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Presidential Beliefs and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Continuity During the Cold War Era

J. Philipp Rosenberg¹

This study attempts to explain the high degree of continuity in American foreign policy during the Cold War era by focusing on the degree of compatibility among the belief systems of the presidents who served during this period and the degree of compatibility between these belief systems and elite foreign policy beliefs held during the same period. It found a high degree of compatibility among the belief systems of Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, and axioms used by other authors to describe the elite foreign policy consensus of that period. It also found, however, the existence of important differences between Kennedy's belief system and those of the other presidents and suggests possible reasons for the continuity of American foreign policy during the Kennedy Presidency despite these differences.

KEY WORDS: belief system; presidency; American foreign policy; Cold War; Weltanschauung.

INTRODUCTION

Four very different men steered the course of U.S. foreign policy during the period commonly referred to as the cold war era. For two of them, politics was not their first career choice. Even the two for whom politics was the initial choice, followed very different routes of getting to the top. Three grew up in a poor rural environment; the fourth in a nouveau riche urban environment. One became wealthy on his own, one inherited his wealth, and two remained relatively poor. One had the best education money could buy, another went to West Point, the third had to settle for the education provided in a small teachers college, the fourth never graduated college. Two were

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from the Midwest; one from the South; the fourth from the Northeast. Yet despite the many differences in their backgrounds, they steered remarkably similar courses in U.S. foreign policy. The objective of this study is to offer one possible explanation for this consistency by focusing on the belief systems of these four American presidents.

Most work done on belief systems has focused on the uniqueness of the individual system (Holsti, 1970; Walker, 1977; Edinger, 1965), and rightly so if one's purpose is to explain the decisions of a particular individual. However, if the purpose is to explain consistency among decision-makers, one must shift the focus to those parts of the individual's belief system which are similar to those around him. It is interesting to note that the work which introduced the "operational code" approach was an analysis of elite, not individual beliefs (Leites, 1951). However, with two exceptions (Hogland and Walker, 1979; Larson, 1981), there has been little followup to Leites' work at anything approaching the elite level.

But why should there be? As May suggests, "To understand the lessons that Americans draw from experience, one has to have some sense of what might be called the American conscience and the American character" (1962, p. 667). To the extent that people who attain the position of President of the United States have lived in the "American environment" it is not surprising that they should share some very fundamental beliefs embedded in that environment. What were those shared beliefs? How important were they in shaping foreign policy decisions? These are the questions which must now be addressed.

ELITE COLD WAR BELIEFS

Although there has been a major attempt at uncovering the American elite foreign policy beliefs of the post cold war era (Holsti and Rosenau, 1979, 1980, 1984; Rosenau and Holsti, 1983), there has been little empirical evidence about those beliefs. However, there does seem to be general agreement in the literature that a foreign policy consensus did exist during this period and there have been numerous attempts to outline the axioms that formed the basis for this consensus (Allison, 1970; Halperin, 1974; Holsti and Rosenau, 1980; May, 1962; Roskin, 1974). Holsti and Rosenau, synthesizing the works of the others cited above, came up with a list of 11 Cold War axioms (1980, p. 266-67). These axioms, shown in Table I, depict "a conflictual world in which all issues and conflicts are related to each other, with the result that disturbances in one area will reverberate throughout the system" (Holsti and Rosenau, 1980, p. 265).

It seems to me that there is one item missing from Holsti and Rosenau's list which forms the basis for the other 11. It starts from the premise that

Table I. Cold War Axioms

Every nation that falls to communism increases the power of the Communist bloc in its struggle with the Free World.
Peace is indivisible... Thus any expansion of Communist influence must be resisted.
Concessions made under pressure constitute appeasement which only whets the appetite of aggressors.
The preeminent feature of international politics is conflict between Communism and the Free World.
Russian intentions toward Western Europe are essentially expansionist. So, too, are Chinese intentions in Asia.
The main sources of unrest, disorder, subversion, and civil war in underdeveloped areas is Communist influence and support.
Communism is monolithic.
The Third World really matters, because it is the battleground between Communism and the Free World.
The United States has an obligation to aid any Free People resisting Communism at home or abroad.
The surest simple guide to U.S. interests in foreign policy is opposition to Communism.
Military strength is the primary route to national security.

Russian behavior is based on the doctrine of survival of the fittest. This would explain the aggressiveness which is fundamental to the American perception of the U.S.-Soviet cold war relationship. More importantly, it leads to the 12th axiom which states that ethical principles should be applied to international relations. At this point several questions must be asked. To what extent were the axioms contained in Holsti and Rosenau's list incorporated into the belief systems of the American presidents who served during the cold war period? To what extent was the twelfth axiom incorporated into the belief system of these individuals? What is behind this set of foreign policy beliefs?

