

Dear Jerry,

4/2/92

Thanks for the interesting Ball "JFK's Big Moment" article from the New York Review. He reviews Beschloss and Dino Brugione's "Eyeball to Eyeball" book on the Cuban Missile Crisis saying virtually nothing about the latter, which I regret, and uses the review as a vehicle for very interesting recollections.

I do not recall that Ball reflects any appreciation of the difference in JFK and his policies and intentions following the ~~Bay of Pigs~~ missile crisis. An example of how this comes out in what he says is that he actually says that what JFK allegedly said at ~~or after~~ the Vienna conference about Viet Nam is what he had in mind and represented his policies at the time he was killed.

I am sure he is wrong in saying that JFK approved assassinating Diem in, without any personal comment, ^{INB} quotes Reston as saying he "cooperated in approving Diem's murder." He "cooperated" in the coup, not the assassination.

Some of this is very worthwhile, like quoting General Taylor on a war in Viet Nam being a pushover. Ball uses this to say that he knew better and said it and was right.

When it gets to recollection and its dependability, a problem for all of us, Ball concludes with, "I remember ^{in my youth} a cartoon strip in which a skeptical character continually asks, 'Was you dere, Charlie?'" It is my recollection that this was a radio show, not a cartoon strip, and that the name was pronounced, "Sharlie."

In the use he makes of quoting the Taylor report Ball as much as says that JFK introduced out "advisers" into Viet Nam. He greatly increased their number but they were, as I recall, already there when he took office.

I'm surprised that it took the Review until its 2/13/92 issue to review Beschloss.

H

T/BBR file

THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS - FEB. 13, 1992

JFK's Big Moment

George W. Ball

**The Crisis Years:
Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963**
by Michael R. Beschloss,
HarperCollins/Edward Burlingame
Books, 816 pp., \$29.95

**Eyeball to Eyeball:
The Inside Story of the
Cuban Missile Crisis**
by Dino A. Brugioni,
Random House, 599 pp., \$35.00

The fading of the cold war makes it increasingly hard to write an objective review of Michael Beschloss's excellent book. In this day of quieter relations with Moscow not even the most talented writer can fully re-create the atmosphere of fear and imminent danger that pervaded Washington. All of us who worked in the postwar American administrations were aware that the Soviet leaders had the power to blow America off the face of the earth.

That sense of ever-present doom proved particularly poignant for President John Kennedy, in whose administration I served first as under secretary of state for economic affairs and then as under secretary of state. Especially during his early weeks in the White House, he felt critically menaced both by enemies abroad and adversaries at home. He lacked his predecessor's high reputation for military command, while his limited electoral victory in 1960 cast doubt on the breadth of his mandate.

I recall, for example, his excuse for inaction when in early 1961 some of us discussed an initiative to normalize relations with Red China. He could not seriously consider that project now, he said, but might well do so when and if he should win election for a second term with a larger majority.

In addition to his narrow electoral victory the President was, by twentieth-century (though not by eighteenth-

