War lobby on top in Washington
By Jeffrey D. Sachs, Special to CNN

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Editor’s note: Jeffrey D. Sachs Director of the Earth Institute and author of the new book To Move the World: JFK’s Quest for Peace. The views expressed are his own.

The War lobby in Washington won two key victories last week. From the White House and Congress, political leaders of both parties swore allegiance to massive surveillance on American and foreign citizens in the name of fighting terror. And then to cap the week, President Barack Obama announced that the CIA would channel weapons to Syrian rebel fighters. Former President Clinton urged the Syrian moves, declaring that, “Sometimes it’s best to get caught trying, as long as you don’t overcommit.”

With so little public scrutiny of spying and wars led by the CIA and other obscure parts of the government (such as the Joint Special Operations Command, or JSOC), it’s hard to gauge the degree of “over-commitment.” What seems clear, however, is that the intelligence agencies and military remain in the driver’s seat of our foreign policy. The mere mention of the
word “terrorist” is still sufficient to ensure that the political class will give the green light to whatever drones, assassinations, special operations, or spying the military brass and spymasters deem to be required.

It is of course very familiar terrain. Fifty years ago, the word “communist” had the same effect as the word “terrorist” today. A half century ago, the U.S. destabilized governments, supported coups, and channeled arms to any group no matter how nefarious or violent, if it promised to fight the “communists.” Very few politicians dared to buck the trend. The results were disastrous. Legitimate politicians in countless countries were toppled and replaced by U.S.-backed thugs, and “over-commitment” became the defining reality, prompting President Eisenhower to warn darkly of the military-industrial complex even before the Vietnam disaster.

It’s especially instructive, therefore, to examine closely a key moment of history when a U.S. president bucked the trend and pursued a strategy of peace rather than of war. President John F. Kennedy pulled the world back from the Cold War nuclear precipice in 1963 by recognizing that escalating warfare was not the only path to national security. A better path, he argued that year, was to pursue peace by engaging the Soviet Union in cooperative policies, starting with a ban on nuclear tests in the air, water, and space.

Like Bush and Obama, JFK also started out his government with trust – or at least acquiescence – in the guidance of the CIA and the military top brass. He agreed to the disastrous CIA-led Bay of Pigs “invasion” of Cuba, the placement of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Turkey, and an overall arms buildup. Yet escalation on one side prompted escalation by the other, and the two nuclear powers soon found themselves at the brink of nuclear war after the Soviet Union secretly and recklessly placed nuclear missiles in Cuba in the fall of 1962. Total annihilation was just one accident, misstep, or crazy local commander away.

JFK learned the hard way that advice he was receiving from the CIA and military was often disastrously flawed, to the point that the military advice during the Cuban Missile Crisis would likely have led to nuclear war. War-fighting agencies are not the best at identifying options for peace, to say the least. They are specialists in violence and destruction, not in accommodation and peace.

This realization led JFK to understand that the pursuit of peaceful options vis-à-vis the Soviet Union required vigorous presidential leadership to overcome the war-making machinery and attitudes that dominate so much of the U.S. government and politics. As I describe in my book *To Move the World*, JFK pursued those peaceful options with remarkable intelligence, grace, political skill, and most of all courage. The result was a key treaty with the Soviet Union and a world-saving step back from the nuclear brink. The 1963 Partial
Nuclear Test Ban Treaty became the crucial stepping stone to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty five years later.

The Cold War was, of course, not just directly between the United States and Soviet Union, but involved numerous regional wars as well that the superpowers viewed in a Cold War context. The most significant of these wars was in Vietnam, and the issue of what JFK would have done in Vietnam is still intensely debated. By 1963, Kennedy was successfully moving towards easing tensions with the Soviet Union, had become more skeptical of the U.S. role in Vietnam, and clearly wanted to avoid escalation. He resisted till the end the calls to introduce ground troops (which did not happen until March 1965, under Lyndon B. Johnson), and was aiming to reduce the number of U.S. military advisors. Yet whether JFK would have fully withdrawn from Vietnam in 1965, as some advisors maintained after JFK's death, is uncertain.

Either way, the dynamics of mutual escalation are clear enough. (The game theorists know it as the Prisoners Dilemma and the Security Dilemma). Yet mutual escalation – whether of massive spying by the U.S. and other governments, or dirty wars led by secret military operatives – can’t bring peace. For that, the options of diplomacy and development rather than of war must be brought to bear. Washington seems to lack that awareness today.