

Chapter 21

“Primarily a Political Problem” Constructing the Image of the Kennedy Presidency, 1961-Present

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Introduction

The presidency of John F. Kennedy was tragically cut short by his assassination on November 22, 1963, leaving history to judge the success or failure of his administration. The attempt to build a historical legacy of that administration, which had begun from inauguration day in 1961, now accelerated into high gear, as the guardians of Kennedy’s memory sought to create a mythical vision of what their slain leader had accomplished, buttressed by the images of what he *would* have accomplished had he lived. More than any other president in American history, the image rather than the substance of the Kennedy administration has been crucial to maintaining his place in history.

In this essay, I will examine the growth and changes in the perception of Kennedy’s foreign policy legacy that his family, friends, administration officials, and, ultimately, historians, created. The image of his presidency has evolved over time, reflecting initially the needs of his administration and the next election, then the Cold War, and finally the post-Cold War definitions of a successful president. I will look primarily at the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam and how the historical discussion of the Kennedy presidency has evolved from the Cold Warrior-image crafted by Kennedy biographers and historians in the 1960s and 1970s through the transition period of the 1980s to the new statesman-image created for the 1990s and 21st century.

Cuban Missile Crisis

At the time, and for the following two decades, supporters and even some critics of the late President praised Kennedy for compelling the Soviets to back down and remove their missiles from Cuba. This portrayal of Kennedy remained consistent and dominant despite revisionist attacks from the right and left. The traditional view of Kennedy’s actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis came from the memoirs of former Kennedy aides, such as Roger Hilsman, Ted Sorenson, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., or from authors such as Elie Abel and Graham Allison who based their work primarily on the testimony of Kennedy administration officials. According to these traditionalists,

the resolution of the Crisis was the high point of the Kennedy presidency. Faced with an intolerable provocation, Kennedy had to compel the Soviets to withdraw the missiles to maintain the balance of power, preserve NATO, and convince Khrushchev of American (and Kennedy's) resolve.¹ These traditionalists hailed the Aquarantine of Cuba as the correct strategy because it coupled a show of superior American force with restraint, providing Khrushchev with enough room to back down without losing face. Kennedy was thus portrayed as both tough and pragmatic, with the emphasis on tough.

An example of this toughness combined with pragmatism, according to the traditionalists, was found in the so-called 'Trollope Ploy.' On the evening of October 26, Khrushchev sent a long, rambling letter which seemed to offer a deal: the Soviets would remove the missiles from Cuba in return for a pledge not to invade Cuba. A similar offer had been made by KGB station chief Alexander Fomin to NBC correspondent John Scali earlier that day. However, the next morning a new letter arrived from Moscow, demanding a swap of the missiles in Cuba for American Jupiter missiles installed in Turkey. Kennedy, at the suggestion of his brother, decided to ignore the second letter and respond affirmatively to the first. The Jupiters in Turkey, according to the traditional interpretation, were going to be dismantled anyway. Indeed, Kennedy had ordered them dismantled months before, and was angered to discover his order had not been carried out

In addition, Kennedy carried on a back channel negotiation with Khrushchev by sending his brother to confer with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. During a meeting recounted in Robert Kennedy's diary/book *Thirteen Days*, the younger Kennedy related that he informed the ambassador that if the Soviets would not remove the missiles, the U.S. would.² Further, when Dobrynin raised the issue of the Turkish missiles, RFK responded that there could be no quid pro quo involving these missiles because any decision about their status had to be made by NATO. However, Kennedy assured the Soviet that the president was Aanxious to remove those missiles and that they would probably be removed after the crisis.³

After the resolution of the Crisis, UN ambassador Adlai Stevenson was portrayed as an appeaser. Journalist Charles Bartlett published a story accusing Stevenson of proposing another Munich. Specifically, Stevenson proposed trading the Turkish missiles and the American naval base at Guantanamo for the Cuban missiles. Bartlett's primary source for the story was John Kennedy.⁴

1. Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 94.

2. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 108.

3. Ibid.

4. Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame, 1991), 569.

