A Question of Principle?: John F. Kennedy's Relations with France and Britain Re-examined

Owen Cooper

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Contents

For the world is changing. The old era is ending. The old ways will not do.

John F. Kennedy.[1]

Introduction: The Man and The Image

The contradiction in the figure of John F. Kennedy has made him an almost endless source

of fascination for people worldwide. On the one hand, Kennedy was a handsome,

charismatic, larger-than-life figure, all of which helped make him an excellent politician.

The real basis of his political success, however, was his gift for articulating the vision of a

new American-led magical age of harmony known as "Camelot". Kennedy was a symbol

of the optimism of the 1960's, representing a belief in man's ability to act as a force for

good, and of almost unlimited potential for America and for the world. Camelot was the

vision of this age. Yet juxtaposed against this idea was the reality of Kennedy the man -

an intelligent man, to be sure, but also a man near crippled by osteoporosis and Addison's

disease, tainted by allegations of mafia links and who seemed to be at the mercy of his

sexual urges. He symbolised the limitless potential of mankind, but demonstrated man's

inescapable weaknesses. He offered hope of lasting solutions to the world's problems, yet

he was dead less than three years after his election, whilst those same problems lingered

on.   It is this apparently irreconcilable rift between the optimistic potential of the

symbolic Kennedy and the reality of Kennedy the man, which has fostered vast numbers

of popular and academic works examining his life, as well as the impassioned debate over

his assassination.

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[1] John F. Kennedy, *Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960*;
http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/JFK+Pre-Pres/Address+of+Senator+John+F.+Kennedy+Accepting+the+Democratic+Party+Nomination+for+the+Presidency+of+t.htm, (last viewed 07/09/2006)

Despite the "dry-as-dust" tendencies of diplomatic history, this same popular paradox traces its way through the many works examining Kennedy's foreign policy. Academics have struggled to reconcile the promises and policies of Kennedy's election campaign with the record of his term in office, despite the convoluted logic of numerous heartfelt attempts.[2] In particular, they attempt to solve the paradox by determining whether Kennedy was a "pragmatist" or an "idealist". It is worth examining exactly what is meant by these terms, for although their general meaning may appear to be evident, their imprecision is a hindrance. For the purposes of this thesis, idealism is taken to mean the selfless pursuit of principle, that is, to do that what is morally right, usually with an assumed benefit to a broad but unspecified group, not just one's self. Idealistic philosophies link this selflessness with a concept of progress; that is, by taking consistently principled actions, this broad unspecified group will obtain a tangible and lasting benefit. At its most optimistic, they assume that mankind can achieve utopia through constant progress. Unfortunately, all of this does not tell us exactly what principle or principles are to be pursued, or in what priority, or exactly what is and isn't morally right, such that an action which seems "principled" to one person may not appear that way to another. Pragmatism, on the other hand, focuses upon self-interest rather than the abstract broader interest, and upon outcome rather than principle. It assumes that decision makers must make decisions based solely upon a comparison of the benefits and costs stemming from each possible course of action. This may mean taking morally suspect actions, if such action offers the most favourable outcome. This concept is closely

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[2] See, for example Alan Nevins, "Introduction," in *The Burden and The Glory: The Hopes and Purposes of President Kennedy's Second and Third Years of Office As Revealed In his Public Statements and Addresses,* ed. Alan Nevins (New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. ix-xv.

tied to the realist school of international relations theory, which suggests that morality

does not apply to nation states as it might to individual humans. In particular, analysts

look to the structural realism of Hans J. Morgenthau, who argued human nature cannot be

transcended, and hence the national interest is the only relevant motivation for the nation.[3]

Nations cannot be "good" or "evil", and to demand that nations do or be "good" is

illogical and idiotic.

Thus pragmatism and idealism might appear to be direct opposites, as the former is selfish

and amoral whilst the latter is theoretically selfless and moralistic. One might determine,

therefore, whether Kennedy is the former or the latter. Yet to ask the question in these

terms, to demand or expect that Kennedy fall more or less in one of these boxes, or even

to condemn him as vacillating between the two, is to adopt a blinkered viewpoint which

will ensure a misleading conclusion. Despite initial appearances, the question offers a

false dichotomy. The real answer lies in an area generally ignored by academics, and

diplomatic historians in particular. That is, the peculiar manner in which nationalism -

and in particular American nationalism - is able to fuse conceptions of the pragmatic with

the idealistic. By establishing the survival of "the nation" as the ultimate and overriding

"principle", nationalism synthesises morality with benefit and self-interest with

selflessness. Thus conceived, that which is in the nation's interest is by definition also

morally good. It is this ability which has made nationalism the most powerful ideology of

the twentieth century, and perhaps yet the twenty-first. Yet none manage this synthesis as

effortlessly or as thoroughly as the peculiar form of the American national myth, for only

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[3] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

in this form is the survival of the nation conceptually tied to the survival of all mankind. To ignore or downplay the role of American nationalism in the United States' response to the world is to omit the most important factor defining American foreign policy, especially the foreign policy of John Kennedy.

This work proposes to show how an appreciation of American nationalism offers a more satisfying understanding of Kennedy's foreign policy, through an investigation of the Kennedy administration's relations with two of its key allies in Western Europe; Britain and France. Upon first impression, it might seem more logical to examine America's relations with its Cold War opponents, rather than its Cold War allies, in order to see demonstrations of American nationalism. Yet although America's allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) were its partners in the Cold War against Communism, this did not prevent a divergence of interests and ideals in a number of key points. These instances highlight the difference between America's world view and those of its allies, without the distracting addition of ideological "capitalism versus communism" propaganda, which tends to downplay or ignore such divergences between allies. The governments of the US, UK and France had a recent history of strong and successful alliance against the aggression of Hitler, and shared a keen opposition to both communism and the USSR. Yet despite these strong foundations for their alliance, it is clear that Kennedy's rhetoric of an Atlantic partnership as a united global force for permanent good was out of touch with the shifting world order of the 1960s. It is Kennedy's attempts to deal with this divergence that allows a real insight into his

thinking. Though at times he justifies his actions on the basis of principle or of necessity, a constant motivating factor is his belief in the American national myth.

There is a considerable body of work examining the diplomatic history of the Kennedy administration, including its relations with Britain and France. The official papers of the Kennedy, Macmillan and de Gaulle governments have been pored over by numerous historians, often in minute detail. The works of Arthur Cyr and John Gaddis provide an excellent overview of American relations with Europe after World War Two, whilst a number of works have examined Kennedy's attitude towards the unification of Europe. The work of Taber, though published only six years after Kennedy's death, is quite revealing and insightful in this regard.[4] John Ashton's book provides a detailed examination of the British papers of the period.[5] Yet despite this significant body of analysis, few authors have attempted to examine the ideas behind Kennedy's actions and policies to any significant degree. Fewer still have specifically accorded American nationalism any great significance in Kennedy's policies. Michael Latham provides perhaps the next-best thing; his examination the ideology of modernism in JFK's foreign policy touches on some key aspects of Kennedy's nationalism, though he generally does not specifically identify them as such.[6] Others, such as Michael Hunt and Roger Whitcomb, provide a strong general overview of the pattern of American nationalism in

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[4] Arthur Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 1987). John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A critical appraisal of American national security policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Lawrence Kaplan, *American Historians and the Atlantic Alliance* (Kent: Kent University Press, 1991). George M. Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe: The Politics of Partnership* (Bruges: College of Europe, 1969).
[5] Nigel J. Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
[6] Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

relation to foreign policy, but they do not recognise the power of nationalism to shape policy. They also do not mention Kennedy or his administration specifically.[7]

This dearth of works is symptomatic of the general lack of attention paid to the phenomenon of American nationalism, particularly in the twentieth century. Though a number of significant and perspicacious works have been published, they are far from comprehensive either in their understanding of the meaning of American nationalism or in their use of nationalism as an analytical tool. There is also, perhaps, the difficulty that a work combining the study of foreign policy with American nationalism attempts to straddle the sometimes awkward divide between proponents of the "old" and "new" modes of history; between the "dry-as-dust" diplomatic history of "great men", and the more recent (though hardly "new") history of ideas. The former tends to take the existence of such things as nation-state borders for granted, whilst the latter may view them as merely another intellectual construct - perhaps to be deliberately ignored, as in the case of trans-national history. Yet to deliberately cultivate the artificial separation between these two models is to encourage confusion. In order to understand the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration, it is necessary to look at both the record of the administration's actions and policies, and at the more abstract and intangible question of his key ideas, particularly his understanding of the American national myth. Man is primarily a creature of ideas, and his perception of the world influences the manner in which he travels through it, no less for governments than for individuals. The rigid distinction between the two modes, this barrier between the idea and the action, is thus

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[7] Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Roger S. Whitcomb, *The American Approach to Foreign Affairs: An Uncertain Tradition* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1998).

illogical. Of course, all this is not to suggest that the relationship between the two is a simple matter of causation, or that the link is always perceptible, as it is clearly not so.

This work examines firstly Kennedy's belief in the American national myth, and the influence of this belief upon his foreign policy in general. Then, in the following chapters, I demonstrate how an awareness of this nationalism can give historians a more accurate understanding of Kennedy's relations with Britain and France. Yet it must be noted from the outset that the elements of American nationalism are easily overlooked or ignored in any reading of the relevant documents. It is partly for this reason that so many writers have failed to consider the effect of nationalism in Kennedy's policy. Yet the fact that these elements are not obvious or overt does not mean that they are absent. Rather, as commentators of American nationalism such as David Larson have pointed out, the basic concepts of American nationalism are so thoroughly disseminated within America that US statesmen can make very subtle allusions to key ideas which are nevertheless easily understood by their target audience.[8] In this sense, America is the archetype of Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Community".[9] Simple words such as "freedom" and "liberty", or historical references such as "the Arabella" all refer to an imagined story of the shaping of "the American people", and are thus bound with a much greater and different sense of meaning for their American audience than for non-Americans. They are, in effect, a sort of nationalist "code", and like most codes, are not easily understood by outsiders. Thus, although many historians have looked at the public documents of the Kennedy period, by now looking at these same documents with sensitivity for this nationalist code, we can

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[8] David L. Larson, *The Puritan Ethic in United States Foreign Policy* (New Jersey and New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1966).
[9] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991).

gain an insight into Kennedy's nationalism which was not perceptible in previous analyses and pose hitherto un-asked questions about both the presence and effect of American nationalism on its policies.

This work examines Kennedy's ideas chiefly through his rhetoric, both as a Senator and as President, as well as the policies and actions of his administration, as seen through government documents from the period. Yet this method like any, is not perfect, and indeed raises some key problems. The most significant is the distinction between Kennedy the man and the Kennedy administration, since it might be argued that the actions of the administration do not necessarily demonstrate Kennedy's own views. It certainly seems possible that members of Kennedy's administration might take actions within their own areas of responsibility which could conflict with Kennedy's intentions. However, I believe this risk to be minimal, due firstly to Kennedy's determination to put his stamp on American foreign policy, demonstrated by his choice of the compliant and indecisive Dean Rusk as his Secretary of State. As historian Donald Ward concludes, Kennedy "planned to be his own secretary, and the appointment of a strong man in the State Department would have thwarted that goal".[10] Secondly, the nature of the American presidential system helped to ensure that the President retained substantial control over all aspects of policy. Unlike the British cabinet system within which Prime Minister Macmillan worked, Kennedy and Vice-President Johnson were essentially the only elected members of the administration. The remaining members were Kennedy appointees, and their authority derived solely from the President. Whereas Macmillan's

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[10] Donald C. Lord, *John F. Kennedy: The Politics of Confrontation and Conciliation* (New York: Barron's, 1977), p. 178.

cabinet ministers were also responsible to their electorates and to the Conservative party, the only loyalty of Kennedy's men was - theoretically - to Kennedy himself.

Kennedy certainly supported this view, arguing in a speech in 1960 that the President alone, not his subordinates, must take the blame or credit for his administration's policies. The President is solely responsible, he argued, and "if his farm program fails, he alone deserves the blame, not his Secretary of Agriculture".[11] Accordingly, Kennedy believed that he should adopt a very "hands-on" approach to his administration, with minimal delegation of decision-making responsibility, in contrast to the leadership style of Eisenhower. In that same speech, he stated that "during the past 8 years, we have seen one concept of the Presidency at work. Our needs and hopes have been eloquently stated - but the initiative and follow-through have too often been left to others". This was a mistake, Kennedy suggested, for "too often [Eisenhower's] own objectives have been lost by the President's failure to override objections from within his own party, in the Congress or even in his Cabinet".[12] He concluded that "[we] need instead what the Constitution envisioned: a Chief Executive who is the vital center of action in our whole scheme of Government". [13] Kennedy was determined to be that Chief Executive. Therefore, it seems reasonable to ascribe at least the broader strokes of American foreign policy to Kennedy alone, if not every detail. As this work examines, it was his conception of the American myth, rather than simply pragmatism or principle, which proved the key factor in the formulation and pursuit of that policy.

