agreed to host Soviet nuclear missiles in the summer of 1962 as a deterrent to an anticipated US invasion, Kennedy did not accept the missiles with equanimity but instead forced a confrontation that nearly sparked a nuclear war.<sup>14</sup> Kennedy ran that risk even though he agreed with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara that the missiles posed no strategic threat, or even strategic disadvantage, to the United States.<sup>15</sup> He also recognized the double standard of protesting Soviet missiles in Cuba when the United States had deployed nuclear missiles to Turkey during his own presidency.<sup>16</sup> Kennedy provoked the crisis in large part because of domestic political considerations, such as intense pressure

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14. We now know this, ironically enough, thanks largely to Blight and Welch's groundbreaking critical oral history projects on the Cuban Missile Crisis (see notes 2 and 3 above).

15. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2009) 90–91, 182.

16. *Ibid.*, 100, 142, 498, 501, 512–16.

from Republicans not to allow any Soviet arms into Cuba<sup>17</sup>—precisely the kind of political pressure he would have faced in authorizing a withdrawal from Vietnam.

Moreover, the situations in Cuba and Vietnam were not at all similar, let alone analogous. Cuba was already “lost” in April 1961 and had been for over two years. The United States was not “in” Cuba, so Kennedy’s decision not to ensure the invasion’s success, however courageous, was not the same as favoring withdrawal. The same could not be said for South Vietnam, where the United States was involved as deeply as it could be short of deploying regular ground forces. By 1963, the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations had poured several billion dollars worth of military hardware and economic aid into Vietnam. Even more importantly, both presidents had repeatedly staked American political and moral prestige on the survival of a non-communist South Vietnam in the most categorical and explicit terms. True, Kennedy also equivocated about Vietnam and even voiced doubts at times. But the US investment in the fate of South Vietnam was not remotely similar to its support for a bunch of ill-trained, amateur, anti-Castro partisans whom Kennedy could jettison far more easily than the South Vietnamese.

In April 1961, JFK’s opposition to direct and open US involvement, let alone outright intervention in Cuba, was crystal clear to policymakers and invasion planners, be they military or civilian, Cuban or American. He was always unsure about the invasion plan and harped on the need to dissemble any US role. “The President has stated that under no conditions will [the] U.S. intervene with any U.S. forces,” the CIA’s Jacob Esterline told his colleague Jack Hawkins only a few days before the operation.<sup>18</sup> Or as Maj. Gen. David W. Gray reminded Adm. Robert L. Dennison, the Commander-in-Chief in the Atlantic theater, as the invasion was going down to defeat, “There is no intention of intervening with US forces.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, Kennedy was merely upholding his own stated policy in deciding to cut his losses and allow the invasion to fail on its own terms. This was a tough call, to be sure, but one more consistent with his stated views than follow-up air strikes or further US action. Vietnam, of course, was a different story. A Kennedy order to withdraw would have meant going back on his own policies as president and his earlier pro-South Vietnam position as a US Senator. Kennedy certainly could have made such a reversal, but the Bay of Pigs provides little evidence that he was likely to do so.

Most seriously, BL&W’s reading of the Bay of Pigs does not always accord with the facts. Their argument rests on a claim that Kennedy cancelled not only the second air strike, but also a follow-on amphibious landing of marines on the USS *Essex* patrolling nearby: “JFK was urged on by increasingly hysterical advisers on April 19–20, 1961, to send the Marines into Cuba to rescue the invading, but overmatched Cuban exile brigade. Kennedy firmly refused to oblige them” because he wanted to avoid committing the United States to “a disastrous jungle war” (231). In the film, *Blight*, the narrator and on-screen analyst, goes even further, saying that Kennedy was “besieged” by advisers pleading with him: “Look, you have an option: you can send in the Marines, and begin the conquering, or the re-conquering, of Cuba and the destruction of the Cuban Revolution.” According to *Blight*, Kennedy rejected this advice and “personally called the commander of that ship [the *Essex*], Admiral Arleigh Burke, and said, ‘Stop. We are not getting involved in jungle warfare 90 miles south of Florida.’”

Now this really *is* counterfactual history. To begin with, Admiral Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, was based the whole time in Washington, was in the same room as Kennedy during much of the crisis, and was not in command of the *Essex*. Moreover, the cancellation of the second air strike is well known, but I had never heard of JFK cancelling or refusing to authorize a ground invasion by US forces. BL&W’s citation (392, n. 45) refers to two books but no page numbers. One, *Politics of Illusion*, is the product of a critical oral his-

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17. Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2009) 201–211; Julian Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security—From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (NY: Basic Books, 2010) 155–74.

