

The Cuban Missile Crisis Just Isn't What It Used to Be

By Thomas Blanton

This special issue of the estimable Cold War International History Project *Bulletin* represents the latest high-water mark of more than 25 years of document-spelunking that has radically changed what we thought we knew about this most-studied of all international crises. Indeed, the Cuban Missile Crisis just isn't what it used to be,¹ because historians, political scientists, psychologists, documents fetishists, and eyewitnesses (including even Fidel Castro) have revised and reconstructed all of our received narratives, while adding many new ones we never thought about before. In this issue, we even find extraordinary new details on the global impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example in East Asia, and on the development of what would become today's North Korean nuclear program! In a classic example of what the *Bulletin* does best, this issue features—for the first time in print—Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev describing his motivations for putting the missiles in Cuba, and pulling them out, practically in real time, as he debriefs the Czechoslovak Communist leader Antonin Novotny on 30 October 1962. This spectacular oral history complements such gems in this issue as the thorough translation of the Malin notes from the Soviet Politburo during the crisis—the kind of information that the CIA would have killed for at the time.

Documents like these, excavated from the frequently uncooperative clutches of security establishments and archives around the world, have punctured one after another the myths of the Missile Crisis. The old story revolved around unprovoked aggressive behavior by the Soviets met with tough American brinkmanship. President John F. Kennedy's biographer Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. conveyed the conventional wisdom (and the well-spun press coverage after the Crisis) when he described Kennedy's "brilliantly controlled... matchlessly calibrated" crisis management that forced the Soviets to back down. Secretary of State Dean Rusk provided the most famous quote about the Crisis: "We're eyeball-to-eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked." But the documents over time (and with the benefit of a series of pioneering "critical oral history" conferences that confronted the policymakers with the evidence, and each other) compelled new conclusions and new narratives suggesting, in fact, that both sides blinked, that the Crisis arose from adventurism beforehand by both Kennedy (his harassment of Cuba with assassination plots and Operation Mongoose) and Khrushchev (his deceptive deployment of the missiles); and that both leaders stepped

back from the brink because of their mutual sense of events spinning out of control.²

Indeed, the new evidence suggested the Crisis was even more dangerous than policymakers thought at the time, with multiple potential flashpoints, mostly unbeknownst to the highest officials and certainly out of their control, girdling the globe with nuclear weapons whose routine deployment was standard operating procedure for both U.S. and Soviet militaries. Thus, American fighter jets scrambling over Alaska to defend an off-course U-2 spy plane over Siberia during the most dangerous day of the Crisis (27 October), each carried nuclear-tipped air-to-air missiles under their wings. Soviet diesel submarines, harassed at the quarantine line with signaling depth charges as the crisis neared its climax, each carried a nuclear-tipped torpedo for taking out large surface ships, or even fleets!³ Armageddon was upon us in October 1962; events were in the saddle and riding mankind; adventurism, accident and human fallibility spelled a doom that was only avoided by luck and restraint. Yet humility and contingency rarely featured in the literature of supposed "lessons learned" from the Cuban Missile Crisis, surely the most-cited (and most mis-cited) of historical analogies for subsequent American policymaking, ranging from the "calibrated" escalation of the Vietnam War to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁴ Different lessons resonated in locations like Hanoi, as this *Bulletin* points out, where hardliners saw Soviet weakness and decided to raise the military ante in the South.

The CWIHP *Bulletin* to the contrary notwithstanding, American-centricity dominates discussion of the Crisis even now, but first the trickle and then the flood of new documentation since the 1980s has provided multiple correctives to the *Thirteen Days* version, which centered in the Oval Office, bashed Moscow, and ignored Havana altogether. Yet the slow motion crisis in U.S.-Cuba relations that catalyzed events in 1962 continues even today. The primary sources—and not least, two historic conferences hosted by Havana in 1992 and 2002—have restored Fidel Castro to the Crisis equation as an independent variable, at the center of key episodes ranging from the anti-aircraft firing decisions on the most dangerous day, to the protracted endgame of the Crisis that continued well into November.⁵

In fact, the story of the documentary history of the Cuban Missile Crisis deserves a book in and of itself, but this brief introduction is not the place, nor has the space, to do justice to that remarkable progression, which proceeded in

fits and starts over three decades despite enormous barriers to the recovery of history. The primary sources were all too often not primary at all, obscured or concealed by secrecy classification systems, bureaucratic inertia and obfuscation, and not least of all the self-interest of many participants to massage the record. Yet, without this basic research of opening the sources, the next levels of scholarly work are hardly possible, or merely speculative. Indeed, in the absence of rigorous evidence, political science models rushed in where angels feared to tread.⁶

