

## Minutes from Armageddon

by Jeremy J. Stone

First of all, it turns out that Elie Abel's *Missile Crisis* is a fascinating rewrite of *Dr. Strangelove*. How else can you explain: Ambassador David Bruce getting instructions to show up at an airport "alone and armed" to get some of the U-2 photos Acheson was taking to de Gaulle; de Gaulle showing more excitement at their technical quality than at the crisis itself; the Soviet ambassador in Washington completely in the dark

about the missiles and "absolutely certain" that the foreign minister was too; the President startled to discover that he still had missiles in Turkey—he distinctly remembered having given instructions to remove them; the Soviet espionage agent Fomin asking the re-

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*The Missile Crisis*  
by Elie Abel  
(Lippincott: \$4.95)

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porter Scali whether Scali's reply to Khrushchev's offer came from the "highest" sources; and Ambassador Dobrynin again, now in high spirits, marching up and down Bobby Kennedy's office reenacting an old scene in Khrushchev's. This stuff isn't stranger than fiction; it's satire.

But this book has a story to tell about the future. The more we learn about the crisis the more frightened we get, not for what happened but for how. Abel says, "How close we came to Armageddon, I did not fully realize until I started researching this book," but he may miss the real point. This recita-

tion may or may not describe a very close call, but it describes several we are going to have. It discloses how substantially our processes for decision are wanting: it discloses characteristics of the human and governmental condition that are more likely to lead to nuclear war than any particular Khrushchevian blunder. And as Schlesinger has paraphrased President Kennedy's conclusion: "The government could hardly have performed better."

There is first and foremost the willingness to risk all on the basis of arguments uncontaminated by serious and sustained criticism. In this, the participants convict themselves by their own testimony. They were unanimous in assessing the risks they were running as enormous. Here is Ambassador Thompson telling his wife that he would let her know where to go if the capital were evacuated; McNamara wondering how many more sunsets he was destined to see; Rusk telling Ball early one morning in the midst of the crisis that it was a considerable victory that "you and I are still alive." These responsible persons were a good deal vaguer about the dangers posed by the Soviet missiles. The Secretary of Defense counsels that the missiles in Cuba had little to do with the strategic balance, but he becomes persuaded that important political questions are at issue. Meanwhile the Secretary of State talks as if the military security of the country literally were at stake. He says about the airstrikes, "If we don't do this, we go down with a whimper. Maybe it's better to go down with a bang." Nowhere does anyone seem to discuss at length exactly in what way the national interest would be so severely damaged as to justify running the risks that all conceded their response would run.

Perhaps thoughts of "do nothing" strategies were quietly suppressed by signals from a President who—leadership demanding what it does—hardly could wait to reflect upon the dangers of as yet undrafted alternatives before choosing between the two postures available to him: "It doesn't matter," and "We won't stand for it." For whatever reason, there is a striking disproportion between our high appraisal of the dangers of dramatic response and our feeble efforts to analyze their necessity. For all practical purposes, our de-

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liberations seem to have treated the introduction of missiles in Cuba as if they were self-evidently part of an ultimate and decisive show of force. This is the standard exaggeration from which the most serious conflicts arise.

Men simply do not have the capacity to gauge the forces at work in the world. The crisis opens with virtually universal agreement that the Soviets will not put missiles in Cuba—because they never put them in any other satellite country; it ends with our very real amazement at having won. In between, people say things in explication of their policies like: "I know the Soviets pretty well, I think they'll knock out our missile bases in Turkey . . . we'd then be obligated to knock out a base inside the Soviet Union . . . then we hope everyone will cool down and want to talk." And while other participants appreciate the insanity of this sort of thing, they have no real substitute for it. The story is all too human. The level of disorganized reasoning and response, which even Kennedy's Executive Committee showed, seems to make it a matter of time before, in another crisis, two groups of such men assume—not decide, but simply collectively assume—that the interests then at stake are so vital that the struggle must be won at any cost. Governments, as a bureaucratic whole, seem every bit as inclined to reach this pompous conclusion as any sensation-seeking journalist.