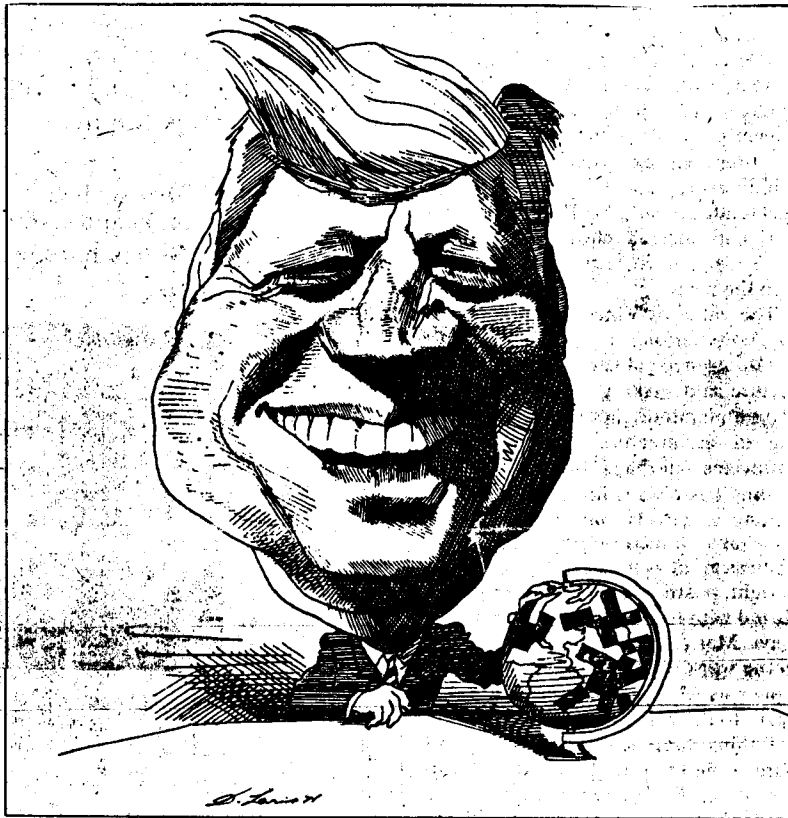
century) standards, far too young to be taken seriously as a statesman. Although he maintained an outward appearance of aplomb and invulnerability, he never forgot that the American people were comparing him with Eisenhower, a looming father figure whose established reputation not only for overwhelming military but also for political victories had given him political self-assurance.

Kennedy's political assets were far less impressive. In Congress, his reputation had been more for absenteeism than serious achievement. He had never belonged to the inner circle of senators; nor was he confident of an always capricious public support. His major political assets were his good looks and the glamour of a golden boy.

As Professor Beschloss suggests, Kennedy's Soviet opponent in the opposite corner appears also, but to a lesser degree, to have been unsure of himself. He repeatedly attributes many aspects of Khrushchev's behavior to constraints similar to those experienced by Kennedy. Khrushchev was constantly sensitive to the bitter hatred of the Soviet hard-liners.

Professor Beschloss quite accurately describes the shifting succession of preoccupations that marked the Khrushchev-Kennedy years. At the outset the new administration felt hard-pressed to rectify Kennedy's reckless campaign charges of a "missile gap" between the US and the Soviet Union; and Defense Secretary McNamara finally had to acknowledge that none existed. Then Kennedy was beset by a problem that had already troubled the Eisenhower administration: repeated Soviet threats to sign a peace treaty with the DDR and thus gain control of access to Berlin.

In addition Castro's Cuba formed an overhanging cloud of public shame



and obsession. Many Americans felt outraged and vulnerable that a Communist outpost should exist so close to their country. Castro's Soviet ties seemed an affront to our history. Such national indignation played a commanding role in the first major crisis of the Kennedy regime—the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Because until the fall of 1961 I was under secretary of state for economic affairs and was only marginally involved in political matters, I had no part in the highly restricted planning operation that preceded the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In discussing it at all I am, therefore, relying not on my own contemporary observations but rather on accounts that I heard from my colleagues as well as the many books and memoirs that have since emerged.

Kennedy, as is now well known, did not initiate the Bay of Pigs project but received it full-blown from the Eisenhower administration. The CIA had shared the public preoccupation with Castro and had dreamed up a number of preposterous schemes to eliminate him. Many were adolescent fantasies, including a plan to have Castro's shoes

dusted with a depilatory that would make his beard fall out, thus depriving him, so the experts said, of the badge of virility thought essential to lead the Cubans. In addition, what was called "Track Two" of the plan contemplated Castro's assassination before the Bay of Pigs invasion and even involved the enlistment of known American gangsters to assist in killing him.

During the last year of the Eisenhower presidency the CIA had scoured the Miami community of expatriate Cubans that formed an anti-Cuban underground, and had gathered more than one thousand men in training camps in Guatemala to participate in an attack on Cuba. High expectations

had been built up at least in intelligence circles, and the press had gained a whiff of these activities.