This negative portrayal of Stevenson served three purposes. First, it was yet another humiliation for a man whom all the Kennedys loathed. Second, Stevenson's willingness to trade was set up as an unfavorable contrast to Kennedy's resolve, highlighting the President's ability to stand up to the communists. Third, it signaled a new standard for liberal foreign policy makers. In place of Stevenson's more intellectual and apparently softer approach to foreign policy, Kennedy provided a picture of a Democrat who was, relatively, safe from the charges that had haunted the Democrats since the loss of China.

Finally, it complimented the administration's consistent line, a line echoed in studies of the Crisis, that there was no deal involving the Turkish missiles. Secretary of State Dean Rusk cabled the American ambassadors to Turkey and NATO assuring them that no deal of any kind was made involving Turkey.⁵ During 1963, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told the House Appropriations Committee, without any qualifications whatsoever there was absolutely no deal...between the Soviet Union and the United States regarding the removal of the Jupiter weapons from either Italy or Turkey.⁶ In his book *The Missile Crisis*, Elie Abel leaves the impression that trading the Jupiters was never really considered.⁷ Counsel to the President Ted Sorenson wrote that the President had no intention of destroying the alliance by backing down.⁸ The replacement of the missiles in mid-1963 by a Polaris submarine, therefore, received little publicity.

For many years, the belief that Kennedy's resolute toughness produced a great triumph for America endured, serving as the defining moment of Kennedy's presidency, making the foreign policy reputation of his administration. There were some challenges. Revisionists on the left accused Kennedy of being too rigid and too eager to take America to the brink of nuclear war for too little cause. Critics on the right accused him of not taking advantage of American nuclear superiority coupled with local conventional superiority to force Castro's removal. However, most scholars (and most Americans) accepted the official interpretation of the Crisis.

Then, beginning in 1985, and accelerating through the 1990s, a change in the interpretation of Kennedy's role began. The release of the transcripts of some of the recordings Kennedy secretly made of Executive Committee (Excomm) meetings led to new insight into the issue of the dismantling of the Turkish missiles. From the transcripts and even more so from the full release of the tapes over the last several years, comes a picture of a president who was far more willing than most of his advisors to seek a nonmilitary solution to the Crisis. Especially on Saturday the 27th, the

5. James Nathan, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 94.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 189.

8. Theodore Sorenson, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 714.

climatic day of the Crisis, Kennedy appeared willing, even eager to trade the Turkish missiles for the Cuban ones, preferably through a private deal, but publicly if necessary. During the morning meeting of the Excomm, Kennedy, discussing the demand to swap the missiles put forward in Khrushchev's Saturday letter, stated that Most people will regard this as not an unreasonable proposal.⁹ He also pointed out several times that if he did not trade the missiles out and the Crisis escalated to war, he would be accused of starting a war over a bunch of obsolete missiles which he should have traded. Kennedy consistently expressed the belief that the Turkish missiles will have to be dismantled, and that it is a price he was willing to pay.

This view is supplemented by the revelation that Robert Kennedy offered an explicit trade of the Turkish missiles during his secret meeting with Dobrynin. McGeorge Bundy laid the groundwork for this revelation in his 1988 book, *Danger and Survival*. Bundy stated that before Robert Kennedy's meeting with Dobrynin, the attorney general, the president, and a small circle of advisors met to discuss what RFK was going to say. The group consisted of the Kennedy brothers, Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, Sorenson, Undersecretary of State George Ball, former ambassador to the Soviet Union Llewellyn Thompson, and Under Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric. According to Bundy, Rusk suggested that we should tell Khrushchev that while there could be no deal over the Turkish missiles, the president was determined to get them out and would do so once the Cuban crisis was resolved.¹⁰ With this statement, the removal of the Turkish missiles was now an implicit part of the deal to remove the Cuban missiles.

During the Moscow Conference on the Crisis held in 1989, the role of the removal of the Turkish missiles changed again when Ted Sorenson confessed that he had deceived the American public about the nature of the deal. Sorenson stated:

Ambassador Dobrynin felt that Robert Kennedy's book did not adequately express that the deal on the Turkish missiles was part of the resolution of the crisis. And here I have a confession to make to my colleagues on the American side, as well as to others who are present. I was the editor of Robert Kennedy's book. It was, in fact, a diary of those thirteen days. And his diary was very explicit that this was part of the deal; but at that time it was still a secret even on the American side, except for the six of us who had been present at that meeting. So I took upon myself to edit that out of his diaries...¹¹

9. David Welch and James Blight, The Eleventh Hour of the Cuban Missile Crisis: An Introduction to the Excomm Transcripts, *International Security* 12, no. 3. (Winter 1987-1988), 37.

10. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), 432.

11. Nathan, 96.

Thus, the dismantling of the Jupiter missiles was an explicit part of the deal, albeit a secret part. Further, not only was the deal concealed from the public, but also Rusk and McNamara had clearly lied to maintain its secrecy.

A different revelation at an earlier conference made it apparent that Kennedy was even willing to risk a public trade of the Jupiter missiles. Dean Rusk revealed that Kennedy had instructed Rusk to contact Andrew Cordier, a former UN staffer who maintained close ties to Secretary General U Thant. Rusk dictated a letter to Cordier which asked U Thant to propose the Turkey-Cuba swap. If Khrushchev had rejected the Trollope Ploy, Rusk was prepared to instruct Cordier to present the letter to Thant. The Secretary General would then publicly propose the swap, and Kennedy would accept the offer, ending the Crisis. According to Rusk, only he, Kennedy, and Cordier knew about this proposal.¹² In fact, the former members of the Kennedy administration present at the conference were stunned. Hawks such as General Maxwell Taylor and former Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon were deeply disappointed that Kennedy even considered making a public swap. Scholars of the Crisis, on the other hand, generally portray the existence of the Cordier maneuver as evidence of Kennedy's willingness to avoid war even if it hurt him politically.

Having briefly described a few of the more telling revelations about the Crisis, I believe there are a number of explanations which together illustrate why Kennedy's supporters have reinterpreted his role. First, the records which paint JFK as a deal maker, especially the recordings of the Excomm meetings, were going to be declassified eventually. By preempting or accompanying their release with revelations of their own, the President's men controlled the spin of the news. Second, by assigning themselves insiders' knowledge, Kennedy's advisors maintain their own roles in history. Actions such as the Cordier maneuver and the secret RFK/Dobrynin meetings reflect not only on President Kennedy, but on those who were privy to this information as well. The primary reason for this reinterpretation, I would argue, is the desire to re-craft the image of the Kennedy presidency to match the post-Cold War model of a successful president, emphasizing statesmanship and flexibility rather than rigid Cold War persona. In the waning days of the Cold War many former Kennedy aides, especially Bundy and McNamara, sought to promote a less militaristic approach to the Soviet Union. As a result of this opposition, the major lesson of the Crisis needed to be changed from compellence through strength to the value of cooperation and conciliation. Furthermore, as the Soviet Union collapsed, these aides wanted to promote cooperation and, in some cases, arms reduction, not victory.¹³ They performed this task of changing the lesson carefully, making sure they did not push too hard.

An example of this is the handling of the revelation of the Cordier maneuver. When Rusk first revealed the existence of the maneuver, both Bundy and McNamara reacted negatively to it.

12. James Blight and David Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 83-84.

13. McNamara, 337-346

Bundy stated that he was profoundly depressed by the idea Kennedy had been considering a public trade of the missiles,¹⁴ while McNamara stated in a post-conference interview that he did not believe Kennedy really intended to make the trade.¹⁵ However, one year and several positive reactions to the maneuver by scholars and others later, Bundy stated in *Danger and Survival* that the president would have been able to marshal a formidable set of arguments in support of his acceptance of a public trade.¹⁶ Almost all recent books and articles on the Crisis present the maneuver as proof that Kennedy was willing to negotiate an end to the crisis, using the released tapes to further buttress the argument.¹⁷ Oddly enough, McNamara has raised no further arguments against the idea that Kennedy would have made the trade.

Thus, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy's greatest triumph, has been recast. The older traditional interpretations of Abel and Allison have been largely pushed aside, and even revisionists have been forced to revise their interpretations. The guardians of the Camelot legacy have done their job well.

