# Rethinking Camelot

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JFK, the Vietnam War, and US Political Culture

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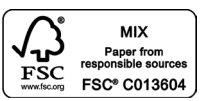


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# Introduction
# Contours and Context

The chapters that follow deal with a crucial moment of modern history, the escalation of the US war in Vietnam from state terror to aggression from 1961 through 1964, setting the stage for the far more destructive assault that followed. They were intended for another book, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues,* which is concerned with central themes of the 500-year European conquest of the world that was commemorated on October 12, 1992 and the forms they are likely to assume in the coming years. The war planning for Indochina illustrates rather clearly some leading features of the Columbian era. It could be regarded as a kind of case study, one of unusual interest and import. Nevertheless, the material seemed special enough to warrant separate treatment. To keep this discussion more or less self-contained, I will sketch some of the relevant context, in part taken from *Year 501*.[1]

Apart from the terrible consequences for the region itself, the Indochina wars had a considerable impact on world order and the general cultural climate. They accelerated the breakdown of the post-World War II economic system and the shift to a "tripolar" global economy; and the internationalization of that economy, along with its corollary, the extension of the two-tiered Third World social model to the industrial societies themselves

as production is shifted to high-repression, low-wage areas. They also contributed materially to the cultural revival of the 1960s, which has since extended and deepened. The notable improvement in the moral and cultural climate was a factor in the "crisis of democracy"—the technical term for the threat of democracy—that so dismayed elite opinion across the spectrum, leading to extraordinary efforts to reimpose orthodoxy, with mixed effects.

One significant change, directly attributable to the Indochina war, is a growing popular reluctance to tolerate violence, terror, and subversion. There was no protest or concern when the US was running a murderous terror state in South Vietnam in the 1950s, or when Kennedy escalated the violence to outright aggression in 1961-1962, or when he and his successor stepped up the attack against the civilian population through 1964. If the President wanted to send the US air force to bomb villages in some far-off land, to napalm people who were resisting the US attack or happened to be in the way, to destroy crops and forests by chemical warfare, that was not our concern. Kennedy's war aroused little enthusiasm, a factor in high-level planning as we will see, but virtually no protest. As late as 1964, even beyond, forums on the war were often—literally—in someone's living room, or in a church with half a dozen people, or a classroom where a scattered audience was assembled by advertising talks on the situation in Vietnam and several other countries.

The press supported state violence throughout, though JFK regarded it as an enemy because of tactical criticism and grumbling. Much fantasy has been spun in later years about crusading journalists exposing government lies; what they exposed was the failure of tactics to achieve ends they fully endorsed. The *New York Times,* expressing the conventional line, explained that the US forces attacking South Vietnam were leading "the free world's fight to contain aggressive Communism" (Robert Trumbull), defending South Vietnam "against proxy armies of Soviet Russia"

just as the French colonialists had sought to defend Indochina from "foreign-inspired and supplied Communists" (Hanson Baldwin). The US army and its client forces sought to "resist" the Vietcong, southern peasants who "infiltrate" into their own homes and are "trying to subvert this country" in which they live (David Halberstam), enjoying more popular support than George Washington could claim, as government specialists ruefully conceded. Kennedy's brutal strategic hamlet program, which aimed to drive millions of peasants into concentration camps, was a praiseworthy effort to offer them "better protection against the Communists"—local people whom they generally supported—marred only by flaws of execution (Homer Bigart). Such methods having failed, President Johnson decided in early 1965 "to step up resistance to Vietcong infiltration in South Vietnam" (Tom Wicker)—the Vietcong being South Vietnamese, as recognized on all sides. To the end (indeed, to the present), the media reflexively adopted the framework of government propaganda, tolerating even the most outlandish fabrications and absurdities. Exceptions did exist, but they were rare.[2]

