

# Playing Back History

## **THE KENNEDY TAPES** **Inside the White House** **During the Cuban Missile Crisis**

Edited by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow  
Harvard University Press. 728 pp. \$35

**By Walter Pincus**

**F**OR THOSE who want their history straight, who enjoy reading the words of government officials from the president on down as they attempt to deal with a serious international crisis—not filtered through print reporters, television anchormen or cloistered historians—this is a book to treasure.

It also should be read, at least portions of it, by those present-day consumers of newspapers, magazines and television news shows who think the briefly spun daily doses of what purport to be the activities at the White House capture complex presidential decision-making even slightly.

“What’s new?” is the question regularly asked when an archival book such as this is published. The quick answer here is “nothing,” if what you have in mind is some stunning

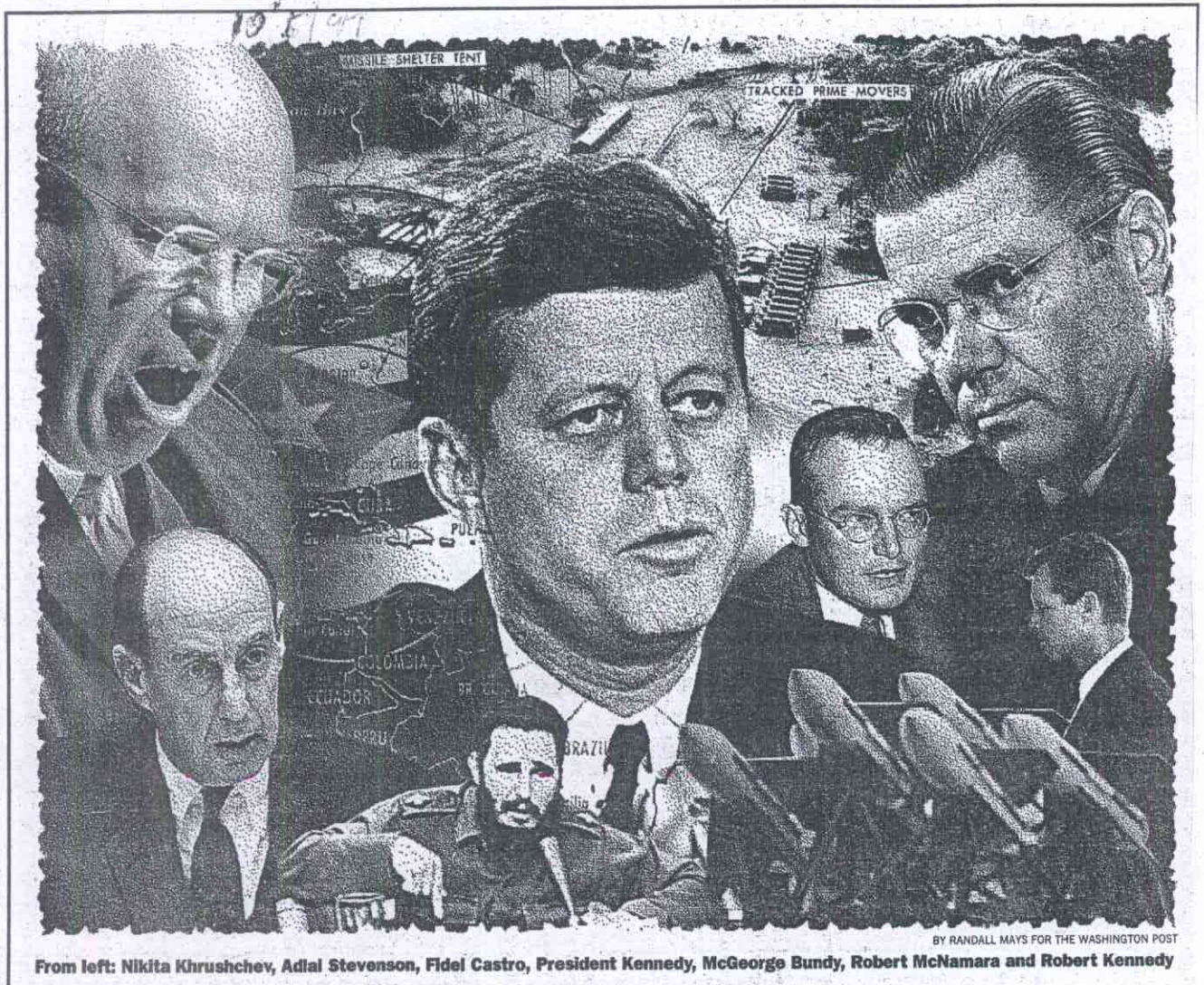
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new fact. The true answer, however, is that a great deal here is new if you want to understand the day-to-day evolution of a policy and the people involved in a crisis through all its ups and downs. It is particularly fascinating to read the exchanges among President Kennedy; his brother Robert, the attorney general; Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara; Secretary of State Dean Rusk; national security adviser McGeorge Bundy; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor; and others almost equally well-known as they pose questions, provide answers, argue, reach decisions and frequently change them.

