

Foreword

Sheldon M. Stern, who served as the John F. Kennedy Library's historian for nearly two and a half decades and has studied the tapes of the Cuban missile crisis meetings for over twenty years, has given us the most accurate, complete and compelling account of the thirteen October days in 1962 that brought the world to the brink of a nuclear holocaust. There are no end of articles and books about this most dangerous crisis in human history. But Stern's *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* is the best of these studies and will become the starting point for all future work on President Kennedy's response to the Soviet challenge in Cuba.

Stern's book is not simply another edition of the missile crisis tapes, though his transcriptions of the ExComm conversations are the most precise reconstruction of these often difficult to understand discussions. (As one who has listened to many of these tapes, I greatly admire those with the patience and skill to identify speakers and make sense of what they are saying.) Rather, as Stern persuasively argues, his book provides "a new avenue of access to . . . the secret ExComm meetings." His volume is "a comprehensive and interpretive narrative account of this gripping and unique primary source . . . [and] fills an important gap in the historical literature" by allowing us to reconsider "many conventional assumptions about the ExComm discussions." Most important, we gain a compelling portrait of JFK as impatient with "Cold War assumptions and convictions," and as a man, despite some "blind spots," with a healthy skepticism about military solutions to what he believed was mainly a political problem.

Stern also convincingly shows that it is not enough to either hear these complex conversations or study them from the printed page. Stu-

dents of the missile crisis are better served by a narrative account constructed by someone intimately acquainted with the tapes and best able to “capture the flavor and mood . . . the depth and intensity” of the discussions. Stern’s book fills this need. As important, it demonstrates that Kennedy’s “often rough give-and-take with the ExComm played a decisive role in continuing to shape JFK’s perceptions and decisions. . . . Even in the final days and hours of the crisis,” Stern writes, “the ExComm had an enormous . . . psychological impact on President Kennedy’s commitment to averting nuclear war. Every major option was discussed, frequently in exhaustive and exhausting detail—providing both the context and indispensable sounding board for the President in making his final decisions.”

No one reading Stern’s book can doubt John Kennedy’s well-justified reputation for good sense in the face of terrible dangers. Stern’s narrative account will permanently secure JFK’s reputation as an astute statesman in a time of unparalleled crisis. This volume will stand as essential reading for anyone who wants not only to understand the events of October 1962 but also how a president managed great international dangers in the service of long-term stability and peace.

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