A few “docu-moments” stand out, however, as emblematic of the power of primary sources, and worth citing here. Back in 1986, for example, a psychologist with an historical bent (Jim Blight) then in residence at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government came to the (less than a year old) National Security Archive to ask about new documents on the Missile Crisis. Blight had met former defense secretary Robert McNamara during a project called “avoiding nuclear war,” and McNamara had challenged the notion of crisis management altogether, arguing for the elimination of nuclear weapons and the study of crisis prevention instead.⁷ Blight’s dean, Graham Allison, had challenged the novice researcher to make *Essence of Decision* irrelevant, clearly doubting the possibility.⁸ And other scholars were complaining that the bookshelves were already too full of Missile Crisis volumes—what else was there to learn?⁹

At the Archive, Blight encountered a couple of beer-bottle crates¹⁰ full of newly declassified records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, including some real eye-openers. Here, for example, were two pages of Top Secret single-spaced notes, taken and signed by McNamara as one of 5 people in the room, detailing the White House military briefing on 21 October, the day before the President’s speech announcing the presence of the missiles in Cuba and the imposition of a quarantine—not an air strike, as so many of his advisers had recommended. The notes show the head of the Air Force Tactical Air Command, General Walter Sweeney, describing the hundreds of sorties that would hit Cuba on the first day, but honestly admitting that he couldn’t guarantee taking out all the missiles: “[H]e was certain the air strike would be ‘successful’; however, even under optimum conditions, it was not likely that all the known missiles would be destroyed.”¹¹ In other words, a single one could well be launched—boom goes Atlanta.¹² By the end, the discussion turned to the President’s brother Bobby (speaking perhaps on behalf of JFK) who said he opposed the air strike for two reasons, the similarity to what the Japanese did at Pearl Harbor, and the “unpredictable” Soviet response that could “lead to general nuclear war.” Needless to say, Jim Blight the psychologist and incipient crisis analyst was riveted, a fly-on-

the-wall in the White House room, connected by the primary source to the very day and hour of decision.

Such documents led Blight to bring together all the Kennedy aides in March 1987, at a congenial resort in the Florida Keys. Face to face with the mounds of declassified documents, and with each other, lips loosened. In one of many highlights, former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy read out a letter written by former Secretary of State Dean Rusk for the occasion, revealing for the first time anywhere an initiative known only to Rusk and President Kennedy, undertaken on the evening of the most dangerous day—just in case direct communication with Khrushchev through the Soviet ambassador failed. Rusk wrote, “It was clear to me that President Kennedy would not let the Jupiters in Turkey become an obstacle to the removal of the missile sites in Cuba because the Jupiters were coming out in any event.” On the night of 27 October, JFK tasked Rusk to reach the Dean of the School of International Affairs at Columbia University, Andrew Cordier, a former top aide to UN Secretary General U Thant, to propose that he be ready to urge Thant to make a public proposal for a trade of the Turkey missiles for the Cuba missiles, as an alternative to war (thereby allowing Kennedy to, as it were, accept his own proposal, laundered through Thant). As it happened, Khrushchev on Sunday morning (Washington time), 28 October, accepted the non-invasion pledge, and the secret withdrawal of the Turkey missiles, so the Cordier ploy was unnecessary—but the revelation (in combination with the transcript of the 27 October Excomm discussions, also disclosed around this time) illuminated JFK the dove, the diplomatic trader doing anything he could to avoid war, backing away from the brink.¹³

The next documentary breakthroughs came in January 1989, just before an American delegation led by McNamara arrived in Moscow to test Jim Blight’s “critical oral history” method with actual Soviet officials, including the former foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and former ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin. Just then, the National Security Archive’s Freedom of Information work opened the first of the long-secret Operation Mongoose files, detailing the U.S. covert operations against Cuba after the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. The documents upset the conventional wisdom—dating back to the ExComm discussions and forward to books such as Graham Allison’s—by reinforcing Cuban and Soviet claims of U.S. aggression (and threatened potential invasion) as the catalyst for the Soviet missile deployment, and the defense of Cuba as the leading Soviet motivation. At the least, the evidence forced the American delegation to put themselves in Soviet and Cuban shoes. One Mongoose prospectus, written on stationery of the Office of the Secretary of Defense in July 1962, even described a