Had Kennedy been longer in office he might have realized that the plan depended on large elements of fantasy based on dubious intelligence and reinforced by the prevailing neurosis about Cuba. That the CIA could be so sure, for example, that the Cuban population would rise against Castro to support such an invasion is merely one more tragic example of wishful intelligence analysis by which our country has been repeatedly victimized.

The preliminary planning and preparations had all been made by the Eisenhower administration, with the active encouragement of the vice-president, Richard Nixon. In fact, on the day before Kennedy's inauguration, Eisenhower had told the new president that the CIA's project was going well and that the new president had the "responsibility" to do "whatever is necessary" to make it succeed.

The dilemma in which Kennedy found himself was thus both poignant and agonizing. Ever since January 1960 substantial effort had gone into organizing the operation. Some leaks

to the press had already occurred, and the plan had become widely known among the Cuban underground in Miami. Had Kennedy abandoned the project he would thus have been faced with a considerable "disposal problem," as the prospect was referred to by his friends and advisers. More important, he would have been charged with cowardice and held up to derisory comparison with his warrior predecessor. No doubt his fear of being criticized as a coward was reinforced by the brash encouragement of his speculator father, Joseph Kennedy, whom he visited just before making the decision to go forward.

When, as the world knows, the operation failed miserably, a crowd of self-appointed experts emerged from the woodwork to assert that the United States Air Force should have provided air cover. That, of course, was precisely what Kennedy wished to avoid; it would have given substance to America's imperialistic reputation throughout Latin America, embarrassed our friends in Europe, and played into the hands of Soviet propagandists.

To me, the disaster merely confirmed a belief I had strongly held for some years—that the United States government should renounce covert operations. Not only could we not keep them covert, but in cases where interference was fully justified we should visibly employ our own armed forces and not rely on ragtag discontents, such as, in more recent years, the Nicaraguan contras. The use of such surrogates was a source more of embarrassment than of pride.

The CIA, I have long believed, should be limited to the gathering and analysis of intelligence, and its operational activities chopped off. More often than not our clandestine services have not only made catastrophic operational blunders but have failed to assess the probable consequences of their actions. Thus when the Eisenhower administration succeeded in deposing Arbenz in Guatemala, we blessed the population of that poor country with a succession of dictators. We overthrew Mosaddegh in Iran and returned the Shah for an extension of his artificial reign, and thus made way for the Ayatollah Khomeini and Islamic fundamentalism. We helped to finance a military coup in Chile in 1974

which murdered Allende and left that country to the brutal rule of General Pinochet. In 1979 we helped overthrow the long-term dictatorship of Somoza in Nicaragua so that he could be replaced by Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas, whom we then tried to overthrow for the next ten years. I shall not discuss what we have accomplished in Salvador; there is little to say.

Our attempt to dislodge Castro by the Bay of Pigs invasion was thus merely one item in a dishonorable list. These were not, however, the conclusions that those immediately around the President reached. Bobby Kennedy had the greatest fascination with covert action. According to James

Reston in his recent memoirs, "Bobby monkeyed around with amateur plots to assassinate Castro," and during the Vietnam experience both he and Walt Rostow were fanatical believers in what was fashionably called the cult of "counterinsurgency" derived from its prophet, Chairman Mao.¹

To provide some control over CIA schemes an interdepartmental committee was established early in the

¹James Reston, *Deadline: A Memoir* (Random House, 1991).

Kennedy administration to vet all covert projects in advance. By this time, I was the under secretary of state (now called deputy secretary). Rather than attend myself I delegated the task to the deputy under secretary, U. Alexis Johnson, who reviewed with me all of the projects for dirty tricks in advance of a committee meeting, including the covert operations against Castro called Operation Mongoose. Most of them, in my view, were either absurd or just plain childish. Some were recklessly dangerous. As I recall,

in almost no case did I find any covert operations worthy of an American initiative. They were based on the improbable assumption that, given money or encouragement, the population of a whole country would rise against its leader. America's objective, as they described it, was to achieve democracy by replacing "their bastard with our bastard."

