

## Castros and Kennedys

*“One Hell of a Gamble”*: Khrushchev, Castro,  
and Kennedy, 1958-1964

By Aleksandr Fursenko and [Tim Naftali](#)

W.W. Norton. 420 pp. \$27.50

*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963:*  
*Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*

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*By Max Holland*

It's been one long Christmas for historians of the cold war since it ended. Communist-bloc documents have been bursting out all over since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. First came *Stasi* files from East Germany; subsequently, as regimes collapsed, access to state and party archives in those countries became possible. Then, with the implosion of the Soviet state in August 1991, came the biggest prize of them all: the promise of “open access” to documentary records from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Defense and Foreign Ministries, the Kremlin, even the KGB.

Fundamental as well as titillating revelations aplenty have issued from a steady stream of documents. The *Bulletin* of the Washington-based [Cold War International History Project](#), which functions as a clearinghouse for documentation, has grown in five years from a modest thirty-two pages to 400-plus pages in its latest incarnation. But Soviet archives have often been opened in an incomplete, haphazard or preferential manner, and even gaining access to previously opened materials can be a byzantine experience. Scholarly access has been granted or restricted, as Raymond Garthoff tells us in [Diplomatic History](#), “to serve current political objectives [or sometimes] nothing more than venal considerations.”

“*One Hell of a Gamble*” has to be considered in this context. It would be easy enough to reinforce all the superlatives on the dust jacket, for the book contains raw, new riches from Soviet sources about the Havana-Moscow-Washington triangle from 1958 to 1964. Not Only are ministerial, Politburo, Communist Party and KGB records cited, but the authors had unprecedented access to records of the GRU, the intelligence service of the Soviet armed forces, which played a larger role in this history than anyone in the West ever knew. On these grounds alone “*Gamble*” qualifies as a “must-have” book on the “Caribbean crisis,” as the Soviets preferred to label it, reflecting Moscow’s claim that the

real issue was not missiles in Cuba, but survival of a fraternal socialist state.

Yet a caveat seems necessary because of the complexities regarding access. Aleksandr Fursenko, by reputation a cautious historian who made no waves during the Soviet era, was not able to rummage through all the cited archives at will and decide firsthand what was important. Under such circumstances, he and co-author [Naftali](#) had an obligation – which they do not discharge – to describe precisely the terms and scope of their unprecedented, privileged access to the inner sanctum. Even casual readers, and “*Gamble*” is obviously calculated to reach a popular audience, are entitled to know if the book is solely the product of the authors’ selectivity and enterprise or if other factors intruded, as they did. Until access is transparent, the situation amounts to a continuation of the cold war by the only means available these days.

The centerpiece of the book is undoubtedly the [Cuban missile crisis](#), and the meaning of the Soviet-sourced information will be debated by students of that clash for years to come. At least one controversy about the period leading up to the crisis, however, would seem settled for good. The notion that a ham-handed US policy alone drove Havana into Moscow’s embrace is hard to sustain after reading Fursenko and Naftali’s account. Fidel Castro was not a card-carrying Communist when his July 26th movement seized power in January 1959; the Cuban Communist Party considered him bourgeois and undisciplined. But the hard-liners on his side, like his brother Raúl and Che Guevara, never had anything less than a Marxist-Leninist revolution and a Moscow alliance as goals, and struggled to bend developments in that direction while Fidel vacillated. “There is no other road [to independence] but the construction of a socialist society and friendship with the socialist camp,” Guevara told Aleksandr Alekseev in October 1959, when the senior KGB operative arrived – unbeknown to the CIA – to establish contacts with the top levels of the Cuban leadership. With the 1954 overthrow of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala uppermost in mind, and via back channels and shell corporations, Raúl Castro immediately set out to obtain Communist-bloc help in bolstering the revolution, while simultaneously purging it of less than reliable elements. This zeal to remake Cuban society, combined with Fidel Castro’s will to power, determined Havana’s course to the point where, in August 1960, the KGB enthusiastically changed its code name for Cuba from YOUNTSIE (Youngsters) to AVANPOST (Bridgehead).

