1 History: From Reel to Real

> The Cuban missile crisis remains a strange enigma—one of the most dramatic and well-documented events of modern history, yet one of the most thoroughly misunderstood.
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> —Fred Kaplan, 2003

The New Evidence

With the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis fast approaching, some scholars have questioned whether there is really anything new to say about the nuclear superpower confrontation of October 1962. The answer, of course, is quite simple: if there is additional evidence then there must be something new to say. And, in fact, a great deal of extraordinary and unprecedented evidence has recently become available. This material has substantially redefined the early understanding of the crisis (based almost entirely on American sources) that had prevailed for the first quarter century after 1962. Nonetheless, the importance of much of this new evidence has not been fully recognized or absorbed.

First, a series of international conferences brought together scholars and government participants from the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and Cuba and produced extraordinary new documents and personal recollections. (The conferences were held in Hawk's Cay, Florida, March 1987; Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 1987; Moscow, January 1989; Antigua, January 1991; and Havana, January 1992. A follow-up conference in Havana was held to mark the fortieth anniversary of the crisis in 2002.) These discussions revealed, for example, that Nikita Khrushchev had indeed sent nuclear warheads (never located by the U-2 spy planes) as well as medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic

missiles to Cuba; however, wary of a "Dr. Strangelove" scenario, Khrushchev had ordered the missiles and warheads to be stored miles apart; the declassified crisis correspondence between Khrushchev and Fidel Castro revealed that the latter had urged the former to initiate a nuclear strike against the U.S. in the event of an invasion of Cuba—which the Soviet leader interpreted as a call for a nuclear first-strike and refused; and, most startling of all, Khrushchev had managed to covertly send more than 42,000 Red Army troops to Cuba to repel an American invasion and had also shipped battlefield tactical nuclear warheads to the island, authorizing on-site commanders to decide when or if to fire them.

Second, the ebbing, and then end, of the Cold War brought forward significant archival evidence from Communist sources about the missile crisis, or "Caribbean crisis" as it was termed in Moscow, or "October crisis" as it was (and is) called in Havana. These primary sources resulted in valuable additions to, and corrections of, the historical record, which previously had an unavoidable Washington tilt since essentially all the primary source evidence had come from the American side. The new documents, which historians never imagined they would see, confirmed, for example, that JFK's instinct was right when he refused on October 27 to order an attack on the Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) site that had brought down a U-2 plane over Cuba (which he had agreed to do a few days before); Soviet officers on the ground had fired the missiles on their own initiative, and Khrushchev was appalled by their recklessness. Also, in the event of American bombing or invasion, Soviet forces in Cuba had nuclear cruise missiles in place to destroy the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo—which would almost certainly have ignited a nuclear war. In addition, evidence from the Soviet archives suggested that Khrushchev's original explanation for his dangerous gamble in Cuba had been fundamentally true: despite the firm convictions of JFK and his advisers, tensions over Berlin were not a decisive factor in the chairman's decision to ship nuclear missiles and warheads to Cuba. Nor did he intend these missiles as an aggressive threat to the security of the United States. From the perspective in Moscow, the missiles were meant to provide a beleaguered Cuban ally with deterrence against covert or overt U.S. attacks and to give the Americans "a little of their own medicine" after JFK's decision to activate the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.[1] Khrushchev was also anxious to conceal the inadequacy of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)—giving the U.S.S.R. at least the public appearance of relative parity in the nuclear balance

of terror. Finally, he was also determined, in response to harsh criticism from Red China, to shore up his standing as the leader of the communist world. It was a colossal political misjudgment, however, to assume that the Americans would understand or accept the Kremlin's perspective.

Third, and the most recent, has been the declassification of the one-of-a-kind 43-plus hours of White House missile crisis tape recordings (just over half from the iconic thirteen days and the remainder from the November postcrisis). Not even the difficult-to-access archival documents from the Kremlin have influenced our understanding of the missile crisis quite as much as Kennedy's secret tape recordings. The tapes are the closest thing imaginable to a verbatim record of the crisis. In the famous formulation of nineteenth-century historian Leopold van Ranke, the tapes promise the tantalizing prospect of history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*—as it really was.

