

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: JOHN F. KENNEDY AND THE “THOUSAND DAYS”

Conference at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Free University Berlin, August 21–22, 2003. Conveners: Andreas Etges (Free University Berlin), Bernd Schaefer (GHI). Participants: Manfred Berg (Center for USA Studies, Halle-Wittenberg), Peter Busch (ZDF, Mainz), Andreas Daum (SUNY, Buffalo), Ralph Dietl (King’s College, London), Petra Dolata-Kreutzkamp (Free University Berlin), David C. Geyer (Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State), Bernd Greiner (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung), Matthew C. Jones (University of London), Arne Kislenko (Ryerson University), Christopher B. Klemek (University of Pennsylvania), Mark A. Lawrence (University of Texas, Austin), Ursula Lehmkuhl (Free University Berlin), Erin R. Mahan (Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State), Christian Nünlist (Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich), Roland Popp (University of Cologne), Andrew J. Priest (University of Birmingham), Axel Schäfer (Keele University), Georg Schild (University of Bonn), Douglas E. Selvage (Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State), Rolf Steininger (University of Innsbruck), Bradley S. Zakarin (Harvard University).

Forty years after John F. Kennedy’s death on November 22, 1963, his presidency continues to fascinate both the public and historians. Commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Kennedy’s memorable visit to Berlin on June 26, 1963, the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Free University’s Kennedy Institute organized a special exhibition on the life, legacy, politics, and myth of John F. Kennedy. The conference “Great Expectations: John F. Kennedy and the ‘Thousand Days’” in Berlin was the major academic contribution to the exhibition, attempting to take a fresh look at Kennedy’s presidency from a transatlantic perspective. Additional support came from the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the American Embassy in Germany. Hans Ottomeyer, the director of the German Historical Museum, Ursula Lehmkuhl, head of the Kennedy Institute, and Richard J. Schmierer, Minister Counselor of the U.S. Embassy, welcomed the participants to Berlin.

The first panel discussed the policy of the Kennedy administration toward Germany and Western Europe. Germany, and in particular Berlin, was a major trouble spot in 1961, with events culminating in the building of the Berlin Wall. Rolf Steininger described how United States policy changed under Kennedy, shifting the emphasis from Germany as a whole to West Germany, or even to the western half of Berlin. Kennedy was ready to compromise the interests of the Adenauer government and

give up the idea of German unification. He readily accepted the Berlin Wall as a “solution” to the Berlin problem, which was better than a war. Next, David C. Geyer analyzed the origins of Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik, showing that Brandt and Kennedy thought along the same lines, and that Brandt and Egon Bahr felt sure that their new approach was “rooted in the West.” The “Atlantic Partnership” that Kennedy had declared on July 4, 1962 was the subject of the analyses by Andreas Daum and Ralph Dietl. Taking an enlightening cultural perspective, Daum emphasized the performative aspects of alliance politics. Kennedy was a master of a “politics of visibility”—most memorably during his visit to Berlin on June 26, 1963. Dietl argued that in spite of the rhetoric about “partnership,” the Kennedy administration practiced hegemony. Following the view of Sir Pierson Dixon, the former British ambassador to Paris, he described the “Atlantic Partnership” as a “cleverly concealed maneuver to keep Europe dependent on America.”

The second panel continued the discussion of transatlantic relations during the Kennedy presidency. Erin R. Mahan described the contrasting perspectives of Kennedy and de Gaulle on the merits of détente with the Soviet Union. While they worked at cross-purposes, the German question played a major role for both of them. Widening the focus to NATO and its members, Christian Nünlist also discussed intra-Western differences about opportunities for and the risks of a policy of détente during Kennedy’s presidency. In his view, West-West tensions were largely responsible for the fact that the Limited Test Ban Treaty did not become a real starting point for a policy of détente. Andrew J. Priest looked at another field of transatlantic differences, the Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF). Picking up an idea from the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy quickly ran into internal and external difficulties. As in many other areas of foreign policy, Priest argued, Kennedy was hesitant to make a firm decision with regard to the MLF issue.