serious policy option as “Use a provocation and overthrow the Castro-Communist regime by U.S. military force.”¹⁴ McNamara himself was sufficiently sobered by the documents to change his mind about the conventional wisdom: “I want to state quite frankly,” he stated at the January 1989 Moscow conference, “that with hindsight, if I had been a Cuban leader, I think I might have expected a U.S. invasion.”¹⁵ (This statement of empathy, made not only in front of the Soviets but also a Cuban delegation that the Russians had invited – much to the surprise and consternation of the Americans! – played no small role in the subsequent invitation from the Cubans to come to Havana and hear from Fidel himself.)

The other Moscow documentary highlight in 1989 featured the interplay between documents and memory and secondary literature. Former ambassador Dobrynin, citing his own still-secret cables about his meetings with Bobby Kennedy, challenged Theodore Sorensen about Bobby’s famous memoir, *Thirteen Days*, which skated over the details of what Dobrynin said was Bobby’s explicit offer on 27 October to trade the Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Publicly of course, the Kennedy administration had denied any such deal; aides had blamed UN ambassador Adlai Stevenson (a Kennedy political rival) for suggesting such a thing; Rusk had cabled ambassadors after the Crisis denying it and McNamara had even done so in testimony to Congress. But under pressure in Moscow, Sorensen admitted he had edited a “very explicit” reference to the secret deal out of RFK’s manuscript, which he had edited, uncredited, after Robert Kennedy’s June 1968 assassination but before its posthumous appearance the following year. Not until 1994 would the Dobrynin cable itself from 27 October reach the public domain, through the Japanese broadcaster NHK. Another year would pass before scholars could read Dobrynin’s follow-up cable, recording his 30 October meeting with RFK, where Bobby handed back to the Soviet envoy a formal letter from Khrushchev mentioning the deal, and explained, “Speaking in all candor, I myself, for example, do not want to risk getting involved in the transmission of this sort of letter, since who knows where and when such letters can surface or be somehow published – not now but in the future – and any changes in the course of events are possible. The appearance of such a document could cause irreparable harm to my political career in the future.”¹⁶

Testimony to the power of the primary source to alter the present and the future as well as what we think of the past came again in Havana in January 1992. Just before the conferees arrived, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and so had U.S. government barriers to the declassification of the previously secret correspondence between Kennedy and Khrushchev during the Crisis – which the organizers hast-

ily compiled into a briefing book for the conference.¹⁷ The conference schedule listed Fidel Castro only for the opening and closing discussions, but instead, the Cuban leader stayed for all four days, because, he said, the Kennedy-Khrushchev letters grabbed him. Apparently, Castro had stayed up all night reading the 85 pages of letters bargaining away his fate, behind his back, “that is why I was a bit sleepy yesterday here in the meeting.”¹⁸

The drama of documents opening then opened other documents. At one of the breaks in Havana 1992, Archive staff presented Castro with more than 10,000 pages of declassified U.S. documents, neatly preserved on microfiche, and with a two-volume index – testimony to the U.S. Freedom of Information Act. Not long afterwards, Castro snapped his fingers and hauled out his own archives, including a long and previously unknown letter from Khrushchev a few months after the crisis, addressed to the young passionate revolutionary, describing snow falling on the birches, inviting the Cuban to visit and make up and go hunting and fishing together.¹⁹ At another point, while introducing the 23 October letter he received from Khrushchev, Castro started to read from it and said, “I’m declassifying here. Does ‘declassification’ have anything to do with the class struggle? [Laughter.]”²⁰

In this context, declassification became an epidemic. The Soviet general perhaps most conversant with the missile deployment planning, Anatoly Gribkov, matter-of-factly included in his Havana conference presentation a discussion of tactical nuclear weapons in the Soviet forces in Cuba. The Americans were stunned. McNamara even interrupted the translator to make sure he heard that correctly – tactical nukes would have meant enormous casualties in a U.S. invasion, and a major escalatory trigger to which the U.S. would have inevitably responded in kind. Massive controversy ensued from Gribkov’s disclosure, including multiple news headlines and journal articles, with scholars of Soviet command-and-control disbelieving. But subsequent releases, some by Gribkov’s initiative and others found in the collection of the late Soviet military historian Gen. Dmitry Volkogonov at the Library of Congress, proved that the Operation Anadyr deployment plans included even more tactical nuclear weapons than Gribkov had described, and that, just like on the U.S. side, tacticals were in all the war plans as standard operating procedure. The danger factor in the Cuban Missile Crisis had just gained an exponent.²¹