WELTANSCHAUUNG

This study is based on three assumptions about belief systems. One is that they are internally consistent. The second is that they vary along a central-peripheral dimension (Rokeach). The third is that the less centrally located beliefs are derived from the more centrally located, which is what gives belief systems their consistency. To sum up, a belief system can be viewed as a spider's web with all beliefs connected to each other by strands which originate in the center of the web.

At the center of the belief system is a core set of beliefs which I call the Weltanschauung. Although the term Weltanschauung has been defined in numerous different ways, I prefer a dictionary definition which calls it "a comprehensive, esp. personal, philosophy or conception of the universe

and of human life" (New World Dictionary, p. 1614). Specifically, I make the assumption that all belief systems stem from personal views of the nature of Man and the purpose of human existence. Further, I assume that a person's beliefs about the political process and the international system are derived from this *Weltanschauung*. Therefore, an examination of the similarities among Presidential *Weltanschauungs* is now in order.

While there are differences in the *Weltanschauungs* of the four presidents who served during the cold war period, there are three overriding similarities in three of the men. The primary similarity is a belief that the principles which should guide human behavior are not man-made but rather dictated by God. The other two similarities are a belief in an individual's responsibility for his own actions and a common belief in Man's obligation to help those less fortunate than himself.

Truman combined his belief in the divine origin of ethical principles with a belief in individual responsibility to form an emphasis on honesty and keeping one's word, even if doing so becomes detrimental to oneself (Rosenberg, 1982, p. 227). In a memo to himself, dated May 14, 1934, Truman referred to The Ten Commandments and The Sermon on the Mount commenting, "I am still, at fifty, of the opinion that there are no other laws to live by in spite of the professors of psychology" (Hillman, 1952, p. 190). Eisenhower, in a 1954 letter to an old Army buddy referred to Man as "a spiritual thing" and commented "If man is only an educated mule, we should eliminate him and turn the earth back to the birds and the fishes and the monkeys" (Eisenhower, 1963, p. 442). In his memoirs, Eisenhower referred to devotion to moral principles as one of two of "mankind's most priceless possessions" (Eisenhower, 1965, p. 261). Johnson's belief in the divine origin of ethical principles is most clearly apparent in his college editorials. In one of these, Johnson outlined the role of faith in Man's existence by making a distinction between Thomas Paine who, lacking faith, became a destroyer and Benjamin Franklin whose great faith turned him into a builder of things (Kearns, p. 64). All agreed that Man's ethical obligations could be fulfilled only by helping others.

One of Truman's favorite quotes was "Nothing is eternal but that which is done for God and others. That which is done for self dies."² He characterized great men as those who helped others, thus eliminating those who fought for personal glory. "I could never admire a man whose only interest is himself" (Hillman, 1952, p. 190). Eisenhower made a similar judgment in a letter to Marshall during World War II, "I get weary of people that have no other thought but 'me'" (Hobbs, 1971, p. 88). As editor of his college paper,

²"Reading List, Truman, Harry S." PSF File, Harry S. Truman Library (hereafter HST L).

Johnson expressed similar thoughts, "Glorious as is genius, it is of little value unless it is wisely and practically applied for the comfort and welfare of mankind".³ According to Johnson, he had incorporated his mother's belief that "the strong must take care of the weak" and therefore he "wanted power to give things to people—all sorts of things to all sorts of people, especially the poor and the blacks" (Kearns, 1976, p. 54-5).

POLITICAL BELIEFS

If one looks at a belief system as a spider's web with all beliefs connected to the center, then a person's political beliefs should be affected by his *Weltanschauung*. Indeed such a relationship can be seen in the way the Presidents looked at politics and political roles.

In Truman's case, the strong emphasis on keeping one's word which appeared in his *Weltanschauung* spilled over to his beliefs about politics. "To me party platforms are contracts with the people and I always looked upon them as agreements that had to be carried out" (Truman, 1956, p. 212-213). His perception of the proper role of a politician contained an emphasis on group welfare. He wrote that a great politician "must think always of the welfare and the interests of the people for whom he works...He must like people and try to help them help themselves".⁴

Eisenhower's political beliefs contain a blend of individual responsibility and an obligation to assure group welfare, both derived from the spiritual nature of Man. He believed that the function of government was to establish a system which "recognizes and protects the rights of the individual and that ascribes to the individual a dignity accruing to him because of his creation in the image of a supreme being."⁵ But he also acknowledged that government had a second function. "But the very fact that man is a spiritual thing makes it impossible for any durable governmental system to ignore hordes of people who through no fault of their own suddenly find themselves poverty stricken, and far from being able to maintain their families at decent levels, cannot even provide sustenance".⁶ Eisenhower liked to quote Lincoln who said,

³College Star editorial, August 7, 1927, p. 30. Speech File, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (hereafter LBJ L). See also editorial, November 9, 1927, Ibid.

⁴Truman to Walter Rosenstein, February 13, 1952, "The President," Box 16, William Hassett Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (hereafter FDR L).