The once-secret tapes of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) have been available for just over a decade; nonetheless, some writers, likely put off by the demanding and labor-intensive effort required to listen to these technically primitive (initially reel-to-reel) recordings, have chosen instead to use the extremely inaccurate 1997 Harvard Press transcripts, the more reliable 2001 Miller Center/Norton transcripts, or my own 2003 narrative of the meetings.[2] This volume will substantiate, once and for all, that there is no substitute for listening to these tapes. No secondary source (transcripts or a narrative), no matter how reliable, can stand in for this unique primary source—now universally available, at no cost, from the Presidential Recordings Program on the website of the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia (http://millercenter.org/academic/presidentialrecordings).

It is hard to imagine, for example, that David Talbot could have made the demonstrably false claim that JFK "could count on only his brother and Robert McNamara for support" in the ExComm meetings and that RFK had "matured from a kneejerk hawk to a wise and restrained diplomat," or that Michael Dobbs could declare that the younger Kennedy "was a chastened man" by October 27, if they had listened to these recordings (Chapters 2–4).[3] Dobbs also contends that on the evening of that decisive day, McNamara, when asked if he wanted dinner, "snapped, 'Eating is the least of my worries.'" In fact, the defense secretary muttered, almost inaudibly, "You don't have to worry, eating is the least of my worries." McNamara's dismal tone, lost in even the best transcript, momentarily exposed the raw depths of exhaustion, fear,

and anxiety which he and his colleagues had endured around the clock since October 16.[4]

Many of the pervasive misconceptions about the missile crisis derive, of course, from the initial "heroic" interpretation—created and promoted by JFK, RFK, and key members of the administration, eagerly swallowed by gullible journalists in the first years after the event, popularized by the selective and manipulative writing of administration insiders like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Theodore Sorensen, and reaching near iconic status in Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*—not to mention wide currency in dramatizations such as *The Missiles of October* (1974) and *Thirteen Days* (2000). The latter concocts a crucial role in the ExComm meetings for JFK aide Kenneth O'Donnell; this claim is pure fiction. The film does not reveal that President Kennedy was taping the discussions, ignores U.S. covert actions against Castro and Khrushchev's motives for placing the missiles in Cuba, and casts Robert Kennedy as a consistent dove—in line with RFK's *Thirteen Days*, but *not* with the tapes.

In this "heroic" but historically one-dimensional rendering, the courageous and determined young American president, always cool under fire, successfully resisted the aggressive intent of the Soviet Union and its puppet regime in Cuba and won a decisive victory over international communism. And even more important, having learned sobering lessons on the nuclear brink, Kennedy reached out to the Soviet Union and Cuba in his last year in office and began the process of détente—as reflected in his June 1963 American University speech, the Moscow-Washington Hot Line, and the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, as well as a series of cautious and secret diplomatic initiatives aimed at achieving a rapprochement with Castro's Cuba.

This heroic consensus did not go unchallenged for very long despite the best efforts of JFK loyalists. In the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the Vietnam war and the expanding documentary record on national security issues from the 1960s, revisionist and New Left historians zeroed in on the Kennedy administration's "secret war against Cuba," which encompassed sabotage and subversion against the Cuban economy, plots to overthrow or assassinate Castro, and "contingency plans" to blockade, bomb, or invade Cuba. These historians accused Kennedy of reckless brinksmanship and condemned him for turning down Khrushchev's entirely reasonable proposal to resolve the nuclear standoff by removing missiles from both Cuba and Turkey. They concluded that JFK's "heroic" management of the crisis, measured against this newly available evidence, was little more than a self-serving fabrication.