After Kennedy's difficult meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961, from which Kennedy took away the im-

pression that Khrushchev was in an aggressive mood, the principal emphasis of foreign policy was shifted to the repeated Soviet threat to sign a peace treaty with the DDR that would enable the Soviets to control access to Berlin and thus in effect eliminate the NATO forces then stationed there. In the Soviets' view the presence of NATO troops in West Berlin was an aberration.

This threat, when coupled with the ever-present awareness of the nuclear danger, conditioned Kennedy's attitude toward Khrushchev, and it tacitly

but persistently restricted the scope of his policies and actions. The Soviet temptation to cut off Berlin was greatly stimulated by the swelling migration of East Germany's most talented citizens to the West. Had that brain drain been permitted to continue, the DDR would, in the Kremlin's view, have lost most of its technical and managerial leaders.

Thus by halting the flight to the West, building the Berlin Wall relieved pressure on the Soviets to create a new Berlin crisis. As a result, although Kennedy could never publicly admit it, he was privately relieved that the Wall might reduce that pressure. That reaction was, of course, a tightly held secret in administration circles. The President meanwhile had some difficulty in defending himself from domestic political charges of timidity because he did not promptly react with force to remove the Wall.

Without doubt the major drama of Kennedy's presidency was the Cuban missile crisis. Though Secretary McNamara assured Kennedy that the missiles would make no appreciable effect on the total balance of power, knowledge of their emplacement in Cuba would almost certainly have a devastating effect on American opinion.

After all, America had fought two world wars without damage to its own territory. The American people had grown accustomed to thinking that the moat of two oceans was an effective barrier to external aggression, and their leaders had made it clear since the Monroe Doctrine that they would not tolerate a European intrusion in

the Western Hemisphere. If the American public had painfully adjusted to the thought of ICBMs capable of reaching our cities, it was largely because those missiles were still thousands of miles away and the danger seemed unreal. The prospect of Soviet missiles ninety miles off our borders was something altogether different; it would be an affront to our history.

The Cuban missile crisis had all the elements of an international detective thriller, a popular genre in America. It combined secret intrigue about vastly destructive weapons, strong elements of deceit, and the danger that large numbers of innocent people would be killed.

The story of the crisis has been retold so often that the facts need not be rehearsed. As might be expected, the incident has been approached from diverse points of view by political scientists and historians. One of the most interesting—though specialized—accounts of the crisis has been written by Mr. Dino Brugioni, who served with the CIA between 1948 and 1982 and participated in founding the National Photographic Interpretation Center. He understandably emphasizes the techniques that made aerial reconnaissance effective, and his role in the Cuban missile crisis was no doubt significant. Without aerial photography, the United States would never have detected the missiles or been able to estimate when they might become usable.

Mr. Brugioni's book should be read as a supplement to Professor Beschloss's version of the crisis. His hero is Arthur C. Lundahl, who organized the National Photographic Interpretation Center in the mid to late 1950s, and whom I had met during the crisis when he came to brief our small group advising the President on the progress

the Soviets were making to bring the missiles to the point where they could be fired.

I found Mr. Brugioni's book fascinating for his disclosure of special information I had not hitherto known on the technical aspects of conducting photographic missions and interpreting their results. I do not in any way diminish the importance of his very informative work when I say it evoked for me a description of the Battle of Waterloo as it might have been written

by a member of Wellington's staff charged with the design, improvement, and maintenance of ordnance. Perhaps the most coherent brief account of the incident has been written by one of its principal participants, McGeorge Bundy, in *Danger and Survival*, a history of nuclear weapons. Bundy, as national security adviser, was at the President's side during the whole ordeal.

Most Americans over fifty will remember that the crisis started when



the President received aerial photographs of work in progress to install missile launchers in Cuba. He then established the EXCOM, composed of the secretaries of state and defense and other relevant members of his foreign relations hierarchy. That group promptly convened in a continuous session in my conference room at the State Department.

From the first, the discussion settled on canvassing four possible courses of action: to treat the affair as a diplomatic matter without need for any military response; to try to trade off America's missiles in Turkey for the Soviet missiles in Cuba; to launch an immediate air strike followed, if necessary, by an invasion; and finally, to establish a selective blockade or, as it came to be called, a quarantine, of Cuba.

