*George F. Will*

# Romanticizing The Cuban Missile Crisis

Clio, the muse of history, is in bed with a splitting headache, prostrated by the task of trying to correct the still multiplying misunderstandings of the Cuban missile crisis. Most Americans believe 'twas a famous victory won by a resolute president prepared to take the world to the brink of nuclear war. Actually, there was not much of a brink, and no triumph worth celebrating.

In last Sunday's New York Times magazine, J. Anthony Lukas reported on a reunion of former Kennedy administration participants in the crisis. The meeting was last April at a Florida resort with the wonderfully inapt name of Hawk's Cay.

Because the crisis began when the Soviet Union began putting missiles in Cuba and ended when the missiles were removed, it was considered an unambiguous triumph achieved by a president more hawkish than some of his dovish advisers. (The terms "hawks" and "doves" were popularized by this crisis.)

Now much is being made of a letter from former secretary of state Dean Rusk, a letter read at the April reunion. The letter is said to show that President Kennedy was a dove.

In the crisis, Robert Kennedy notified former Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that U.S. missiles in Turkey would be withdrawn within months of withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba, but it was imperative (obviously for American domestic political reasons) that the linkage of the withdrawals not be announced. Rusk's letter reveals that if the Soviet Union had insisted on public linkage, President Kennedy would have complied.

That historical morsel is only redundant evidence of what should by now be patent: Kennedy succeeded because his military advantage was huge and his goal tiny.

The Soviet Union was not going to war at a time when U.S. advantages were three to one in long-range bombers, six to one in long-range missiles and 16 to one in warheads. The Kremlin must have been astonished—and elated—when Kennedy, in spite of advantages that would have enabled him to insist on severance of Soviet military connections with Cuba, sought only removal of the missiles. He thereby licensed all other Soviet uses of Cuba.

The stunning revelation in Lukas' report is not Rusk's letter; it is something said at the reunion by Ted Sorensen, the aide closest to Kennedy.

On Aug. 31, 1962, five weeks before the administration discovered the missiles, New York's Republican Sen. Kenneth Keating, trusting information received from intelligence and refugee sources, said offensive missiles were going into Cuba. Republicans were making an election issue out of Soviet shipments to Cuba. In September, Kennedy warned the Soviets, with interesting preciseness, not to put in Cuba "offensive ground-to-ground missiles." Now, Sorensen says the president drew a line where he soon—in October of 1962—wished he had not drawn it:

"I believe the president drew the line precisely where he thought the Soviets were not and would not be. That is to say, if we had known the Soviets were putting 40 missiles in Cuba, we might under this hypothesis have drawn the line at 100, and said with great fanfare that we would absolutely not tolerate the presence of more than 100 missiles."

Sorensen is a member of the McGovernite wing of the practically one-wing Democratic Party. But he also is an assiduous keeper of the Camelot flame. Thus it is fascinating that he says, in praise of the former president, that Kennedy wanted to practice appeasement but calculated incorrectly.

This is amusing in light of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s rhapsodizing about Kennedy's handling of the crisis that the president, according to Sorensen, wanted to define away: "He coolly and exactly measured. . . . He moved with mathematical precision. . . . This combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated . . . ."

Even assuming Sorensen is wrong, Schlesinger's romanticizing is not right. In 1978, MiG-23s (nuclear-delivery vehicles far more menacing than the 1962 missiles) were introduced into Cuba. Kennedy's noninvasion pledge, given as part of the crisis-ending deal, guaranteed the survival of this hemisphere's first communist regime and makes attempts to remove or reform the second seem disproportionate.

The Reagan administration, which began by talking about dealing with Nicaragua by "going to the source"—Cuba—is reduced to clawing for piddling sums for the contras, a recipe for another protracted failure. Today, most "peace plans" for Central America postulate the moral equivalence of U.S. and Soviet involvements in the region, another legacy of the missile-crisis "triumph" that killed the Monroe Doctrine.