One prominent New Left historian, for example, told me in the early 1980s that JFK had been the ultimate macho cold warrior and that the historical record would eventually prove that in foreign relations Kennedy had been the most dangerous of the Cold War presidents. However, as Kennedy Library historian, I had already listened to the tapes. The library was preparing for their declassification, and I was the first nonmember of the ExComm, and certainly the first professional historian, to hear all the recordings and learn exactly what had happened at these meetings. As a result, I knew that JFK had actually accepted the missile trade despite strenuous opposition from essentially all his advisers. I could only reply, "You may be in for some major surprises when these tapes are declassified."

However, the story is unfortunately not that simple, and the crisis is still widely misunderstood despite the availability of this definitive primary source. An entirely mythical Cuban missile crisis remains alive and well. And ironically, the most pervasive and enduring myths about the crisis revolve around the very core event—the secret White House meetings—for which these verbatim tape recordings exist.

There is, of course, nothing new about historical participants manipulating the evidence and inventing "truths" to suit their purposes. In 1984, as a case in point, the Kennedy Library sponsored a conference to mark the centenary of the birth of Harry Truman. The keynote speaker was Clark Clifford—the ultimate Washington insider and power broker—who had served in the Truman White House. Clifford was an imposing figure in every sense: not a single strand of his silver-white hair was out of place, and he seemed almost royal in his immaculately tailored suit. At the conclusion of his talk, which included his personal recollections of the day FDR died and Truman became president, he took questions from the audience.

A rather scruffy, bearded young man politely but firmly contradicted several of the important details in Clifford's account of the events of April 12, 1945. Clifford looked down at him from the rostrum and with a rather lordly gesture admonished the student, "Young man, I was there." The audience spontaneously erupted into applause for the distinguished speaker. In fact, the student's version was correct (and I told him so), and later I decided to check the details of Clifford's recollections. I discovered that Clark Clifford was in the navy, stationed in San Francisco, on that historic day. He did not even meet Truman for the first time until later that summer.

Many of the enduring myths about the Cuban missile crisis can likewise

be traced back to the Kennedy administration's own initial spin on the events of October 1962—especially to Robert Kennedy's personal (and until recently, unverifiable) version in *Thirteen Days*. These misconceptions, of course, also have their own curious and rather circuitous history.

McGeorge Bundy, JFK's special assistant for national security, worked at the Kennedy Library in the early 1980s researching his memoir (published in 1988).[5] During that period, he was granted special access to some of the ExComm recordings and listened to the meetings from the first day (October 16) and the last day (October 27). He usually brought a brown-bag lunch, and I often sat and talked with him in the staff lunchroom. Bundy knew that the tapes were going to be declassified but seemed very surprised when I told him that I had already listened to them. He admitted that he was having problems identifying some of the voices of his former colleagues; one afternoon we listened together, and I was able to persuade him that the voice he thought was John McCloy's was actually John McCone's. However, he was particularly interested in my contention that the Black Saturday tapes revealed that the president had accepted Khrushchev's missile trade proposal; he insisted that it was an understanding, not an actual deal. He seemed evasive, if not hostile, when I referred to the stubborn and all but unanimous resistance to the trade by the ExComm—including Bundy himself—on that final Saturday of the crisis.

A quarter of a century later, in October 2007, I shared the platform with Ted Sorensen at a Princeton University conference marking the forty-fifth anniversary of the missile crisis. Sorensen was scheduled to speak first, but his driver called to say that they were stuck in traffic and I was moved up to that spot. About five minutes into my remarks, the door to the theater was opened, and Sorensen entered on the arm of his assistant (a severe stroke had left him legally blind). The crowd gave him a standing ovation. He listened attentively as I discussed my findings from the meeting tapes—backed up with verbatim quotes.