After careful consideration the members of EXCOM quickly discarded the first two options. All agreed on the need to force the removal of the missiles from Cuba; the only question was how to achieve it.

I personally opposed a "surgical air

strike." It would have been an irrevocable action, and there was no assurance that the air strike would either destroy all the missiles or be in any way "surgical." I had been a director of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey at the end of the Second World War and had concluded from the record of Allied bombing in Europe that if the medical profession should ever adopt the air force definition of "surgical," anyone undergoing an operation for appendicitis might lose his kidneys and lungs yet find his appendix intact.

convincing interpretation when he wrote in his memoirs that:

At no time in our conversation did Kennedy raise the question of the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba; consequently, there was no need for me to say whether there were any there or not.²

Particularly because there had thus been a concerted effort to mislead the United States government, the President had necessarily to regard this as a matter of the highest importance. Khrushchev, he believed, must be presented with a *fait accompli* requiring an active response. At the same time, Kennedy was adamant on the issue of secrecy.

Although far from the most assertive participant in the EXCOM meetings, the State Department Soviet expert Llewellyn Thompson proved to be the most useful member of the group. He appraised Soviet reactions and the effect of suggested American moves with unfailing accuracy. He had served as ambassador to Moscow during Khrushchev's period, and, as Professor Beschloss makes clear, he had developed a more intimate relation with Khrushchev than had any previous American ambassador. As a consequence, Tommy, as we knew him, was reassuringly knowledgeable when we tried to predict the Soviet reaction to each move we might contemplate. He was, in my mind, the very model of a career ambassador, quick to understand,

² Andrei Gromyko, *Memoirs* (Doubleday, 1990), p. 177.

To me, the critical advantage of the quarantine was that it would provide ample time for diplomacy. If that failed, we might still consider the resort to more violent actions, although I was not prepared to make even that choice in advance.

Central to the decision was the fact of deceit. The missiles had been smuggled in surreptitiously and in contradiction of explicit assurances that the Soviet Union would never resort to such a reckless action. Thus even after we had spotted the missiles, Gromyko had visited the President without mentioning the presence of the missiles; and when confronted with the facts, Ambassador Dobrynin had denied that they were there. As we now know, and as Beschloss confirms, Ambassador Dobrynin was not lying to the President when he assured him that he knew of no missiles in Cuba; he had never been told of the event. Gromyko, however, gave a less

perceptive, and skillful in framing his observations. I can think of no one else I ever met who was so well suited to be the President's adviser in such a complicated and unnerving period.

The President did not want to open communications with Khrushchev until he knew what action the Soviet side would take. He feared that if America blockaded Cuba, the Russians might reply with a blockade of Berlin which would, in turn, require the use of deadly force before it was broken. But as Bundy points out, a blockade of Cuba would not begin with "sudden death, and it was a first step, not a last."

Those of us who participated in the missile crisis regarded the outcome as a major achievement. The Soviet missiles were withdrawn; the US blockade of Soviet ships was ended; the US promised to withdraw its own outmoded missiles from Turkey and to refrain from invading Cuba. The correspondence between Kennedy and Khrushchev released on January 6, 1992, reveals that Kennedy attached various conditions to his assurances about future invasion, among them that "Cuba itself commits no aggression against any of the nations of the Western Hemisphere." In *Deadline*

James Reston reflects a widely held opinion when he writes,

Kennedy... improved with experience. He was tested as no other president had been, during the Cuban missile crisis, and his masterful handling of that crisis was the greatest achievement of his administration.

Yet Professor Beschloss takes a completely different view. He is obviously not happy with the way the missile crisis was handled; and, he implies, had he been president it simply would not have occurred.

Beschloss treats the emplacement of missiles as resulting from Kennedy's failure to understand that his own behavior was provocative and to give Khrushchev adequate advance warning of his possible responses to the installation of missiles. Thus he writes:

With hindsight, it is more clear that had Kennedy not provoked Khrushchev by repeatedly heralding American nuclear superiority, indulging himself and his officials in talk that caused the Russians to fear an American first strike, and suggesting through Operation Mongoose and military preparations that the United States might invade the island in 1962, it is doubtful that Khrushchev would have felt compelled to take his giant risk on Cuba.