Abel evidently drew on a wide range of acquaintances in Washington because almost everyone gets that little protective phrase which is a journalist's reward for an hour of interviewing. Keating was "almost certainly justified"; Rusk "felt it was important to reserve his own position"; of Sylvester's misleading press statements, "it was hard to see how he could have done otherwise"; and so on. But on a fundamental disagreement on the military implications of the Soviet action, Abel clearly takes the side of Paul Nitze rather than McNamara; Nitze thought that the missiles might so threaten SAC bombers in the southwestern United States as to shift the existing strategic balance.

It does not seem to have crossed the minds of any of the participants that the missiles could have been, in part,

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defensive Soviet reactions to our plans to make shifts in the future strategic balance. October, 1962, was the very month in which our first really usable ICBM's — the Minuteman — were being deployed, and our intention to build one a day for about three years(!) was well advertised. The Soviet inability to build even inferior ICBM's at more than about one a week presented it with strategic risks that would have left true counterparts of our own strategists hysterical with concern. If, indeed, a major Soviet motivation was to match US Minutemen with shorter-range missiles in Cuba, then our own failure to revise US missile procurement plans downward, as fast as we revised our estimate of the missile gap, was in part responsible for the crisis. It is instructive to reflect upon the possibility that the leadership of both sides were motivated by fears of an intolerable shift in the strategic balance.

That these and similar explanations have been given about as much consideration as heresy by the faithful; that Soviet specialists should be com-

monly referred to as "demonologists"; and, in particular, that their speculations should have been accorded the deference that Abel describes — all reflect an unfortunate analogy between the controversies of religion and the analysis of Soviet foreign policy. Abel says that Llewellyn Thompson won everyone's respect "by his astonishing readiness to produce at any hour of the day or night, a shrewd guess as to Khrushchev's likely response." The book unintentionally shows how shamelessly vulnerable was our leadership to the informed guesses of those who had read the forbidden books and seen the infidel in his natural habitat. It has to be said again: in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Fortunately, our best Soviet experts are,

politically, as sophisticated and cautious as our presiding generals are naïve and bold.

Sorensen, Schlesinger, and now Abel — who adds significantly to their disclosures — are giving our citizens an eye-ful of the way in which governments by the people work. What our highest public servants willed, dared, and feared, when the chips were down, now flows beyond the Washington Cocktail Circuit to Kansas City and Oshkosh. All can learn what, before, all who mattered knew. It's a good thing. Kennedy's generation teathed on how England slept. Another generation will learn how America reacted. The experiences we have with cataclysmic crises are too important to be wasted on those who may never face another.

## Health Scandal, USA

by Michael Alderman

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"Scandal," says Mr. Tunley, is the word to describe the state of American health. The word is harsh. So are the facts. The avoidable death of thousands of babies, the hobbling blight of needless mental retardation, the callous disregard for the aged, and the personal degradation that characterizes much of

*The American Health Scandal*

by Roul Tunley

(Harper & Row; \$4.95)

our medical services, combine to sustain a compelling tale of grim reality.

Influenced by housing, sanitation, and nutrition, as well as medical care, the rate at which babies die in the first year of life is one objective reflection of the values a nation places on human life. America, blessed with knowledge, manpower, technical capacity, and wealth that outstrip every other nation, tolerates the death of infants at a rate greater than 10 other Western countries, including poverty-stricken Ireland. An American baby stands almost twice as great a chance of not reaching his first birthday as does his Swedish counterpart. And if that baby happens to be Negro, his chances of an infant demise are three times that of the Swede. Lest we think this absence of

pigment is the magic factor, the infant mortality rate of white Americans is still greater than that of six other countries. The AMA is quick to point out that there is only a one-percent difference between the rate of Sweden and the US. But that statistic represents 40,000 dead babies every year. We cannot even take comfort in the hope that, in this best of all possible countries, things are getting better. In New York City, hardly a neglected backwater of American medicine, the infant mortality rate has been going up steadily since 1952 and is now 10 percent higher than it was then. A scandal?

This human waste and sorrow has led Mr. Tunley to wonder whether the nature of national health-care systems themselves might explain the differences. As even the casual observer knows, such questions are usually approached through a welter of descriptive phrases: "free enterprise," "socialized medicine," and "destroy the sanctity of the doctor-patient relationship." He describes our system as it is, including some of its off-beat and visionary nooks and crannies. Notable among the latter is the prepaid, comprehensive group-health programs, so successful and popular in the Far West, but virtually unknown east of the Rockies. Most