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[11] Kennedy, *The Presidency in 1960, National Press Club, Washington D.C., January 14, 1960*; http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/JFK+Pre-Pres/The+Presidency+in+1960.htm, (last viewed 07/09/2006)
[12] Ibid.,
[13] Ibid.,

The key consideration is not that the Grand Objective be exactly right, it is that we have one and that we start moving toward it

- Kennedy Aide John McNaughton[1]

Chapter 1: Kennedy's Grand Objective

Despite Kennedy's fervent criticism of the Eisenhower administration during the 1960 Presidential election, the actual policies of Kennedy administration were often not vastly different from those of the Eisenhower era. Yet Kennedy's election did seem to symbolise a tremendous change, marking the beginning of a new era of idealism and progress. There was the fact that Kennedy had overcome discrimination to become the first Catholic Presidency, as well as the potent image of one of the oldest presidents in American history making way for the youngest. Kennedy symbolised a dramatic changing of the guard from the Eisenhower era, and he declared "it is a time, in short, for a new generation of leadership - new men to cope with new problems and new opportunities…For the world is changing. The old era is ending. The old ways will not do". [2] Exactly what these "old ways" and these "new opportunities" were was not defined. They didn't need to be - as rhetorical devices they worked better as vague promises, offering all things to all men. Whatever Kennedy did would be the "new ways", and they would bring progress to America. But this evolution was not restricted to the United States; rather Kennedy saw himself as part of a global phenomenon, as "all over the

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[1] John McNaughton to McGeorge Bundy, September 28, 1961, John F. Kennedy presidential Papers, NSC File, Box 273 quoted in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 198.
[2] Kennedy, *Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960,*

world…young men are coming to power - men who are not bound by the traditions of the past - men who are not blinded by the old fears and hates and rivalries - young men who can cast off the old slogans and delusions and suspicions".[3]

These young men would bring the progress that the previous generation were unable to provide, thanks to the latter's impotency and rigid thinking – their "delusions and suspicions". The achievement of progress was thus determined more by one's attitude than by specific actions. Kennedy's succession did not translate to specific policy reversals; rather it took the form of a *feeling* of such a shift; a vague but symbolically powerful change.   The philosophical element of this evolution was based upon two key ideas; firstly, a feeling of tremendous American power, and secondly, a feeling that many major problems and conflicts could be solved though the application of that power. In his first State of the Union address, Kennedy declared that "I speak today in an hour of national peril and national opportunity".[4] He and his team felt that their predecessors had failed to use American power effectively for the greater good – and that this was immoral. Kennedy's rhetoric sounded a real note of urgency when describing these problems facing the world. "Beneath today's surface gloss of peace and prosperity are increasingly dangerous, unsolved, long postponed problems - problems that will inevitably explode to the surface during the next 4 years of the next administration", Kennedy warned in 1960.[5] He was certainly vague as to exactly how he would solve these problems, but he was not attempting a melodramatic rhetorical exaggeration – he saw these problems as a clear and

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[3] Ibid.,

[4] Kennedy, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union", January 30, 1961, available from http://www.jfklink.com/speeches/jfk/publicpapers/1961/jfk11_1961.html, (last accessed 5/10/06).

[5] Kennedy, *The Presidency in 1960, National Press Club, Washington D.C., January 14, 1960.*

present danger to all mankind, to use the favoured American term. The list of problems

was a long one, including "…the growing missile gap, the rise of Communist China, the

despair of the underdeveloped nations, the explosive situations in Berlin and in the

Formosa Straits, the deterioration of NATO, the lack of an arms control agreement"

overseas, as well as "all the domestic problems of our farms, cities, and schools".[6] All had

the potential to increase suffering throughout the world, unless America could find and

implement solutions quickly.

Yet whilst Kennedy emphasised the scale of these problems, he simultaneously

emphasised his confidence in America's ability to overcome them. This belief stood at

the heart of Kennedy's foreign policy.   In fact, Kennedy tended to make little distinction

between domestic and foreign problems, viewing both as within America's power and

jurisdiction to solve. Kennedy publicly praised Democrat Presidents such as Franklin

Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson who "got things done" at home and abroad, compared

with conservative Republicans such as Calvin Coolidge who "preferred to talk about the

local flower show and its exhibits".[7] Kennedy felt that as President he too could get

"things done"; America could end segregation in Universities or famine in Africa - it

could even go to the moon. Such barriers as national borders or earthly limits were

merely psychological limitations, and were certainly nothing compared to the resources

and spirit of the American nation. A motivational speaker long before the era of

motivational speakers, Kennedy suggested that Americans simply needed to remove their

mental barriers to progress, in order to fulfil their potential.

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[6] Ibid.,
[7] Ibid.,

As Arthur Cyr points out, this thinking both parallelled and was based upon the rise of the

"New Economics", which suggested that increased government spending (particularly on

the military) would enhance the economy, thus allowing for even more spending, without

fear that this profligacy would destroy the American economy.[8] The net effect was that

the nation's means were seen to be highly elastic, if not limitless. Here lies the first

indication that Kennedy did not see a need to choose between pragmatism and idealism -

the Kennedy administration saw only potentially limitless resources, and pressing

problems that needed to be solved. If doing "the right thing" was achievable without

damaging the American economy, then there was no dilemma, at least superficially. It

was a simply a "choice our nation must make", Kennedy suggested "between the fresh air

of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of 'normalcy'".[9] Americans simply needed to

learn to view problems in these terms, and to avoid the negative, limited thinking which

was preventing solutions and hence withholding progress. This was not "strategy", as

Gaddis defines it, of assigning means to prioritised ends, since American means were seen

as limited only by human conception.[10] All that was required was the intelligence and

nerve to apply one to the other, and to avoid "the old slogans and delusions and

suspicions" which created barriers to progress where there were otherwise none. [11]

Kennedy's idealism also demonstrated a strongly utopian streak. Progress would not

simply make life bearable for most of mankind, it could ultimately make life *perfect*. His

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[8] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*.
[9] Kennedy, *Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960.*
[10] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*.
[11] Kennedy, *Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960,*

ultimate aim was this perfect earth - "…a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved".[12] As this statement highlights, Kennedy believed that strong nations needed to act justly – that is, according to idealistic principle, in order to avoid hurting the weak and creating the conflict which was prolonging the imperfection in the world. A superpower such as the US thus needed to be particularly careful to ensure that their actions were idealistic, and not selfish, to ensure they fulfilled their potential to create good, not harm. As he noted in his inaugural address, man could "invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors…let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce…".[13] The key was for nations (but particularly the strong ones) to do all these things idealistically, not selfishly; boldly, not timidly.

Yet whilst Kennedy spoke frequently of mankind in general, it was clear that he placed the real onus for finding solutions upon the United States of America. As a tremendously powerful nation, Kennedy saw that the United States had the potential to bring great good to the world. However, beyond this calculation of pure power, he believed that the United States also held a special philosophical role; a global responsibility. In a key statement, Kennedy argued that "…with respect to some of the major challenges in the world at the present moment there is an opportunity for the idealistic initiative of our people and the self-interest of the nation to intersect".[14] The statement asserts that the selfless pursuit of principle is congruent with the self-interest of America. Therefore, by taking actions

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[12] Kennedy, *Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961*;
http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03Inaugural01201961.htm, (last viewed 7/09/2006)
[13] Ibid.,
[14] Kennedy, "A Democrat Looks at Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 36, No. 1 (October, 1957), p. 59.

which benefited America – presumably by "solving" any of the major problems previously mentioned, the United States would *in fact* be helping all mankind. In the case of America, to act selfishly is thus also to act selflessly. As the most powerful nation on earth, America could and should act to help itself, and thus to help the whole world. Calculations of pragmatism and of principle are thus fused. To understand this phenomenon, we must delve deeper into the workings of the American national myth, and in particular its key concepts of American exceptionalism and God-given destiny.

I. A Sense of Mission for the United States

The antecedents of the theory of US global responsibility date to a time long before Kennedy and his administration. The historian Sacvan Bercovitch has suggested that the American national myth was based upon a Puritan tradition, which developed in the isolation of the first America colonies (in Kennedy's birthplace of Massachusetts), into a unique and distinctive American character.[15] The most fundamental aspect of this tradition was the idea of a redeemer mission, which argues that the Americans were, from the time of the first pilgrims, a "chosen people", selected by God and sent to that bountiful continent on a special mission. This mission was to become a model of liberty and democracy, described by Puritan leader John Winthrop as the "city on a hill", or as Kennedy described it, "beacon lights for other nations", which would lead the world from darkness into enlightenment.[16] As Bercovitch points out, since the mission to provide this

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[15] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
[16] Kennedy, *Address delivered to a Joint Convention of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, The State House, Boston, January 9, 1961*;

"city on a hill" was commissioned by God, those actions which were taken selfishly, in the name of the nation, were also holy by definition. Any action which strengthened America also helped America achieve its mission, sped the world's transition to salvation, and therefore benefited all of mankind. This created the rather counter-intuitive situation whereby a selfish act by the American nation was morally good, and hence idealistic, *by definition*. America the nation was thus essentially incapable of taking an immoral action. It was this belief which, in Kennedy's phrase, allowed the "idealistic initiative of our people and the self-interest of the nation to intersect", since the interests of the US and of mankind were conceptually one and the same thing.

Of course, only the American nation had God's unqualified approval in this manner. This point is fundamental, because the American national myth took a very different view of other nations and their own forms of nationalism than it did its own. Traditional forms of nationalism (in the classic European model) limited the focus of each nation's destiny to the survival and success of that nation. In contrast, the American national myth was universal; through America, all mankind would be saved. Classical nationalism was exclusive, since only the members of each nation could subscribe to its own limited form of nationalism. But all mankind could theoretically subscribe to the American national myth - indeed the more who believed, the faster the vision would become reality. The idea of "America" was thus closer to an inclusive religion than to a self-centered nation in the European model. This belief was the basis of a crucial distinction between American and regular forms of nationalism. According to the myth, when other nations took actions

http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03General Court01091961.htm, (last viewed 7/09/2006)

out of pure self-interest, those actions were selfish, and were almost certain to be detrimental to mankind in general. When America took such actions, they were idealistic and unselfish by definition. America thus judged its own actions and the actions of others on an entirely different scale – as indeed many countries do – but it was not a scale based simply on jingoism. This was not one nation claiming superiority in a hierarchy of nations. As a pre-destined people with a universal mission from an interventionist God to spread the ideals of liberty and democracy, the United States placed itself in another category entirely from all other nations on earth. America was unique; an exception made by God to serve the good of mankind, to whom the normal rules simply did not apply.

This construction of American exceptionalism also entailed unique demands from the American nation. Since America alone had the mission to save mankind, America needed to make the required sacrifices to achieve this mission. Kennedy quoted from John Winthrop in his final speech before assuming the Presidency, at the State House of Massachusetts, and noted that "we are setting out upon a voyage in 1961 no less hazardous than that undertaken by the Arabella in 1630".[17] Only America had been blessed by God and led from the corruption of Europe to bountiful "untouched" lands in order to create this model of liberty. With this blessing came a responsibility, or as Kennedy paraphrased from Isaiah, "For of those to whom much is given, much is required".[18] Everything had been given to the United States, and "now the trumpet summons us again - not as a call to bear arms…but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle…a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty,

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[17] Ibid.,
[18] Ibid.,

disease, and war itself".[19] The United States was called upon to make great sacrifices, yet this was not a thing to be resented, Kennedy reassured. Rather, "I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people…The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world".[20]

In order to build that fire, Kennedy believed his administration needed two things: fresh ideas and action. Kennedy decried the disappearance of gifted intellectuals from American politics, which he believed had resulted in a dearth of ideas to solve the problems of America and the world.[21] "What we need now in this nation", Senator Kennedy declared in a 1959 speech, "more than atomic power, or airpower, or financial, industrial or even manpower, is brain power...What we need is a constant flow of new ideas".[22] He disparaged Republican nominee and former Vice-President Richard Nixon as "a young man" with ideas "as old as McKinley" in a period when "the times demand new invention, innovation, imagination, decision".[23] Exactly what these new ideas were was once again rather vague and undefined. Kennedy posited the creation of ideas as the key to America's history and future, arguing that "our country has surmounted great crises in the past, not because of our wealth, not because of our rhetoric…but because our ideas were more compelling and more penetrating and wiser and more enduring".[24] Indeed,

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[19] Kennedy, *Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961,*
[20] Ibid.,
[21] Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace, Ed. Allan Nevins* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 186.
[22] Ibid., p. 164.
[23] Kennedy, *Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960,*
[24] Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*, p. 165.

Kennedy's own record stands as testament to the compelling power of the greatest of American ideas, the American national myth.

Yet it was also clear to Kennedy that these new solutions would not simply appear from the zeitgeist. The key to the new approach was logic, a belief that if leaders would logically and objectively consider the consequences of their actions, then everybody would benefit. Here again Kennedy conflates the idealistic with the pragmatic, by suggesting that since logic is objective, logical solutions could not be selfish, and must therefore be moral, and would ultimately help all of mankind. To act logically (and presumably pragmatically), is thus to act idealistically. He suggests that there is no inherent conflict between principled action and national interest, and that perceptions of conflicting interests between nations were often emotional and irrational, and could therefore be minimised or avoided altogether. This belief in the infallibility and objectivity of rational logic was exemplified in the figure of Robert McNamara, the former CEO of Ford Motors and new Secretary of Defence, who had built his career upon the "systems analysis" techniques pioneered at Harvard University. McNamara was famous for his ability to swamp political opponents with statistics, stymieing their attempts to criticise administration policy. Unfortunately, as the infamous body-count statistics from Vietnam showed, "pure" logic was not as objective as it first appeared. Even McNamara's sophisticated analysis techniques were ultimately limited by their inputs and assumptions. If the latter were wrong or inappropriate, the results were be convincing but misleading - a dangerous combination.

Perhaps the only thing more important in Kennedy's philosophy than logical solutions was a perceived need for action.[25] Kennedy condemned the inaction of the Eisenhower administration as "the last seven years of American drift", which had allowed the Soviets to overtake the US in rocketry and space exploration, and to win victories in Indo-China, Central Europe and the Middle East.[26] To Kennedy's thinking, action was always better than inaction, because inaction, or "spectation" as he termed it, created inertia, and prevented solutions.[27] At its most basic level, action was lauded as a desired end in its own right – it was necessary to do *something*, anything, even if the net effect of that action was negligible, or occasionally destructive. This fondness for action resulted in what Thomas Paterson describes as a "cult of toughness", applauding impulsive action in a competition to be the boldest, which was to lead Kennedy into an embarrassing fiasco at the Bay of Pigs.[28] At its most extreme, this desire for constant action stood at odds with the pursuit of rationality. A rushed and crude attempt to solve a problem can often make that problem worse, particularly in the rarefied atmosphere of international diplomacy. The Kennedy administration encountered numerous situations in which a 'steady-as-she-goes' policy might have been preferable to the hasty action stemming from a crisis mindset, such as the decision to cancel the Skybolt missile, which is examined in the third chapter of this work. Yet Kennedy and his advisors seemed unaware of this dilemma, and continued to favour the "active" approach over the cautious one, often to the alarm of

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[25] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*, p. 75.
[26] Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*, p. 193.
[27] Kennedy, "For More Exercise and Less "Spectation". National Football Foundation, New York, N.Y.," in *The Burden and the Glory: The Hopes and Purposes of President Kennedy's Second and Third Years in Office as Revealed in his Public Statements and Addresses*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row, December 5, 1961).
[28] Thomas G. Paterson, "Introduction: John F. Kennedy's Quest for Victory and Global Crisis," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 14.