After the 1992 conference, the declassification continued. The Cubans became willing, after repeated requests, to give the Americans a copy of the core account on the Cuban side of the Crisis – Castro’s lengthy secret speech to his comrades during a tense moment in Cuban-Soviet relations in early 1968, reviewing the whole history of the Missile Crisis from

the Cuban perspective, including his dark feelings of being sold out by the Soviet Union. At a subsequent gathering, a Cuban official would refer to the secret speech in a dinner toast, lifting a glass of rum “to our next historical inquiry together, to the mystery of whether Cuba has suffered more from American aggression, or Soviet friendship?”²²

Après Havana, le deluge! The CIA hastened to mark the 30th anniversary year and claim credit for its photographic breakthroughs of 1962 with a published volume of declassified documents and a conference under the “bubble”—in the auditorium at Langley, Virginia—even including uncleared Havana conference participants such as Khrushchev’s son Sergei.²³ The State Department took longer, but released far more, with its *Foreign Relations of the United States* volume and microfiche supplement of documents on the Missile Crisis.²⁴ The John F. Kennedy Library finally achieved in late 1996 the declassification of the October 1962 ExComm tapes, 17 hours worth. Multiple published versions of the tape transcripts ensued—particularly from the ambitious project launched by the Miller Center at the University of Virginia—and the new evidence forced scholars to look again at JFK the dove. On 27 October, for example, as the Joint Chiefs are urging the invasion of Cuba, JFK remarks, “We can’t very well invade Cuba, with all its toil and blood there’s gonna be, when we could have gotten ‘em [the missiles in Cuba] out by making a deal on the same missiles in Turkey. If that’s part of the record, but ah... then you don’t have a very good war.”²⁵

Post-Soviet Russia now was losing the documents race, as the brief period of archival openness in the early 1990s (corresponding to the CIA’s) had given way to a pattern of negotiated exclusive-access arrangements. Notably, the academician Aleksandr Fursenko teamed up with the Harvard-trained Canadian scholar Timothy Naftali and a major publisher’s book advance to take advantage of the usually-off-limits Kremlin archive (Archive of the President of the Russian Federation), together with a wide range of other sources (even some materials from the former KGB and GRU archives), to produce a whole new narrative centered in Moscow for a change. Among many other highlights, at the core of the Fursenko/Naftali account were the remarkable short-hand notes taken by Khrushchev aide Vladimir Malin during meetings of the Presidium of the Central Committee—the distilled Soviet equivalent to the ExComm tapes, or as close as we’re likely to get—featured in this *Bulletin* in a new updated translation by Mark Kramer and Naftali. These contemporaneous notes showed Khrushchev abandoning adventurism almost immediately after Kennedy’s 22 October speech, pulling back from the brink, ordering Soviet ships still en route to Cuba to turn around, avoiding confrontation, sending instructions

to his commanders in Cuba against using nuclear weapons without direct orders from Moscow—in effect, going dove much like his counterpart in Washington.²⁶

By the time of the 40th anniversary of the Missile Crisis in 2002, documentary momentum and current events conspired to bring the eyewitnesses back to the table in Havana. Washington was debating the imminent invasion of Iraq, on the ostensible grounds of weapons of mass destruction present there; while pundits and policymakers cited the Crisis for their own ends with phrases like “credible threat of force” and even “blockade.” Robert McNamara was ready to go back to Havana, seeing yet another opportunity for him to deliver his jeremiad on nuclear weapons and crisis prevention. Fidel Castro was ready to receive the visitors, not least because Hollywood had left him out of the Crisis again, with the blockbuster movie *Thirteen Days* featuring Kevin Costner as Kennedy—a movie that Castro viewed with Costner in a private screening in April 2001.²⁷