“*Gamble*” also makes a dramatic contribution to understanding US policy toward Moscow during the Kennedy Administration. President Kennedy wanted to finesse the views and participation of his foreign policy team. So he turned to his most trusted confidant – Attorney General Robert Kennedy – to establish a back channel to Premier Nikita Khrushchev, hoping an informal exchange of views would allow the two leaders to be more flexible than they could be otherwise. Existence of this confidential channel has been known at least since 1995, when former Soviet ambassador [Anatoly Dobrynin](#) published his memoirs. But no one has ever had access to the gist of the more than fifty meetings that occurred between Robert Kennedy and Georgi Bolshakov, nominally head of the Washington bureau of TASS, the Soviet press agency, but actually a GRU colonel. This back channel is a fine example of what McGeorge Bundy aptly called the “non-sharables,” the secret things the Kennedy brothers kept between themselves.

Ultimately, however, the narrative often seems driven by the next event about which there is a Soviet document. The temptation to toss out information from Soviet files rather than plumb its meaning is most evident in the chapter on Dallas. Given Lee Harvey Oswald's sojourn in Minsk, the Soviet Union was mortified at the prospect of being blamed for the assassination of President Kennedy, and its propaganda organs worked overtime spewing out disinformation. At the same time, the assassination was a political Rorschach, and Moscow tried to make sense of the event by putting it in understandable, self-referential terms. Thus, according to KGB analysts, an anti-Soviet *coup d'état* had in fact occurred, "organized by a circle of reactionary monopolists in league with pro-fascist groups of the US with objectives of strengthening the reactionary and aggressive aspects of US policy." It's one thing to convey what ruling circles in the Soviet Union thought about the assassination. But the authors make almost no effort to distance themselves from the tripe about an oil depletion allowance conspiracy, nor do they stop to consider the implications of an intelligence service so hidebound by ideology that it cannot report objectively about a critical event in the adversary's camp.

Not coincidentally, access to new Soviet sources has its counterpart on the American side. Tangible evidence comes in the form of the latest volume in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, a historical series initiated by President Lincoln during the Civil War. Beginning in the mid-1980s, *FRUS* volumes came under justified attack by diplomatic historians. The series is supposed to be the official documentary record of US foreign policy and activity. Yet despite ample public evidence to the contrary, new volumes were implying that covert action had played no role in US diplomacy *vis-à-vis* such countries as Iran in 1953 or Guatemala in 1954. In 1991 Congress stepped in and passed a statute requiring that *FRUS* volumes be thorough, accurate and reliable – which was another way of saying they had to include covert actions of major proportions.

Volume XI, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, is an impressive step in this direction. The book painstakingly documents American decision-making over the removal of the missiles, the less heralded "bomber crisis" and the protracted negotiations that never reached any formal agreement ending the standoff. There was never a flat "no invasion" pledge, just a limited assurance by Washington full of loopholes. The active role of then-Director of Central Intelligence John McCone is documented, but the new US openness is truly on display when [covert action against Castro's rule](#) resumes. Notwithstanding the Bay of Pigs debacle and the failure of Operation [MONGOOSE](#), the Kennedy administration embarked on an "Integrated Program of Action toward Cuba" in June 1963. The covert program sought to make Cuba's economy scream, circa 1963, and employed the full panoply of clandestine tools. President Kennedy apparently had no illusions about its chances of success, but it represented a domestic as much as a foreign policy – promulgated with the November 1964 election clearly in mind. The administration simply had to give the impression of "busyness in Cuba," as McGeorge Bundy put it.

The *FRUS* volume also reveals at the highest level of government an unusual preoccupation in 1963 with the possibility of Castro's death. Contingency planning, of

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course, is normal. But the number of references to Castro's death indicates this line of thinking wasn't all that wishful and is further circumstantial evidence that the assassination plots were yet another of the Kennedy brothers' "non-sharables."