AMERICA AND THE WORLD IN THE SIXTIES : MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS DURING THE KENNEDY AND JOHNSON ADMINISTRATIONS (1961-1969)

Appel à communications : colloque international organisé par Alexandra Boudet-Brugal (UVSQ, CHCSC) et Sandrine Ferré-Rode (UVSQ, CHCSC).

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"...diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another. Either alone would fail. A willingness to resist force, unaccompanied by a willingness to talk, could provoke belligerence--while a willingness to talk, unaccompanied by a willingness to resist force, could invite disaster."
Kennedy's speech at University of Washington, November 16, 1961

"I do not mean to be the president who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominions. I want to be the president who educated young children […] who helped feed

the hungry […] who helped to end hatred […] the President who helped to end war among the brothers of the earth."
Johnson's speech on US foreign policy in Asia, July 12, 1966

The 1960s were tumultuous for the foreign policy of the United States and its status in world affairs. The decade marked the closest that the planet ever came to a nuclear war between two superpowers and also marked the deepening of the war in Asia that generated the greatest domestic crisis since the end of the Civil War. Both Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson witnessed other serious events that injected portent –whether the emergence of the People's Republic of China as a nuclear power, or the challenge to NATO that the French Fifth Republic posed, or the Soviets' military invasion of Czechoslovakia, or the war in the Middle East. Although the United States was presumed to be at the pinnacle of its power during the sixties, the end of the decade raised questions about the wisdom and skill of American leadership of the Western alliance.
In the wake of World War II, the nation fixated on a policy of containment that climaxed in the Cuban missile crisis during Kennedy's administration and resulted, during Johnson's presidency, in one of "the worst foreign policy disaster[s]" (Dallek, 1999, 626) in American history, namely the Vietnam War. These two pivotal episodes have become emblematic of the period and their respective presidents. While not excluding these milestones, the various interactions between the American nation, its allies, its enemies and the non-aligned countries also offer rich ground for reexamining, through the multidisciplinary lens, broader foreign policy choices leading to miscalculations, stalemates and successes.

Arguably, US foreign policy during the 1960s stood at the crossroads between "hard" and "soft power" (Nye, 1990), war and diplomacy, an oscillation that JFK craftily articulated in his 1961 speech at the University of Washington. Potential areas of study could include a reexamination of the evolution of the United States' diplomacy as an increasingly powerful tool in shaping American relations with the world. For the most part, American foreign relations were dominated by a proactive diplomatic stance during both the Kennedy and Johnson eras when both presidents displayed distinct negotiating skills. After all, the United States had actively sponsored the creation of major international organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank that aimed to preserve peace and increase cooperation. These efforts also provided the means for the United States to consolidate their leadership other than solely through its hard power.
We also welcome proposals that will provide fresh perspectives on the relationships between the United States and its closest "good neighbors:" shifting grounds proved that

the North American continent was moving towards greater integration, a move that has contributed to shaping today's region. However, Canada's nation-building efforts in the wake of its Centennial (Expo67) contributed to exacerbated anti-Americanism, enhanced by the growing sense among Canadians of the need to resist the American cultural behemoth. Worst of all for Americans, Canada refused to commit troops to Vietnam and further infuriated the United States by welcoming thousands of draft-dodgers onto its soil. And yet, despite those feuds, the governments in Ottawa and Washington signed ground-breaking accords (including the Auto Pact of 1965) that paved the way for a long-lasting economic consolidation. Meanwhile, American relationships with Mexico continued to show echoes of the "good neighbor" policy initiated by Hoover and expanded by Roosevelt.

Interestingly, foreign relations display a form of continuity from Kennedy to Johnson, evidenced in the decisions concerning such "traditional grounds" as Latin America. In that regard, the United States did not hesitate to rely on its hard power in several instances, markedly in Cuba and the Dominican Republic (1962), illustrating the considerable influence of anticommunist rhetoric in American foreign policy that led the United States to resort to military intervention. In the same way, tensions of vast magnitude between the Soviet Union and the United States stand as the unmistakable hallmark of the Cold War (Berlin Wall, Cuba, the arms race, Czechoslovakia, etc.). Yet, major international agreements and treaties were signed between the two rivals, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968, bearing witness to rising caution and pivotal diplomacy and leading Jonathan Colman to argue for "nascent détente" (Colman, 2010, 116). Similarly, both presidencies also faced rising challenges testing the United States' growing diplomatic and military power in the Middle East and in Europe. If the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (Six-Day War) marked US failure to prevent another conflict in the region, the situation prompted a firm but diplomatic response from Johnson that has since led to a soaring US presence in the Middle East. Likewise, the United States had to adjust vis-a-vis their allies, notably Germany and France. On that account, both Kennedy and Johnson's foreign policies were "broadly successful in dealing with NATO and European allies" (Priest, 2006, 159). Papers aiming to explore these issues in the light of current events would provide an invaluable contribution to the conference.

While this conference aims to "go beyond Vietnam," the war indisputably shaped the sixties, making it an imperative theme of any serious re-examination of the decade. Johnson has come to bear most of the blame for it, but his decision was arguably as much the result of a developing context since World War II and the Cold War rhetoric shaped by his predecessors, as that of his own personality and choices. While his decision marked a continuation of American foreign policy, it also unequivocally affirmed American readiness to resort to coercion in an exceedingly challenging geopolitical

context for the United States.
Finally, we will welcome explorations of how soft power “tools” could offset or instead reinforce tense situations on the world stage. What, and how effective, were the strategies used by the United States around the world to promote an American way of life boosted by economic prosperity? What impact, if any, did soft power have on drawing new waves of immigrants to the United States, as the country revamped its immigration laws (Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965)? In what ways did American popular culture (motion pictures, literature, music, photography and even fashion) and counterculture movements circulate around the world, exacerbating or challenging perceptions of American hegemony? What new shapes, if any, did cultural diplomacy take during the decade?

Such are some of the various questions that this international conference proposes to address in the light of recent research on American foreign relations during the 1960s. Contributions on theories of foreign policy, international relations, hard and soft power, and cultural diplomacy are also welcome when specifically related to the context of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations. Discussions involving events or themes that emerged in the 1960s but are unmistakably relevant to the present are also encouraged. Scholars in all disciplines of the humanities, in social sciences, law, political science and international relations are invited to submit proposals.

The conference will be held October 22-24, 2025, at Université de Versailles-Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ) and Université Paris-Saclay, France.
Proposals of no longer than 2,000 signs should be submitted in either English or French to Sandrine Ferré-Rode (sandrine.ferre-rode@uvsq.fr) and Alexandra Boudet-Brugal (alexandra.boudet-brugal@uvsq.fr) by May 15, 2025.
Please make sure that proposals include the participant’s last name, first name, university, department, position, full address, email and cellular phone number as well as a short bio-bibliography.
Decisions on proposals: June 30, 2025.

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