America's European allies, although Kennedy was certainly more cautious about unilateral military actions after the Bay of Pigs.[29]

II. JFK - "A Believer in the American Mission"[30]

With the rapid fading of fascism after World War II, communism quickly became the chief enemy of American "freedom and liberty". Indeed the American mission could hardly have found a more fitting ideological enemy than communism, for unlike fascism, it combined anti-democratic theories with anti-capitalist ones, allowing Americans to effectively link two fine American traditions of capitalism with democracy to posit their philosophy of "freedom" opposing "tyranny". Thus in terms of the myth, it was relatively easy to equate a national mission to spread liberty and democracy with a mission to defeat communism. Yet America's vehement hostility to the USSR was based upon more than its anti-democratic government – after all, Ngo Dinh Diem's authoritarian South Vietnamese regime was considered to be a part of the "free-world". The real clash was not of political systems, but of myths. Whereas other forms of nationalism limited the focus of their destiny to the nation, communism and the American national myth both offered a plan to save all of mankind. Yet mankind could clearly not be saved both by the workers' revolution and by an American model of liberty and freedom.[31] The US and USSR were mythical rivals; and Kennedy was determined to see the US triumph. Unlike many other Democrats, Kennedy generally did not suffer from the tag of being "soft" on Communism. He had built his political reputation upon being at least as anti-communist

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[29] See chapter 2, Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War.*
[30] Nevins, "Introduction: A Believer in the American Mission," in Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*, p. ix
[31] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

as the Republicans; an image which had greatly helped him in his campaign against Republican Presidential candidate Richard Nixon.

Yet at the same time, Kennedy was keen to minimise direct conflict with China and the USSR. As Kennedy declared in his first State of the Union speech, "on the Presidential Coat of Arms, the American eagle holds in his right talon the olive branch, while in his left he holds a bundle of arrows. We intend to give equal attention to both".[32] As historian Paul Hammond notes, Kennedy's "posture was intended to be not only tough…but also flexible and conciliatory, with more choices available".[33] Whilst Kennedy certainly believed that the US was right to combat communism, he believed that the two superpowers must not let the Cold War preclude their regular communication, and attempts to talk out their differences, to help avoid potentially deadly miscalculation and false impression.[34] There was, after all, little point in attaining a US victory for mankind if the price was a nuclear holocaust. He made numerous statements to this end in his inaugural address, appealing for both sides to "begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction".[35] The new defence doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) specifically aimed to avoid such a nuclear war, whilst its companion doctrine of Flexible Response allowed the US to continue to fight "brushfire wars" whilst minimizing

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[32] Kennedy, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union", January 30, 1961, available from http://www.jfklink.com/speeches/jfk/publicpapers/1961/jfk11_1961.html, (last viewed 5/10/06).

[33] Paul Y. Hammond, *The Cold War Years: American Foreign Policy Since 1945* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Atlanta: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1969), p. 150.

[34] Frank A. Mayer, "Adenauer and Kennedy: An Era of Distrust in German-American Relations," *German Studies Review,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Feb, 1994): p. 89.

[35] Kennedy, *Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961,*

the risk of escalation. If disastrous miscalculation could be avoided, then with superior ideas and bold action, the American model would inevitably triumph.

Kennedy felt that the risks of such deadly miscalculation were greatly increased by the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The United States had long held deeply ambivalent feelings about nuclear weapons in this manner. In keeping with the myth, many Americans perceived that the US had been "blessed" by an interventionist God with a nuclear monopoly. As long as nuclear weapons were held only by those with pure intentions, it was reasoned, they would have only positive effects, since they would serve as the ultimate deterrent to aggression, hence reducing the likelihood of war. The development of nuclear weapons by other nations had spoiled this ideal situation. As Whitcomb notes, these other nations were "morally unqualified since they were compromised by histories of colonial exploitation and selfish nationalism", and could not be trusted with such tremendous power.[36] Thus from the viewpoint of the American myth, nuclear weapons provided both tremendous potential for good, accompanied by even larger potential for evil - everything depended upon whose finger was "on the button". The more restricted their availability, the safer mankind would be.

Significantly, of the Western allies, only the United States elevated their fear of nuclear holocaust through nuclear proliferation to such a quasi-religious status.[37] Beyond the calculations of self-interest, there was a clear ideological gap between America and its allies in this regard. For Europe, still recovering from the devastation of World War II,

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[36] Whitcomb, *The American Approach to Foreign Affairs: An Uncertain Tradition*, p. 23.
[37] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 78.

any outbreak of war would be a disaster, and nuclear war did not hold such a special status. In contrast, it had been a long time since North America had experienced significant military conflict, and for Americans of JFK's generation, the McKinley-esque idea of a "nice little [conventional] war" was vastly different to a nuclear war. Americans also had a long tradition of armageddonist and millenarian religious beliefs, giving the idea of an "end-of-days" scenario of nuclear holocaust a particular resonance for Americans that was not shared or understood by Europeans.

The one thing, besides nuclear war, that Kennedy was determined to avoid in his foreign policy was the appearance of weakness. England's failure to stand up to Hitler's aggression had been the subject of Kennedy's thesis *Why England Slept*, where he argued that "aggressive conduct if allowed to grow unchecked and unchallenged ultimately leads to war".[38] Kennedy had certainly taken the "lessons of Munich" to heart. Kennedy stated in his inaugural address, "we dare not tempt [adversaries] with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed".[39] To the Kennedy mindset, appearances were all important. International relations consisted of a test of wills, in which only those consistently demonstrating commitment and steady nerves could "win". Kennedy argued "that is the real question. Have we the nerve and the will?... Are we up to the task - are we equal to the challenge?".[40] These ideas were based on the emerging international relations theories of credibility in deterrence - the belief that threats of retaliation needed to be credible if they

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[38] Lord, *John F. Kennedy: The Politics of Confrontation and Conciliation*, p. 196.
[39] Kennedy, *Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961,*
[40] Kennedy, *Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960,*

were to have the desired deterrent effect. At the same time, historian Arnold Toynbee's theories of challenge and response stressed the importance of states vigorously responding to challenges to their authority, in order to prevent an erosion of their power.[41]

Nations therefore needed to consistently demonstrate resolve in their relations with other nations, since a failure to demonstrate such resolve could lead other nations to risk aggressive action, in effect calling the bluff of the would-be deterrer. The bluff was all important; the idea being that if nations could *express* their determination and resolve through rhetoric and symbolic actions, they would not be called upon to *exhibit* it in warfare with another nation.[42] Accordingly, the Kennedy administration was particularly concerned with symbols, and with signalling America's resolve at every opportunity or potential "challenge". Unfortunately, this demand for constant resolve tended to inflate the significance of challenges out of all relation to their strategic importance, since the nation's credibility was seen to be at stake in every situation. Any "challenge", no matter how minor, needed to be met with a firm "response", signalling one's determination to the opposition.

Because of this requirement for a firm response, Kennedy was unable to capitalise on opportunities demanding a less confrontational approach. Strangely for a politician, Kennedy seemed unaware that a direct confrontation could often strengthen an opponent's position, as allies put aside diverging interests to tackle a common threat. After all, even the USSR and the US had formed an alliance to fight the challenge of Hitler - an alliance

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[41] See, for example, Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London & Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1960).
[42] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 239.

that would have been unthinkable in any less dire a situation (as the rapid breakdown in

their relations after the cessation of hostilities demonstrated). Yet the Kennedy

philosophy demanded confrontation and prevented him from even rationally evaluating

the benefits of a "divide and conquer" approach, which might well have been more

successful. The most significant example of this failure lay in Kennedy's inability to

capitalise on the emerging Sino-Soviet split. The C.I.A. had gathered strong evidence

illustrating the widening gap in the interests and ideology of the USSR and China, yet his

"challenge and response" mindset prompted Kennedy to act, and occasionally speak, as

though he was fighting one monolithic communist enemy – "the single-minded advance of

the Communist system", instead of a shaky coalition of non-capitalist states.[43] Due to

China's geography and lack of air and sea power, the build-up of its military power during

the early 1960s posed a far greater risk to the Soviet Union than to the United States.[44] By

sending economic aid and military advisors to prop up the besieged Diem regime in South

Vietnam, Kennedy was indeed vigorously confronting the "Communist challenge" there.

But his actions made America appear more threatening to China than the USSR, creating a

common interest between the two states which helped to delay the Sino-Soviet split and

thus strengthened the global Communist cause.

In a sense, however, since Kennedy was a "believer in the American Mission", he *was*

fighting a monolithically communist enemy. That enemy was not the nation-states of the

USSR or China, but of the communist myth of universal salvation through the workers'

revolution, which rivalled America's own universal myth. It was this mythical rivalry that

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[43] Kennedy, *Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960,*
[44] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 42.

prompted Kennedy to ignore the differences between the Communist powers, and instead focus on undermining "the Communist system". Exactly what that system consisted of was characteristically vague and undefined, and more rhetorically powerful for that. Since the communist system challenged the myth, it was not just the credibility of the American nation that was at stake in any "challenge", it was the entire universal myth of liberty through America.   As Kennedy had famously declared in his inaugural address, he was willing to "…pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty".[45] Kennedy was willing to gamble almost anything to defend the credibility of the American national myth, since the survival of that myth was the only hope for all mankind. For America's allies, this was a somewhat alarming attitude to take, and one that had profound implications for American relations with Europe.

The determination to achieve a firm response to every challenge was also a barrier to achieving compromise, because even small losses were seen as unacceptable, and possibly encouraging further challenges.[46]   The mentality prevented Kennedy from accepting minor losses in the expectation of a long term gain. For example, as Gaddis has noted, allowing independent communist governments in the Mediterranean might have provided a short term boost to the Communist movement, but would have been a useful means to help discredit communism in the longer term.[47] Unfortunately, both the American national myth and "Challenge and Response" doctrine made even short-term communist

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[45] Kennedy, *Inaugural Address*;
[46] Paterson, "Fixation with Cuba: The Bay of Pigs, Missile Crisis and Covert War against Fidel Castro," in Paterson (Ed.), *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*
[47] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 42.

victories unacceptable. These philosophical structures simply did not allow benefits in the medium to long term to be weighed against a short term cost. Thus the problem was not simply that Kennedy was "too grand a visionary", as Arthur Cyr would have us believe.[48] Ironically, Kennedy's mythic vision blinkered his analysis and prevented him from exploiting opportunities which might have strengthened America, and hence its myth.

III. A Place for Allies?

The belief America was predestined to lead the world to freedom and liberty also resulted in a rather ambiguous view of America's alliances. America had a long tradition of isolationism and avoiding foreign "entanglements", and the national myth was based on the idea America was independent and self-sufficient, standing above and apart from the corrupt nations of Europe as an example for them to follow. With God as its sponsor, America had little need for other nations' help to achieve the mission. Kennedy also believed his desire to solve the world's problems would require the United States to provide "leadership", which might occasionally involve acting unilaterally.[49] Kennedy warned both the American public and the wider world that America's unique role prevented her being universally popular, noting "no role in history could be more difficult or more important. We stand for freedom. That is our conviction for ourselves - that is our only commitment to others. No friend, no neutral and no adversary should think

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[48] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*.
[49] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 37.

otherwise".[50] Kennedy was not an isolationist, but he also did not fear being isolated due

to the boldness of his policies – either domestically, or internationally. Theodore

Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had defied Congressional opposition to enact their

legislation; now he was prepared to make whatever decisions he felt were in America's

(and hence the world's) interests "at the risk of incurring their momentary displeasure".[51]

Such an attitude was not conducive to strong alliances.

At the same time, Kennedy strongly believed that an alliance between America and

Europe in an "Atlantic Community" would benefit both parties, and hence the world. The

precise benefits of this "solution" were characteristically vague. "We look forward to a

Europe united and strong", Kennedy declared, "a world power capable of meeting world

problems as a full and equal partner…sharing equally both burdens and decisions, and

linked together in the tasks of defense and the arts of peace".[52] A strong and united

Europe would enable America to shift its resources in the battle against Communism,

away from the defence of Europe, towards the areas which Kennedy viewed as the real

battlegrounds, in the third world. More ambitiously, Kennedy argued a United Europe

would be a "partner" in "defending a community of free nations", helping to reinforce

America's achievements to date in its mission for the redemption of mankind.[53] But in

order to achieve this aim, two things would be required. The first was firm leadership, to

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[50] Kennedy, *Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs, May 25, 1961*;
http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03Nationa
lNeeds05251961.htm, (last viewed 09/10/06)
[51] Kennedy, *The Presidency in 1960, National Press Club, Washington D.C., January 14, 1960,*
[52] Kennedy, "Partnership with Germany and a United Europe. Assembly Hall of Paulskirche, Frankfurt,
Germany," in *The Burden and the Glory: The Hopes and Purposes of President Kennedy's Second and Third
Years in Office as Revealed in his Public Statements and Addresses*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York, Evanston
and London: Harper & Row, June 25, 1963), p. 116.
[53] Kennedy, "The Doctrine of National Independence. Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pa.," in Kennedy,
The Burden and the Glory.

coax or drag Europe away from its long history of corruption - and as President of the United States, Kennedy felt he was just the man for the job. The second requirement was for a synchronization or unification of Europe. The theory was that Europe, as a collection of small nation-states with little coordination in plans for defence or economics, was weak and vulnerable to both Soviet intrigue and political infighting. The similarity of this situation to America's own origins as a disorganised and disparate collection of states was, to American minds at least, striking. As Kennedy claimed in a 1962 speech, "the nations of Western Europe, long divided by feuds more bitter than any which existed among the thirteen colonies, are joining together, seeking, as our forefathers sought, to find freedom in diversity and unity in strength".[54] To those with even an elementary knowledge of American history, it seemed a federalisation of these states was the only "logical" course of action.

