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# Cuba '62: A Brush With Armageddon

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## **THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS REVISITED**

Edited by James A. Nathan  
St. Martin's Press. 302 pp. \$39.95

## **THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, 1962**

### **A National Security Archive Documents Reader**

Edited by Laurence Chang  
And Peter Kornbluh  
The New Press. 415 pp. \$25

## **THE MISSILES OF OCTOBER**

### **The Declassified Story of John F. Kennedy**

### **And the Cuban Missile Crisis**

By Robert Smith Thompson  
Simon and Schuster. 395 pp. \$25

## **DEADLY SECRETS**

### **The CIA-Mafia War Against Castro**

### **And the Assassination of JFK**

By Warren Hinckle and William Turner  
Thunder's Mouth Press. 464 pp. \$21.95

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**By Tad Szulc**

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**W**HAT IS the *real* truth about the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962?

We have known for 30 years that the secret Soviet deployment of strategic nuclear weapons in Cuba and their removal under deadly pressure by President John F. Kennedy constituted the scariest sequence in modern history: Those "thirteen days in October" had indeed brought the world to the brink of atomic holocaust. Until this year, however, we lacked adequate knowledge of how the crisis had come about, how it was resolved, and what it meant in terms of superpower relations.

Now much of this truth is emerging for the first time from masses of written material and oral data declassified or simply made available by the U.S., Russian and Cuban governments—and by many of the surviving crisis participants (including Fidel Castro). The main conclusion one draws from this documentation is that the situation was even scarier than we had ever imagined on our side of the confrontation.

In the purely military sense, it turns out that Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, had equipped his 42,000-man expeditionary force in Cuba (twice the number reported at the time by U.S. intelligence) with tactical battlefield nuclear weapons and had given Soviet commanders on the island the discretionary authority to use them against American troops in the event of an invasion. Kennedy was totally unaware of this fact as he planned his responses during the crisis—an invasion was a very live option and U.S. forces were ready to attack if the strategic arms were not withdrawn—just as he was in the dark about Castro's appeal to Khrushchev to launch a preemptive nuclear strike on the mainland to forestall an invasion. For that matter, he did not know, either, that Castro's urgings had the effect of convincing Khrushchev that his gamble was getting lethally out of hand and that he should accept the secret deal with Kennedy.

Equally frightening, I think, was the extent to which Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro (who triggered the whole crisis by requesting Soviet protection against the U.S.) had misunderstood or misinterpreted one another's motives, intentions and actions. Moreover, all three leaders were rapidly losing control of the situation as military

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*Tad Szulc, author of "Fidel: A Critical Portrait," interviewed Castro about the missile crisis in Havana in 1984 and 1985.*

subordinates began doing their own thing, accidentally or deliberately.

Khrushchev, for example, had not realized that his commanders in Cuba had shot down an American U-2 spy plane without orders from Moscow, nearly provoking Kennedy into ordering a massive air strike against the island. And the president discovered with horror that another U-2 had penetrated Soviet air space above Alaska and that jet fighters armed with nuclear weapons had scrambled to protect it—and that in the middle of the crisis the Air Force had inexplicably launched a test missile, alerting the Soviets to the possibility that a U.S. first strike was underway.

Under the circumstances, it was something of a miracle that we were spared a nuclear war. But I am presenting this catalogue of confusion not simply because it adds up to fascinating history: What the new data teaches us about crisis management in 1962 crucially applies to the crises we are certain to face in the aftermath of the Cold War.

**T**HE PERSIAN GULF war, about which we really know so little, makes me wonder for instance about President Bush's crisis management bent before, during and after Desert Storm—and his comprehension of the situation with which he tried to cope; dramatic revelations may lie ahead (unless every embarrassing document is shredded). Moreover, nuclear perils still exist, with strategic weapons deployed in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, and with the threat that hardline military plotters may grab power there to reassert the world clout of the former Soviet empire. China too possesses nuclear weapons, and may be passing bomb technology to Iran. Finally, dangers and challenges for U.S. policy loom in the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The "New World Order" announced by George Bush isn't all that much of an improvement over the old one.

For all these reasons, the eight elegant and insightful essays in *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, edited by James A. Nathan, a scholar and former Foreign Service officer, should be mandatory reading for American policy-makers, planners and thinkers on all levels. The book is fully up-to-date on all the newly released materials, and several of the authors have participated in conferences on the subject in the U.S., Moscow and Havana, and have conducted major interviews and research of their own.

