
The bear in our own backyard

By Michael Amrine

THE MISSILE CRISIS. By Elie Abel. Illustrated. Lippincott. 220 pp. \$4.95.

In October 1962, for the first time since the invention of the atomic bomb, two great powers, each armed with that ultimate weapon, came down to the wire in a famous confrontation. This "eyeball to eyeball" meeting, to use Dean Rusk's famous phrase, pivoted around the installation by the Soviets of medium-range missile bases in Cuba. But in fact this crisis was not merely about missiles, but about how to avoid war in the H-bomb era. Presumably, the leaders and peoples who lived through that period profited by it. Many may profit from this account of it. In this objective and fact-filled book Elie Abel shows how a first-rate reporter can make a contribution to history. He has given us the day-by-day, hour-by-hour account of a few "golden days" of 1962, when our top leaders breathed

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the minds of American policy makers that we could not tolerate this as a permanent threat, though Adlai Stevenson and others pointed out that we presented a somewhat similar threat to Russia, although not identical, with our weapon bases in Turkey and elsewhere.

The basic question to us, however, was how to get the missiles out of Cuba without war, and President Kennedy (and his brother Robert, very influential in this crisis) saw clearly that the problem was one of displaying firmness and a willingness to use force if necessary without pushing the opposition to such a point that they could not find a way to get out and still save some "face." The book outlines well the basic alternatives, including invasion of Cuba, and the judgments which led to the "track" chosen, the establishment of a limited naval blockade of Soviet ships carrying in more

the October air and wondered if they would be alive the following week.

Mr. Abel does not have the stylistic dash of Arthur Schlesinger but he matches that historian and Mr. Sorensen for thoroughness and adds something they could not hope for—an objectivity that necessarily eludes a one-time insider. Mr. Abel was close to these events, but he writes as a reporter, from the outside. Perhaps many of his readers will share Abel's own reaction: "How close we came to Armageddon I did not fully realize until I started researching this book."

One factor in all such crises is speed—the speed of political events and the speed of missiles traveling thousands of miles per hour. On a TV interview on October 14 of that year, McGeorge Bundy said, and had reason to believe, that the Soviets and the Cuban government "would not attempt to install a major offensive capability." A few days later our intelligence sources, from pictures taken on U-2 flights over Cuba, had unmistakable evidence that the Soviets had placed missiles in Cuba.

As the U. S. had appraised the situation, few imagined that Russia would have done what aerial photographs proved beyond reasonable doubt: Russia had sent by surface ships a supply of missile-launching equipment, missiles, and technicians. These missiles were capable of carrying atomic warheads, and presumably would be supplied with them. So 90 miles away from U. S. shores the Soviet Union, either directly or through her small ally, Castro's Cuba, was preparing weapons that could kill millions of Americans in a matter of minutes. There was virtually no question in

missile equipment. The book also gives an excellent idea of the Russian and American negotiating styles as well as hitherto unpublished details on how Khrushchev appealed to JFK to "untie," with him, the "knot of war." In another passage Khrushchev is reported having told an American during the crisis that it was difficult for the Russian Premier to deal with a principal adversary who was younger than Khrushchev's son.

Through it all, speed was of the essence. When it was finished Mr. Kennedy gave a small silver calendar to all who had lived through the harrowing ordeal. The days, etched on the silver and on the hearts of those who recognized the confrontation for what it was, covered less than two weeks, October 16 through 28.

Tomorrow's crises may move even more swiftly. Mr. Abel writes with the cer- (Continued on page 17)

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tainty and completeness of a man who has had all of the major facts in hand and who has interviewed the major participants. Known—in Washington, at least—as a “reporter’s reporter,” he writes with conviction and adds some colorful human details; we see, for example, Mrs. Evelyn Lincoln start out with a hair brush to smooth the President’s hair a few seconds before he is to make his crisis speech on television. And one shudders at the temper displayed—and somewhat underplayed in Mr. Abel’s account—when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was seeking to make sure that the Navy understood its mission in the blockade was not to shoot, but to convey a message.

When one looks at the wars of the last hundred years to find out which started by miscalculation, which by accident or which by the acts of wild men, one finds they all started by some act of fate piled upon many acts of preparation. The preparation is for deterrence. It is for peace, not war—but the basic fuels for war are there. Then the act of fate intervenes. The guns of August—or of October—are fired.

The Missile Crisis is a hair-raising story in which Mr. Abel points up how both sides in this confrontation had misread intelligence reports and above all misread each other’s intentions. Of prime importance, of course, is that each side was misunderstanding the other. Mr. Abel makes this clear, perhaps clearer than any other account has done. He quotes President Kennedy as saying, 60 days later, in a broadcast: “I think, looking back on Cuba, what is of concern is that both governments were so far out of contact, really . . . well now if you look at the history of this century, where World War I really came from a series of misjudgments . . . certainly World War II where Hitler thought . . . that the British might not fight . . . you put the nuclear equation into that struggle . . . that is what

makes this such a dangerous time . . . one mistake can make this whole thing blow up.”

The Missile Crisis is a book for everyone who wants to understand the problems of statecraft in our times, and one cannot resist the pious hope that Abel’s book gets a good reading by new persons in the State Department and the Pentagon. The men leading the U. S. in 1962 had been tried before and had learned from the Bay of Pigs in 1961, from living through history. This book adds point to the concept that men now must learn from *reading* such histories; we cannot keep pushing our luck, our bluff, and our bombs in flaps like the Cuban missile crisis. ✽