Mythically, Western Europe occupied a particularly difficult space for Americans, in light of the national myth. On the one hand, the European powers, as members of NATO, were America's greatest supporters in its struggle against that mythical, monolithic enemy of freedom, the "Communist system". On the other hand, the Puritans had sought escape from the tyranny of Europe, creating a nation in a new land which was untouched by European corruption. Nor was it clear to Americans that Europe had successfully redeemed itself, despite the clear American model. Many nations obstinately attempted to retain their colonies, despite American pressure, whilst even foreign policy elites remained suspicious that Europe might betray the cause by "appeasing" the Communists, particularly given the large Communist political parties within many European nations.

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[54] Ibid.

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So it was with some degree of ambivalence that Europe was accepted as a partner in the struggle for worldwide freedom and liberty.

The notion of a "United States of Europe" - labelled the "Grand Design" by Kennedy - fitted much more easily with the myth. A United Europe would be a fresh, new (and possibly redeemed) Europe - an evolution away from the "old" corrupt, tyrannical states which had oppressed John Winthrop and his Puritan brethren. It would be proof irrefutable that America's "city on the hill" was leading the world to redemption, thus "proving" that America's mission and destiny was true. As Kennedy proclaimed in 1963, in language similar to that which he used at the time of his election, "free Europe is entering into a new phase…The era of colonial expansion has passed; the era of national rivalries is fading; and a new era of interdependence and unity is taking shape".[55]   There was also the issue of power. America had been "blessed" with vast resources, which had enabled her to become a superpower with an agenda to save all mankind. On the other hand, the "Great Powers" of Europe had ceased to be such after World War II, and could thus be dismissed as irrelevant and corrupt. A United Europe was a different story; a body powerful enough to enter a partnership with the United States - under US leadership, of course; perhaps not an equal partnership, but at least one in which the power differential did not completely dominate their relationship.

Yet despite Kennedy's frequent references to a "partnership" between Europe and the US, it is difficult to accept that the partnership would be a truly equal one. As the only

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[55] Kennedy, "The Third State of the Union Message. Washington D.C.," in Kennedy, *The Burden and the Glory,* p. 28.

divinely ordained nation on earth, America would remain the leader of the free world.

America's aims would surely have priority in any conflict. Yet, to Kennedy's thinking,

this was a non-issue. Their comparative size would simply create a congruence of

interests. There might *appear* to be conflicts, but Kennedy argued they could be "freely

and frankly discussed", and hence resolved, since they were merely "differences of

approach, not spirit".[56] We are not told exactly what this spirit was, but it seems safe to

assume it was the desire to spread liberty and democracy to all mankind. Since Europe

would not oppose such progress, they could not possibly seriously oppose America's

plans. As Kennedy declared in a speech at NATO headquarters, "I return to the United

States more firmly convinced than ever that common ideals have given us a common

destiny…".[57] Only America had the providential mission to save mankind, but an allied

Europe would serve as a useful sidekick to help speed the process.

In order to achieve this unity, Kennedy needed "solve" the key problems of Europe, by

achieving what German foreign policy expert Wolfram Hanreider terms "double

containment".[58] Firstly, he needed to prevent the USSR from gaining further inroads into

Europe. Secondly, he needed to contain German power, since the rearmament of

Germany had the potential to alarm neighbouring states, scaring them into pursuing

traditional European balance-of-power policies. These would spell the death knell of

European Union, and distract Western Europe from what was, to America's mind, the real

struggle – to defeat communism. Kennedy therefore needed to apply a brake to German

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[56] Kennedy, "Italy, NATO and European Unity. NATO Headquarters, Naples, Italy," in Kennedy, *The Burden and the Glory,* p. 139.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Wolfram F. Hanrieder, *Germany, America, Europe: Forty Years of German Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

desire for the reunification of their nation, and to prevent Germany gaining nuclear armaments, at any cost.[59] These problems are examined in greater detail in the following chapter.

Kennedy's administration was divided over the lengths to which America should go to push Europe towards unity. The 'Europeanist' group, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Paul Nitze, believed the United States needed to enforce solutions to these problems in Europe, through any means necessary, and so ensure European unity.[60] They tended to believe America's global responsibility to mankind was the key factor in any policy calculation. They also felt that America needed to gain control of the unification movement, in order to ensure its outcomes benefited the US (and thereby the world) on a pragmatic level, particularly by reducing barriers to US imports, known as the "Open Door" policy.[61] Since American actions were selfless by definition, such policies were easily justified – though they certainly would have been condemned if the relationship was the other way around. Presciently, the Europeanists realised that without this tight control, European unity could hurt America – particularly through protectionist trade policies.

Others, such as McNamara, believed America needed to pay more attention to immediate strategic imperatives than to these vague and distant goals. Yet even McNamara could see the benefits of tight control over the US's European allies. Indeed, the new deterrence strategy of "flexible response" demanded a high degree of centralised, hence American,

[59] Mayer, "Adenauer and Kennedy," p. 92.
[60] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 203.
[61] Dileo, p. 271

control. The strategy had great appeal to Kennedy as it would allow him to combat

challenges more effectively through minor "brushfire" wars, whilst minimizing the risk of

escalation into nuclear holocaust.   Yet in order to achieve this control over escalation, the

US needed to prevent its allies mounting any independent, pre-emptive action. In

particular, the independent nuclear deterrents of the United Kingdom and France

undermined this co-ordination, and hence weakened the overall Western deterrent. The

tighter Kennedy's grip over Europe, the stronger the American position, to the benefit of

all mankind.

Ultimately, Kennedy's ambivalent attitude towards Europe was not a sound basis for

strong alliances. He has drawn heavy criticism from historians, many of whom suggest

that whilst Kennedy's rhetoric was global in tone, he seemed to think only in terms of the

United States. Frank Costigliola argues "the Kennedy Administration talked community,

but practiced hegemony".[62] Paterson suggests that whilst Kennedy said "there cannot be

American solution to every problem", he proceeded to act as though there was.[63] Yet this

was not illogical. Ultimately, the American myth dictated that the only solution to the

greatest problem of all – the redemption of mankind – was America. The European allies

were a potential bonus to American strength, but only if they could be tightly controlled.

Kennedy needed to become, as he termed it, "the commander in chief of the Great

Alliance", between the United States and a United Europe.[64] A failure to achieve such

tight control would only harm America's ability to achieve its mission and fulfil its

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[62] Frank Costigliola, "The Pursuit of Atlantic Community: Nuclear Arms, Dollars and Berlin," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory,* ed. Thomas G. Paterson, p. 25.
[63] Kennedy, quoted in Paterson, "Introduction: John F. Kennedy's Quest for Victory and Global Crisis," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory,* ed. Thomas G. Paterson,, p. 22.
[64] Kennedy, *The Presidency in 1960, National Press Club, Washington D.C., January 14, 1960,*

destiny. On the other hand, as a politician, Kennedy knew he could not compel Europe to accept such a diminishing of their sovereignty. Kennedy asked " what kind of peace do we seek?...Not a Pax Americana, forced on the world by American weapons of war" .[65] Instead, as Cyr points out, Kennedy stressed *mechanisms* for cooperation, to make Europe feel as though it was an equal partner with the US - whilst always ensuring these mechanisms would increase or at least maintain American control. [66] Viewed through the lens of the American national myth, this was not a hypocritical or contradictory policy; rather it was a natural consequence of their providential mission to redeem mankind. In the following chapters, this thesis will examine this assertion in detail by analysing Kennedy's policy towards France and Britain.

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[65] Theodore C. Sorenson, "JFK's Strategy of Peace," *World Policy Journal* Fall, 2003: p. 2.
[66] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*.

There will always be differences among friends, and they should be freely and frankly discussed. But these are differences of ends, not means. They are differences of approach, not spirit…I return to the United States more firmly convinced than ever that common ideals have given us a common destiny…

-John F. Kennedy.[1]

Chapter 2: Charles de Gaulle and the Force de Frappe

The introduction of Kennedy's foreign policy was not executed with subtlety. His campaign speeches had proposed a new American approach to world affairs, but to foreign observers this might have been put-down to populist idealism and hyperbole in the midst of one of the closest elections in American history. This was certainly the case with the much talked-of "missile gap", which was shown to be non-existent immediately following the election.[2] Yet Kennedy was still determined to achieve a fresh start for American foreign policy. Assistant Secretary of State Averell Harriman arrived in Berlin declaring that the new Administration did not consider itself bound to any previous negotiations with the USSR, and intended to begin again from the start.[3] The significance of this action was clear: the Kennedy administration was symbolically setting aside the foreign policy and precedents of the Eisenhower administration, and was approaching the world's problems from first principles.

One of those major problems was Europe. Shattered by WWII, Europe was seemingly defying its mythic destiny by remaining divided by national rivalries, whilst draining

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[1] Kennedy, "Italy, NATO and European Unity," p. 139.
[2] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 205.
[3] Mayer, "Adenauer and Kennedy," p. 86.

American resources for its defence.[4] Europe seemed in dire need of a Kennedy-led

rehabilitation. Yet Kennedy's election and foreign policy shift came at a time of great

change in Europe as well as in America, a fact perhaps underestimated by some American

statesmen. The most significant factor in this change was the shift in attitude caused by

the resurgence of European power, or as US Ambassador to France Charles Bohlen

described it, "[not] only the economic and financial recovery, but also the moral and

spiritual vigour which seems to have accompanied this process".[5] Accompanying this

change was a re-evaluation of Europe's position by a number of key statesmen,

particularly French President Charles de Gaulle, and an accompanying attempt to regain

the past influence of their nations.

France had suffered a number of shocks and setbacks following World War II, of which

the most galling was the inexorable collapse of the French empire. The embarrassing rout

of France's military by the meagre North Vietnamese forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 had

greatly undermined French public confidence. The result was a period of prolonged

political instability, marked by "revolving-door cabinets" and rowdy protests.[6] The

turning point was the election of General Charles de Gaulle as President, in January 1959,

after his Gaullist party won a comfortable victory in the 1958 elections. In addition to

tough economic reforms, de Gaulle set out to reshape French foreign and defence policy,

hoping to restore the nation to something near its previous "Great Power" status. A key

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[4] Lord, *John F. Kennedy: The Politics of Confrontation and Conciliation*, p. 215.
[5] Charles Bohlen, "270. Letter From the Ambassador to France (Bohlen) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), Paris, March 2, 1963," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, ed. United States Dept. of State (Washington D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1977), p. 767.
[6] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*, p. 31.

part of this strategy was ending France's embarrassing campaign to keep its rebellious colony in Algeria, a move which was deeply unpopular with the political right who had originally backed de Gaulle, leading to a number of uprisings in the colony that threatened to spill over into France itself. [7]

I. De Gaulle's Mythic Alternative

These incidents of domestic turmoil lulled American observers, including Kennedy, into the mythic assumption that France, like much of Europe, was too racked by infighting to present any challenge or alternative to US leadership (and indeed control) of the West.[8] This was a fundamental error, for in successfully dealing with the Algerian General's coup, de Gaulle raised his domestic approval to even greater heights, reinforcing his political grip on France. Like Kennedy, de Gaulle's intentions could no longer be ignored. Indeed, Kennedy and de Gaulle shared a similarity of vision, not in terms of the details of their visions, but of their leadership style. Although a keen conservative, de Gaulle also felt the progress of his nation was being restrained by a negative national attitude. The specifics of his national vision were of course different to Kennedy's, particularly his belief it was "the rights and duty of the European continental powers to have their own national defense", and that it was "intolerable for a great State to leave its destiny up to the decisions and action of another State, however friendly it may be".[9] Like

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[7] Ibid., p. 65.
[8] Ibid., p. 62.
[9] Charles de Gaulle, "Fourth Press Conference Held By General de Gaulle as President of the French Republic in Paris at the Elysee Palace on April 11, 1961," in *Major Addresses, Statements and Press Conferences of General Charles de Gaulle* (New York: French Embassy, Press and Information Division, 1964), p. 124.

Kennedy, de Gaulle was willing to act unilaterally in order to achieve these fundamental, non-negotiable outcomes, regardless of the support or opposition from allies and neighbouring states. Like Kennedy, he felt on some matters there could be no possibility of compromise. He too, was determined to make the most of French national resources, and his vision was reinforced by his strong domestic approval. However these similarities with Kennedy's own situation did not lead to a common interest between the two men; in much the same way as the communist system's universal alternative to the American myth made it an object of vehement American loathing. As a universalist myth of divine salvation, the American national myth could not tolerate rivals, regardless of whether they originated from "friendly" or unfriendly nations.

Atlantic Historian George Taber suggests Americans were simply unable to understand de Gaulle.[10] On the one hand, he was at times one of America's staunchest allies – as was demonstrated during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when De Gaulle strongly supported Kennedy's hard-line stance whilst Macmillan was hesitating over spy-plane photos of alleged missile sites.[11] Yet it was de Gaulle's opposition to Kennedy's philosophy, and therefore to the American national myth, which made him a mythical figure of opposition for America, comparable perhaps only to Stalin or Kennedy himself in the degree the myth took on a life almost entirely separated from the man, such that any and all European opposition to Kennedy's policies was attributed to de Gaulle.[12] This is not to suggest this conception was entirely inaccurate – De Gaulle was an active and effective opponent of

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[10] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 121.
[11] Ibid.
[12] William S. Borden, "Defending Hegemony: American Foreign Economic Policy," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory,* ed. Thomas G. Paterson, p. 64.

many of Kennedy's policies, as his veto of English entry into the EEC demonstrated. But like Kennedy, it was not the specifics of De Gaulle's actions which resulted in this mythical status, but rather what he appeared to stand for; a limited-nationalist challenge to the universalist American national myth.

De Gaulle viewed the world as both a French nationalist and a realist, based firmly upon his experiences as military leader of the Free French in World War II. In this manner, de Gaulle presented his own French alternative to the American national myth, in the classic nationalist model. Whereas the American and Communist systems were "destined" to change the entire world, de Gaulle saw France's destiny in much more limited terms, bluntly declaring "our great national ambition is our own national progress, [and] constituting a real source of power and influence".[13] Unconvinced by the rhetoric of the American national myth, he refused to participate in Kennedy's schemes, except where there was a clear and direct benefit to France. Yet because of the universalist nature of the American national myth, even this ambivalent attitude towards the myth's promises appeared to be a major challenge to US leadership. Whilst Stalin offered communism as a mythic universalist alternative to the American myth of liberty and freedom, de Gaulle symbolised realist and limited nationalism. His model did not promise global salvation, merely the best chance of safety for the (French) nation. This was anathema to many Americans, who were determined to ensure that the US did not have to rescue Europe from a third world war caused by rampant nationalism. As Kennedy declared, "war in Europe, as we learned twice in forty years, destroys peace in America", and to the minds

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[13] Gaulle, "Fourth Press Conference," p. 116.