⁵Eisenhower to Capt. Swede Hazlett, July 19, 1947, "Capt. Swede Hazlett, 1941-49(4)," Ann C. Whitman (hereafter ACW) Name File, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (hereafter DDE L).

⁶Eisenhower to Gen. G. Chynoweth, July 20, 1954, p. 3, "Jan.-Nov. 1954" DDE Diary, DDE L.

The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do for themselves in their separate and individual capacities. In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere.⁷

Johnson, like Eisenhower, also believed in the same dual function of government, although he differed in where to draw the line referred to in the above quote. He believed that the cornerstone of American freedom was “individuality of political philosophy” (Mooney, 1964, p. x). However, Johnson also saw that much of the inequality in the United States was due to unequal competition and saw government’s function as one of equalizing the competition. As a Congressman, he stated “so far as my philosophy of life and government is concerned, I’ve got two other words I want to substitute for free enterprise; they are EQUAL OPPORTUNITY”.⁸ A hint of Johnson’s perception of the function of a good politician is contained in a 1939 letter.

Now you take Father O’Brien, for instance. There is a man whose life is consecrated to the poor, the needy, the unfortunate, the discouraged, the disconsolate from whatever source. He wants them to have jobs, he wants them to have plenty of food in their pantries, decent homes for their families, schools and churches to minister to them—just an American chance to grow and live. Now doesn’t that make him a good Democrat, too, like me?⁹

Twenty five years latter, he incorporated those ideas into his Great Society.

At the heart of it, I thought of the Great Society as an extension of the Bill of Rights. When our fundamental American rights were set forth by the Founding Fathers, they reflected the concerns of a people who sought freedom in their time. But in our time a broadened concept of freedom requires that every American have the right to a healthy body, a full education, a decent home, and the opportunity to develop to the best of his talents. (Johnson, 1971, p. 104)

FOREIGN POLICY BELIEFS

Since one’s foreign policy beliefs are, in essence, a subunit of one’s political beliefs, themes which appear in an individual’s general political beliefs should reappear in that person’s foreign policy beliefs. Indeed this is true of the foreign policy beliefs of Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson.

Truman’s beliefs revolved around the simple concept that international relations had to be played according to the same ethical standards that governed relations between individuals. As he stated in a major foreign policy ad-

⁷Ann C. Whitman to Rosemary Chwatal, Nov. 3, 1956, PPL 1-A-18, DDE L.

⁸LBJ Speech, Austin Texas, Jan. 3, 1944, p. 3, “1944” Speech File, House of Representatives Collection, LBJ L.

⁹Johnson to James P. Nash, April 25, 1939, Unmarked File, Container 147, House of Representatives Collection, LBJ L.

dress, the goal of American foreign policy was to bring "the Golden Rule into the international affairs of the world." This meant that it was impossible for the United States to "give our approval to any compromise with evil" (Public Papers, 1946, p. 433). It also meant that there should be greater American involvement in global affairs to "let the bandits and thugs among the world powers know they will be punished for their thuggery just as we punish individuals for it."¹⁰ According to Truman, avoidance of global responsibility landed the United States in World War II and could no longer be continued (Hillman, 1952, p. 11).

To Truman, the key was nations acting in good faith with each other. Thus Tito was forced out of Trieste and DeGaulle out of the Aosta Valley because landgrabbing was not part of this new moral world order that had to be created. This emphasis on behaving ethically was especially important in Truman's perception of the cold war.

To Truman, the cold was created by Stalin's refusal to keep his agreements. In his appointment calendar, Truman wrote, "I told him [U.S. Ambassador to Russia] to tell Stalin I held him to be a man to keep his word. Troops in Iran after March 2 upset that theory" (Hillman, 1952, p. 107). This theme of fulfilling one's commitments surfaces repeatedly in Truman's private correspondence. He told Harry Hopkins to tell Stalin that the United States never made agreements that it did not expect to carry out to the letter and that "we expect him to carry his agreements out to the letter and we intended to see that he did" (M. Truman, 1974, p. 225). In a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, Truman complained about the failure of the Russians to carry out "a single commitment they made with him [FDR] or with me".¹¹ In 1948, Truman rejected another meeting with Stalin because "I can't see any reason for making any other agreements simply for the purpose of having them broken."¹²

Truman summarized his attitude toward the Soviet Union in a letter written in 1948.

Russia followed the same procedure throughout the efforts of the United Nations and the United States for peace in the world. Look at their obstructionist tactics in Korea. They haven't kept agreements made at Yalta or Potsdam. In not one country they dominate has there been free elections. Yet Russia misuses the word Democracy shamefully. Russia calls the totalitarian states which have been set up in Eastern European countries Democracies. That is a desecration of the word. Tito murders the opposition in order to establish himself with an airtight police state.