He continues:

Had the President enough understanding of Soviet motives to issue the warning in March 1962 that he issued in September, Khrushchev would almost certainly have been deterred. The stakes would have been raised to a vital interest for which the United States had announced itself willing to go to nuclear war...

Despite Khrushchev's hints as early as July 1960 that Soviet nuclear missiles might one day defend Cuba, as of the spring of 1962, Kennedy had yet to issue a single serious warning against them.

The New York Review

But Beschloss does not show that plans to invade Cuba had in fact been set in motion in 1962, or that Khrushchev believed an invasion was impending. And Kennedy did give plenty of warnings against Soviet aggressive acts that any reasonable Soviet leader would have interpreted as including a missile emplacement. In fact, such a possibility was occasionally referred to in their exchanges. Khrushchev could not have misunderstood him; otherwise, why did he feel compelled to proceed secretly and by deceit?

Before the missiles were discovered, no one I know of in the Kennedy camp believed that the Soviets would have the audacity to risk such a dangerous action. Had Kennedy explicitly expressed his opposition to the emplacement of missiles he would, to be effective, have had to use exactly the kind of language with regard to their forceful removal that Beschloss complains about his using in September. Beschloss wants to have things both ways. He apparently would want Kennedy to have issued a sharp warning earlier in the spring; but he also believes Kennedy should not have explicitly insisted on the removal of the missiles in the fall. He writes:

How different these Cabinet Room conversations might have been had Kennedy phrased his September pledge more vaguely or not at all. Instead of discussing how to take the missiles out, he and his advisers would now be able to consider the option of explaining to Americans that they had little to fear from the missiles in Cuba.

As I have already pointed out, "his advisers" did carefully consider a solely diplomatic option. But in the climate of the time, no president in his right mind would have failed to react incisively to the Soviets' perfidious move; if he had not reacted, he would have had to face the need to persuade the American people that the missiles were not a threat.

Implicit in Professor Beschloss's critical comments is his apparent conviction that the missile crisis and the quarantine with which America responded were a reckless adventure in which Kennedy put the whole world at risk for no serious purpose.

What Professor Beschloss could not know at the time he wrote his book is the serious prospect of a nuclear exchange implicit in a fact only recently disclosed at a meeting between Soviet, Cuban, and American representatives in Havana this January. That meeting made clear that Khrushchev had sent Cuba not only the missiles spotted by our U-2s but shorter range tactical missiles, and had authorized the Soviet general on the spot to use them against any American advancing force if the US should ever undertake an invasion of the island. Since the EXCOM was seriously considering such an invasion if other measures failed, the possibility of a nuclear exchange had a troubling reality.

What Professor Beschloss repeatedly overlooks, it seems to me, is that a continuing tension between two major military powers is like a high fever. It may have to reach a crisis before it can subside, and the incident of the Cuban missiles provided that breaking point. Following that incident, relations between

Moscow and Washington gradually diminished in intensity, Khrushchev lost his job, and the Soviet leadership recognized that their megalomaniac ambitions would inevitably be checked by effective American countermeasures.

Such realities do not, however, seem to bother Professor Beschloss. The missiles were not a mere gesture of bravado; they were installed through deceit and treated by Khrushchev as a major move in the ongoing contest. Nor did the President finally accede to the hard line that several members of the EXCOM demanded. That minority group advocated a surprise air strike, followed by an invasion.

Still, Beschloss points out that even losing the 1962 elections would have

been preferable to the Kafkaesque nightmare that now faced the President—risking nuclear war to eliminate missiles that, in his own opinion and that of the Secretary of Defense, did little to harm American security.

Kennedy had, he writes:

...made exactly the kind of fateful miscalculation he had cautioned the Chairman against in Vienna.

