

Capital Reading

Account of Missile Crisis Is Spiced With New Bits

Reviewed by Chalmers M. Roberts

Staff writer Roberts covered the Cuban missile crisis for The Washington Post.

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

NO INTERNATIONAL CRISIS IN AMERICAN history has been written about in more complete detail so soon after the event than the Soviet-American confrontation over Cuba in the fall of 1962. Elie Abel now gives us, in day-by-day form, a thorough and valuable account of those critical two weeks in October.

A conscientious and scrupulous reporter for the National Broadcasting Co., as he was for years as a newspaperman, Abel pieces together much already known and spices his account with many new bits and pieces: especially military details and direct quotations from the still unpublished text of Nikita Khrushchev's famous letter of Oct. 26. He gives more of the letter than did either of the two insiders, Theodore Sorensen and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., in their books on the Kennedy era.

But one must conclude that the definitive book on the missile crisis has yet to be written. A combination of Abel, Sorensen and Schlesinger would be better. The latter two provided many details Abel lacks and he has an outsider's perspective they could not have.

Within these limitations, then, what does Abel tell us? It is evident that the Kennedy debacle at the Bay of Pigs and the President's behavior at the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev led the Soviet leader to take the great gamble of putting missiles into Cuba. This is the lesson of weakness.

The lesson of strength, and it can be applied to today's problem in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, is that a major power such as the

United States must act on its own vital interests, sometimes in disregard of what other people and other governments think. President Kennedy was lucky that the missile crisis was highly condensed in time.

Abel abjures opinions and limits his characterizations. He shows that a division into "hawks" and "doves" in the Cuban crisis was an



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oversimplification, however catchy for the magazines. He limits himself to a concluding postscript of which the core is:

"In the nuclear age, every President has the power to make war, with or without a Congressional declaration. Every President has the power to surrender a vital interest, with or without Senate ratification. To this extent, megaton technology has annihilated the clock and amended the Constitution."

THE KENNEDY triumph was that in such an age he sought the path between war and surrender; that to find it he took, and fought to keep, direct personal control of every detail and action.

Much of what Abel tells us has to do with that struggle. We hear the calm advice of Llewellyn Thompson, but we also hear him concede that "he just didn't believe" the Russians would try to put missiles in Cuba. And here is Robert Kennedy, the tough guy who none-

theless argued and won the case for the immorality of a surprise air strike at Cuba. And here, too, is Defense Secretary McNamara, operationally great but once again showing a lack of international political sensitivities.

Abel, for the first time, relates McNamara's attempt on the President's behalf to guide the naval blockade and Adm. George W. Anderson's abrupt: "Now, Mr. Secretary, if you and your deputy will go back to your offices, the Navy will run the blockade." And so the Admiral was not reappointed Chief of Naval Operations the following June.

The missile crisis emerges from the Abel account, as from most others written by Americans, as a vast American victory and a milestone in Moscow-Washington relations. Some, both at home and abroad, have begun to question that conclusion, but what has happened in the postcrisis period supports the majority view.