However, when he stepped to the microphone, Sorensen emphatically rejected my conclusions on the grounds that he was the only person on the panel "who was actually there"—even claiming, much like Bundy in those earlier lunchroom chats, that there had never been a missile trade deal. And again like Bundy, he objected to my findings about the strident and all but unanimous opposition to the trade on that final day. Sorensen did, in fact, attend most of the ExComm meetings but rarely contributed to the dis-

cussions. His most important role was behind the scenes in drafting JFK's October 22 speech and the letters to Khrushchev. When he did speak up, his views generally paralleled those of RFK. For example, he urged the seizure of an East German passenger ship because it would demonstrate that the U.S. response was "not a soft one at all"; recommended that the Organization of American States declare Cuba's possession of nuclear weapons a violation of the Rio Pact in order to give the U.S. "greater grounds" for attacking Cuba; opposed Khrushchev's Cuba-Turkey missile trade offer; and declared on the final evening of meetings, "I think in some ways it's a sign of weakness if we just keep responding [to Khrushchev] in messages."

These key participants in the White House meetings were clearly working to spin and shape the evidence in an effort to minimize their own opposition to the secret agreement that in the end avoided nuclear war—an agreement which had to be imposed on the ExComm by the increasingly irritated and intractable President Kennedy. This last-ditch effort, in light of the availability of the tapes, seems to be little more than tilting at windmills. Notwithstanding, Sorensen did not budge from this position in his personal memoir, published only months after the Princeton conference.[6]

There are many conflicting Cuban missile crises in American historical memory. Unfortunately, the mythic crisis, shaped largely by manipulation and half-truths, has gained far more attention than the crisis rooted in hard and often irrefutable evidence. The White House tape recordings offer scholars the rare opportunity to forge a fresh, accurate, and in-depth understanding of this unique historical event. This volume, therefore, building on my previous narrative version of the ExComm recordings, exposes and analyzes a series of pervasive and lingering myths and misconceptions which continue to cloud our understanding of the most dangerous two weeks in human history.

The Historical Authenticity of the Missile Crisis Tapes

The Kennedy White House tapes present historians with a unique opportunity to accurately assess both the process and substance of presidential leadership during the most perilous event of the Cold War. Many presidents have faced extremely grave crises, but never before or since has the survival of human civilization been at stake in a few short weeks of extremely dangerous deliberations, and never before or since have their unique and secret

discussions been recorded and preserved. And given the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Cuban missile crisis will hopefully remain, for policy makers and scholars, the only "case study" of a full-scale nuclear showdown between military superpowers.

These tape recordings are a one-of-a-kind historical source because they transcend the limitations of human memory and the inevitable selectivity of notes taken at the time or memoranda written after the fact. They allow us to know, with very few exceptions resulting from their sometimes poor quality or preservation, exactly what the meeting participants said and heard. They highlight, as never before possible, the thought processes that influenced and shaped decision-making. And perhaps most important, the tapes allow us to glimpse the real people behind the political mask worn by all public figures.

Inevitably, in our increasingly cynical era, some analysts have questioned or even dismissed the historical value of the Kennedy administration tapes because only the president and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, knew they were being recorded. The Kennedy taping system has been particularly suspect because it was manually activated (not voice activated like Nixon's) and easily derailed by human carelessness or error. JFK, like any person in similarly stressful circumstances, often forgot to turn the machine on until after a meeting had begun and sometimes neglected to turn it off, so that the tape ran out. He also failed to record his critical October 18 confrontation with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko as well as the decisive Oval Office meeting, with only eight advisers, on the evening of October 27. In at least one case, the tape was left running after a meeting ended and recorded the chatter of the White House cleaning crew.

Presumably, therefore, JFK (and perhaps RFK as well) could have manipulated the outcome during the taped meetings in order to enhance his historical reputation. This view has been and continues to be repeated, again and again—often by people who should know better. JFK seemed "open and straightforward," but the value of the tapes "can only be diminished by the fact that the two key players of the crisis [JFK and RFK] knew they were being recorded." The apparent neutrality of the tapes is doubtful because "we can never determine how much either man tailored what he said in order to control the historical record." The tapes are "selective and somewhat misleading because the President could turn his tape recorder on and off at will." Even the editors of the 1997 edition of published transcripts seemed concerned about "the President selectively choosing what to record for posterity."[7]