

JFK and The Real Cuban Missile Crisis

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'On October 16, 1962, John F. Kennedy and his advisers were stunned to learn that the Soviet Union was, without provocation, installing nuclear-armed medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. With these offensive weapons, which represented a new and existential threat to America, Moscow significantly raised the ante in the nuclear rivalry between the superpowers—a gambit that forced the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear Armageddon. On October 22, the president, with no other recourse, proclaimed in a televised address that his administration knew of the illegal missiles, and delivered an ultimatum insisting on their removal, announcing an American “quarantine” of Cuba to force compliance with his demands. While carefully avoiding provocative action and coolly calibrating each Soviet countermeasure, Kennedy and his lieutenants brooked no compromise; they held firm, despite Moscow’s efforts to link a resolution to extrinsic issues and despite predictable Soviet blustering about American aggression and violation of international law. In the tense 13-day crisis, the Americans and Soviets went eyeball-to-eyeball. Thanks to the Kennedy administration’s placid resolve and prudent crisis management—thanks to what Kennedy’s special assistant Arthur Schlesinger Jr. characterized as the president’s “combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve, and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated, that [it] dazzled the world”—the Soviet leadership blinked: Moscow dismantled the missiles, and a cataclysm was averted.’ [“The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory](#) By Sheldon M. Stern, Stanford

Every sentence in the above paragraph describing the Cuban missile crisis is misleading or erroneous. But this was the rendition of events that the Kennedy administration fed to a credulous press; this was the history that the participants in Washington promulgated in their memoirs; and this is the story that has insinuated itself into the national memory—as the pundits’ commentaries and media coverage marking the 50th anniversary of the crisis attested.

Scholars, however, have long known a very different story: since 1997, they have had access to recordings that Kennedy secretly made of meetings with his top advisers, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (the “ExComm”). Sheldon M. Stern—who was the historian at the John F. Kennedy Library for 23 years and the first scholar to evaluate the ExComm tapes—is among the numerous historians who have tried to set the record straight. His new book marshals irrefutable evidence to succinctly demolish the mythic version of the crisis. Although there’s little reason to believe his effort will be to any avail, it should nevertheless be applauded.

Reached through sober analysis, Stern’s conclusion that “John F. Kennedy and his

administration, without question, bore a substantial share of the responsibility for the onset of the Cuban missile crisis” would have shocked the American people in 1962, for the simple reason that Kennedy’s administration had misled them about the military imbalance between the superpowers and had concealed its campaign of threats, assassination plots, and sabotage designed to overthrow the government in Cuba—an effort well known to Soviet and Cuban officials.



Customers in the electronics section of a department store watch as JFK addresses the nation, October 22, 1962. (Ralph Crane/Time-Life Pictures/Getty)

In the 1960 presidential election, Kennedy had cynically attacked Richard Nixon from the right, claiming that the Eisenhower-Nixon administration had allowed a dangerous “missile gap” to grow in the U.S.S.R.’s favor. But in fact, just as Eisenhower and Nixon had suggested—and just as the classified briefings that Kennedy received as a presidential candidate indicated—the missile gap, and the nuclear balance generally, was overwhelmingly to America’s advantage. At the time of the missile crisis, the Soviets had 36 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), 138 long-range bombers with 392 nuclear warheads, and 72 submarine-launched ballistic-missile warheads (SLBMs). These forces were arrayed against a vastly more powerful U.S. nuclear arsenal of 203 ICBMs, 1,306 long-range bombers with 3,104 nuclear warheads, and 144 SLBMs—all told, about nine times as many nuclear weapons as the U.S.S.R. Nikita Khrushchev was acutely aware of America’s huge advantage not just in the number of weapons but in their quality and deployment as well.

Kennedy and his civilian advisers understood that the missiles in Cuba did not alter the strategic nuclear balance.

Moreover, despite America’s overwhelming nuclear preponderance, JFK, in keeping with his avowed aim to pursue a foreign policy characterized by “vigor,” had ordered the largest peacetime expansion of America’s military power, and specifically the colossal growth of its strategic nuclear forces. This included deploying, beginning in 1961, intermediate-range “Jupiter” nuclear missiles in Italy and Turkey—adjacent to the Soviet Union. From there, the missiles could reach all of the western U.S.S.R., including Moscow and Leningrad (and that doesn’t count the nuclear-armed “Thor” missiles that the U.S. already had aimed at the Soviet Union from bases in Britain).

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