But this time around the headlines in Havana came from underwater. By October 2002, the Archive’s sleuths in Russia and at the Navy Yard in Washington had matched some extraordinary oral histories and contemporaneous diaries from Soviet submariners, together with the extensive U.S. Navy tracking charts for the four diesel “Foxtrot” submarines deployed from Murmansk to what they expected would be their permanent base in Mariel. (Their families would have followed, for a nice tour in the tropics, so imagine the disappointment when Khrushchev ordered the subs to stall after 22 October and ultimately to return home.) Unbeknownst to the U.S. Navy, busy tracking and harassing and “forcing to the surface” the submarines, each one carried a nuclear-tipped torpedo and orders to use it if a war broke out. On the ExComm tapes one hears Kennedy’s concern at the harassment of the Soviet subs, even without knowing about the torpedoes, and McNamara’s reassurances that only “signaling depth charges” (like grenades) would be used. At the Havana conference table, retired Navy Captain John Peterson (aboard a key destroyer chasing the subs in 1962) explained the sailors’ frustration at dropping such firecrackers, so they encased the grenades in toilet paper tubes and the cardboard would keep the pin from popping and only disintegrate hundreds of meters down, right next to the Soviet subs. Also at the table was former Soviet submariner and signals intelligence officer Vadim Orlov, who described the impact of the “signaling” depth charges as the equivalent of being inside an oil drum getting struck with a sledgehammer. Coming on top of horrendous temperatures (the subs were made for the Arctic, not the Caribbean) and equipment breakdowns (including interruptions in communications with Moscow), the Navy’s pressure—culminating above Orlov’s sub on the most dan-

gerous day of 27 October—nearly put the commander of that submarine over the edge. Thinking the war had already broken out upstairs, the Soviet captain ordered the arming of the nuclear torpedo, and only calmed down under the influence of a peer officer aboard named Vasily Arkhipov. For McNamara especially, and for the reporters present in Havana, this was news—yet another example, previously unknown, of how close we were to Armageddon in October 1962, how fallible we humans are, how illusory the notion of crisis management.²⁸

For the documents fetishists among us, Havana's most joyful moment came when a historian got to play ambassador. The Kennedy ExComm had discussed at length at the height of the Crisis sending a message to Fidel through the well-respected Brazilian ambassador in Havana, Luis Bastian Pinto – a message (camouflaged as Brazilian rather than American) that would warn Castro that his Soviet allies were negotiating behind his back, that the presence of the missiles endangered Cuba, and more. Events intervened on 26 and 27 October; by the 28th Khrushchev had already announced the deal; and the Brazilian message, by the time it was delivered to Castro by an emissary sent from Rio, received little attention, since the Cuban leader did not realize its actual source of inspiration. Only four decades later, at the 2002 Havana conference, did a scholar inform him that in fact the message had been scripted in Washington, not Rio, and approved personally by JFK and the Excomm. Though Castro told the professor he would still have scoffed at the proposal, regardless of its source, the discovery of the hidden Brazilian effort (which in fact climaxed a nearly three-year attempt to mediate between Washington and Havana) helped inspire this special issue and its focus on the global history of the Missile Crisis.²⁹

Substantively, the most significant new evidence on the Missile Crisis actually extends it well beyond the conventional thirteen days. At the 2002 Havana conference, and in the text of his posthumous book in 2012, Sergo Mikoyan detailed the Soviets' initial plan to leave the tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba and even train the Cubans to use them—Cuba as a nuclear power! Drawing on the extraordinary series of transcripts of his father's meetings with the Cuban leadership in November 1962, plus the cables back and forth with Moscow, Mikoyan the historian explained how Mikoyan the deputy premier at first empathized with Castro's sense of betrayal, but gradually came to see the volatile Cuban leadership as undependable. In effect, Cuban intransigence (their righteous indignation at the Soviet pullout without consultation, and unilateral actions like Castro saying on 16 November the Cubans will shoot at the low-flying U.S. planes) convinced the Soviets that it was too risky to leave behind any nuclear weapons in Cuba. In the culminating 22 November con-

versation with Castro, the Soviet emissary even conjured up a (nonexistent) Soviet law that purportedly prohibited the transfer of such weapons beyond Soviet control—and then cabled his colleagues in Moscow practically urging them to hastily devise such a law. But thus the Missile Crisis was finally settled.³⁰