As President Johnson sharply increased the attack against South Vietnam in early 1965, also extending the bombing to the North and introducing US combat forces, there were stirrings of protest, though they were limited and aroused bitter antagonism. Take Boston, perhaps the center of US liberalism. The first public protest against the war was in October 1965 on the Boston Common, with a huge police presence. It was violently disrupted by counterdemonstrators. The media angrily denounced the audacity of those who had sought to voice (embarrassingly timid) protests, but were fortunately silenced; not a word could be heard above the din. The next major public event was scheduled for March 1966, when hundreds of thousands of US troops were rampaging in South Vietnam. The organizers decided to hold meetings in churches, to reduce the likelihood of violence. The

churches were attacked and defaced while police stood calmly by—until they too came under the barrage. In suburban towns, mothers and children were pelted and abused when they stood silently in protest against the escalating war. It was not until late 1966 that the climate began to shift.

By the late 1960s much of the public was opposed to the war on principled grounds, unlike elite sectors, who kept largely to "pragmatic" objections of cost (to us). This component of the "crisis of democracy" was considered severe enough to merit a special designation—the "Vietnam syndrome," a disease with such symptoms as dislike for war crimes and atrocities. When Ronald Reagan sought to emulate Kennedy in the first weeks of his term, preparing the ground for a direct attack on "aggressive Communism" throughout Central America, the media went along as usual, but public protest quickly induced the Administration to back down in fear that its more central programs would be prejudiced; press critique of Administration fabrications followed some months later. The Reagan Administration was compelled to resort to clandestine international terrorism, at unprecedented levels, to avoid public scrutiny.

An early Bush Administration National Security Policy Review, leaked on the day US ground forces attacked in the Gulf, concluded that "much weaker enemies" (meaning any acceptable target) must be defeated "decisively and rapidly," because any delay or resistance would "undercut political support," recognized to be thin. Classical forms of intervention are no longer an option, the domestic base having eroded. No more Marines marauding and terrorizing for years as in Wilson's days, or US Air Force planes bombing the South Vietnamese countryside in the Kennedy-Johnson style. The options are limited to clandestine terror with foreign agents, so that the media can pretend they do not see and the public is kept in ignorance; or "decisive and rapid" blows against an enemy too weak to strike back after a

huge campaign to portray him as a demon on the verge of destroying us.

Despite some changes, leading themes persist, and merit attention and thought. Naturally there are variations as circumstances change, and the world is far more complex than any brief description of it. Nevertheless, we gain no little understanding of contemporary affairs by placing them in a larger framework of policies, goals, and actions with cultural and institutional roots that endure over long periods.

## 1. Military Science and Spirit

Adam Smith described the voyages of Columbus and Vasco da Gama, opening up the Western Hemisphere and Asia to European conquest and setting the stage for the devastation of Africa as well, as "the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind." Writing in 1776, he understood very well the "essential contribution" of these achievements to the rapid development of Europe, and was no less aware that they were "ruinous and destructive" to the populations subjected to "the savage injustice of the Europeans," which brought "dreadful misfortunes." With "the superiority of force" the Europeans commanded, "they were enabled to commit with impunity every sort of injustice in those remote countries" that they reached.

The crucial role of Europe's mastery of the means and culture of violence is substantiated by contemporary scholarship. The inhabitants of Asia and the Western Hemisphere were "appalled by the all-destructive fury of European warfare," military historian Geoffrey Parker observes: "It was thanks to their military superiority, rather than to any social, moral or natural advantage, that the white peoples of the world managed to create and control" their "global hegemony," history's first. "Europe's incessant wars" were responsible for "stimulating military science

and spirit to a point where Europe would be crushingly superior to the rest when they did meet," historian V.G. Kiernan comments aptly.[3]

These traditional features of European culture emerged with great clarity in the Indochina wars. There is a direct line of descent from the English colonists who carried out "the utter extirpation of all the Indians in most populous parts of the Union" by means "more destructive to the Indian natives than the conduct of the conquerors of Mexico and Peru" (Secretary of War Gen. Henry Knox, 1794), to the "ethnic cleansing" of the continent, to the murderous conquest of the Philippines and the rampages in the Caribbean region, to the onslaught against Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.[4]