However, this spate of revelations and reinterpretations open up a series of deeper questions. There are two final thoughts that this discussion of how the interpretation of Kennedy's role has evolved brings to the fore. First is the question: would Bundy, Rusk, McNamara, et. al. have better served the nation if they had revealed the importance of conciliation sooner. Specifically, where was this willingness to compromise during the Vietnam War? Presumably these men should have recognized what they now present as the real lessons of the Crisis back in the mid-1960s. Why were they not applied then? Was their desire to protect themselves and the Johnson administration from charges of softness and a new McCarthyism worth the debacle in Vietnam?

Next, if the Cold War had not ended when it did, would some of these revelations have ever come to light? I speak here primarily of the Cordier maneuver and the explicit offer to dismantle the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. If the Soviet Union had not collapsed, would Bundy, Sorenson, and Rusk have made those revelations, or would they have died with these men? It seems unlikely that these former officials would have been willing to tarnish their greatest triumph and leave their old boss, and his party, vulnerable to charges of softness. The revisioning of the Crisis in the 1980s and 1990s

14. Blight and Welch, 171.

15. Blight and Welch, 190.

16. Bundy, 436.

17. For example, Robert Weisbrot concludes that from his actions during the Crisis Kennedy can be seen as a Amoderate leader in a militant age.@ Robert Weisbrot, *Maximum Danger: Kennedy, the Missiles, and the Crisis of American Confidence* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 208.

provided a new paradigm for Democratic foreign policy makers: negotiations and cooperation with the Soviets was a viable policy.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the ongoing war in Iraq, Kennedy's actions were mined by both critics and supporters of the Bush administration. Each side could cherry-pick the appropriate lessons: toughness and unilateral action for the supporters of the Bush Doctrine, while opponents emphasized the pragmatic negotiator who was willing to pay a political price to utilize the United Nations.

Vietnam

The interpretation of the Kennedy administration record on Vietnam has evolved more quickly than that of the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the Kennedy presidency, biographers, looking to stress the late President's Cold War commitments, spoke of the need to maintain containment in Southeast Asia and of the necessity of being in South Vietnam. For example, in an oral history interview conducted by John Barlow Martin in 1964, Robert Kennedy stated, The President felt that he had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and that we should win the war in Vietnam.¹⁸ When asked what the overwhelming reason was, Robert Kennedy replied, "The loss of all of Southeast Asia if you lost Vietnam. I think everybody was quite clear that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall".¹⁹ When further asked if there was ever any consideration given to pulling out, he replied with a flat no, and when asked if the President would have proposed using ground forces Vietnamese were about to lose, Robert Kennedy replied, We'd face that when we came to it.²⁰ In his biography of the late President, Arthur Schlesinger lauded the success brought by the increased military commitment made in 1962 and referred to the presence of 16,000 American troops by the end of the administration (and 132 killed), and the uncertainty surrounding the policy choices.²¹

As the war in Vietnam began to go sour, however, and especially after Robert Kennedy emerged as an opponent of the war, the brief Cold War emphasis was replaced by a sustained denial of any desire on the part of the President to escalate and citations of statements implying that withdrawal was imminent had Kennedy lived. Once the extent of the debacle of Vietnam was clear, Kennedy's contribution was revisioned, even in the aftermath of the release of the Pentagon Papers. For example, when Arthur Schlesinger wrote his biography of Robert Kennedy, he portrayed the

18. Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 394. Hereafter cited as RFK.

19. RFK, 394.

20. RFK, 395.

21. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Thousand Days: JFK in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 548-550 & 995-998.

President as consistently and unequivocally against an American military solution in Vietnam regardless of the circumstances or consequences (at least after his reelection).²² No longer were the American soldiers in Vietnam troops; Schlesinger was careful to always refer to them as advisors, and downplaying their participation in combat while citing the President as the only administration official willing to stand up to the military and refuse to countenance a significant intervention.