The third panel opened with Bradley S. Zakarin’s paper on the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which he argued that surprisingly, the Monroe Doctrine was a non-factor in the policy making of the Kennedy administration, even though there was public pressure to apply it. Opting instead for an internationalist approach, a policy based on multilateral institutions and treaties, and the mobilization of world opinion against the Soviet Union, Kennedy took a huge domestic risk, but was ultimately rewarded with diplomatic success. Next, Douglas E. Selvage and Bernd Greiner discussed whether there was a window of opportunity for a policy of détente during the Kennedy presidency. In the case of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, Selvage described how Kennedy and his advisors failed to pick up nuances in the Soviet position that might have made negotiations worthwhile. Misinterpretations on the American side and a lack of

clarity in Moscow's official position in Selva's view killed a true opportunity for détente. Focusing on the relations of the two superpowers after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Greiner denied that opportunities had been missed, revising a view he had formerly held. Kennedy pursued a policy to appease hardliners, and even among his advisors he had few allies ready to break with the Cold War's logic. This strongly limited the president's options at a time when the national security elite was in the prime of its political and bureaucratic power. In many ways, Kennedy was a captive of his time and his own indecision, and it is rather doubtful that he would have taken the necessary political risks. A weakened Khrushchev made success even less likely. Looking at American-Cuban relations after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Mark A. Lawrence sees some attempts at deescalation by the Kennedy administration. In the end however, when it seemed less likely that it would cause a major conflict with the Soviet Union, the confrontational course became dominant again. Instead of marking a clear turning point in the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis intensified the Cold War in the Third World, he concluded.

Vietnam and the question whether Kennedy would have sent regular troops or not is still heavily discussed. The panelists in the fourth section focused on Iran, Indonesia, and Thailand, countries that are much less studied. Kennedy's inaugural promised a new policy for Latin America and other parts of the developing world. Democratic reforms were high on the agenda, but the Kennedy administration proved to be quite willing to align itself with repressive regimes as long as they were anti-communist. Iran is a case in point. Roland Popp showed that while the Kennedy administration initially pushed for domestic reforms in Iran and was critical of the Shah, by 1963 it supported the monarch, who had been able to portray himself as a pro-Western reformer and the best option for stability. In Indonesia, Kennedy tried to improve relations with the Sukarno regime, offering diplomatic support in the West Irian conflict with the Netherlands. Another regional conflict—the planned creation of Malaysia—disrupted hopes for closer cooperation, with Kennedy caught between Britain and Malaya on the one hand and Indonesia on the other. Matthew C. Jones refuted the idea that this was a “lost opportunity” and that the Kennedy administration could have significantly changed the development of Indonesia in the mid-1960s. But he blamed the Americans for having strengthened the army to counter the influence of the Communist Party. During 1963 the war in Vietnam gained more and more importance for American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Thailand became a crucial military base for the United States. Arne Kislenko showed how the Kennedy administration significantly increased economic and military aid and established even closer political relations with Thailand.

In May 1962, Thailand was the scene of the first overt deployment of American combat soldiers in Southeast Asia since World War II.

Foreign policy and international crises dominated the Kennedy presidency. This is also reflected in the historiography, and accordingly, most of the presentations at the conference dealt with Kennedy's foreign policy. It is nevertheless worth taking a new look at his domestic record. Many of the "great expectations" with regard to his inauguration were in the field of civil rights and social policy. To be sure, it was Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson who steered a major domestic reform program and civil rights legislation through Congress. But as Petra Dolata-Kreutzkamp and Georg Schild showed, it was the Kennedy administration that made poverty a national issue, and it was active in a large number of fields and in many ways paved the road for the "War on Poverty." But both Dolata-Kreutzkamp in her paper on Kennedy's "War on Poverty" and regional development in Appalachia and Schild in his discussion of Kennedy's social policies raised doubts that even in a second term Kennedy would have turned these ideas and initiatives into a large-scale program. But precisely because a Kennedy program probably would have been more in line with the New Deal than with Johnson's War on Poverty, it might have averted the serious backlash against the welfare state that characterized the eighties and nineties, Schild argued. Next, Christopher Klemek looked at debates on urban renewal of the 1960s and the role of intellectuals. Again it was Johnson who implemented an item from Kennedy's domestic agenda: the creation of a cabinet-level department for urban issues. Finally, Manfred Berg discussed Kennedy's civil rights record, giving both a historiographic overview as well as a balanced assessment. For Berg, Kennedy took a much stronger stand than Eisenhower before him and moved away from gradualism to racial liberalism. The Kennedy years do not amount to a Second Reconstruction, but they mark the beginning of the crucial stage in the struggle against white supremacy in the United States.

Andreas Etges