An indispensable feature of the "military science and spirit" in which European culture excelled, revealed once again in the Indochina wars, is the talent described by Alexis de Tocqueville as he watched the US Army driving Indians from their homes "in the middle of winter," with snow "frozen hard on the ground," a "solemn spectacle" of murder and degradation, "the triumphal march of civilization across the desert." He was particularly struck that the conquerors could deprive people of their rights and exterminate them "with singular felicity, tranquilly, legally, philanthropically, without shedding blood, and without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of the world." It was impossible to destroy people with "more respect for the laws of humanity," he wrote.

The more humane thought it advisable to make the savages "happy and useful" so as to save "the pain and expense of expelling or destroying them" (Jefferson's commissioners, preparing the next stage in the near-extermination of the Cherokees, continued under de Tocqueville's eyes, consummated by self-styled "philanthropists and humanitarians" half a century later). "We become in reality their benefactors" by expelling the natives from their homes, Pres-

ident Monroe explained as the groundwork was being laid for Jackson's Indian Removal Act. The perpetrators knew what they were doing, if they chose to know. Secretary of War Knox warned that "a future historian may mark the causes of this destruction of the human race in sable colors," looking askance at the genocidal practices of his countrymen. The "men of virtue" who ran the country also expressed occasional qualms. Well after he left power, John Quincy Adams became an outspoken critic of slavery and policy towards the indigenous population—policies that he described as "among the heinous sins of this nation, for which I believe God will one day bring [it] to judgement." He hoped that his belated stand might somehow aid "that hapless race of native Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious cruelty." But the recantation by the intellectual father of Manifest Destiny and domination of the hemisphere had no effect on the extermination, which continued in full ruthlessness.[5]

Adams spoke from firsthand experience. One notable case, with long-term consequences reaching directly to Indochina, was the "exhibition of murder and plunder known as the First Seminole War,...one part of the American policy aimed at removing or eliminating native Americans from the Southeast," as William Weeks describes General Andrew Jackson's "campaign of terror, devastation, and intimidation" against the Seminoles in 1818 in Spanish Florida, in his study of Adams's diplomacy. The Spanish Minister concluded that "the war against the Seminoles has been merely a pretext for General Jackson to fall, as a conqueror, upon the Spanish provinces...for the purposes of establishing there the dominion of this republic upon the odious basis of violence and bloodshed"—"strong language from a diplomat," Weeks writes, "yet a painfully precise description of how the United States first came to control the province of Florida."

As Secretary of State, Adams had the task of justifying what General Jackson had achieved. So he did, using the opportunity

to establish the doctrine of executive war without congressional approval that was extended to new dimensions in the Indochina wars. Adams presented the justification and novel doctrine in his "greatest state paper," as the noted contemporary historian Samuel Flagg Bemis calls it admiringly, a document that impressed Thomas Jefferson as being "among the ablest I have ever seen, both as to logic and style." This racist diatribe, full of extraordinary lies, was designed to "transform the officially unauthorized conquest of foreign territory [Florida] into a patriotic act of self-defense and the United States from aggressor into aggrieved victim," Weeks observes. He suggests that Adams may have been inspired by Tacitus, "his favorite historian," who caustically observed that "Crime once exposed had no refuge but in audacity." Steeped in the classical tradition, the founders of the Republic appreciated the sentiment.

