

BOOK WORLD

JANUARY 19, 1969

WHAT EVERY MEMBER OF THE NEW CABINET SHOULD READ AS SOON AS POSSIBLE (SEE PAGE 4)



Storm over Havana: Who were the real heroes?

THIRTEEN DAYS: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis.
By Robert F. Kennedy. Illustrated. Norton, 224 pp. \$5.50.

By John Kenneth Galbraith

On Saturday, October 20, 1962, I had just arrived in London to give a lecture and, such things not being possible in New Delhi, had gone to see a Peter Ustinov play. When I came out, the papers had big black headlines about a Chinese invasion of India and I made a suitable mental note that another political ambassador had been caught absent from his post at the moment of need. I wasn't especially surprised when, about three o'clock in the morning, the duty officer of the London Embassy awoke me with a message conveying the same thought in rather sardonic terms from President Kennedy and asking that I return forthwith to India. That

John Kenneth Galbraith, professor of economics at Harvard, and author of The New Industrial State, was U. S. Ambassador to India at the time of the Cuban missile crisis.

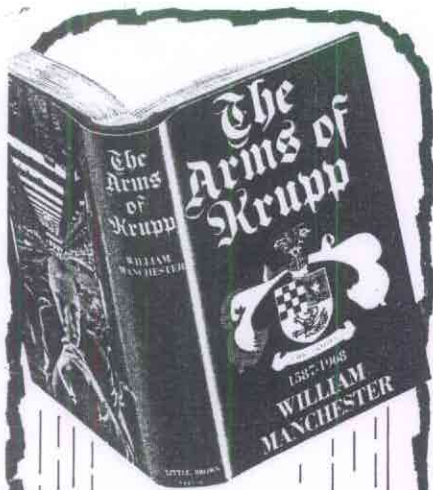
I did. On arriving, I learned that it was the Russians in Cuba, not the Chinese in the Himalayas, that had induced the President's message. He wanted me to persuade Nehru to react sympathetically and use his influence accordingly.

Though I did so, there could have been few Americans, in or out of office, who were less involved in the crisis of the days following than I. The Chinese were making great progress in the mountains. Someone had to worry about an infinity of questions ranging from the military reaction of the Indians, to the foreign policy of Bhutan, to how to keep under wraps our own crusaders (fortunately not numerous), who saw in India's involvement with China an exciting new breakthrough in the Cold War. Additionally, our communications system was monopolized by the Cuban crisis as was the attention of everyone in Washington. I knew only what the headlines told until long after the fact.

When I had time to worry, it was, as always, about the peculiar dynamics of the Washington crisis meeting. This has the truly terrible tendency always to favor the most reckless position, for this is the position that re-

quires the least moral courage. The man who says: "Let's move in with all we have and to hell with the consequences" will get applause and he knows it. He seems personally brave and also thinks he is. In fact, he is a coward who fears that in urging a more deliberate policy, he will invite the disapprobation of his colleagues or will later be accused of advocating a policy of weakness. Normally, also, he is aided by his inability to foresee, or even to imagine, the consequences of the action he advocates. In contrast, the man who calls for caution, a close assessment of consequences, an effort to understand the opposing point of view, especially if Communist, and who proposes concessions must have great courage. He is a real hero and rare.

I would have worried more in 1962 had I then known with what classical precision these tendencies were working themselves out in Washington. We know now from this fascinating memorandum. The generals, with the major exception of Maxwell Taylor (who later and sadly succumbed to the advocates of sanguinary action on Vietnam and so blotted the end of a well-regarded career), were all for the easy. (Continued on page 16)



Climbing the bestseller lists as the controversy rages...

The N. Y. Times doesn't like William Manchester's "tiresomely promiscuous, visceral anti-Germanism" (*Allstair Horne, Sunday*) or his "loving attention to irrelevant detail" (*Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, Daily*).

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Photo © Grant Heisler
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Storm over Havana: Who were the real heroes?

(Continued from page 1) heroes. So was one group of civilians who, like the generals, yearned to be known as men of hard-boiled, masculine decision. They urged not air raids on the missile sites but, for purposes of scholarly gloss, a "surgical strike." There can, in history, have been few more appalling examples of the self-deluding power of words. Those concerned knew about air power, or should have. They knew, accordingly, that there was no way of bombing the missile sites without attacking all of the surrounding acreage and missing, very likely, some of the missiles. The medical counterpart of a surgical air strike would be an operation by a surgeon with cataracts wearing skiing mittens who, in moving to excise a lung cancer, was fairly likely to make his first incision into the large intestine.

On the other side were the men with enough moral courage to consider consequences—Robert Kennedy, Robert McNamara, George Ball, Adlai Stevenson and, before all, the President himself. As one now reads this memorandum, it is almost impossible to imagine anyone being on the other side—and those who were must now have a certain problem in explaining it to themselves. In particular, it was Adlai Stevenson who was willing to trade some obsolete nuclear weapons in Turkey (which the President had already twice ordered removed) for similar action by the Russians in Cuba. (It has since been said on ample authority that the President would have removed these missiles if that had been necessary for a peaceful bargain. And they were taken out almost immediately after the missile crisis.)

The most chilling thing about this memorandum is the reflection it prompts on what would have happened if the men of moral courage had not been present—or if a President's disposition was not to uphold but overrule them. And it is disconcerting to consider how the political position of an Administration, one more moderate than its Republican opposition, was juxtaposed to the survival of the country, even of mankind. I do not know what insanity caused the Soviets to send the missiles to Cuba—and after showing commendable caution about the deployment of this gadgetry in far less dangerous locations. But once they were there, the political needs of the Kennedy Administration urged it to take almost any risk to get them out. Temporizing would have been politically disastrous. Yet national safety called for a very deliberate policy—for temporizing. In the full light of time, it doubtless called for a more cautious policy than the one that Kennedy pursued. Again we see how frayed and perilous are the threads on which existence depends.

Robert Kennedy, perhaps it is needless to say, wrote this memorandum himself and it is done with economy of style and no slight narrative power. With all his other talent, he was a very good writer. This makes it all very sad that the publisher, no doubt in order to retrieve his investment in the manuscript, has made it a monument to bloated bad taste. To what should have been a compact and powerful booklet, he has added not one but two unnecessary forewords and a random casserole of photographs—an Air Force RF101 in flight, a Navy F8U at rest, Dean Rusk about to take off. He has then put great white spaces between the highly artificial chapters and about a quarter-inch of paper between the lines of type. Finally, all available documents, omitting only the original articulation of the Monroe Doctrine and the final act of the Punta del Este Conference, are included, also between wide margins. The result is a triumphant \$5.50. If there is a Mr. Norton, Virginia, he should be ashamed of himself and his wife and his children and all his little grandchildren should blush for him too.

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