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of most Americans, it was European nationalism that caused such wars.[14] European

nationalism was inherently tied to their corruption and historical impingement on the

liberty of its subjects: Americans looked upon it with strong suspicion, if not outright

hostility.[15]

Yet de Gaulle's challenge to the US mythic hegemony was accompanied by an intense

stubbornness and willingness to resist tremendous pressure from the US. Unlike most

other European statesmen, de Gaulle was not afraid to defy the US President. In 1959 he

withdrew the French Mediterranean fleet from NATO command and ordered all NATO

forces to be removed from French territory, despite protests from Eisenhower.[16] De

Gaulle was even more intransigent to Kennedy - indeed he seemed to take an almost

perverse pleasure from such opposition. From de Gaulle's perspective, the alliance of a

large superpower with a middling power could only serve to impinge on the weaker

country's sovereignty, unless it was rigidly policed to protect the national interest.[17] . As

a realist, he also challenged the redemptionist moralism underpinning Kennedy's

"Atlantic Community" concept, declaring that "alliances have no absolute virtues,

whatever may be the sentiments on which they are based".[18] The combination of this

mythic challenge and de Gaulle's hard-headedness, as well as his strong domestic support,

made the French President a significant barrier to the implementation of Kennedy's plans

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[14] Kennedy, "Partnership with Germany and a United Europe," p. 116.
[15] Whitcomb, *The American Approach to Foreign Affairs: An Uncertain Tradition*, p. 23.
[16] Kaplan, *American Historians and the Atlantic Alliance*, p. 84.
[17] Charles Bohlen, "277. Memorandum From the Ambassador to France (Bohlen) to Secretary of State Rusk, Paris, December 13, 1963," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 790.
[18] Charles de Gaulle, "Seventh press conference held by General de Gaulle as President of the French Republic in Paris at the Elysee Palace on Janurary 14, 1963," in *Major Addresses, Statements and Press Conferences of General Charles de Gaulle*, p. 216.

in Europe, challenging Kennedy's belief that the US could achieve its aims by acting unilaterally where required.[19]

The strategic situation faced by de Gaulle and the other West European statesmen had dramatically changed over the course of the Eisenhower administration. In 1958 the Soviet Union successfully launched the first Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), which offered a frightening demonstration of the USSR's ability to deliver nuclear weapons at ever increasing distances.[20] Soviet nuclear weapons could now hit major population centres in the United States, where previously their range had been limited to targets in Europe. From the point of view of de Gaulle, this meant "everything is now in question", since "it is not certain that they will take this risk" to mount a nuclear attack on American cities in order to save Europe from a conventional Soviet attack.[21] He declared "…it is quite natural that America is seeing its own survival as the principal objective in a possible conflict and is not considering…the defense of other regions, particularly Europe".[22] An unapologetic nationalist, de Gaulle knew *he* would not trade Paris for New York, and he had little reason to believe that the US would really do the reverse for France. Since France could not totally rely on the United States in the case of an attack, France would need to take suitable steps to provide for its own defence, including

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[19] Costigliola, "The Pursuit of Atlantic Community," p. 30.
[20] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*, p. 42.
[21] Charles de Gaulle, "Sixth press conference held by General de Gaulle as President of the French Republic in Paris at the Elysee Palace on May 15, 1962," in *Major Addresses, Statements and Press Conferences of General Charles de Gaulle*, p. 180.
[22] Charles de Gaulle, "Eighth press conference held by General de Gaulle as President of the French Republic in Paris at the Elysee Palace on July 29, 1963," in *Major Addresses, Statements and Press Conferences of General Charles de Gaulle*, p. 235.

developing its own nuclear forces.[23] A military man himself, de Gaulle knew such a scheme would be both costly and difficult, and it was with this thought in mind that he ended France's colonial adventures in Algeria, despite the ensuing stab at French national pride.

Kennedy was unable to understand de Gaulle's determination for an independent defence platform. To his mind, de Gaulle's insistence was patently illogical, since France was protected by the US nuclear umbrella, and the United States had repeatedly given assurances and undertakings to Europe that it would come to Europe's defence in the case of an attack. As Kennedy declared, "a threat to the freedom of Europe is a threat to the freedom of America…The United States will risk its cities to defend yours because we need your freedom to protect ours".[24] Yet to de Gaulle, these assurances must have meant little; he remembered the sacrificing of Czechoslovakia to avoid war with Hitler. To Kennedy, on the other hand, the situation of Munich was no parallel: the states of Europe could not be trusted not to put their own self-interest ahead of the alliance, but the United States - the "City on the Hill" and hope for the salvation of all mankind - had only pure intentions, and would not appease the Soviets. Both men had learned the "lessons of Munich", but due to their diverging mythic viewpoints, those lessons were strikingly different.

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[23] Samuel F. Wells, "Charles de Gaulle and the French Withdrawal from NATO's Integrated Command," in *American Historians and the Alliance*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1991), p. 142.

[24] Kennedy, "Partnership with Germany and a United Europe," p. 116.

Superficially, Kennedy's inability to understand de Gaulle's thinking seems somewhat curious, for Kennedy would never have willingly placed the US in a situation where its security depended on the assurances of another nation.[25] Yet that which seemed patently illogical to de Gaulle appeared equally logical to Kennedy, as a result of the opposing assumptions upon which they based their world views. Kennedy's conception was entirely in keeping with the national-myth based philosophy of American exceptionalism. America's situation was unique, the American national myth suggested, since it alone was commissioned by God with the mission to save mankind. When Kennedy declared to de Gaulle "the defense of Europe and the defense of the United States are one and the same thing", he meant the survival of America - both the country and the idea - was dependent upon maintaining the free world against the threat from Communism.[26] To allow any free country to be defeated by the Communist system would be a body blow to the American mission to spread liberty through the world. As the champion of this mission, the United States could not rely on other nations - but other nations could and should rely on the United States, since their salvation ultimately rested entirely with America. Only in the case of the United States, it alleged, was national self-interest by definition synonymous with the interest of the world. To de Gaulle's realist and nationalist-based logic, such calculations were not only fatuous, they were dangerously risky. Ultimately, the only thing the nation could rely upon was its own strength. He was determined to see France provide for its own defence, independent of any dubious assurances from its star-gazing allies.

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[25] For example, Kennedy's determination to retain overall control of the Supreme Allied Command in Europe.
[26] "107. Memorandum of Conversation, Paris, June 1, 1961," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 313.

II. The Independent Nuclear Deterrent

The second major development to affect the defence of Europe also occurred in 1958, with Britain's successful development of an atomic weapon. The creation of the first nuclear deterrent in Western Europe helped reinforce a sense of European confidence in its own abilities. De Gaulle decided France would also develop an independent nuclear force, known as the Force de Frappe, and France's first nuclear test occurred in February 1960, despite strong opposition from the United States.[27] De Gaulle's determination to maintain the independent French nuclear deterrent, in the face of tremendous opposition from the Kennedy administration, demonstrates the different philosophical assumptions of the two allies, stemming from their respective national myths.

As already mentioned, the Kennedy administration opposed the proliferation of nuclear weapons, even amongst its closest allies. An NSC policy directive stated it was "most important to the U.S. that use of nuclear weapons by the forces of other powers in Europe should be subject to U.S. veto and control". This was based upon both strategic calculations and for fear of nuclear holocaust, neither of which were convincing for Europeans such as de Gaulle. For these Europeans, nuclear war might well have been a worse outcome than conventional war, but the distinction was hardly relevant, since any war in Europe would result in massive, unacceptable destruction to the nations involved. It was for this reason Europe's reaction to the Kennedy doctrine of Flexible Response was

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[27] Wells, "Charles de Gaulle and the French Withdrawal from NATO's Integrated Command," p. 86.

muted, if not openly hostile.[28] Whereas the "Massive Retaliation" strategy of the

Eisenhower era had aimed to avoid war altogether by greatly increasing the costs of

conflict, Flexible Response was specifically designed to allow the United States to fight

minor conventional wars when required, whilst preventing escalation to "hot war" through

tightly-coordinated control.[29]

European statesmen believed Europe would bear the lasting costs of these conventional

wars, and were determined to ensure they did not occur, at least in Europe.[30] It was in the

interest of de Gaulle, therefore, to develop and maintain a nuclear deterrent which could

prevent the concentration of nuclear power required for the controlled escalation of

Flexible Response, making conventional conflict more risky to the US, and hence less

likely. In effect the possession of nuclear arms would allow a "twin deterrence" of both

the USSR and the US, resulting in peace for Europe. This explains the quandary, noted by

a number of commentators, whereby European statesmen dreaded the prospect of the use

of nuclear weapons, as might be expected, but were nevertheless very eager to see them

deployed throughout Europe. More nuclear weapons meant less certainty in preventing an

escalation to nuclear war, making conventional war less likely. Their eagerness resulted

in a 60% increase in tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe during the Kennedy

administration.[31]

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[28] Ibid., p. 143.
[29] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 80.
[30] Ibid., p. 82.
[31] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 218.

The Kennedy administration also argued that development of expensive nuclear weapons diverted money away from Europe's conventional defence. America had been pressuring Europe to take more of the burden for its conventional defence since long before Kennedy's election.[32] These policies had as much to do with America's economic position as its military strategy. America's continued deployment of large forces in Europe was an enormous drain on the US economy, and prevented Kennedy from using these forces in the third world. Thanks to their providential mission, an American economic collapse would not only be disastrous for the US nation, it would be disastrous for all mankind. Yet there was little incentive for de Gaulle to increase his contributions to the conventional defence of Europe. Creating more soldiers to defend Europe would allow the US to withdraw its troops to fight "brushfire wars" in the third world, but Europe relied upon these troops, since it was believed that their presence would force the US to respond in the case of a Soviet attack, thus deterring the Soviets and avoiding war.[33] The military value of these soldiers was, in a sense, irrelevant; it was their symbolic value and resulting ability to draw the US into the conflict that Europe required. De Gaulle therefore had no reason to submit to US demands.

A third key reason for US opposition of independent European nuclear deterrents was the fear these weapons would force or encourage West Germany to develop its own nuclear weapons programme, with destabilising consequences for NATO. For the Europeanists in the State department, this German nuclear armament scenario held a distinctly nightmarish quality. They became almost hyperactive in their efforts to crush the numerous appeals

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[32] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*, p. 42.
[33] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 87.

from the US ambassador to France, James Gavin, for the US to give assistance to the French nuclear programme. Whilst Gavin felt the French development of nuclear arms was inevitable, he also felt the negative future consequences of this build-up were being overemphasised by the State department, whilst they ignored the very real damage US intransigence was doing to French-American relations. He rather presciently pointed out in March 1962 that that the French could extend non-cooperation into economic areas, hampering US plans for the EEC.[34] Kennedy evidently seemed to share the Europeanists' fear enough to remark to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev "if Germany develops an atomic capability of its own, if it developed missiles or a strong national army that threatened war, then I would understand your concern, and I would share it. After all, we have had two wars in Europe, as well as you".[35] He also demonstrated his sympathy by responding to Europeanists' pleading and replaced Gavin with noted anti-Gaullist Charles Bohlen.

De Gaulle probably concurred with the US view of potential for danger stemming from the recovery of Germany. Unfortunately this agreement did not benefit the United States. For America, the Soviet threat to global freedom still loomed large, particularly after Khrushchev's statement in January 1961 pledging support for wars of national liberation.[36] Yet the threat to Western Europe of Soviet invasion seemed to have diminished. Bohlen suggested in France there was "a real line of thought that the danger of a Russian attack (particularly after the Cuban crisis) had greatly diminished and, in fact,

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[34] Gavin, "242. Letter from the Ambassador to France (Gavin) to President Kennedy, March 9, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 687.
[35] Mayer, "Adenauer and Kennedy," p. 90.
[36] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 207.

is non-existent in the eyes of many Europeans".[37] As the Soviet threat faded, West

European minds slowly returned to their traditional intellectual groove, pondering the

rising Teutonic power much closer to home.   Without a shared fear of a common enemy,

it became harder to ignore their diverging interests, and not sharing Kennedy's

universalist myth, de Gaulle had little reason to attempt to paper over these differences.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, de Gaulle did not seem to share the American panic over

Germany's future development of nuclear weapons, even though France's own security

would likely be threatened as a result. Bohlen noted on multiple occasions de Gaulle

"spoke of the inevitability of Germany acquiring the bomb", and seemed quite accepting

of the fact.[38] As a military man, de Gaulle would have been well aware of the

implications for French security, but since the development was inevitable, he could see

little point in impulsive actions which might upset Germany prematurely. Instead de

Gaulle adopted a long-term view of France's security, seeking nuclear weapons for

protection not against the Soviets – though he used that as a convenient justification - but

chiefly for protection against a resurgent Germany. De Gaulle's thinking, Bohlen

declared "tends to regard the Cold War as over", and like any good General he was

already making defence preparations for the next, "the beginnings of the process that he

sees for the long-distance future as already in operation".[39] The threat from the USSR was

fading, whilst the traditional threat from Germany was only beginning to re-emerge.

France needed to take action now, to ensure the nation was adequately prepared. De

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[37] Bohlen, "277. Memorandum From the Ambassador to France (Bohlen) to Secretary of State Rusk, Paris, December 13, 1963," p. 767.
[38] Bohlen, "270. Letter From the Ambassador to France (Bohlen) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), Paris, March 2, 1963," p. 765.
[39] Ibid., p. 767.

Gaulle refused to allow France to rely upon external allies for protection against countries on its very border. His memory of Munich reinforced this attitude.

