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What if JFK had survived his assassination?

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On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was killed in Dallas. Almost as prevalent as theories about his assassination are theories about what would have happened to three major historical events if JFK had been alive in 1964.

Since then, many theories have sprung up about the assassination, who was involved, and why Kennedy was killed.

Among historians and some authors, there has been detailed debate and discussion about what would have happened in the event that Kennedy wasn't killed in November 1963.

The three main topics of debate have been the outcome of the 1964 presidential election; the escalation of the Vietnam War; and the finality of the historic Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts.

All three of those items were in process when Kennedy died when he visited Texas as part of the run-up to the 1964 presidential campaign.

Kennedy was committed to running again in 1964 and based on the theories among historians, he had a good chance of winning.

His popularity rating was at 58 percent right before the assassination, just after he served 1,000 days in office. That number was higher than similar ratings for Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, five presidents who won re-election bids.

The presumptive presidential nominee for the Republicans in late 1963 was Senator Barry Goldwater. He was friends with Kennedy and briefly dropped out of race after Kennedy's death, only to re-enter it to oppose a man he disliked, Lyndon Johnson.

Kennedy and Goldwater had reportedly agreed to debate, while Johnson had no interest in debating Goldwater.

The closeness of an election between Kennedy and Goldwater would have been decided by two big issues looming over the year of 1964: civil rights and Vietnam.

On taped recordings made in the White House just before his death, Kennedy told advisers he expected a tough re-election campaign because of his support of civil rights.

President Kennedy had introduced his historic Civil Rights Act in June 1963. It was stalled in Congress when Kennedy died.

The Civil Rights Act faced fierce opposition in Congress, mostly from southern Democrats. Kennedy rejected an attempt to substitute a bill that would allow segregation at public facilities to continue.

After Kennedy's death, President Johnson told the nation that passing the Civil Rights Act would be the best way to honor Kennedy's legacy, but it took until July 1964 for Johnson and his allies to get the act approved.

If Kennedy had lived, the debate over the Civil Rights Act would have occurred during an election year—or maybe not.

One theory is that Kennedy would have waited until after the 1964 election, with the hope of having more leverage in Congress to pass the act. The combination of Kennedy and Johnson would have tackled the bill, which would have been a protracted battle.

In reality, President Johnson was able to get the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 and Voting Rights Act passed in 1965 using his mandate from a landslide election, Kennedy's legacy, and his considerable powers of persuasion in Congress.

The same audio tapes from November 19, 1963, also show Kennedy's concerns about the crisis in Vietnam as he quizzes two aides who had returned from Asia.

"On the one hand, you get the military saying the war is going better, and on the other hand, you get the political [opinion] with its deterioration . . . I'd like to have an explanation what the reason is for the difference," Kennedy asked.

The president's brother, Robert Kennedy, did an audio interview for the Kennedy Library in April 1964 that recounted the thinking about Vietnam at the time of the president's death: that Vietnam couldn't fall to the Communists.

"He had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and that we should win the war in Vietnam," Robert Kennedy said about his brother. The reason was the Domino theory, "Just the loss of all of Southeast Asia if you lost Vietnam. I think everybody was quite clear that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall," Kennedy said.

Just three weeks before President Kennedy's death, South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem was killed in a military coup indirectly supported by the United States.

In August 1963, Kennedy said in another taped conversation that Congress would be mad if it found out about a proposed coup in Vietnam, but Congress would "be madder if Vietnam goes down the drain."

The situation rapidly deteriorated in Vietnam in the year after Kennedy's death and in August 1964, Congress approved by a near unanimous vote the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave President Johnson the ability to commit massive amounts of U.S. troops without a war declaration.

In 2009, filmmaker and visiting Brown scholar Koji Masutani took on the subject of Kennedy and Vietnam in Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived. The film was based on a book and considerable research on the subject by academics at Brown and the University of Toronto, who looked at large amounts of data and transcripts from the Kennedy administration.

Masutani and the researchers concluded that Kennedy would have sought a more diplomatic solution than Johnson, who committed more troops to the Vietnam War in 1964, and that Kennedy wanted to be out of Vietnam entirely by 1966.

Their theory was that Kennedy had a pattern of behavior, established in his handling of crises like the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile situations, which usually had the president going against the advice of his military advisers to find a diplomatic solution.

Planning documents from November 20, 1963 show that the U.S. had hoped to have all military personnel out of Vietnam by the end of the 1965 calendar year, unless there were "justified" exceptions.

But the fallout from the Diem coup was unknown at the time of the Kennedy assassination, so how the president would have handled Vietnam during an election year remains a mystery.

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