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Book World

The World on The Brink of Nuclear War

THE CRISIS YEARS
Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963
By Michael R. Beschloss
HarperCollins/Edward Burlingame. 816 pp. $29.95

By Tad Szulc

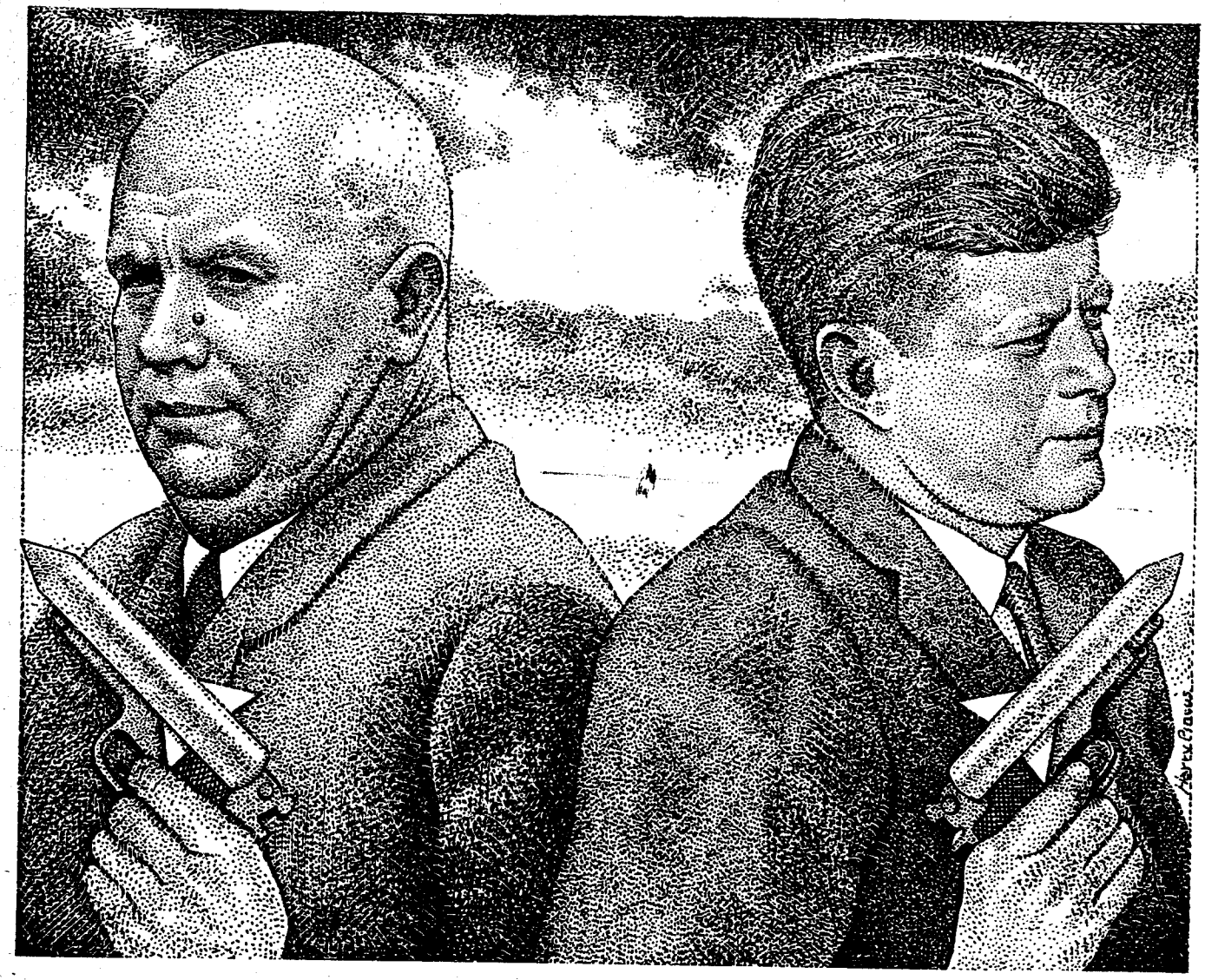

ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY PINCUS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

THIS NEW book by young historian Michael R. Beschloss is a remarkable *tour de force* in Cold War history, a superbly documented and argued account of probably the most important and dangerous period in the nuclear age. Beschloss, who has written the acclaimed *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair*, now offers us what he calls "The Years of Kennedy and Khrushchev," which is a sequel drawn on a vastly broader canvas with an extraordinary wealth of human detail.