The chapters in the Nathan compendium throw significant new light on Kennedy's decision-making processes (based on transcripts of the top-secret presidential deliberations, Kennedy-Khrushchev letters, Central Intelligence Agency reports and collateral materials) and on the reasons he proceeded as he did. The consensus is that both Kennedy and Khrushchev overcame confrontational pressures from their respective "hawks." Kennedy held firm against insistence by the U.S. military on air strikes and invasion while Khrushchev ignored Castro and Soviet military chiefs in his decision to repatriate the missiles. Incidentally, I was interested to note that nothing in the new data contradicts the version of the events given to me by Castro in a 1984 interview: He never sought to embellish the story.

As to the question of who "won" in 1962, I think the

best answer is supplied by historian Barton J. Bernstein who concludes, in his brilliant essay on "Reconsidering the Missile Crisis," that Kennedy had achieved a "victory with compromise." Addressing themselves to the controversy over whether Kennedy was a hero of the confrontation (as "traditionalists" claim) or a weakling dishonestly playing electoral politics (as revisionists tend to allege), Bernstein and most of his colleagues conclude that both views are exaggerated. Their careful analysis shows that final decisions were made, as Bernstein puts it, by "weary men" in the Oval Office led by the president and his brother Robert.

The victory, of course, was the removal of the Soviet missiles and the "compromise" was Kennedy's agreement to phase out our Jupiter missiles from Turkey and a vague pledge not to invade Cuba. The authors believe that Khrushchev moved secretly to place

his missiles in Cuba to counter the open installation of the Jupiters by the Eisenhower administration and that Castro's real fears of an American invasion after the fiasco of the 1961 Bay of Pigs enterprise became the pretext for doing it. It was a *quid pro quo*, but Bernstein and the others note that Khrushchev was willing to go along with Kennedy in keeping secret the concession on the Jupiters (it remained so for many years), suggesting that, at least politically, the president had the upper hand in the eyes of public opinion.

The topicality of the 1962 crisis is emphasized by Philip Brenner, who remarks that "for a small power, conventional warfare may be as threatening as nuclear warfare is to the United States" and that "a small power is likely to take whatever steps are necessary to reduce the threat." He adds wisely that "when the United States deals with small countries, the use of force or the threat of force to achieve political ends can have 'exaggerated' consequences."

The reader who wishes to gain a sense of involvement in the travails of the crisis managers should turn to *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, which offers more than 400 pages reproducing texts of the declassified secret documents. In the foreword, former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara declares that "in this age of high technology weapons, crisis-management is dangerous, difficult and uncertain," acknowledging that "the record of the missile crisis is replete with examples of misinformation, misjudgement, miscalculations."

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*"Under the circumstances, it was something of a miracle that we were spared a nuclear war.... What the new data teaches us about crisis management in 1962 crucially applies to the crises we are certain to face in the aftermath of the Cold War."*

Misinformation is the essence of *The Missiles of October—The Declassified Story of John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, by Robert Smith Thompson, who teaches foreign policy at the University of South Carolina, and seems to have concocted his book from newspaper clips he did not quite understand. Apart from a truly stupefying number of factual errors (the Soviets did *not* invade Czechoslovakia in 1948 to impose communism; the National Security Council is *not* "large"—it has five statutory members, including the president; Max Frankel was *not* the publisher of the New York Times in 1962—even today he is *only* the executive editor), Thompson indulges in much innuendo and nonsense. For example:

"The Cuban missile crisis actually was the climax of two massive and parallel efforts, the one on the part of U.S. foreign policymakers in general and the other on the part of the family of the tycoon named Joseph P. Kennedy, to become masters of the world." Or: "The Kennedy administration intervened in the internal affairs of another country [Canada], helping to bring Diefenbaker down and avenging the Prime Minister's refusal to play along with the White House."

Because, as most specialists agree, Castro's fear of a U.S. invasion was greatly motivated by the Kennedy administration's covert operations to dislodge (or assassinate) him, this particular episode in the Cuban-American saga forms part of the overall history of the missile crisis. Much of that story is told in extraordinary detail in *Deadly Secrets: The CIA-Mafia War Against Castro and the Assassination of JFK*, by Warren Hinckle and William Turner. It is a richly updated version of the book published in 1981 under the title *The Fish Is Red*, and it is a logical adjunct to the new works related to the freshly declassified accounts of the Cuban missile crisis. ■