¹⁰"Teaching Peace," speech delivered in Independence, Missouri, Nov. 11, 1937, Senatorial Speech File, SV, HST L.

¹¹Truman to E. Roosevelt, May 31, 1947, "HST 1945-48," Box 4560, E. Roosevelt Papers, FDR L.

¹²Truman to Sen. Burton K. Wheeler, April 5, 1948, "W", PSF General File, HST L. See also Truman to E. Roosevelt, March 16, 1948, "HST 1945-48" Box 4560 E. Roosevelt Papers, FDR L.

You know what happened in Bulgaria, in Rumania, in Hungary, and in Czechoslovakia. We must keep trying for peace, however. The false approach of the Russians must not prevent our peace program from going through to a successful conclusion.¹³

Thus when Russia acted, the U.S. had to react. This is best summarized by Truman's recalling of his thoughts while flying back to Washington after having been informed of the North Korean attack on South Korea.

In my generation, this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war. (Truman, 1956, p. 378-379)

Eisenhower also perceived international relations in terms of "a moral fight as well as a diplomatic maneuver."¹⁴ He started from the premise that "Communism is an ideology that seeks to defeat us by every possible means."¹⁵ Therefore, the most important element in global politics, according to Eisenhower, was the existence of an "irreconcilable conflict between the theories of Communist dictatorship and the basic principles of free world existence."¹⁶

Eisenhower perceived the communist objective as the destruction of "representative government."¹⁷ Russian leaders would use any means at their disposal because they were devoid of moral principles.¹⁸ They were seen as duplicitous because they knew that any knowledgeable person, given a free choice, would choose "that form of life in which are implicit opportunities for men to satisfy their individual spiritual, intellectual, and material cravings."¹⁹ (Note the positioning of the word spiritual.) Therefore, according to Eisenhower,

¹³Truman to Congressman J. H. Folger, May 20, 1948, "Russia 1945-48," PSF Subject File, HST L.

¹⁴J. Jack Martin to Ann C. Whitman, June 13, 1955, "June 1955(4)," ACW Diary, DDE L.

¹⁵Diary entry, June 4, 1956, "June 56," ACW Diary, DDE L.

¹⁶Eisenhower to Gen. A. M. Gruenther, Feb. 1, 1955, "Feb. 1955," DDE Diary, DDE L.

¹⁷Handwritten Diary entry, June 11, 1949, "Dec. 13, 1948-March 5, 1951(1)," DDE Diaries 1935 *et al.*, DDE L. See also Handwritten diary entry, Jan. 27, 1949, *Ibid* and Eisenhower to Paul Hoffman, Jan. 18, 1958, "Hoffman, Paul (1)," ACW Administrative File, DDE L.

¹⁸See conference notes, Eisenhower-Hoover *et al.*, Nov. 14, 1955, "Nov. 1955," DDE Diary and Eisenhower to L. W. Douglas, March 9, 1955, "March 1955," *Ibid*.

¹⁹Eisenhower to William S. Paley, Jan. 16, 1956, "Jan. 56 Misc. (2)," *Ibid*.

Truth, honor, justice, consideration of others, liberty for all—the problem is how to preserve them, nurture them, and keep the peace—if this last is possible—when we are opposed by people who scorn to give any validity whatsoever to these values.²⁰

This was especially a problem in the Third World because “World Communism” was taking advantage of Nationalism to cause dissension in the “free world.” As Eisenhower saw it, the real choice for the Third World was between “slavery, preceded possibly by a momentary independence, as in the case of Czechoslovakia” on the one hand or “orderly progress toward independence” on the other.²¹

This was true in Indochina where, according to Eisenhower, the real battle was “to defeat Communism in the region and give the natives their freedom”.²² It was also true in the Middle East where Eisenhower lamented the fact that area leaders such as King Saud of Saudi Arabia “did not seem to realize the extent to which the Communists were gaining greater and greater control in Syria and Egypt.”²³

The Lebanon Crisis of 1958 was, according to Eisenhower, a Soviet penetration attempt with Nasser acting as the Russian puppet.²⁴ Thus in publicly justifying his decision to intervene, he drew parallels between Lebanon and prior attempts to contain Communist aggression (Eisenhower, 1965, p. 274-275) and in private he stated, “it was better if we took a strong position rather than a Munich-type position, if we are to avoid the crumbling of our whole security structure.”²⁵

Johnson perceived international relations in much the same way. He began with the assumption that there were universal realities that shaped any president. The major reality in foreign affairs was “the existence of totalitarian Communist power in much of the Eurasian landmass-power that continuously threatens to disrupt such order as the world has managed to achieve” (Johnson, 1969, p. 6). Johnson’s answer as to how to deal with this threat was similar to Truman and Eisenhower’s basically because they all looked back to the lessons of the 1930s.

In Johnson’s view, Nazism spread because “European democracy fell down on the job. Dictatorships are the consequence of the failure of

²⁰Eisenhower to L. W. Douglas, March 29, 1955, “March 1955,” Ibid.