Beschloss's complaint that the President decided on a quarantine too quickly after the missiles were discovered is not consistent with his further complaint that the President failed to make a prompt decision on what action to take. According to Beschloss, at the President's Tuesday cabinet room meeting following the discovery of the missiles, the President was not, as his supporters have claimed,

superbly in command of the crisis from the start. Even allowing for the fact that he may not have wished to inhibit the conversations by dominating them, he made little effort to provide discipline, other than by injecting questions and comments.

Obviously we were all shocked at the discovery and what we needed was conversation and time to reflect carefully before committing ourselves. It would, in my view, have been highly irresponsible for the President at the outset to have expressed his own views explicitly; he needed first to have his advisers explore the various implications and possibilities without being influenced by his own wishes. He thoughtfully made that possible.

To my mind, the discussion among members of the EXCOM was conducted at a high intellectual level, and with the somber intensity that the situation required. Yet, I have since concluded, that was probably the last time such a protracted debate could have been held without becoming public property; the chance to discuss a serious threat for a week before being required to react was a luxury which would not now be possible.

One contributing reason why secrecy was possible was that the White House press corps was engaged in the 1962 political campaign, leaving on Fridays with their bags packed and staying on the road through Saturday and Sunday. Still, I think it highly doubtful that with the changed attitude of the press today, we could have

kept the secret for the week needed to debate all its implications. The brash and tireless investigative reporter has now become an accepted cult figure in American life and, although great precautions are increasingly being taken to assure secrecy, exposure of inner White House secrets has become irresistible.

Nor would newspaper publishers likely have shown such constraint in handling the story once they had even a whiff of unusual activity. As I remember the situation three decades after the fact, Reston telephoned me at home late Saturday, October 20, or early Sunday morning, October 21, to inquire about the stories the *Times* reporters were gathering that the air force was being readied for an attack on Cuba. I gave him a dusty answer and suggested that he call McGeorge Bundy. According to Reston's own account Bundy was as ambiguous as I was, but suggested that Reston call the President. The President assured him that no action would be taken before his announcement due for Monday evening. The President, so Reston writes, "was calm and candid in a very sticky situation, and the *Times* spiked the story." For the *Times* it was a highly contentious issue since the paper had been criticized for holding back on revealing the Bay of Pigs landing.

Later, after I had left the government, I spoke on the same platform with the well-known *Times* correspondent Harrison Salisbury. When I praised the press for its restraint in handling the Cuban missile crisis, Salisbury challenged me vigorously, contending that Reston should not have agreed to withhold the story until after the President's speech announcing that the missiles had been discovered and the US would impose a blockade. His argument, which I then thought bordered on the presumptuous, was that the *Times* had better judgment on when and how to preserve America's political and military secrets than did the President. The *Times*, he said, had made a mistake in holding back the story of the landing at the Bay of Pigs, and the paper should immediately have gone forward with what its reporters had then discovered about the missiles in Cuba.

The late columnist Joseph Kraft, who was present on the occasion, supported my view, but it was certainly not shared by all of the *Times* news

and editorial staff. There had, Salisbury suggested, and as Reston implies in his memoirs, been a noisy row among the *Times* staff on Tuesday. I doubt that any president could these days expect such restraint from a responsible journal in the light of sensational subsequent events, including the Watergate scandal.

Although only at the end of Kennedy's term did Vietnam first become a major issue, Kennedy was gradually taking steps that would confront his successor, Lyndon Johnson, with tragic problems. He sent General Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission and the general cabled from Saigon that we should introduce a military force into South Vietnam to raise national morale and, among other things,

conduct combat operations necessary for self-defense and for secu-

rity of the area in which it was stationed.... The risks of backing into a major Asian war by way of SVN are present but...not impressive.³

He argued, among other things, that North Vietnam was "extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing." That vulnerability, according to Taylor, was "a weakness which should be exploited diplomatically in convincing Hanoi to lay off SVN."

The recommendation continued that the force initially should not exceed eight thousand men but that the initiative "should not be undertaken unless we are prepared to deal with any escalation by the Communists." Finally, the report included a statement which the thousands of young Americans who later arrived would have treated with scornful hilarity: "As an area for the operations of US troops, SVN is not an excessively difficult or unpleasant place to operate."