The Crisis Years, centering principally on Cuba, Berlin and the American-Soviet nuclear-policy confusions and miscalculations, belongs to the modern (and somewhat revisionist) school of postwar history, and it is bound to revive basic arguments and debates of three decades ago—which should be most useful in the light of newly available information concerning events between 1961 and 1963. Foremost, President Kennedy emerges as less of an accomplished figure in foreign-policy planning than Camelot legend has it, and Khrushchev as less of a villain than we had assumed after he had so dastardly deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba and threatened us with war over Berlin. In fact, Beschloss strongly suggests that it was Kennedy's ill-conceived approach to Cold War issues that pushed Khrushchev to bluster and blunder.

Whether or not his conclusions on this fundamental theme are entirely sound—and this is a matter of continuing historical evaluation—Beschloss does succeed in demonstrating in a wholly cohesive fashion how closely Kennedy's and Khrushchev's destinies (and therefore America's and the Soviet Union's) were intertwined and how their respective fears and uncertainties were mirror images, especially when it came to suspicions that either of them might be the first to have recourse to the use of nuclear weapons. In this sense, *The Crisis Years* is an almost pathetic tale of these two men, who unquestionably desired to preserve peace, foundering in endless misunderstandings and misperceptions as well as in their personal policy obsessions (Cuba for Kennedy and Berlin for Khrushchev). Their story brings to mind the Russian proverb about two blind men searching for a hat in a dark room. As to Eisenhower, the author finds him to have been more prudent and much more knowledgeable about *—Continued on page 15*

Tad Szulc's 16th book on world affairs, "The Secret Alliance," will be published in the fall.

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nuclear strategy in dealing with Khrushchev; the U-2 incident on Eisenhower's watch was infinitely less damaging historically than Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco.

To be sure, it was Eisenhower who had set in motion the preparations for the invasion of Fidel Castro's island by the CIA-trained and -led Cuban exiles' brigade, and it is more likely that, as the decisive military man that he was, he would have guaranteed victory in some manner if he had been in office when the assault was finally launched, with international consequences at which one cannot guess. But the fact is that the disastrous landing did take place with Kennedy's assent, hesitant as it may have been at the end of his third month as president, and that the Bay of Pigs soon turned into an uncontrollable chain of events. Smarting from the defeat, Kennedy (and his brother Robert) became nearly pathologically obsessed with the goal of overthrowing Castro—the CIA undertook a campaign of violent covert actions to accomplish it, and it cannot be excluded that the president had himself tacitly authorized attempts to assassinate Castro—and Khrushchev secretly installed nuclear missiles in Cuba after he was convinced by Havana that a full-fledged U.S. invasion was imminent. Even with the availability of all the new data, this reviewer remains uncertain whether Khrushchev acted to protect Castro and his revolution or to use the invasion peril as a pretext for furthering Soviet strategic objectives in the Cold War (or both); there is no question, however, as Beschloss points out, that there would have been no Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 if Kennedy's actions had not persuaded the suspicious Communists in Havana and Moscow that he was planning to invade Cuba with American forces.

MORE TO the point, Beschloss writes, Kennedy may have brought the nuclear crisis on himself by failing to warn Khrushchev—specifically—that the United States would not tolerate nuclear missiles in Cuba despite Khrushchev's hints as early as July 1960 that the Soviets might defend the revolution in this way. Inasmuch as Kennedy had made clear to him with great precision what were America's vital interests in the 1961 Berlin crisis, Beschloss believes that the president's silence on Cuba must have led Khrushchev to assume "that this omission was not by accident." In his critique of the Cuban crisis, Beschloss claims that when Kennedy finally issued the warning—after discovering the missiles' deployment—"it was too late to stop Khrushchev's Cuba operation and so precise that it caused him to forfeit the option of responding . . . with anything less than a full-fledged confrontation with the Soviet Union. Had the president issued such a warning five months earlier or not painted himself in a corner now, history might have been different."