Yet this dry consideration of the strategic reasons of both sides cannot altogether explain the vehemence with which Kennedy and his team opposed the French nuclear deterrent. As in the battle against the "Communist system", this was really a battle of mythic legitimacy, not of strategy. For the powers of Western Europe, the significance of owning nuclear weapons had little to do with their actual military application. Indeed, if they actually needed to be used, then something had gone critically wrong. Nuclear weapons were, as Kennedy's Presidential Aide McGeorge Bundy described them "the most expensive status symbol since colonies" for nations desperately seeking to regain some of the "great power" status they had held before WWII.[40] Nuclear weapons simply assumed the mantle previously held by colonies, as the ultimate status symbol of the European powers in a world in which they had become otherwise largely irrelevant.   De Gaulle knew that French pride had been hurt by its failure in Algeria, he therefore sought to swap colonies for nuclear arms to restore her prestige.[41]

America viewed Europe's possession of nuclear weapons much as it did with colonies - as reckless, selfish and potentially destabilising – and hence endangering America's mission to save mankind. Of course, America took a very different view of its own possession of both symbols, based upon America's mythic exceptionalism. American exceptionalism meant that "stabilising" interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean were not

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[40] Richard E. Neustadt, *Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 136.
[41] Costigliola, "The Pursuit of Atlantic Community," p. 36.

"imperialist" policies, as they would no doubt have been if European powers had been involved.[42] Similarly, the myth simultaneously condemned any other power possessing nuclear weapons as dangerous and morally indefensible, whilst demanding that America wield the power of these weapons – idealistically, of course - in order to achieve its mission of world redemption. In this manner, regaining American control of the free world's nuclear weapons was more than an issue of deterrence strategy (though it certainly was that); it was also a fundamental issue of moral legitimacy.

Yet France held a special place in the American calculation of illlegitimacy. Whilst Kennedy did not look favourably upon the British nuclear deterrent, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was quick to remind him of the UK-US collaboration on the Manhattan Project which resulted in the very first nuclear weapons. The U.K. had, therefore, played an undeniable role in helping the US achieve its "destiny". The Force de Frappe, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter. Unlike the UK, France was a post-WWII latecomer to the nuclear club. For her to develop nuclear forces in 1960 was thus a direct challenge to American leadership of the Western alliance, in a way the UK's force was not. France was protected by the American nuclear umbrella and by America's idealistic guarantees, and thus there was no *logical* reason for France to spend the extraordinary amounts required to develop an immoral and illegitimate nuclear capability.

The Kennedy administration therefore decided against giving assistance to the French nuclear programme, since they felt such assistance "would not bend de Gaulle to our

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[42] See, for example, Stephen G. Rabe, "Controlling Revolutions: Latin America, the Alliance for Progress, and Cold War Anti-Communism," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory,* ed. Thomas G. Paterson,.

purpose but only strengthen him in his" – that is, his challenge to the US monopoly on legitimacy. [43] De Gaulle, however, was nothing if not pragmatic. Realising his requests for US nuclear assistance would not be successful, and considering the non-negotiable need for these weapons, he simply decided to act unilaterally.[44] For their part, Kennedy's team held little doubt de Gaulle would eventually achieve his aim. Considering de Gaulle's stubbornness and political position, even firm Europeanists like Dean Rusk could "recognize that France will nonetheless continue its missile program", regardless of the pressure applied from Washington.[45] It is worth considering this statement, for this development meant Kennedy's motives to try to stop the French programme, no matter how noble, were essentially irrelevant - since the supposedly disastrous consequences would occur regardless of America's actions.

Astonishingly, however, the Kennedy administration nevertheless persisted with their campaign to stop the French programme - in the full knowledge their attempts would almost certainly be unsuccessful, and whilst ignoring the negative consequences of such a course of action on US-France relations, which Gavin and Maxwell Taylor had both pointed out.[46] The best justification the Europeanists could construct for this idealistic but doomed plan was the "cost and time required for France to prosecute [the nuclear] program will surely be greater if we do not provide help than otherwise" along with the half-hearted suggestion that "this cost and time may eventually tend [to] discourage

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[43] Costigliola, "The Pursuit of Atlantic Community: Nuclear Arms, Dollars and Berlin," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory,* ed. Thomas G. Paterson, p. 31.
[44] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*, p. 31.
[45] Dean Rusk, "227. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in France, Washington, May 5, 1961," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 655.
[46] Maxwell Taylor, "131. Letter From the President's Military Representative to President Kennedy, Washington, April 3, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 369.

French from pursuing [its] present path…if alternative means of responding to basic French concerns are developed by US".[47] The potential damage to US-France relations from the failure was a non-issue.

Such a course of action seems odd for a President who lauded the pursuit of logic. Logically, since America could achieve nothing from its ineffective opposition to the French programme, but stood to damage its relations with a key ally, Kennedy should have adopted a neutral, if not supportive stance towards the French nuclear programme. He might have offered some sort of compromise to de Gaulle, which might have minimised the appearance of a challenge to US nuclear hegemony, if not the reality. Paul-Henri Spaak, the Secretary-General of NATO, recommended such a face-saving compromise to Kennedy just after the latter's inauguration, in February of 1961.[48] Ultimately, however, Kennedy's belief in the American myth meant this was not a valid policy option. By challenging America's monopoly on moral legitimacy in nuclear weapons, De Gaulle's Force de Frappe challenged the entire American national myth. Such challenges had to be met with resolve, regardless of the degree to which America could influence the final outcome. The appearance of a determined opposition was all important.

The American national myth thus effectively forced Kennedy into taking an action which was counterproductive and which he knew would not succeed. Ironically, the myth's

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[47] Dean Rusk, "227. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in France, Washington, May 5, 1961," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 655.
[48] "95. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, February 21, 1961," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 261.

intolerance of its rivals and demand for supremacy helped demonstrate its weakness. America's repeated and public failure to stop the Force de Frappe showed the US was not all-powerful, and that it could not always act unilaterally to achieve its aims, as Kennedy had asserted. In contrast, De Gaulle achieved his limited-nationalist aims by simply ignoring US pressure. Of course, the task the Americans set themselves was certainly much harder, despite the significant technological barriers France faced in developing nuclear weapons. Considering the strength of de Gaulle's conviction and his domestic political strength, it is difficult to conceive of a strategy which would have resulted in de Gaulle giving up his independent nuclear ambitions. As Bohlen declared, "I don't see what we could do to prevent it without doing mortal damage to the whole concept of the Alliance".[49] Yet by publicly declaring its unqualified opposition to the Force de Frappe, the credibility of the America and its myth, as well as the Alliance, were undermined much more than would otherwise have been the case. Despite America's superpower status and Kennedy's bold rhetoric, it in fact demonstrated that Kennedy really had no realistic means of punishing de Gaulle for his rogue action. Indeed, if anything, de Gaulle held the strongest cards. France was no superpower, but de Gaulle could embarrass Kennedy's Grand Alliance schemes by publicly rebuking them, as he did by vetoing Britain's application to the EEC, as is examined in the next chapter.

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[49] Bohlen, "147. Paper Prepared by the Secretary of State's Special Assistant, Washington, July 2, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII,*, p. 428.

All knew that we were pure in heart and meant no harm to Britain; we assumed our friends would know this because we did…

- Kennedy aide Prof. Richard E. Neustadt [1]

Chapter 3: Skybolt and the British Nuclear Deterrent

The events of the Skybolt missile debacle have been examined in detail by a number of writers, yet these accounts have restricted their analysis of the motivations of both sides to calculations of power politics, in the manner typical of diplomatic history. They fail to consider the concepts of nationalism as a motivating factor throughout the events of December, 1962. This chapter examines some of the ways in which nationalism influenced both British and American thinking in this regard, but particularly Kennedy's understanding of the American national myth. The story of Skybolt and the British independent nuclear deterrent during the Kennedy administration contains many similarities with the Force de Frappe, as might be expected, but the unique nature of the US-UK "special relationship" makes for some intriguing insights into Kennedy's mythic approach.

Kennedy's election created a problem for British Prime-Minister Harold Macmillan. Having rebuilt his relationship with Eisenhower after the disastrous 1956 Suez invasion, he feared the generational gap between himself and Kennedy would lead to another slump in US-UK relations. As it was, his worse fears proved to be unfounded, and "Mac and Jack" maintained generally strong personal relations throughout Kennedy's Presidency.

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[1] Neustadt, *Report to J.F.K.*, p. 118.

Yet the period was, nevertheless, a rather stressful one for Macmillan, as the "Special Relationship" between the US and UK came under attack from the Europeanists in the State department. They demanded the United States treat all West European states according to the principle of equality, but this was "equality only as a region, not for each country", as historian Paul Hammond has noted.[2] Indeed, the Europeanists wanted the US to cease dealing with individual European countries wherever possible and instead devote its energies to creating a United States of Europe. Dean Rusk was vehement on this point, arguing "the special US-UK relationship may have to be closely re-examined…it is of the utmost importance to avoid any actions to expand the relationship. Such actions could seriously prejudice…sound multilateral arrangements…".[3] By continuing the special relationship, they argued the US was discouraging Britain from pursuing union with Europe, preventing Europe from unifying - and hence from achieving its destiny, as the US had done.[4] By keeping Britain at arms length now, they would be helping all parties in the long term.

Whilst Kennedy was perhaps not as fervent a supporter of this line of argument as some of the Europeanists, he did adopt policies downgrading the special relationship. Perhaps the most significant was his decision, not long after his election, to cease US support to Britain's independent nuclear deterrent.[5] As his NSC declared, since it was "most important to the U.S. that use of nuclear weapons by the forces of other powers in Europe should be subject to U.S. veto and control", it "would be desirable if the British decided to

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[2] Hammond, *The Cold War Years: American Foreign Policy Since 1945*, p. 154.
[3] Dean Rusk, "396. Letter from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to Secretary of Defense McNamara, September 8, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1079.
[4] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 46.
[5] Costigliola, "The Pursuit of Atlantic Community," p. 30.

phase out of the nuclear deterrent business. If the development of Skybolt is not warranted for U.S. purposes alone, the U.S. should not prolong the life of the V-bomber force by this or other means".[6] To this end, Kennedy attempted to discourage Macmillan from continuing the independent deterrent, firstly by convincing Britain that ending the program was both the logical and moral thing to do. He ardently pursued this theme in a letter to Macmillan, stating that "I must express special concern about [the British White Paper's] explicit statement that the United Kingdom will 'continue to maintain throughout the 1960's' its independent strategic nuclear deterrent". The reasons he gave for this "special concern" were significant, for in addition to the standard claim of dire repercussions on "the future course of Germany", Kennedy feared the British programme "may well have the effect of convincing de Gaulle of the rightness of his course".[7] The British programme was thus seen as much more than a strategic problem, since it might publicly reinforce the limited-nationalist challenge to the American universalist myth. This was unacceptable.

Kennedy hoped to convince Britain to abandon its independent deterrent poise and to place its nuclear weapons in an Atlantic "multilateral force" (MLF), to be controlled by the nations of Western Europe and America, thereby giving Kennedy a veto over their use. Predictably, Macmillan found this proposal unacceptable, as did de Gaulle. Macmillan's Conservative party had staked its political position upon a rigorous defence policy, including maintaining the expensive status symbol of the independent nuclear deterrent.

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[6] National Security Council, "100. Policy Directive, Washington, April 20, 1961," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 289.
[7] Kennedy, "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, Washington, February 16, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII, p. 1060.*

To abandon the program under US pressure would be embarrassing for the Conservative government, and would appear to vindicate the anti-nuclear stance of the Labour opposition. Macmillan's credibility rested on the maintenance of the independent nuclear deterrent. Thus, from the start, Macmillan and Kennedy were at cross-purposes in the matter of nuclear weapons. This was, however, a much more pressing problem for Macmillan than for Kennedy. The special relationship had always been cherished in Britain more than in the United States, and the Conservative party had committed its political capital to its successful record in dealing with the Americans. It was thus also crucial for Macmillan's political position that he maintain at least the veneer of warm relations with Kennedy. He therefore needed to find some way to keep the independent deterrent whilst keeping the US loosely on side – a sizeable task, even for a veteran statesman such as Macmillan.

I. The Skybolt Agreements

President Eisenhower had concluded two deals with the Macmillan government at Camp David in 1960.[8] The first entailed the leasing of a submarine base at Holy Loch to the US, which would be used to resupply America's Polaris submarine fleet. In exchange, Eisenhower had agreed to supply Britain's V-bomber fleet with Skybolt missiles, allowing Britain to maintain its independent nuclear deterrent through the 1960s.[9] Although the two agreements were not specifically linked, it was clear Eisenhower had agreed to supply the missiles in exchange for the Holy Loch base. Having achieved the Skybolt agreement,

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[8] Harold Macmillan, *At the End of the Day* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 357.
[9] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*, p. 42.

Britain cancelled its own faltering Blue Streak missile programme, thus placing total reliance upon the as-yet untested Skybolt missiles to ensure the continuation of the British nuclear deterrent.