²¹Diary entry, Jan. 6, 1953, “12/52-8/19/53(2),” DDE Diaries 1935 et al., DDE L.

²²Eisenhower to Capt. Swede Hazlett, April 27, 1954, “Capt. Swede Hazlett 1954(2),” ACW name File, DDE L.

²³Eisenhower to Capt. Swede Hazlett, April 27, 1954, “Capt. Swede Hazlett 1954(2),” ACW Name File, DDE L.

²⁴Memorandum of Conversation, Feb. 6, 1957, “Lebanon(3),” International Series, DDE L.

²⁵Memorandum of Conference with the president, July 15, 1958, “Staff Memos-July 1958(2),” DDE Diary, DDE L.

²⁶Ibid.

democracy.”²⁶ The European democracies had failed to keep the peace because of “a lack of courage that serves as an open invitation to all aggressors of the world” (Kearns, 1976, p. 95). Therefore the answer of how to deal with the Russians was clear to Johnson. “We must apply to dictator Stalin the same doctrine that we should have applied to the Kaiser and Hitler. Dictatorships must be stopped before they become more powerful than we are.”²⁷

In a private letter, Johnson indicated how he would have “sold” the Truman Doctrine to the Congress. “We will not tolerate prima donna, high handed, sulking, thieving forces who seek to gobble up helpless peoples in order to become the dominant power and rule the world.”²⁸ During the same period, he addressed the Senate in the following manner.

One thing is clear...whether Communist or Fascist or simply a pistol-packing racketeer, the one thing a bully understands is force and the one thing he fears is courage...I want peace, but human experience teaches me that if I let a bully of my community make me travel the back streets to avoid a fight, I merely postpone the evil day. Soon he will chase me out of my house. (Kearns, 1976, p. 95)

According to Johnson, the problem in Vietnam was reflective of the central problem in the Third World in general which was “hunger, disease, poverty, and illiteracy upon which communism feeds”.²⁹ This is very consistent with his perception of the major problem in domestic society, a problem the Great Society was supposed to solve. However, the big difference between the problem in the domestic context and in the international context was the greater attempt made by the communists to take advantage of the situation at the international level. Therefore, to Johnson, the immediate need in Vietnam was to stop this communist attempt because “if—given all the disadvantages and undesirable factors involved in Vietnam—we, as the strongest nation in all history, cannot or will not repel the aggressor there, then as I have said, it is one down and ninety-nine [nations] to go.”³⁰ This was just as true of a civil war as an international war. “Belligerence is no less a reality when it involves the external support of insurgency than it is when it involves armies moving across national boundaries.”³¹

This was also true in the Dominican Republic in 1965. In his speech to the nation justifying American intervention, Johnson stated, “But revolution in any country is a matter for that country to deal with. It becomes a

²⁶Speech, April 21, 1941, p. 3, “Campaign Speeches, Senate Race 1941,” House of Representatives Collection, LBJ L.

²⁷Speech before the Kiwanis Club-1947, “1947,” Speech File, Ibid.

²⁸Johnson to A. W. Wirtz, April 29, 1947, “Wirtz, A. W., 1944,” LBJA Selected Names, Ibid.

²⁹Johnson to E. Palmer Hoyt, March 4, 1965, “Hon,” WHCF, Alpha File, LBJ L.

³⁰Johnson to Edward J. Meeman, March 30, 1965, “3/16/65-3/31/65,” WHCF, ND19/CO312, LBJ L.

³¹Johnson to J. William Fullbright, May 27, 1966, “FRI,” WHCF, Alpha File, LBJ L.

matter calling for hemispheric action-only—repeat only—when the object is the establishment of a Communist dictatorship” (Senate, 1965, p. 59). The next day, Johnson made another speech in which he defended his decision to intervene by referring to a story about the time Huey Long went to Arkansas to campaign for a woman running for the Senate. When criticized for interfering in local politics, Long replied that he did not come to Arkansas to dictate to anyone but only to “pull those big, pot-bellied politicians off this poor little woman’s neck” (Geyelin, 1966, p. 238). The above story is a perfect summary of Johnson’s view of America’s role in international affairs.

WHAT ABOUT JFK?

At the beginning of this article, I noted that four individuals occupied the presidency during the Cold War era. Yet previous sections have traced the belief systems of only three. I have delayed a discussion of the belief system of John F. Kennedy until now because of an acute lack of “good” data on Kennedy’s *Weltanschauung* and political beliefs. This data shortage has many causes.