Schlesinger's work has served as the jumping off point for an increasing number of works that have emphasized the reluctance of John Kennedy to resort to the use of force in South Vietnam, contrasting his restraint with the willingness, and in some books eagerness, of Lyndon Johnson to commit American forces to combat. For example, David Kaiser has argued that the entire blame for escalation can be placed at the feet of Lyndon Johnson. According to Kaiser, Kennedy resisted the military and the majority of his advisors recommendations to escalate and instead absolutely intended to withdraw from Vietnam. Howard Jones, in his comparative study of the two assassinations in November, argues that the recent tapes and papers definitively prove that Kennedy never intended to resort to the use of the American military to rescue the South Vietnamese government from its failings, and that the assassination in Dallas was ultimately more important to the ensuing history of the conflict than the one in Saigon.²³

Thus on the issue of Vietnam, some historians have assumed the role that Kennedy administration officials played in the Cuban Missile Crisis, in part because of the lack of credibility of some Kennedy administration officials on the subject of Vietnam (see, for example, the response to Robert McNamara's memoirs which made many of the same assertions in 1995). Despite the actions of the Kennedy administration from 1961-63 (increasing the number of American troops from approximately 700 to approximately 17,000; authorizing the Air Force to fly missions in South Vietnam, including the use of napalm and chemical defoliants; tacitly allowing American officers to lead Vietnamese troops into battle; acquiescing in the overthrow of the government, which increased American culpability for South Vietnam) and the uncertainties of the future had Kennedy survived his trip to Dallas, the image of Kennedy as both unwilling to escalate and planning to withdraw has seen increasing support in the historical community, if not total acceptance. In fact, how Kennedy would have responded we do not know; thus, the burden of proof still remains for historians regarding their assertions about Kennedy's subsequent actions in Vietnam for 1963. The evidence as to what Kennedy intended to do next is contradictory and can be parsed to support both the argument that he intended to withdraw and the argument that he intended to maintain an American role in the

22. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 705. This is the famous sending troops is like taking a drink quote.

23. For a discussion of the limitations of the tapes in general and the tapes regarding Vietnam in particular, especially the issue of what remains to be declassified, see Richard M. Filipink Jr., A Necessary Reinterpretation: Using the Kennedy and Johnson Tapes as a Biographical and Historical Source, *Journal of Historical Biography* 3 (Spring 2008): 87-97.

defense of South Vietnam.²⁴ Kennedy's own oscillations regarding support for the coup reinforce the image of a man who could not make up his mind.

More fundamentally, the question of how subsequent events would have influenced Kennedy's thoughts and actions is largely unanswerable. 1964 was a presidential election year, and the Cold War was still going to be a significant issue in the campaign, especially if the Republican nominee was Barry Goldwater. With Vietnam's emergence as a major Cold War battleground, Kennedy's policy choices would have been influenced at least in part by the needs of his campaign. We do not know how the events of 1964 would have played out had Kennedy lived, nor how Kennedy would have responded to the events.²⁵ We do know what Lyndon Johnson did with the advice of the foreign policy staff he inherited from Kennedy. Johnson believed at the time and after his presidency had ended that he carried out the wishes and policies of his predecessor regarding Vietnam, and Kennedy's men did not contradict this belief significantly at the time, their later works notwithstanding.

Conclusion

As we approach the forty-fifth (now forty-sixth) anniversary of his assassination, the foreign policy legacy of the Kennedy presidency remains a matter for debate. Even as the Kennedy Library selectively processes the declassification of tapes and records from the administration, and hundreds of works on the administration and the man are produced each year, a definitive interpretation remains elusive, clouded by layers of interpretation, revision, spin, and perhaps most potently by the grief of a nation's loss. What is clear is that the Kennedy legacy has been remade to fit both the current perceptions of what a successful presidency should look like, and has hung like an albatross around the interpretations of his immediate successors. The ability to assign only the best of motives and most successful outcomes to the administration and by extension the country, if only he had lived has affected the interpretation of what actually happened by both the general public and historians (who should know better). It remains to be seen if time and distance will allow for a more objective look at the legacy of Kennedy's Thousand Days.

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24. One of the major problems with counterfactuals is the difficulty in conceiving of how changing one variable affects every other variable. If Kennedy lived, other events in 1964 may not have happened, or if they did happen their meanings and significance could have changed.

25. The most obvious example of this ability to selectively employ evidence to support both arguments is Kennedy's televised interview with Walter Cronkite in September 1963. At one point in the interview Kennedy tells Cronkite that the ultimate responsibility for the war lay with the South Vietnamese; later he stated that he did not agree with those who thought the United States should leave Vietnam.

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