As already noted, the Kennedy administration had declared in Berlin that it did not feel itself bound to the agreements made by the Eisenhower administration, and had decided it would continue with the Skybolt deal only if it suited the interests of the US.[10] Thus when the development of Skybolt fell behind time and vastly over budget, there were strong reasons for the administration to reconsider its commitment to the programme. Secretary of Defense McNamara was determined to weed out inefficiencies in his department, a task made even more urgent by the weakening US economy. He decided the US could save two-hundred and fifty million dollars by ending the development of Skybolt and focusing on more reliable programmes. Yet McNamara worried the cancellation could topple the Macmillan government, unless it was given sufficient warning to develop an alternative plan. He decided the US should "warn them now and then consult with them once we were done with our decision making".[11] Luckily for McNamara's budget, the decision to cancel Skybolt was a rare example of agreement between the departments of State and Defence.[12] The Europeanists in the State department had long held a particular dislike for the British independent nuclear deterrent, as it symbolised the preferential treatment given to Britain as part of the special relationship. They seized upon McNamara's conclusion of the non-viability of Skybolt, as a means to end the UK independent nuclear deterrent. They creatively re-interpreted the Eisenhower agreements, declaring that "our

[10] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 104.
[11] Neustadt, *Report to J.F.K.*, p. 36.
[12] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 110.

commitment to the British on this weapon is an agreement to sell it to them *if we decide to produce it*" (my italics).[13] For his part, Kennedy could see the clear budgetary benefits, and he approved the cancellation.[14]

The problem of the political fallout of this move remained.[15] There was clearly a difference between openly criticising de Gaulle, who had presented himself as a clear mythic rival to America, and reneging on an agreement with the UK, America's "most trustworthy ally to count on when chips are down and fighting in prospect" - particularly given the predicted dire effect on the Macmillan government.[16] Most Europeanists considered this was simply the necessary price to be paid, with former Secretary of State Dean Acheson bluntly declaring if the Macmillan government should fall, "then let it fall".[17] To their thinking, the potential detriments from continuing with Skybolt - particularly the possibility of a European veto of the British entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) - outweighed the risk of the Macmillan government's collapse. Kennedy was almost certainly more concerned about the latter, given his warm relations with Macmillan. He remarked in a letter to Macmillan in 1962 "I have written here with great candor…I could not raise a matter of this sort in this way with any other

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[13] "398. Department of State Memorandum, Washington, October 31, 1962: Implications for the United Kingdom of Decision to Abandon Skybolt," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1083.
[14] Neustadt, *Report to J.F.K.*, p. 36.
[15] "398. Department of State Memorandum" in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1083.
[16] Quoted from Finletter, "386. Telegram From the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Regional Organizations to the Department of State," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII,*, p. 1052.
[17] Neustadt, *Report to J.F.K.*, p. 45.

man".[18]   Yet mythically, the claim to an American monopoly on nuclear legitimacy reinforced Kennedy's overall opposition to the British independent deterrent. Given the profound importance of the mission, there was little sound reason to compromise on its universal principles in this matter. Indeed, it is possible Kennedy's close relationship with the British PM gave him faith he could bring Macmillan around to the American point of view with greater success than he had experienced with de Gaulle.

The rumours of the impending cancellation of the Skybolt programme created a furore in London, as had been predicted. The Conservatives grumbled they had backed the path of total cooperation with the US and were now seemingly being punished for it. It was all the more galling that the French tactic of being an almost hostile alliance partner to the US now seemed to be paying dividends, since the Force de Frappe maintained a steady pace of development whilst the demise of Skybolt gave the UK no means of delivering its nuclear warheads.[19] Macmillan was fighting for his political life whilst de Gaulle's position only seemed to grow inexorably stronger (which in turn only made him more intransigent). [20] Furthermore, the British argued they had a clear deal with the Americans, giving Holy Loch in exchange for Skybolt. Since Skybolt was being cancelled for reasons other than technical infeasibility, they concluded the onus was on America to supply an alternative. The only attractive alternative was the new Polaris missile, and Macmillan was determined to coax it from Kennedy at their next meeting, at Nassau.

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[18] Kennedy, "389. Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1061.
[19] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 105.
[20] Ibid., p. 106.

II. The Nassau Conference

The Kennedy administration was divided over potential solutions to the British problem in the lead-up to Nassau. McNamara seemed to accept the US had to give the UK *something*, and recommended that the US should replace Skybolt with the new Polaris missile, under certain conditions which went some way to providing coordination and US control. [21] This would achieve American strategic objectives, as well as cutting costs. George Ball opposed this idea, since the principle of equal relations with all members of Europe would mean they would have to also give the powerful Polaris missile to France and Germany, which was unacceptable. [22] Forseeing the problems of a Polaris deal, Dean Rusk argued for financial assistance to the UK to subsidise their development of Skybolt, a largely status-quo solution that offered no real benefit other than it minimised potential harm.

For his part, Kennedy was torn. Pragmatically, he was reluctant to spend US money on a missile programme which would not benefit the US. In principle, however, he was sympathetic to British arguments that since the US had cancelled Skybolt, it was up to the US to provide the replacement, particularly since the British had cancelled their own Blue Streak missile programme based on US assurances. [23] Even the myth offered no clear answer, since the British nuclear programme offered only a minor challenge to the US monopoly on nuclear legitimacy, whilst Britain had been a generally stalwart ally to the

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[21] Ibid., p. 105.
[22] McGeorge Bundy, "401. Memorandum of Conversation," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1090.
[23] Ibid., p. 1089.

US in pursuing the providential mission. There had been some noteworthy points of disagreement between the US and UK, such as the latter's diplomatic recognition of the Communist government in China, but overall the United Kingdom was perhaps the closest follower of the American "light" of liberty in the Free World.[24] Even the State Department recognised "it is easier for us to be frank and full with the British than with any of our other allies. On so many international problems we find ourselves starting from a point basically similar to the starting point of the British".[25] Despite the flexible logic of Kennedy's mythic-exceptionalist viewpoint, the betrayal of such a loyal ally seemed difficult to justify. Thus mythically, neither aiding or not aiding the British program seemed acceptable. The result was Kennedy's strategy and objectives at Nassau were never clearly defined.

As Neustadt notes, the furore over Skybolt hijacked the agenda of the Nassau conference, which was – ironically enough - originally supposed to be about finding a solution to the problem of de Gaulle through Anglo-American cooperation.[26] Instead, the key question was clearly whether the US and UK could maintain their close relationship post-Skybolt. In May 1962, McNamara had announced Kennedy administration policy on independent nuclear deterrents to a meeting of NATO leaders at Athens, stating "…weak nuclear capabilities, operating independently, are dangerous, expensive, prone to obsolescence,

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[24] Rusk, "381. Circular Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in France," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1038.
[25] "385. Objectives and Scope Paper Prepared in the Department of State," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1051.
[26] Neustadt, *Report to J.F.K.*, p. 26.

and lacking in credibility as a deterrent".[27] At Nassau, the American team began by

outlining these stock arguments against independent nuclear deterrents in general.

McNamara argued the British force was too small to provide any serious deterrent to the

communists. Macmillan countered by pointing out "twenty missiles in Cuba had a

deterrent effect on the US".[28] McNamara argued the British force was not a useful

contribution to the Western deterrent without coordination – that is, control - from the US.

It would therefore only serve as a target of any Soviet attack, and as a drain on Britain's

finances.[29] Neither point was particularly convincing to Macmillan. From his point of

view, the immediate political future of the Conservative Party was a more pressing

question than a hypothetical and unlikely attack from the Soviet Union. Unlike Kennedy,

both de Gaulle and Macmillan viewed nuclear weapons more as a political and status

symbol than as an actual tool for battle. Macmillan defended the moral legitimacy of the

British force by reminding the Americans of the British role in the Manhattan Project. He

also emphasised that if the Americans were using the Skybolt difficulties as an excuse to

force Britain to abandon its nuclear deterrent, the results for US-UK relations would be

"very serious indeed", since it would "offend the sense of national pride and would be

resisted by every means in our power".[30] Macmillan noted "Kennedy seemed somewhat

taken aback" at this firm warning.

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[27] "394. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Kohler) to Secretary of State Rusk, Washington, May 24, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1074.
[28] "402. Memorandum of Conversation, Nassau, December 19, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1092.
[29] Finletter, "386. Telegram From the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Regional Organizations to the Department of State," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1053.
[30] Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, p. 357.

Ultimately, the policy restrictions imposed on Kennedy by his American mythic viewpoint limited his ability to deal effectively with Macmillan, just as it had with de Gaulle. Fully aware of the high stakes for the British government, Macmillan adopted de Gaulle's tactics by threatening to act unilaterally, stating Britain would remain in the "nuclear game" with or without US help.[31] Faced with this ultimatum, and reluctant to give the more modern Polaris missile, Kennedy proffered Rusk's suggested compromise of a one-hundred million dollar subsidy for British production of Skybolt.[32] This "rather startling" offer, as Macmillan put it, effectively undermined both of the principles upon which the Americans had originally based their decision, by ensuring the continuation of the independent British nuclear deterrent and paying for the production of a missile which was of no benefit to America. However, even as a cynical expedient the offer was hopelessly undermined by the previous statements of McNamara, who upon his arrival in the UK had attempted to justify the American decision to cancel the program by outlining in detail the technical faults and general unreliability of the Skybolt missile to the British media. As Macmillan archly pointed out, McNamara's statements had effectively destroyed public confidence in the missile, and "we were being asked to spend hundreds of millions of dollars upon a weapon on which the President's own authorities were casting doubts, both publicly and privately".[33] Continuing with the missile was no longer an option, so Britain demanded the more modern (and unblemished) Polaris missile.

The tactic was successful, just as it had been for de Gaulle, and Macmillan gained the Polaris missile to replace Skybolt. Although Britain was required to commit the missiles

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[31] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 111.
[32] Neustadt, *Report to J.F.K.*, p. 88.
[33] Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, p. 358.

to a "NATO nuclear force", if and when such a force was established, crucially, it could

withdraw the missiles in the case of a "supreme national emergency".[34] Whilst the British

public perceived the Nassau agreement as a humiliating loss for the UK at the hands of the

Americans, in fact Macmillan had struck a remarkably hard bargain.[35] He had not only

persuaded the Americas to give a replacement for Skybolt (against the better judgement of

most of the Administration), the replacement missile had greater range and accuracy.

Perhaps most striking, however, was the economics of the deal. The Americans would

bear most of the cost of the Polaris force, both in purchasing costs, and in the ongoing

costs of their maintenance and updating.   The British paid only 5% of the actual price of

the missiles as a contribution towards these ongoing research and development costs.[36] It

is worth examining in detail, therefore, not only why Kennedy caved in at Nassau, but he

compromised his mythic principles to such a degree.

III. The Collapse at Nassau and the American National Myth

Numerous commentators have expressed surprise that Kennedy gave so much away at

Nassau. Neustadt suggests even the British were amazed at the deal they gained.[37]

Certainly Acheson condemned Kennedy's backdown, stating "POLARIS risked the whole

of European policy for nothing but fidelity to a declining ally whose defense posture was

silly on its face".[38] Yet if we look beyond this ideological fundamentalism and consider

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[34] Hammond, *The Cold War Years: American Foreign Policy Since 1945*, p. 152.
[35] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 112.
[36] Nigel J. Ashton, "Harold Macmillan and the "Golden Days" of Anglo-American Relations Revisited, 1957-1963," *Diplomatic History* Vol. 29, No. 4 (September 2005): p. 712.
[37] Neustadt, *Report to J.F.K.*, p. 93.
[38] Ibid., p. 45.

the actual situation Kennedy faced at Nassau, the result was hardly surprising. The constraints of the American national myth meant American objectives were cripplingly unclear, a point the British were able to exploit to great effect.

At Nassau, and following McNamara's public attack on Skybolt, the British were left with a single clear objective – they needed to gain the Polaris missile, on terms which allowed the British force to remain at least notionally "independent". In contrast, the objectives of Kennedy's team were unclear and somewhat contradictory. American ambassador to the UK David Bruce noted "Macmillan was so pleased to have done better than he feared…we could have got anything we wanted out of him…if only we'd known *what* we wanted".[39] Clearly, the Americans did not know what they wanted. For Kennedy, the President with bold solutions to major problems, there was simply no answer to the dilemma of Nassau which was both mythically palatable and feasible.

On the one hand, Kennedy wanted to gain American control over all the nuclear deterrents in the West, as both myth and strategy dictated, and to end an unnecessary drain on the American economy. However, he also wanted to avoid toppling the government of America's nearest ally, and to maintain his claim of mere "differences of approach, not spirit" within the Atlantic Community.[40] As Lord Home pointed out at Nassau, "even if there was a row with France" as a result of the Polaris agreement, "it would be far less damaging to NATO than a rift between the United States and Great Britain".[41] Macmillan

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[39] Ibid., p. 95.
[40] Kennedy, "Italy, NATO and European Unity," p. 139.
[41] "402. Memorandum of Conversation, Nassau, December 19, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1096.

had pointed out the "very serious" results for the US-UK relationship if Kennedy attempted to terminate the British independent nuclear deterrent.[42] Destroying friendly governments by breaking agreements and thereby creating greater hostility within the Free World would be difficult for Kennedy to justify - even considering the remarkable flexibility of the American national myth. Unable to decide on an achievable objective, the American approach to negotiations was marked by confusion and contradiction. "On the one side they said Skybolt would fail" Macmillan wryly pointed out in his memoirs, whilst "on the other they said that it could be made to work but they did not need it because of the development of Polaris".[43] Considering this muddled approach, it is not surprising Macmillan was able to use the words of one member of Kennedy's team to contradict and undermine the others, to great effect.

By this point, there was precious little principle upon which the Americans could base any compromise. In fact, at Nassau, Kennedy's pursuit of a compromise with Britain poignantly demonstrated how the American national myth was unable to deal with compromises on fundamental principles. This was demonstrated clearly, by JFK's offer of the subsidy to the UK deterrent - an expedient move which was nevertheless in contradiction to the very principles under which the Americans had cancelled Skybolt in the first place. Once these principles had been abandoned, their rhetorical power was lost for the remainder of the negotiations. Since they had been abandoned, they were obviously not as all-important as the Americans (and the American national myth) had maintained. Without these principles as a basis for his negotiating platform, Kennedy's

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[42] Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, p. 357.
[43] Ibid., p. 358.

bargaining position was very weak. He had to face either acceding to British requests for Polaris, and hence extending the life of the British independent deterrent, or accepting a "very serious" rift with America's closest ally in the Free World. Neither action was easily justifiable according to the tenets of the myth. In an attempt to stave off this unpalatable choice, Kennedy attempted to adopt a further compromise, by offering Polaris as part of a Multilateral Force, which would ensure some measure of US control over the UK deterrent.

Yet the weakness of Kennedy's position was such that even this last attempt was essentially unsuccessful. Although the UK did agree to commit the missiles to the "NATO nuclear force", it could take them back whenever "supreme national interests were at stake".[44] Commentators have dismissed this clause as essentially meaningless "diplomatic doubletalk" intended only to keep up appearances for both sides.[45] It is true that in practice, the clause would likely have been problematic, but in focusing on the practical limitations we risk forgetting its operation in the realm of ideas was not similarly constrained – after all, the British nuclear deterrent was really about symbolism, not military usefulness. In this realm, the agreement was a clear victory for the realist and limited nationalism pursued by de Gaulle and Macmillan, and a serious defeat for Kennedy's universal and idealist model. It was an official acknowledgment that American supreme interests might not be congruent with Britain's supreme interests, despite their alliance as standard bearers of the Free World. Indeed, the very idea of a British "supreme national interest" was anathema to the American national myth, which

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[44] Lord, *John F. Kennedy: The Politics of Confrontation and Conciliation*, p. 219.
[45] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 111.

suggested only America could legitimately have a supreme national interest, based upon its providential mission. The supreme interest of all other people was world freedom, and by pursuing selfish national based policies, they were hampering this progression. Thus the Nassau agreement was much more than a bargain for Macmillan, it was a victory for the European model of limited nationalism, and a public defeat for the grand claims of the American national myth.

