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Notes on JFK

I APPRECIATE Barton Bernstein's interest in some details of sourcing in his review of my book *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (Book World, Oct. 31). The reason for extensive source notes, of course, is to make it as simple as possible for scholars to duplicate original research.

He is incorrect, however, in stating that I did not emphasize the importance of the political aspects of the Cuban missile crisis. On page 376, I quoted the president (from the audio-tape of the Excomm meeting of Oct. 16, 1962) saying: "This is a political struggle as much as a military . . ." He is incorrect, too, in stating that I ignored President Kennedy's willingness to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. On page 421, I described the president's willingness and covered the Excomm meeting on the evening of Oct. 27 in the context of that willingness.

In effect, by checking only previously published works and readily available documents, Bernstein excluded from his consideration original work, including new interviews, dozens of oral histories opened for the first time for my use, private papers and unpublished manuscripts also made available for the first time in my research. He argues therefore, that it is impossible to describe facial expressions during meetings. But every such instance in *President Kennedy* comes from interviews with participants, oral histories or personal journals.

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Barton J. Bernstein responds:

I have spent five days checking materials on 52 pages of Richard Reeves's book from the very source-documents he cites. That required going beyond "readily available" sources to over 1,200 pages of archival documents, transcripts, and unpublished oral histories. They do not substantiate the many questionable descriptions and quotations in his book. This criticism is not quibbling about minutiae of footnotes, or pouncing on a few errors (everyone makes some), or about the different cultures of journalism and history. The problem is the very substance of *President Kennedy*—frequent carelessness, rewritten quotations, and seemingly invented dialogue and scene fragments. Trusting readers relying on this book are akin to people walking on quicksand. And they cannot gain assurance from Reeves's response to my criticism of his missile-crisis segment. My review stressed his omission of JFK's *domestic* political concerns, but Reeves responds with a JFK statement about *international* political concerns. And Reeves's noting JFK's willingness to trade the missiles is different from understanding that JFK made a *secret, explicit* deal to trade. Reeves's book does not tell readers this. But the basic problem with *President Kennedy* is not its misunderstanding of the missile crisis or any other particular event. Rather the problem is the book's unreliability.