In Adams's version, Jackson sought to defend Americans from "all the runaway negroes, all the savage Indians, all the pirates, and all the traitors to their country" who were mobilized by the British to "wage an exterminating war" against these innocents—a mélange of "half-truths, falsehoods, and powerful rhetoric," Weeks shows. In reality, the aim of Jackson's "bloodthirsty tactics" and aggression in violation of the Constitution was to conquer the Spanish-held territory and exterminate runaway slaves and Indians who had sought to escape the savagery of the colonists—"mingled hordes of lawless Indians and negroes" who were waging "savage, servile, exterminating war against the United States," in the rhetoric that impressed Jefferson and modern scholars. Two innocent Englishmen were executed by the conquerors for conspiring to incite the savages, an act that Adams commended for its "salutary efficacy for terror and example." The story ended 20 years later, Weeks continues, with the "second war of extermination against" the Seminoles, "in which the remaining members of the tribe either moved west or were killed or forced to take refuge in the

dense swamps of Florida," surviving today "in the national consciousness as the mascot of Florida State University." If the Nazis had been victorious, perhaps Jews and Gypsies would survive as mascots of the Universities of Munich and Freiburg.[6]

"In defending Jackson," Weeks writes, "Adams was implicitly defending Indian removal, slavery, and the use of military force without congressional approval," establishing an important precedent that holds until today, in the last case.

Extermination of the lesser breeds with utter respect for the laws of humanity is a pervasive feature of the European conquest. Massacre of people who are utterly defenseless is considered a particular mark of heroism, as we saw again during the 1991 Gulf slaughter. A concomitant is the standard phrase "hero of X," referring to the manager who sat shuffling papers in some quiet room while his minions were fighting the battle of X, slogging through jungles and deserts, trying to escape enemy fire, or, preferably, raining death and destruction from afar. Murder of infants by starvation and disease through economic warfare, a US specialty for many years, is considered less meritorious, therefore concealed by the doctrinal institutions.

The ability to churn out self-acclaim for unspeakable atrocities is highly regarded, virtually an entry ticket to the ranks of the respectable intellectual culture. The practices are routine, unnoticed, like the air we breathe. It is, for example, hardly likely that the producers of the evening news cringe in embarrassment as they present George Bush in his farewell address, wiping away a tear as he recalled the US troops who reached out in sympathy to pleading Iraqi soldiers, thinking perhaps of the "turkey shoot" on the Basra highway or the B-52 attacks on conscripts hiding in the sand—or the Shi'ite and Kurdish civilians left to the tender mercies of Saddam Hussein as Bush returned to support for his old friend in the interests of "stability" a few weeks later, with nods of sober approval in news and commentary. And none

would be so rude as to raise a question about the thousands of children dying as Bush and Saddam played their little games.[7]

A related task is to reshape history so as to demonstrate the nobility of our intentions and the lofty ideals that guide us as we bring "dreadful misfortunes" to those lucky enough to fall under our sway. The more hard-headed warn that we should not "revert to form" with the Cold War ended, "granting idealism a near exclusive hold on our foreign policy" as we slip back unthinkingly to our role of world benefactor while ignoring "the national interest"; the world is too harsh a place for us to be guided solely by the "Wilsonian idealism" that has so long lighted our path (*New York Times* chief diplomatic correspondent Thomas Friedman, quoting a high official with approval). This sage counsel also has deep roots. As the country celebrated an earlier victory in 1783, a committee warned Congress not to go to excess in "gratify[ing] their better feelings in acts of humanity"; "generosity becomes bankrupt and frustrates its own designs by prodigal bounty," the committee explained as it recommended the further robbery of Indian lands.[8] The reverential awe over our humanitarian intervention in Indochina, which would fill many volumes, has also been accompanied by regular warning that our generosity might be excessive, possibly harmful to the "national interest."

Falsification of the historical record, often reaching quite impressive levels, can persist for many centuries, as illustrated by the fate of those who faced "the savage injustice of the Europeans" from the early years of the conquest. It was not until the cultural revival of the1960s that it became possible to confront some of the realities, even in scholarship, apart from rare and largely ignored exceptions.

It would not be fair to imply that the regular fabrication of useful history passes entirely unnoticed. In mid-1992, the *New York Times Book Review* devoted an essay to this abomination, with a lead headline running across the top of the front page reading: