

DAN ELLSBERG

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW
PART II

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that I could see, from the national point of view, for us to get in. It was explained to me at the time Kennedy was looking for a place to draw the line against Communism in the fall of '61. Because of his public retreats in the Bay of Pigs, Laos and the Berlin Wall, he wanted to take a firm stand against Communism in the sight of the military . . . in the sight of right-wing public opinion.

The understanding I had from within was that basically it was a cynical domestic calculation, with some strategic overtones, in that he wanted to convince Khrushchev he couldn't be pushed around too much. There's some truth to that, but it can be overestimated if you assume wrongly, like most people, including insiders, that Kennedy had made a firm decision in the fall of '61 that greatly increased our commitment.

A very surprising discovery to me in the fall of '67, as I began to study the documents of '61 in connection with the McNamara study project, was that the major decision Kennedy had made was to *reject* the recommendation made to him by virtually everyone, that he send combat units to Vietnam. Kennedy realized that most of the people in the country, whatever the politics, would have said, "If it takes combat troops, or if it takes heavy bombing or nuclear weapons, it's obviously not worth it for us. We won't succeed."

Kennedy did decide to send in advisers. He *had* had too many retreats that very year, and he couldn't afford another one. But at the same time, he chose not to put troops in, and he was careful to conceal from Congress and the public that any of his advisers had defined the situation as being so critical as to require troops as a solution.

which you met?

We were both speaking at a background set of discussions for CBS officials—CBS executives who had been gathered from all over the country. I spoke in the morning, when he wasn't there, and then he and Bill Bundy both spoke at lunch. And Frank Mankiewicz came up and said that Robert Kennedy would like to talk to me that afternoon; would I come back with him after lunch to talk over Vietnam?

I remember that session with Bobby very well. I've never described this to anyone, incidentally: During my trial and during the '72 campaign season, I didn't want to lend any credence to the false notion that my disclosures were part of a Kennedy plot, which Johnson was prone to suspect anyway; so I didn't talk much about associations with Kennedy. (As a matter of fact, the Papers made Kennedy look bad.)

But I remember the discussion very well. He showed an unusual familiarity with the different political factions in Vietnam, and the alternatives. This was in October of '67, by the way, at a time when he said that he would not be a candidate in 1968—just somebody who was concerned about Vietnam. His reactions I don't remember in detail, but all of them had the form of real anguish at the involvement, and the necessity for ending the involvement.

I'd just started my study on the McNamara papers of the 1961 decision-making, which was the volume that I drafted. So I asked him some questions about Jack Kennedy's refusal to send combat troops as requested by Taylor, Rostow, the joint chiefs and McNamara, virtually everybody involved, in 1961.

I asked why Kennedy had sent advisers if he wouldn't send troops.

Well, Bobby said, his brother had been absolutely determined not to send combat troops to Vietnam; he felt that

It's consistent with other stuff that come out since then, such as what Kenny O'Donnell says. O'Donnell was Kennedy's close friend and chief of staff. He says that Kennedy decided in late '62, and more strongly in early '63, that our position was essentially hopeless in Vietnam and that we should get out, but that he could not afford to close out our involvement there before the election of '64, precisely because, as he said, "When we get out, whenever it is, there will be a McCarthyite attack on me and I will be accused of selling out the country and losing Indochina to Communism. After we win the election I can take that, but I can't afford it before the election."

Now, that is very far from a flattering story, because, although it shows realism about Vietnam, it also shows a willingness to keep bombing the Vietnamese for a couple of more years in order to get through the election.

I said to Bobby: "What made him so smart, how could he be so clear-sighted about the low likelihood of success?" And I remember he really burst out at that point saying: "But we were there; we had seen it! We were there together in the early Fifties, and we saw the position the French were in and saw what they were trying to do to the Indochinese. And my brother was determined early that we would never get into that position."

Now, all of this was very plausible to me, because I had been getting a feeling from reading these documents that the only men who were capable of visualizing the trap that Vietnam might be for us were people who happened to have a direct acquaintance with the French experience. George Ball was one. He had been a consul in this country for the French during that period. The others, the great majority of officials, just could not conceive that we could be subject to the same problems

John McNaughton told me in the fall of '64 that Robert McNamara had told him of an understanding with President Kennedy that they would close out Vietnam by '65, no matter what happened, whether it was in good shape or bad. McNamara had told him exactly what Robert Kennedy had told me: that his brother had determined not to send troops.

Just to interrupt here, what was the nature of your discussions with Robert Kennedy? He had by this time decided to become a critic of the War.

I had had a long session with him in the course of my study of crises back in '64. I'd discussed the Cuban missile crisis and gotten a poor impression of him. He seemed rather immature to me at that time.

But meeting him later, in the fall of '67, in a discussion of Vietnam policy which he asked to have, I was very impressed by him. He seemed very different. Three years had passed and he had, meanwhile, run for the Senate and been in for a couple of years. I was impressed above all by the concern he obviously had for the people of Indochina, for the Vietnamese situation.

At that point I'd been all over Washington talking to the highest officials, virtually everyone connected with Vietnam except Rusk and Johnson, on the need to back a different kind of leadership in Vietnam—one that was willing to negotiate directly with the NLF. I'd gotten a variety of attitudes, but in no case did I find a real concern about the problem, and particularly about the Vietnamese.

But in the case of Robert Kennedy, I was convinced that he really cared. I was very moved by that.

What were the circumstances in

been absolutely determined not to send combat troops to Vietnam; he felt that if we started sending them, our force would substitute for that of the Vietnamese that we were hiring, and we would end up doing the whole job and get into the same position as the French."

"Well," I said, "did he really expect to succeed with the advisers since everybody said he wouldn't?"

He said, no, probably not, but there was some chance of success, and in any case the decision could be made later.

So I said, "Was he prepared to see the country go Communist rather than send combat troops?" Because that was the crucial question.

He said, very carefully: "I can't say exactly what he would have done in the actual situation, say of '64 or '65, that Johnson was faced with, where that was the alternative—either send troops or let it go Communist. But I can say what his intention was in '61 or '62, and it was that he was absolutely determined not to send troops."

I asked him, "Do you think that politically, he could have let it go Communist? What did he plan to do?"

He said, his brother would have arranged "a Laotian-type solution, some form of coalition government with people who would ask us to leave—which would hold together for some period of time and sort of paper over our withdrawal."

And that had some plausibility, because Kennedy had presided over the Laotian solution in '61 and '62 at a time when virtually everybody believed it would quickly fall apart and lead to a Communist takeover, which in fact it did not do. But he clearly was willing to do it in Vietnam. This was very significant.

This isn't the conventional assessment of Kennedy's role.

...ians, just could not conceive that we could be subject to the same problems as the French; they couldn't think of us as colonialists, or racists, for God's sake. They thought of us as so much more competent and powerful than the French that the problem looked entirely different. But people who had actually known the French experience could see otherwise, and Jack Kennedy was one of those.

I've never really referred to that interview, although it was genuine historical data from a participant, because I wanted to avoid being one of those who went around saying that he could vouch for the certainty that Kennedy would carry out those intentions, if he were put in a crisis. But I think it is true to say that Kennedy was more likely to have closed out, cut the losses in '64, '65, than any of the other Presidents we've had.

So what else took place in your meeting with Bobby? What was the point of the discussion—the end of the War?

Yes, we talked about the possibility. You see, my proposal at that time, in the election of '67, was that the US should drop its support of Thieu and Ky and either be generally neutral or preferably back a civilian leadership which would be willing to negotiate with the NLF. I couldn't get anybody interested in that proposal at that point, but Bobby was interested.

In the course of the discussion, by the way, he went through his famous shirt-changing routine. He always used to change his shirt for practically every appointment, and he would strip down right in front of you at his desk—this beautiful red-haired chest which glowed in the dark—and put on a new shirt. He was always dashing about. I must have seen him changing his shirt a dozen times.