Kennedy did not keep a diary. He did not maintain long-running correspondence with very many individuals. In the two exceptions to the above statement, the correspondence remains closed for the foreseeable future. He, of course, did not live long enough to write his memoirs. Last and most importantly, Kennedy, far more than the three other presidents, was concerned with projecting the “right image.” To this end, he was very scrupulous about making everything he said, did, or wrote in public conform to that image. That characteristic is substantiated even by his closest friends (Fay, 1963). He wasn’t very open even in private. As close an aide as Ted Sorensen has admitted that in the 11 years he worked with Kennedy, Kennedy never disclosed to him his personal views on Man’s relationship to God (Sorensen, 1965, p. 19).

Knowing that Kennedy made a very conscious effort to project a certain image in public which might or might not have corresponded to his true beliefs makes it very difficult to determine what those beliefs really were. Despite this almost fatal drawback, an attempt will be made to outline Kennedy’s beliefs, beginning with his *Weltanschauung*.

In contrast to the three other presidents, there is no evidence that Kennedy believed in the divine origin of ethical principles. As cited above, his views on the relationship of Man to God were a mystery even to his closest aides. What is known is that central to Kennedy’s *Weltanschauung* was a perception of life as a series of athletic competitions.

All of Kennedy's biographers have remarked upon the competitiveness of the entire Kennedy family. Indeed Parmet points out that John Kennedy's father and maternal grandfather used their abilities in athletic competition to gain legitimacy in school (1980, p. 236). This competitive spirit was probably behind a remark John Kennedy made to his brother, Bobby, that "I'd rather be an aggressor in victory than a bum in defeat" (Parmet, 1983, p. 163). It was also reflected in his tendency to lose interest in women once he "won" them (Parmet, 1980, p. 94). It would seem that at the heart of Kennedy's Weltanschauung was agreement with the famous Vince Lombardi quote, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

The second and related element was a Machiavellian outlook on the expending of resources toward a goal. At Choate, he did not make the varsity because he was reluctant to apply himself in practice (Burns, p. 26). During his days in Congress, he responded to a shut-in's request for a TV by instructing an assistant to buy a USED set for her (Lincoln, p. 21). It also affected his view of his employees as illustrated by his long time secretary's account of an incident that occurred when she came down with an illness which forced her away from her job for a period of time. She recounts that Kennedy's first reaction was to fire her despite her long association with him simply because her illness prevented her from doing the job she was hired for (Lincoln, p. 62). The essence of Kennedy's attitude toward people seemed to be the Machiavellian notion of judging people by the extent to which they served a useful purpose.

This pragmatism affected his political beliefs. A favorite Kennedy quote, attributed to Lincoln stated, "There are few things wholly evil or wholly good. Almost everything, especially of Government policy, is an inseparable compound of the two, so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded" (Schlesinger, 1965, p. 110). This flexibility extended to beliefs about political systems.

In his senior thesis at Harvard, Kennedy tackled the issue of why England was so unprepared for World War II. In the conclusion, he wrote,

Why exactly is the democratic system better? It may be answered that it is better because it allows for the free development of man as an individual. But it seems to me that this only indicates that democracy is a "pleasanter" form of government—not that it is the best form of government for meeting the present world problem. All men would like to have the freedom to develop as individuals, even the Germans. But they have decided that for certain reasons they could no longer afford this luxury—and so they became totalitarians.³²

³²"Appeasement at Munich, Final Thesis, Harvard Copy, Conclusion and Bibliography," p. 141, JFK Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Library (hereafter JFK L). The reason for citing from the senior thesis instead of from the published version, *Why England Slept*, is because of the changes that were made in the published version for public consumption. Thus the senior thesis is a more accurate indicator of Kennedy's true beliefs.

This quote seems to indicate that, according to Kennedy, the democratic form of government was not to be taken as a given but rather had to continually prove its utility for winning under changing conditions. The severest test of this utility would come in the competitive international sphere.

In his senior thesis, he pointed out that the democracies were engaged in a fierce competition in which they could not afford to rest on their laurels—a no holds barred competition in which the opponents “intend to use all their weapons to bring about the defeat of the democracies.”³³ The answer to this problem, according to Kennedy, was to be flexible about the kind of society democracies would have to become.

Instead of speaking of the glories of democracies in regard to its superiority in domestic affairs, we should realize the disadvantages in the international field. Instead of claiming that our great national wealth and high standard of living are due to our democratic capitalistic system, we should realize the great natural resources we have. Maybe they were the best form for developing the country, but that doesn't mean they don't have to be proved the best now. In other words, let us realize exactly what the advantages are it gives and exactly what are its disadvantages. If you decide that the democratic form is the best, be prepared to make certain great sacrifices.³⁴

Although he didn't spell out what those sacrifices were, the theme of the thesis was that a certain amount of individualism had to be sacrificed for the sake of national unity and that democracies had to shoulder the economic burden of a standing defense force in order to defend themselves against those who wished to destroy them. This pragmatism, combined with enough strength to win the competition, formed certain beliefs about how to combat aggression in the world. The key was always to act rationally in assessing threats to the national interest.