The wider repercussions of the Nassau agreement were also not positive for the US. At the conference, the British and Americans had agreed the same offer of Polaris missiles under a multilateral system would be made to the French, in the spirit of Atlantic cooperation. Of course, this proposal of US assistance to the French nuclear deterrent was a dramatic change in philosophy for the United States. That Kennedy had suddenly changed this policy without warning or consultation shocked continental Europe and enraged the Europeanists.[46] There was also a practical quid pro quo, as France lacked the capability to build both the submarines and the warheads which the Polaris system required, meaning the offer was perhaps not as "equal" as it initially appeared. True to form, De Gaulle publically rebuked the offer, but more significantly, he also used the UK-US agreement as "proof" Britain was still favouring its links with America over Europe, and would be a "Trojan Horse" for America within a United Europe.[47] On this basis de Gaulle indicated France would veto Britain's application to join the EEC. Various commentators have shown De Gaulle had decided to veto the application long before this point, and in fact had indicated this decision to both Macmillan and McNamara before

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[46] Cyr, *U.S. Foreign Policy and European Security*, p. 42.
[47] Gaulle, "Seventh press conference," p. 219.

Nassau.[48] Nevertheless, the timing of the agreement offered a convenient means for de Gaulle to justify his veto, increasing his standing in France and wider Europe.

The tenets of the American nationalist were more than vague notions for Kennedy; they imposed very real limitations in his actions throughout the Skybolt affair. Nationalism drove him to pursue the moral and practical benefits from cancelling the Skybolt programme, but it also prevented him from acting ruthlessly to achieve those same ends. Faced with the collapse of a friendly government and damage to the image of Atlantic community, the myth demanded Kennedy temper his actions. As a result, the American objectives grew increasingly unclear, their actions inconsistent and contradictory. The United States ended up not only paying considerable amounts of money to extend the life of the British independent nuclear deterrent with a superior missile, they also alarmed other European allies with their capricious policy reversal, giving de Gaulle's increasingly anti-American nationalist vision a considerable fillip. These actions were neither idealistic nor pragmatic. They were undesirable policy choices imposed by the logic of the American national myth – and which, ironically, clearly undermined the mythical concepts with which Kennedy had originally approached the Skybolt problem.

IV. The Multi-Lateral Force

From the point of view of Kennedy's team, the one positive outcome of the Nassau agreements was that Britain had agreed to commit her missiles to a NATO nuclear force.

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[48] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 116.

Britain might be able to withdraw the missiles to defend the "supreme national interest",

but a measure of American control through NATO was clearly preferable to none, as was

the case pre-Nassau. The next step, of course, was to construct the force which would

achieve these objectives. The Americans generally chose to describe this force as

"Multilateral" as opposed to multinational, since it was envisioned nations would hand

ultimate authority of these forces over to the supranational organisation.[49] As Kennedy's

team saw it, the successful creation of such an organisation, with such authority, would be

a significant nail in the coffin of de Gaulle's style of limited nationalism. The US would

support to the "European Communities" as a whole rather than to national defence forces,

a potent symbol of America leading Europe away from its corrupt and divided past

towards redemption.[50]

Unfortunately for Kennedy, Britain and France were highly sceptical of both his motives

and the practicality of the plan. Macmillan was scathing, declaring "this is not a

European rocket. It's a racket of the American industry".[51] Practically, the plan was hurt

by doubts as to its workability, felt by Americans such as former President Eisenhower, as

well as European statesmen. Support for the concept of multi-lateral cooperation was one

thing, but proposals for the multi-lateral manning of ships raised the practical problems of

language and cultural barriers between crewmembers, making their military utility

doubtful at best. It did not help Kennedy's cause that the plan put to the Europeans

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[49] Rusk, "396. Letter from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to Secretary of Defense McNamara, Washington, September 8, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1079.
[50] "394. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Kohler) to Secretary of State Rusk, Washington, May 24, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1076.
[51] Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, p. 335.

changed from nuclear missile-armed surface ships to submarines and then back again, due

to internal politics and disputes within the Administration.[52] McNamara remarked he

"had been told repeatedly by different delegates in Paris that they would be glad to follow

the United States if they could only tell what it was that the United States was for".[53]

Even the US seemed unsure of exactly what it wanted. This was due, to a degree, to a

fundamental ambivalence about the plan, whereby the US needed to make the deal

attractive enough to gain support from the nations of Europe, whilst simultaneously

remaining fearful of giving away too much, particularly the tightly-held national secrets of

nuclear submarines and missiles.

Yet it was not the impracticality of the MLF plan which was to seal its fate, but rather its

nationalist implications. Predictably, France and Britain, the nations with existing nuclear

deterrents, could see little benefit in a scheme which required them to place their nation's

security in the hands of other nations, based solely upon an abstract principle. For the

limited-nationalist viewpoints of these European states, there was ultimately only one

principle which mattered, and that was the survival of the nation. De Gaulle declared that

"to turn over our weapons to a multilateral force, under a foreign command, would be to

act contrary to that principle of our defense and our policy".[54] Macmillan also pointed out

the MLF did not really fulfil the principle of equality within the Atlantic Community

vaunted by the Americans, since "the United States [would] contribute part of their force

[52] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 127.
[53] Bundy, "401. Memorandum of Conversation," p. 1090.
[54] Gaulle, "Seventh press conference," p. 219.

while the others would contribute all of theirs". In his reply, Kennedy simply confirmed the statement was correct. [55]

The United States' determination to retain a veto over the MLF's activities confirmed the suspicions of British and French statesmen that the MLF was simply a stalking horse for the US to gain hegemony over its allies.[56] Bohlen declared that unless the US was willing "to give on the control issue", the MLF would collapse.[57] Yet despite this clear warning, the powerful mythic combination of principle and self-interest meant the US veto was not negotiable. Dean Rusk declared the US would offer no assistance to the MLF whatsoever if it did not retain a final veto over the MLF's activities.[58] Though a strong believer in the MLF, Kennedy too was inflexible. He "again emphasised that although we wanted to get a multilateral force organized and to sea, we wanted to do so without giving up our control".[59] At one point, the President and his advisors considered replacing the veto provisions with a "rule of unanimity"; though this was essentially a veto under a different name.[60]

For de Gaulle and Macmillan, both of whom had staked their political fortunes on the continuation of independent nuclear deterrents, this made the proposals unacceptable by definition. A force which was ultimately controlled by the US could not be credibly

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[55] "402. Memorandum of Conversation, Nassau, December 19, 1962," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 1095.
[56] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 100.
[57] David Klein, "174. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, February 18, 1963," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 503.
[58] Taber, *John F. Kennedy and A Uniting Europe*, p. 100.
[59] Klein, "174. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, February 18, 1963," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII*, p. 505.
[60] Ibid., p. 503.

paraded about as a symbol of British or French national strength, let alone as a useful

military tool. The one party that was firmly convinced of the merits of the plan was

Kennedy's prime target, West Germany, the significant nuclear have-not of Europe.

Unfortunately, in this case Kennedy's plan was too successful, and Germany's fervent

enthusiasm only seemed to confirm the suspicions of its neighbours of a re-emergence of

German military power.[61] Thus the remainder of Europe could see few benefits from the

MLF, and Kennedy's assassination effectively killed the proposal.

The MLF proposals in many ways embody that mix of almost-Machiavellian realism and

optimistic idealism which has repeatedly confused diplomatic historians studying the

Kennedy administration. The US promoted the MLF as a move towards a more equal

Atlantic community, giving the nation-states of Europe a chance to contribute and control

the nuclear defence of their continent. It would reduce tensions within Europe whilst

simultaneously providing for their protection and reassurance. Yet at the same time it was

clear the MLF was intended as a means for America to maintain control over its

increasingly powerful (and independent) European allies, offering an end to proliferation,

a stabilisation of Europe and a US veto over the firing of missiles. By now, it should

come as no surprise to readers that these two desires were essentially the one idea, drawn

from the vision of the American national myth. Yet the MLF was also plagued by doubts

as to its practicality, whilst Europe's reaction to the proposals was lukewarm at best.

Ultimately, Kennedy persisted with the MLF plan, optimistically overlooking the barriers

to its success, since he believed the key assumptions of the American myth applied to the

nuclear age. America had been "blessed" with the unprecedented power of the atomic

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[61] Wells, "Charles de Gaulle and the French Withdrawal from NATO's Integrated Command," p. 145.

bomb, and ultimately only America had sufficiently pure intentions to use the weapon responsibly. Since the American nuclear monopoly had been broken, a new system was needed to regain US control over America's allies, as the logical complement to the system of deterrence. The USSR could be deterred from using its missiles, but America's morally-weak friends needed a guiding hand to prevent them from using theirs inappropriately – in ways which might drag the US into war without the US having a say in the matter. Of course, only America had the moral purity to adopt such a role.

The Kennedy administration's energetic pursuit of these large-scale solutions to the large-scale problems of Europe was possibly "noble", as "court historians" such as Theodore Sorenson and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. have attempted to show.[62] Nevertheless, the Kennedy administration was unable to deal with the fact that Europe did not view the world according to the American national myth, and (more significantly) that it could effectively resist Kennedy's plans. Indeed, Kennedy's dogged pursuit of mythic solutions whilst ignoring these practical barriers unnecessarily panicked the European allies, which only increased the odds against ambitious programmes such as the MLF. Perhaps more importantly, the myth's demand for uncompromising idealism prevented the United States from reaching realistic compromises with the states of Europe which might have gone some way towards improving these problems of proliferation and coordination.

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[62] For a summation of the court historians, see Lord, *John F. Kennedy: The Politics of Confrontation and Conciliation*, p. 295-298.

Conclusions

As historians, we cannot hope to understand the history of the Kennedy administration without an understanding of the American national myth. It was this myth, with its fusion of American self-interest with selflessness, and its condemnation of other limited-nationalist forms, which was the basis of so much of Kennedy's foreign policy. By deliberately or unintentionally ignoring this mythic nationalism, diplomatic historians can find no satisfying answer to the apparent dilemma of Kennedy's pragmatism and his idealism, amongst other questions. Their conclusions are necessarily misleading, because they are so glaringly incomplete. To attempt to analyse the policies of Kennedy, a man so clearly concerned with great ideas, without a detailed understanding of the basis of those great ideas, is fatuous and misguided.

Kennedy's mythic nationalism was at once the greatest strength and greatest weakness of his foreign policy. The universal claims of the myth, upon which Kennedy offered his bold solutions, created an incredible "imagined community", reaching even beyond the limits of American territory.[1] This, in turn, gave Kennedy a moral and practical mandate to attempt to tackle the greatest and most serious problems facing the world in the 1960s. The entire world was seemingly within the jurisdiction of this American president. Yet, as this work has demonstrated, the unique assumptions and logic of the American national myth ironically also enforced a blinkered view of the world, which ultimately limited his ability to solve those problems.

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[1] Ibid., p. 185.

The mythic basis of his foreign policy worked best where the national myth offered a clear perspective on right and wrong. Almost any action on behalf of the "Communist system" could be powerfully condemned as endangering the future of all mankind. The myth also justified actions in America's self-interest with ease. Unfortunately for Kennedy, interactions with America's European allies could rarely be viewed in such Manichean terms. Although Kennedy maintained there was no serious divergence of interest between the allies, and any differences were only "differences of approach, not spirit", it was clear that this was not the case.[2] Where America did come into conflict with its allies, there was an inherent barrier to painting these situations in the black-and-white fundamentalist terms demanded by the American national myth. Allies could not be condemned as easily as could America's communist enemies. De Gaulle and Macmillan might be labelled naïve or misguided, or even morally weak, but they could not be portrayed as morally bankrupt in the manner of Stalin, since such men would hardly make fitting allies for the US, bringing the whole concept of a united Free World into question.

Though Kennedy attempted to remain faithful to the myth, in such ambivalent situations the myth offered little guidance. The result was confusion and contradiction, as was strikingly demonstrated at Nassau. Macmillan exploited the weak American position to great effect, achieving a settlement to the Skybolt affair which was in direct contravention of the principles for which Kennedy had originally taken action. This effect was made worse by the mythic persuasive assertion that America could achieve its aims by acting unilaterally where required. Whilst America was undoubtedly powerful in many fields,

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[2] Kennedy, "Italy, NATO and European Unity," p. 139.

that power simply did not extend to a deep control over its allies. These allies knew that America's ideology and position as leader of the free world prevented it from punishing allies in the manner in which it might punish an enemy. This effect was most powerfully demonstrated by de Gaulle, who simply ignored the fierce opposition from Washington and continued developing his Force de Frappe.

Ultimately, although the Kennedy administration represented a peak in mythic nationalism within the United States, it also was a period in which American universal nationalism was undermined by these successes of limited-nationalist forms in Europe. Strikingly, from this analysis of the Force de Frappe and the Skybolt debacle, we must conclude that despite Kennedy's rhetoric of an Atlantic community, non-cooperation presented the best way for the European allies to obtain their objectives. Being prepared to act in direct opposition to the desires of the United States paid dividends, whilst going along with American plans – as the British Conservative party had essentially done before Nassau – brought scant reward. Macmillan and de Gaulle achieved their limited objectives through opposing Kennedy, whilst Kennedy was unable to achieve his – admittedly much grander - aims. Though the scale of their objectives was dramatically different, Kennedy's failure was nevertheless a cause for concern, since it had the potential to bring the whole structure of the myth into question. Kennedy's assassination effectively averted the possibility of a critical re-examination of the claims of the myth and the limitations upon American power, delaying it until the tribulation of Vietnam under Lyndon Johnson. Yet we, as historians, have no excuse to avoid such critical analysis. We must give American mythic

nationalism its rightful place in Kennedy's foreign policy, if we are to have any hope of

understanding the man and his time.

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