A few more such triumphs and we shall be undone. The romanticizing of the missile crisis makes such triumphs more likely.

an official effort under way to dump Adlai Stevenson." Stevenson, the Democratic presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956, never got over the hurt from the incident, according to a close friend.

As the years have passed and

**DEAN RUSK**
**... a "postscript" to missile crisis**

memoirs have accumulated, it has become clear, as Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorenson has written, that "each of us changed his mind more than once that week on the best course of action to be taken . . . ." Or, as McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser said yesterday, "During the first and second weeks, people were in many places."

When construction of the Cuban missile sites was confirmed on Oct. 15, 1962—barely three weeks before congressional elections in which the Republicans had made Cuba a big issue—there was a widespread view in the NSC that air strikes should be launched at once and an invasion of Cuba prepared. Stevenson argued that before such action was taken the United States should make clear to the Soviet Union that the missiles stationed near each other's territory should be "negotiable." He subsequently proposed that in exchange for removal of the missiles in Cuba the United States would give up Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba and would "consider the elimination of NATO bases in Turkey and Italy."

The NSC "hawks" initially insisted on launching air strikes, then settled for a naval "quarantine" of Cuba. But the idea of withdrawing missiles from Turkey as a quid pro quo for the Soviet Union, remained appealing to the president.

On Oct. 27 his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, secretly proposed to the Soviet ambassador here, Anatoliy Dobrynin, that if the Soviet missiles were withdrawn from Cuba, the United States "within three or four months" would withdraw, with no public announcement, its Jupiter missiles in Turkey. It was essential, he told Dobrynin, that it should not appear that such a deal had been struck. Khrushchev eventally agreed to this plan. (Kennedy disclosed these details in 1968; they were not known to many senior officials of the Kennedy administration, including Stevenson, at the time they occurred.)

If Khrushchev had not accepted the deal Robert Kennedy offered to Dobrynin, Rusk revealed in his letter, President Kennedy was willing to go farther and publicly agree to withdraw U.S. missiles in Turkey. The plan, which Rusk said he devised, was to transmit Kennedy's offer to U.N. Secretary General U Thant, through Andrew Cordier, a former diplomat who was then an official at Columbia University, with the idea that U Thant could propose the tradeoff publicly and Kennedy would accept his idea. Rusk dictated the proposal to Cordier and told him to deliver it upon receipt of an agreed signal. When Khrushchev accepted the Kennedy-Dobrynin deal, the signal was never sent.

"It was clear to me," Rusk wrote, "that President Kennnedy would not let the Jupiters in Turkey become an obstacle to the removal of the missile sites in Cuba because the [obsolete] Jupiters were coming out in any event."

In fact, the Turkish government was eager that the 15 Jupiters—which technically belonged to NATO, not the United States—remain on Turkish soil, and though the Kennedy administration perceived the missiles as obsolete, at the time of the missile crisis no NATO decision had been taken to remove them. During the crisis, hawks in the administration argued against removing the missiles on grounds that do so would be a grave blow to NATO.

Rusk prepared his letter for a meeting last March of experts on the Cuban crisis held in Hawk's Cay, Fla. Rusk was unable to attend because of illness and his letter was read to the group by James G. Blight, executive director of the Center for Science and International Affairs of Harvard University. Blight said the letter was "evidence that President Kennedy, in the real dark hours of the crisis . . . was convinced that, first of all, war was likely if things continued on their present course and, secondly, that he did not want war."

One of the conference participants was George Ball, Kennedy's undersecretary of state. He told one scholar that if he had known Kennedy was willing to publicly give up the Jupiters in Turkey, he "would have slept a lot of better during those nights."

Another participant was Bundy, who said the transcript will show that there is still considerable tension between the "hawks" and "doves" of 1962 but that it is easy to laugh now about some of the bloopers that came out of the crisis. One involved General Thomas Powers, commander of the Strategic Air Command. Powers inadvertently put out an uncoded message over a clear channel that his nuclear bomber crews should go to a war-alert status.

"That," Bundy said, "was like talking on a party line in Moscow."