In a written account of a dinner party he had attended in November 1941, Kennedy relates that up until shortly before the party, he had been an isolationist for the pragmatic reason that the effort to defeat Germany “would be so great that in the end the U.S. would have lost what they were fighting for.”³⁵ However, the long stand of the Russians had changed his mind. He now advocated American involvement in the war but only if “a quick victory” could be achieved. He continued, “I felt that for people to take a die-hard position on the war was wrong. Our policy must be flexible, fluid, if it is to stay abreast of the changing conditions of the world.”³⁶

This pragmatism also came into play after Pearl Harbor in Kennedy's motivation for fighting the war. In a letter, Kennedy complained about the “selling job” done by the American government to convince the American

³³Ibid, p. 142.

³⁴Ibid, p. 146.

³⁵Memo on dinner party at Mrs. Patterson's, Nov. 10, 1941, “11/10/41-1/23/42 speech and book material,” JFK Personal Papers, JFK L.

³⁶Ibid.

people of the necessity of war. He lamented people's inability to "see that what we are fighting for is not a lofty crusade, but a bitter back-to-the-wall fight for survival."³⁷ In the same letter, Kennedy makes an interesting comment which could shed light on his policies in Indochina twenty years later. He wrote, "We'll see that we are not fighting for Dong Dang, but for ourselves, and that while it doesn't matter a damn what happens to Dong Dang, it does matter and matters a great deal more than parity prices, 40-hr weeks, cost plus contracts, what happens to the U.S.A."³⁸

This pragmatism is also evident in his beliefs on international relations in general. In a 1939 letter to his father, Kennedy outlined the problem in Palestine based on his visit there. He criticized the British policy in the letter because "theoretically it sounds just and fair, but the important thing and the necessary thing is not a solution just and fair but a solution that will work."³⁹

In a 1951 letter to his father following a visit to the same region, Kennedy talked about the poverty and maldistribution of wealth in the region. But the real problem, he wrote, was that the Russians were using these bad conditions to make inroads into the region. Therefore, the biggest American problem was to "convince Arab and Jew that threat is not from each other but from the north."⁴⁰

The above line seems to indicate that Kennedy did indeed see Russia as a threat. The point here is that the threat, as perceived by Kennedy, was of a different nature. Kennedy saw the threat as coming from a Nation-State, not an ideology. This is supported by Sorensen's statement that Kennedy drew a distinction between communist aggression and subversion which Kennedy regarded as intolerable and Communism itself (Sorensen, 1965, p. 514).

This distinction was grounded in Kennedy's *Weltanschauung* which emphasized pragmatic self-interest over idealistic considerations. Thus he keyed in on the overriding common objective between the two countries, survival. This is evidenced by the first private letter Kennedy wrote to Khrushchev in which he used the analogy of Noah's ark. He wrote that both the clean and unclean animals wanted the ark to stay afloat (Sorensen, p. 515). It also led to a foreign policy which emphasized deterrence and credibility.

One of the first things Kennedy did when he assumed the Presidency was to call for a greater conventional role in military strategy. Walton and

³⁷Kennedy to Lady Astor, March 3, 1942, "Boston Office Files (House), Gen. Corr. B," Presidential Papers, JFK L.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Kennedy to Joseph P. Kennedy, undated, "Letter written to his father 1939," POF, JFK L.

⁴⁰Report on Asian trip, undated, "Asian Trip 1951," JFK Personal Papers, JFK L.

others have used this to argue that Kennedy was a Cold Warrior. However, if one looks back at Kennedy's senior thesis, one sees that this is a natural extension of the argument made there. Democracies had to be prepared, not for ideological reasons but for balance of power reasons. Not only did they have to be prepared for an all-out war but they also had to have a "flexible" capability so that they could respond to aggression without going on a moral crusade which, in the nuclear era, meant mutual destruction. Thus was the strategic doctrine of flexible response born.

That this was Kennedy's reasoning is supported by notes he took at a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff during his first week in office. He wrote, "How do we add credibility to the nuclear force? Put yourself in K.'s position. How would he add. I am positive in that as we strengthen the credibility—by increasing conventional forces—much better than going from 3 months to atomic war."⁴¹

The important thing, according to Kennedy, was to use this capability and credibility to America's best advantage in this competition with the Soviets. This meant picking our responses carefully and not going on moral crusades. As he put it in a 1957 speech on Vietnam, "The U.S. is willing to make any sacrifice on behalf of freedom but can American servicemen be the fighters for the whole free world, fighting every battle, in every part of the world?"⁴²

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have attempted to make three points. First, belief systems are consistent. Truman's, Eisenhower's, and Johnson's foreign policy beliefs were merely extensions of their political beliefs which were, in turn, extensions of their *Weltanschauungs*. Second, that there were some strong similarities among the *Weltanschauungs* of the three men which resulted in similarities in their foreign policy beliefs. This is NOT to say that the *Weltanschauungs* were identical because there were certainly many important differences among them. Truman and Johnson's broader definition of the proper function of government would affect how they would perceive a request for aid, especially economic aid, made by a foreign country. Eisenhower's broader definition of individual responsibility would predispose him to expect foreign countries to contribute more toward their own development. But the key is the third point.