Now, 50 years after the fact, we are approaching a multi-national, multi-archival, multi-lingual history of the Missile Crisis, even as we are getting further and further away from the immediacy, the sense of crisis, the “lived forward” and “understood backward” reality. The most important—and continuing—barrier to historical understanding of the Missile Crisis arises from excessive and anachronistic secrecy, mostly-outdated national security classification on all sides of the former Cold War. Decades after the fact, U.S. securocrats still censor references to the Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy, even though, as a contemporaneous document pointed out in 1961, the presence of the Jupiters was no secret, evident to anyone driving by on the highway: “It clearly makes no sense to classify the existence of the Jupiters and their location, but the Italian Government seems to want it that way, for political reasons.”³¹ Indeed, for political reasons, such historical nuclear deployments remain secret today by the order of the Republican-dominated U.S. Congress in 1998, which decreed in the Kyl-Lott amendments the re-review of documents declassified in the post-Cold War Clinton-era reforms just in case they referred to nuclear weapons—in effect the last gasp of a discredited Republican conspiracy theory that President Clinton had divulged nuclear secrets to the Chinese.³²

The intelligence bureaucrats have been just as retrograde as the nuclear ones, only now, 50 years later, beginning to declassify President Kennedy's intelligence briefings, the President's Intelligence Checklist (the so-called “pickle”). Reviewers of intelligence records have left whole sections of the Kennedy tapes deleted as somehow sensitive, even though written records and notes of the same conversations—including the deleted sections—have been declassified for years. For example, in the 26 October briefing of Kennedy on the latest photographs over Cuba, the tapes are missing the section where CIA director McCone points to a shot of a LUNA/FROG tactical missile launcher and suggests the possibility of “tactical nuclear weapons for fighting troops in the field.” This of course had been known publicly at least since General Gribkov announced the deployment at the 1992 Havana conference, and the JFK Library's own descriptive notes on the meeting include the direct McCone remark quoted here.³³

Of course, researcher frustrations with Washington's archival bottlenecks pale beside those encountered in Moscow. Huge swathes of the Soviet archives—those of the KGB,

military intelligence (GRU), and the General Staff, for example—remain almost completely off-limits to researchers in the newly authoritarian Russia. Similarly, continuing official hostility between Cuba and the U.S. offers an excuse, or pretext, for authorities on both sides of the Florida Straits to keep all too many of the relevant files locked away in the vaults. Were it not for the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, many of the contents of this special issue of the CWIHP *Bulletin* would likewise remain concealed under ideological control.

Over and above the security blockades are the actual assaults on the record. Fidel Castro has described a Malecon flood that inundated the Cuban foreign ministry archives, stashed in a basement. More pernicious have been the actual alteration and even destruction of the historical record by participants. The most egregious offenders here were the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, who ordered in 1974 (after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that President Nixon could not keep his Watergate tapes to himself) the destruction of their entire taped proceedings dating back to the 1950s, leaving only 31 pages of notes dating from the Missile Crisis period.³⁴ On a lesser scale, but still emblematic, was the penciled scratch-through—possibly by Bobby Kennedy himself—altering his 30 October memo addressed to Secretary of State Rusk (but later found only in a Presidential file) to delete mention of the specific Turkey-for-Cuba missile trade he had discussed with Dobrynin.³⁵

Persisting control of key records by interested parties, including the memoirists with exclusive access to files, has certainly enabled self-serving official spin over the years. For example, the RFK family continues to claim ownership of the Attorney General's office files as if they were personal records, even though the security classification of most of the 62 boxes would preclude the family from even looking at the files they supposedly own.³⁶ But the documentary history of the Cuban Missile Crisis also features notable exceptions such as in the generosity of scholar/eyewitness Sergo Mikoyan. Archives of the world will unite—they have nothing to lose but their chains!

Even the documents fetishists must also give credit to the memoirists like Sorensen and Schlesinger who gave us road-maps to the documents, and went on to participate enthusiastically in the whole series of “critical oral history” conferences, helping to supply the atmospherics and context sometimes missing from the documents—and even specific exchanges that the documents did not capture verbatim, but which lodge themselves in memory. Such is Sorensen's account of Dean Acheson's advocacy for an immediate and massive air strike on the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Acheson was asked, what would the Soviets do in response? “I think I know the

Soviet Union well. I know what they are required to do in the light of their history and their posture around the world. I think they will knock out our missiles in Turkey.” Then what should we do? “Well, I believe under our NATO treaty with which I was associated, we would be required to respond by knocking out a missile base inside the Soviet Union.” Then what do they do? “Well, then that's when we hope cooler heads will prevail, and, they'll stop and talk.”³⁷

Notes

1 The title owes its inspiration to the late C. Vann Woodward, “Our Past Isn't What It Used to Be,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 July 1963.