18. J.D. Esterline to Jack Hawkins, 13 April 1961, in a memo for the record, CIA to Maxwell D. Taylor, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 10: *Cuba 1961–1962* (Washington: Gov’t Printing Office, 1997) 221.

19. *Ibid.*, 276 (18 April 1961).

tory project on the Bay of Pigs, organized by Blight and Peter Kornbluh of the National Security Agency.<sup>20</sup> The other is journalist Peter Wyden's classic investigative narrative, *The Bay of Pigs*.<sup>21</sup> The only references in either book to a proposed US ground invasion are, to put it charitably, pretty thin. In one of the oral history sessions in *Politics of Illusion*, Thomas Blanton (who also participated in *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived*), said that the father of a researcher at the National Security Archive had been on board the *Essex* during the crisis and had assumed he was there to mount an invasion of Cuba after the exiles had landed.<sup>22</sup> This third-hand account nearly forty years on merely indicates that some people at scene (understandably) anticipated an invasion; it proves neither that any ground invasion was actually contemplated nor that JFK refused to authorize it. *Politics of Illusion* also discusses whether the Cuban exiles believed Kennedy would send in US troops—apparently they did—but nothing more.<sup>23</sup> Again, this proves only what people in and around the Cuban operation (mis)perceived, not what Kennedy had in fact authorized or not. Wyden says American naval personnel assumed an invasion was possible<sup>24</sup> and expected to evacuate the exiles from the beach, but that the exiles themselves chose to make a last stand and fight on.<sup>25</sup> My reading of other secondary sources uncovered nothing more. Corroborating evidence that Kennedy rejected direct intervention by US ground forces may exist, but BL&W do not provide it.

This is critically important. There is a huge difference between, on one hand, Kennedy paring down and then ruling out air support and, on the other, his rejecting a ground invasion. Phrases like “jungle war” (in the book) and “jungle warfare” (in the film) powerfully evoke Vietnam. But if there was never any prospect of US forces waging “jungle warfare” in Cuba—and it appears there was not—the case for a virtual JFK withdrawing from Vietnam suffers.

Moreover, the supposed confrontation between Kennedy and his “hysterical” advisers, especially Admiral Burke, does not pass the test of logic. Kennedy's aversion to tipping the US hand was, we have seen, widely known in Washington. As the invasion was failing, Burke and others had a very hard time trying to convince him to authorize the second air strikes. Having lost that argument, why would they possibly think JFK might approve a full-scale ground invasion by US Marines?

This is not to say that my reading of the Bay of Pigs proves Kennedy would have escalated and Americanized the war in Vietnam. My interpretations are no more definitive than anyone else's, including BL&W's. I would merely caution against the purported “unequivocal” conclusions drawn from a particular historical episode. Historians should not shy from using counterfactual history, but nor should they pretend that it is methodologically rigorous and historiographically conclusive. BL&W have every right to conclude from the Bay of Pigs and other examples that Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam, but they must also acknowledge that their virtual history is purely subjective and speculative. There is simply no basis to contend so categorically that “Kennedy decided—that is the most appropriate term—Kennedy *decided* that under no circumstances he could foresee would he be dragged into a major military conflict in the Third World” (233, authors' emphasis). Kennedy made no such decision about Cuba or elsewhere—and certainly not about Vietnam.

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What, then, would Kennedy have done? There is a case to be made that he would not have Americanized the war, and, despite its flaws, *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived* makes it. He might well have tried to limit American involvement and have succeeded in the attempt. The key difference between Kennedy and Johnson is that, had JFK lived to win the 1964 election, he would have been less susceptible to political pressure than Johnson, who always had one eye on 1968.

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20. See note 3 above.

21. Subtitle: *The Untold Story* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

22. See note 3 above, 93.

23. *Ibid.*, 87–95.

24. Wyden (note 21 above) 126–27.

25. *Ibid.*, 276–77.

I, however, remain unconvinced, mostly because I find the merits of BL&W's case unconvincing. Though I fully share their concern for contingency over inevitability and agency over structure, that policymakers had options open to them does not mean they would have taken those options. Thus, despite all their intriguing book's merits, BL&W fail to resolve the Kennedy counterfactual question one way or the other. The debate continues. Long may it run.