Kennedy, of course, forced Khrushchev to remove the missiles, and Beschloss makes it clear for the first time that the Russian leader gained absolutely nothing from his Cuban gamble inasmuch as Kennedy's pledge as part of their deal not to invade Cuba was never formalized, "a flimsy no-invasion pledge that could be revoked at any time." But the author adds another important dimension to the discussion of the Kennedy-Khrushchev years' traumas by saying that the president committed a cardinal political and psychological error by insisting publicly and privately that the United States had achieved nuclear superiority over the Soviets—whereas the cautious Eisenhower had chosen to keep Khrushchev reasonably calm by asserting that parity existed between the two superpowers—and that this had "provoked" Khrushchev into fearing "an American first strike." Joined with signs that Cuba might be invaded, Beschloss indicates, his nuclear fears, already triggered by Kennedy's rhetoric, compelled Khrushchev "to take his giant risk on Cuba."

Beschloss's relentless research and analysis does not spare John Kennedy even on the issue of the Berlin Wall, accusing him of "complicity in the building of the Wall" by allowing it to happen as the price for defusing a larger crisis he feared the Russians would stage over Berlin. He notes that Kennedy "ostentatiously avoided mentioning the Berlin Wall in public," except in passing on only four occasions between August 1961 "and the day of his death."

ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Kennedy in April, 1961

What makes *The Crisis Years* such a fine and usefully controversial book is, to a significant extent, Beschloss's talent in blending crucial new information newly declassified in Washington and Moscow with the official record of the 1961-1963 events and with the vivid talk, mostly private, of the American principals, starting with the president. In the Beschloss narrative, they come intensely alive, profanity and all. The author has been vastly helped by the (until recently secret) written record of the Kennedy-Khrushchev Vienna negotiations and by the Oval Office discussions during the Cuban missile crisis—and by the fact (new to me) that Kennedy also secretly taped conversation in his office; Beschloss has evidently read the transcripts. Moreover, he notes that "the increased openness of the Soviet government has excited expectations that at last historians can write with equal access to Soviet and American sources."

Beschloss likewise provides rich material on the president's impressively active sex life, including his relationship with a young woman closely connected with the "Mafia" (which was trying to help the CIA kill

Castro); a wartime affair, when he was in Naval Intelligence, with a woman who may have been a Nazi spy; and, as president, an affair with the wife of a West German airman stationed in Washington who had past Communist party associations. The last two are new revelations (including the fact that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover knew all about it and could blackmail the Kennedy family with his knowledge), and they have already made headlines over stories that ignore the other contents of the Beschloss book. Writing about Kennedy's sex life, the author sagely observes that "whether the President wished to sleep with women not his wife does not concern the historian of his diplomacy," but "what is of importance is that from all the evidence we have, Kennedy made no systematic effort to ensure . . . that all of the women with whom he was involved lacked the motive or the ability to use evidence of their relationship to blackmail him on behalf of a hostile government or organization."

The Kennedy-Khrushchev years ended with the president's 1963 assassination, and this key Cold War period came to a total close when the Russian was ousted from power 11 months later. Beschloss gives them both credit for ending the Berlin and Cuba crises without nuclear war and for taking steps to control nuclear weapons, and he insists that "these achievements are not mitigated by the darker side of their legacy"—Khrushchev's adventurism and Kennedy's obsessions and his lack of "the magnanimity that should have been expected of a superior power."

Beschloss, however, also quotes from a letter to Khrushchev from Jacqueline Kennedy immediately after the president's funeral, which offers this summation: "You and he were adversaries, but you were allied in a determination that the world should not be blown up. You respected each other and could deal with each other . . . The danger which troubled my husband was that war might be started not so much by the big men as by the little ones. While big men know the needs for self-control and restraint—little men are sometimes moved by fear and pride . . ." ■