2 For an earlier overview, see Thomas Blanton, “Annals of Blinksmanship,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 1997. For myth-by-myth puncturing, see the series of Web postings by Michael Dobbs including *The “Eyeball-to-Eyeball” Myth*, posted 2 July 2008, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/dobbs/, and for the most current standard account, Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

3 See Michael Dobbs, *Missing Over the Soviet Union*, posted 11 June 2008, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/dobbs/maultsby.htm.

4 For the latest account, in “transmedia” format, by the pioneers of “critical oral history,” see James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Armageddon Letters: Kennedy/Khrushchev/Castro in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

5 See James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, The Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon, 1993). For the best account of the post-October crisis, with an extraordinary selection of previously unavailable transcripts of Cuban-Soviet discussions, see Sergo Mikoyan, edited by Svetlana Savranskaya, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Missiles of November* (Stanford, CA/Washington, DC: Stanford University Press/Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012).

6 The best-selling and most influential academic book on the Crisis, Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971), relies on models of decision-making (rational actor, organizational process, and bureaucratic politics) to tell the story, although the cascade of new evidence has rendered most of those explanations as obsolete as the Jupiters (that is to say, still powerful, but not at all what you'd want to deploy anywhere). For the most comprehensive review of Allison, as well as of his second edition of *Essence*, co-authored in 1999 with Philip Zelikow, see Barton J. Bernstein, “Understanding Decisionmaking, U.S. Foreign Policy, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 134-164.

7 Blight and Lang, *The Armageddon Letters*, Appendix A.

8 James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), p. viii.

9 See Eliot A. Cohen, "Why We Should Stop Studying the Cuban Missile Crisis," *The National Interest* (Winter 1986), pp. 3-13. Cohen now serves as a senior foreign policy adviser for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

10 There remains some debate among eyewitnesses as to whether the beer boxes were Pabst Blue Ribbon or Schaefer, but either low-end brand would have been a favorite of the Archive's upstart softball team, the Info Czars.

11 Robert McNamara, "Notes on October 21, 1962 Meeting with the President," Document 26 in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press, 1992; revised edition, 1998), pp. 154-155. This volume, together with the 40th anniversary Web postings at http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/docs.htm, provide a selection of "greatest hits" from the massive indexed reference collections on the Crisis produced by the Archive in 1990 (edited by Chang) and 2006 (edited by Kornbluh) totaling some 5,000 documents, all available through the Digital National Security Archive published by ProQuest, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

12 A reference to "boom goes London and boom Pa-ree, more room for you and more room for me," in Randy Newman's classic song, "Political Science" (1972).

13 Blight and Welch, *On the Brink*, pp. 83-84. But see Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Volume Three* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), p. 485, for doubts about the Cordier contingency.

14 Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale, "Review of OPERATION MONGOOSE," 25 July 1962, Document 7 in Chang and Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962*, pp. 40-47.

15 Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, eds., *Back to the Brink* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), p. 7. For the best review of pre-Crisis invasion evidence, see James G. Hershberg, "Before 'The Missiles of October': Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike Against Cuba?" in James A. Nathan, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 237-280.

16 For the most comprehensive account, including the Dobrynin cables, the *Thirteen Days* text, and commentary from Sorensen and others, see Jim Hershberg, "Anatomy of a Controversy," *CWIHP Bulletin* 5 (Spring 1995), pp. 75-80; and Jim Hershberg, "More on Bobby and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9 (Winter 1996-1997), pp. 274, 344-347. The RFK quote is on p. 345.

17 Credit goes to Professor Philip Brenner of American University, long-time National Security Archive board member, and Archive founding director Scott Armstrong, who insisted on a Freedom of Information lawsuit to break loose these and several thousand other documents – with the *pro bono* help of the Washington law firm of Crowell & Moring.

18 Blight, Allyn, and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 219.

19 See Khrushchev to Castro, 31 January 1963, Document 84 in Chang and Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962*, pp. 332-342.

20 Blight, Allyn, and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 211.

21 Blight, Allyn and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 54-75, includes Gribkov's original presentation and the American reaction. For the best substantive overview of the issue, correcting previous accounts, see Raymond L. Garthoff, "New Evidence on the Cuban Missile Crisis: Khrushchev, Nuclear Weapons, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *CWIHP Bulletin* 11 (Winter 1998), pp. 251-262. For dramatic evidence of the tactical nuclear weapons ultimately targeting Guantanamo in the event of a U.S. invasion, see Michael Dobbs, "The Soviet Plan to Destroy Guantanamo Naval Base," posted 4 June 2008, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/dobbs/gitmo.htm.

