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# The Thwarted Promise of the 13 Days

By Sergei Khrushchev

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Those participating in or witnessing turning points in world history are generally displeased by the way such crises are depicted in films and plays. So, it was only reluctantly that I went to see the film "Thirteen Days," about President John F. Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis that brought the world to the brink of nuclear catastrophe in 1962. But I was pleasantly surprised.

The film portrays the psychological drama of a president at the very moment when he must make decisions that may determine the fate of his country, as well as others, with no knowledge of what is happening in the opposing camp.

In times like that one, it's hard to resist the temptation of applying the cudgel of a military "solution" to the problem. Fortunately, in 1962 the world avoided that temptation, and both sides, the White House and the Kremlin, President Kennedy and my father, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, deserve credit for that. I was particularly struck in the

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movie by what President Kennedy said to General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — that the blockade of Cuba and announcements of military readiness would serve as signals to the opposing side. And that the future would be determined by how well those signals were understood in the Kremlin. My father had thought along those same lines. In fact, the

## Fate closed a door that two leaders had opened during the missile crisis.

Installation of missiles in Cuba was to serve as a signal to prevent an American attack of Cuba. But Americans misunderstood this signal as a provocation.

The subject of a leader's able and effective behavior in a crisis is particularly close to me. I relayed those days while working on my last book, "Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower." It deals at length with the Cuban crisis.

While "Thirteen Days" portrays what was happening in the White House and barely touches on the

Soviet side, I described what was going on in Moscow and my father's role. The film and my book are like mirror images reflecting the events of those days. Despite all their differences, Washington and Moscow were united in one conviction: Whatever the cost, the situation must not slip out of their control.

The very first shot fired would mean that their generals — not they, the political leaders — and the logic of war, not the logic of negotiations, would begin to determine the future of the planet.

When the crisis was already over, I remember how American hawks (along with Mao Zedong) vied with each other in taunting my father, accusing him of weakness, of being the first to "blink." At the time my father said to me: "The one who blinks first is not always the weaker one. Sometimes he is the wiser one."

In this case both leaders showed wisdom. This was the first crisis of the cold war in which the leaders began almost immediately to exchange secret messages. And that meant that they had begun to trust each other. During the crises that arose before 1962, the two sides simply resorted to threats, like military maneuvers and angry diatribes on the front pages of newspapers.

A great deal changed after the crisis: A direct communication link between Moscow and Washington was established, nuclear testing (except for underground tests) was

banned and the confrontation over Berlin was ended.

But there was much that President Kennedy and my father did not succeed in seeing through to the end. I am convinced that if history had allowed them another six years, they would have brought the cold war to a close before the end of the 1960's. I say this with good reason, because in 1963 my father made an official announcement to a session of the U.S.S.R. Defense Council that he intended to sharply reduce Soviet armed forces from 2.5 million men to half a million and to stop the production of tanks and other offensive weapons.

He thought that 200 to 300 intercontinental nuclear missiles made an attack on the Soviet Union impossible, while the money freed up by reducing the size of the army would be put to better use in agriculture and housing construction.

But fate decreed otherwise, and the window of opportunity, barely cracked open, closed at once. In 1963 President Kennedy was killed, and a year later, in October 1964, my father was removed from power. The cold war continued for another quarter of a century. It has now ended, but the two sides still have a hard time understanding each other. And although mistakes today do not threaten to destroy everything living on earth, in international affairs it is no easier now to adopt the right decision than it was in October 1962. □