On November 4, 1961, I met with General Taylor as well as Secretary McNamara and Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric. Since McNamara and Gilpatric were invariably prompt, I had an opportunity to talk with them before Taylor arrived. I told them that I was appalled at the report's recommendation. Vietnam was a terrain hostile to American military operations both physically and militar-

ily. We must not commit our forces there or we would find ourselves in a protracted conflict far more serious than Korea. But I found no sympathy for these views. The assertion that America had committed its prestige, read in the light of the "falling domino" theory, was felt sufficient to dispose of my arguments.

Then on the following Tuesday, November 7, I raised the question with President Kennedy. To commit American forces to South Vietnam would, I said, be a tragic error.

Within five years we'll have three hundred thousand men in the paddies and jungles and never find them again. That was the French experience. Vietnam is the worst possible terrain both from a physical and political point of view.⁴

Obviously, these were not words the President wanted to hear, for he replied with an overtone of asperity: "George, I always thought you were one of the brightest guys in town, but you're just crazier than hell."

I have often pondered the meaning of that statement, but I am still not sure what the President had in mind. Was he suggesting that he would not let such a situation develop, or predicting that events would not evolve along that line?

In any event, Kennedy's reaction deterred me from expressing opposition to the war until after the Tonkin Gulf incident in the Johnson administration. Later I was often asked whether, if Kennedy had lived, we would have avoided our deep involvement in the Vietnam War. I could only answer that I did not know. Nor do I have any clearer opinion today. Kennedy would almost certainly have

³George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (Norton, 1982), p. 365-366.

⁴Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 366.

received the same advice and pressures from the same group of advisers who persuaded Johnson to deepen America's involvement.

James Reston, who knew the Washington politics of the time better than anyone, has written that when Kennedy sent Lyndon Johnson to explore the Vietnam situation and he returned "insisting that success in the war depended on the determination of the United States, the President ordered even more advisers to the battlefield." Reston's comments on what followed seem to me convincing:

This, I always thought, was a critical mistake. Once Kennedy had over fifteen thousand "advisers" engaged not only in giving advice but also in giving support on the battlefield, United States power and prestige were thought by many officials in Washington and in the Asian capitals to be committed. And when Kennedy, alarmed by the inefficiency of the Saigon government under Diem, ... cooperated in approving Diem's murder, he was all the more convinced that he had to carry on the war.

No doubt, as president, Johnson was more responsible for committing the United States to that struggle (he eventually had 500,000 Americans in the war), but in my view Kennedy started the slide.

Robert Kennedy, eager to protect his brother from blame, always denied that the president intended to increase the nation's commitment to Vietnam, and also denied that the Kennedy-Khrushchev meeting in Vienna had anything to do with it. But he didn't hear what his brother said to me [about

Khrushchev's aggressive statements on Berlin] in the Vienna embassy, and I did.

What Kennedy had said to Reston at Vienna was:

He had tried to convince Khrushchev of US determination but had failed. It was now essential to demonstrate our firmness, and the place to do it, he remarked to my astonishment, was Vietnam! I don't think I swallowed his hat, but I was speechless. If he had said he was going to run the Communist blockade into Berlin, I might have understood, but the reference to Vietnam baffled me.

Although Professor Beschloss's book describes the facts of the period with clarity and sensitivity, it could clearly have benefited from more rigorous editing. One of his practices I find persistently annoying. He tries to explain the complex events that marked the Kennedy-Khrushchev relationship by stating as categorical fact exactly what was in Khrushchev's or Kennedy's mind. In the latter part of the book, to be sure, he begins to inject qualifying phrases such as "it might have been" or "probably," but, without the psychic powers which Beschloss does not explicitly claim, no outsider can indulge in mind-reading with absolute assurance he has got it right. I remember in my youth a cartoon strip in which a skeptical character continually asks, "Vas you dere, Charlie?" Omniscience after the fact should not go unchallenged. □