22 For Castro's secret speech and the overall role of Cuba, the indispensable volume is James G. Blight and Philip Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers After the Missile Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). For the dinner toast, see *The Washington Post* "Live Online" discussion, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: 40 Years Later," with the author, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/liveonline/02/special/world/sp_world_blanton101602.htm.

23 Mary S. McCauliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992). For the conference, the author was present.

24 The State Department's *FRUS* volume on the Cuban Missile Crisis, published in 1996, is online at http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/frusXI/index.html.

25 Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 367. Stern's is the best one-volume version of the tapes, providing narrative and evidence from other documents in addition to the direct quotes.

26 Alexandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). For the Russian text of the Malin notes, see *Presidium TsK KPSS, 1954-1964* (Presidium of the CC CPSU), ed. Alexander Fursenko (Moscow: ROSSPAN, 2003).

27 McNamara discussions with the author in Washington and in Havana during 2002; author's observations of Castro at the Kevin Costner screening in Havana, 9 April 2001, which produced even more documents: Thomas Blanton, "What If the Cuban Missiles Hadn't Been a Secret?" *Slate*, 19 April 2001, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/chatterbox/2001/04/what_if_the_cuban_missiles_hadnt_been_a_secret.html.

28 See William Burr and Thomas Blanton, "The Submarines of October: U.S. and Soviet Naval Encounters During the Cuban Missile Crisis," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 75, posted 31 October 2002, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB75/>; and Svetlana Savranskaya, "New Sources on the Role of Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 28, No. 2 (April 2005), pp. 233-259. One

of the latest TV documentaries on the Crisis, premiering on PBS on 23 October 2012, focuses on the Arkhipov story as “The Man Who Saved the World.”

29 See James G. Hershberg, “The United States, Brazil, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962, (Parts 1 & 2),” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, No. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 3-20, and No. 3 (Summer 2004), pp. 5-67.

30 Sergo Mikoyan, ed. Svetlana Savranskaya, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis*.

31 “Report on Visit to Jupiter Sites in Italy,” 18 September 1961, by Allen James, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European Affairs, SECRET (original in DoS Lot 65D478, National Archives, posted on the National Security Archive web site at http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/NC/nh3_4.gif). For dozens of similar examples, see William Burr, “More Dubious Secrets,” <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb281/index.htm>.

32 See “DOE Puts Declassification into Reverse,” by George Lardner Jr., *The Washington Post*, 19 May 2001, <http://www.fas.org/spp/news/2001/05/wp051901.html>; and Matthew M. Aid, “Declassification in Reverse,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 179, posted 21 February 2006, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB179/>

33 For this 38-second deletion, see Zelikow and Ernest, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Volume 3*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), p. 327. For the contrast, see Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, p. 145 and note on p. 381.

34 See, on this episode, CWIHP *Bulletin* 8-9 (Winter 1996/1997), pp. 276-77 fn 11. The text of the notes indicates they were handwritten in 1976 and typed in 1993. For the evocative notes, suggesting extraordinary detail and emotion that would have been heard on the tapes, see http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/621000%20Notes%20Taken%20from%20Transcripts.pdf.

35 See Jim Hershberg, “More on Bobby and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” CWIHP *Bulletin* 8-9 (Winter 1996-1997), pp. 345-347. Zelikow and May prefer RFK’s memo, written after the resolution of the crisis and in the midst of the credit-claiming, over Dobrynin’s, written immediately after the meeting. See *The Great Crises Volume Three*, pp. 486-488.

36 See Bryan Bender, “Kennedys Keep Vise-Grip on RFK Papers,” *The Boston Globe*, 5 August 2012, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2012/08/05/index_details_contents_of_robert_f_kennedys_papers/. [Ed. note: On 11 October 2012, after this introduction was written, the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library opened up seven boxes totaling 2,700 pages of these previously closed RFK records, including documents on the missile crisis. JFKL press release, 11 October 2012. For an early assessment, see National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book (EBB) no. 395, “Cuban Missile Crisis Revelations: Kennedy’s Secret Approach to Castro,” edited by Peter Kornbluh, posted 12 October 2012.]

37 Quoted in Douglas Brinkley, *Dean Acheson: The Cold War Years, 1953-1971* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 161-162.