The plot is familiar. The Soviets clandestinely bring intermediate- and short-range nuclear missiles into Cuba in 1962 and attempt to deploy them. U.S. overflights discover them. There are secret diplomatic exchanges against a background of public statements. The United States puts in place a blockade and makes preparations for air strikes against the missile sites and Cuban air defenses if the missiles are not removed, with a full-scale invasion to follow.

What is not familiar, however, are the myriad steps and potential missteps over the 13 days, as disclosed in transcripts of taped meetings of the so-called Ex-Com or executive committee. The editors have bolstered the transcripts with helpful historical and political notes.

If you do nothing else, read the transcript of the meetings of Saturday, Oct. 20, the day that —Continued on page 10



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# Kennedy Tapes

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McNamara said he went home from the White House thinking that perhaps they had taken a step toward nuclear war. It was a day that had President Kennedy and his aides dealing with the famous private and then public statements by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. The first, private statement said that the missiles would go if the United States made assurances that there would be no invasion of Cuba. The second, public announcement offered to exchange the Cuban weapons for withdrawal of U.S. missiles in Turkey—part of NATO's nuclear arsenal. Next came the firing on low-flying U.S. reconnaissance planes prompted by an earlier White House statement that we would retaliate for such action. Later, word came that an American U2 spy plane had been shot down and its pilot killed.

As Oct. 20 goes on, each of these events must be dealt with. While in the room, President Kennedy clearly takes the lead, although other Ex-Com members, including his brother, share their thoughts freely. The group goes back and forth working out responses to each event; its discussions take place against a background belief that Khrushchev will not back down and that eventually the plans under way at the Pentagon—plans not only for massive air raids on Cuba but also for an invasion of the island—will inevitably be implemented within the next few days.

As the pages unfold, dozens of items are discussed. A U.S. U2 has strayed over Siberia into Soviet air space; Kennedy with McNamara's support decides not to disclose it publicly so as not to embarrass Khrushchev with a provocation. The president and his aides go back and forth over whether to tell the NATO allies that Washington is prepared to agree to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey because nuclear-armed Polaris submarines are to be stationed off Turkey as less vulnerable replacements. In the end the NATO briefing is limited to a report on the seriousness of the situation because, as Kennedy put it, "anything else would leak."

McNamara, convinced that a U.S. attack on Cuba would bring retaliation against the missile bases in Turkey, suggests making them "inoperable. And let the Soviets know that before the Cuban attack . . . on that basis, I don't believe the Soviets would strike Turkey." Llewellyn "Tommy" Thompson, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, whose analyses of Soviet attitudes proved in retrospect almost flawless, suggests that disclosing the Polaris plan would achieve "nothing toward persuading the Soviets to trade out their missiles in Cuba by getting rid of the Jupiters [the missiles in Turkey]."

Bundy at one point reminds the president that his desire to show the world he was prepared not to reject out of hand Khrushchev's offer to trade Cuban missiles for those in Turkey would inevitably harm Washington's relations not only with NATO countries but other allies. "There are two different audiences here, Mr. President," Bundy says.

Showing his realistic view of his people and the allies, Kennedy points out that although taking U.S. missiles out of Turkey might appear unacceptable to some, the prospect of having to fly 500 U.S. bombing sorties a day over Cuba for seven days to destroy the Soviet nuclear capability there, followed by a possible invasion of Cuba, might make the Turkish deal look better. "We all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow," he says, "and that's what's going to happen in NATO. When we start these things and they [the Soviets] grab Berlin, everybody's going to say: 'Well, that was a pretty good proposition [meaning the Turkey missile trade].'"

A Kennedy-type statement would be hell of a television sound bite if the subject were Bosnia and the speaker President Clinton. It's lucky for all of us that Kennedy's words that day weren't leaked and that the crisis came to a successful conclusion, thanks in part to the fact that almost all the conversations that took place behind closed doors 25 years ago remained secret.

Perhaps we would have better chances these days of solving complex foreign policy problems—and have fewer initiatives driven primarily by spin and public relations—if officials were able to keep their deliberations secret. ■