⁴¹KP-5, Meeting with JCS, Jan. 25, 1961, "1961 KP1-5," Ibid.

⁴²Police Force Speech, "Doodles 1957 KS1," Ibid.

Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson all reflected the general and/or elite consensus outlined by Holsti and Rosenau's list of Cold War axioms. The foreign policy beliefs of Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson were similar to each other in terms of perception of the nature of the Soviet threat and the nature of the International System. The three perceived the International System as a zero-sum game. They saw the Soviets as the main source of destabilization within the system. They drew the same lesson from the events in Munich in 1938 and agreed that what happened in Munich in 1938 was very relevant to the situations they were confronted with. All three would agree that while the Russians were not the cause of Third World problems, the most immediate need was to stop the Soviets from exploiting Third World problems for their advantage which, given the perception of a zero-sum game, meant a corresponding Western loss.

Korea, Lebanon, The Dominican Republic, and Vietnam were all places where global balance of power considerations did not dictate nor even recommend intervention. Yet U.S. troops did intervene because the symbolic loss was perceived as unacceptable within the context of Munich. Was the Sudetenland of strategic importance? That issue was irrelevant from the perspective of lesson learned by American decision-makers. It was irrelevant because of their belief in the twelfth Cold War axiom.

Just as Fascist ideology was based on the doctrine of survival of the fittest, so too was Communist ideology. Therefore, the perception of these three presidents, one they shared with a large segment of Americans, was that the Soviets, motivated by that doctrine, were compelled to initiate a continual series of challenges, a string of potential Munichs, in order to find any weaknesses in the Western alliance. Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson might disagree about the exact rules to play by but all agreed that the nature of those rules was the same, a divinely given set of ethical principles which should be applied to international relations. It is this 12th axiom that wedded the three presidents as well as a large segment of Americans. All believed that American foreign policy, like domestic politics, should be played according to moral rules and, therefore, that the United States had a moral obligation to oppose those who didn't play by those rules.

What infuriated the three presidents and Americans at large was that the Russians didn't want to play by these rules, nor could they have, as perceived by these men. The Russians couldn't play by these rules because their concept of morality was independent of the concept of God. This Russian position could not be accepted by Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, and the majority of Americans because of the central position occupied by the concept of God in their *Weltanschauungs*.

But what about Kennedy? No definitive answer can be given due to the lack of good data. However, indications are that God may not have held

as central a role in Kennedy's *Weltanschauung* as it did in the others. This may have been the source of Kennedy's greater flexibility and anti-crusade beliefs. This is why he could write that it didn't matter a damn what happened to Dong Dang, the only thing that mattered was what happened to the United States. I think that what did happen to Dong Dang would have mattered to Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson. Indeed, this may be the single greatest difference between Kennedy and Johnson in terms of their perception of Vietnam.

But, the critics will say, Kennedy also looked at the Russians as hostile and was on the verge of intervening in Laos and Vietnam. If his beliefs were not the same as those of the other three, why did he look and act like another cold warrior? The answer, I believe, is twofold.

First, as stated earlier, Kennedy did have a hostile perception of the Soviet Union. The difference, however, is that this perception was based on balance of power considerations instead of the morality of the situation. Kennedy reacted negatively toward the Soviets because, in his mind, the Russians were trying to alter the balance of power situation in their favor. What is different about Kennedy's perception is that this Russian behavior was allowed under the rules. However, another part of the rules stated that the United States, to protect its advantage, had to oppose such moves. Therefore opposition to Soviet moves was based on "winning" a competition in which both sides played by the same rules rather than the perception that the U.S. had a moral obligation to confront a competitor who insisted on playing by different rules.

Second, as also stated earlier, Kennedy was extremely sensitive to his image, especially as it affected reelection chances. Indeed, many people have repeated Kennedy's remark that we would pull out of Vietnam but only AFTER the 1964 election. This indicates that, in a democracy, even if an individual plays by a different set of rules, he must be perceived by others as playing by their rules or else he won't be reelected. This could be a very potent example of the effect of the Cold War consensus on foreign policy making.

Last, two words of caution. First, in emphasizing similarities among presidential belief systems, I have glossed over differences among them. There were very important differences among the belief systems of Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson. However, the point to be made here is that the similarities acted as an outer boundary within which differences were allowed. Thus in determining what was "in the ballpark," this Cold War consensus insured a degree of continuity despite changes in personnel during the cold war period.

Second, the existence of certain beliefs does not cause foreign policy behavior. It merely predisposes an individual in certain directions and away

from other directions. This entire discussion should be perceived within this context.

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