

The Cuban Missile Crisis 45 Years Later: A Personal and Professional Remembrance

By Sheldon M. Stern

For those who lived through it, the 1962 missile crisis was surely the most terrifying event of the Cold War.

After President Kennedy's sober revelation on the evening of October 22, I was so unsettled that I took a long walk through the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts. I thought it might be my last, or at least my last with the city's infrastructure intact. All the while I glanced skyward, believing—incorrectly—that I would be able to see incoming, nuclear-tipped Soviet missiles before they detonated.

As a 23-year-old graduate student in history, primarily interested in civil rights, I could never have imagined that 19 years later, I would be the first non-member of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) permitted to listen to all the secret tape recordings of the missile crisis meetings.^[1] The mere existence of surreptitious Kennedy tapes was not publicly known until 1973, when the revelations about Nixon's White House taping system forced open the issue of whether other post-war presidents had also secretly taped conversations.^[2] Even so, the arduous processing of the ExComm recordings, and recognition of what the more than 22 hours contained, did not begin until 1981, four years after I became historian at the John F. Kennedy Library.^[3]

Once I began listening to the ExComm tapes, it quickly became evident that they would alter many presumptions about the most dangerous confrontation of the Cold War. In the early 1980s, for example, a prominent Cold War historian with deep knowledge of the missile crisis told me that JFK's recklessness in October 1962 would ultimately prove that he was "more dangerous than Nixon." At that point, I had already gleaned enough from the tapes to know he was dead wrong, but was, of course, prohibited by law from speaking or writing about still-classified material. I simply replied that he might be in for some big surprises once the tapes were released—a slow process which began in 1983 and concluded early in 1997.^[4]

The ebbing, and then end, of the Cold War brought forward significant archival evidence from Communist sources about the missile crisis, or "Caribbean crisis" as it was termed in Moscow, and "October crisis" as it was (is) called in Havana. These new primary sources predictably resulted in valuable additions to, and corrections of, the historical record, which previously had a decided Washington tilt to it.^[5] That was unavoidable, of course. For the first quarter century after the missile crisis, essentially the only primary evidence had come from American sources.

But not even hard-to-get archival documents from the Kremlin, which no Cold War historian reasonably imagined would ever see the light of day, have influenced our understanding of the missile crisis quite as much as Kennedy's secret tape recordings. The tapes are the closest thing imaginable to a verbatim record of the crisis. In the famous formulation of Leopold van Ranke, the 19th century historian, the tapes promise the tantalizing prospect of history "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*"—as it really was.

Despite what the recordings represent, they have not been immune to attack. Because the Kennedy brothers were the only ExComm participants who knew the meetings were being recorded, it has been charged that JFK and RFK manipulated the discussions to make themselves look good to future historians. This intellectual red herring, like the proverbial bad penny, turns up quite regularly. The most extreme example was William Safire's response to the 1997 publication of Harvard University Press transcripts of the missile crisis tapes. Safire declared that "the [JFK] tapes inherently lie. There pose the Kennedy brothers knowing they are being recorded, taking care to speak for history—while their unsuspecting colleagues think aloud and contradict themselves the way honest people do in a crisis." The ExComm tapes, Safire insisted, "do not present pure, raw history" since JFK knew the tape was rolling and could "turn the meetings into a charade of entrapment—half history-in-the-making, half-image-in-the-manipulating. And you can be sure of some outright deception . . . [by] the turning-off of the machine at key moments."^[6]

This argument, for many reasons, was demonstrably absurd. *Perhaps* in a recorded phone conversation between two people, it might be possible to manipulate a discussion somewhat to shape its outcome, or otherwise permit a false representation to be made. But in a meeting of some 15 people, operating under enormous stress, tension, and uncertainty, it would be tactically and physically impossible. JFK could turn the tape machine on and off in the Cabinet Room—the switch was under the table in front of his chair—but he did not have access to the fast-forward, rewind, play, or record buttons, or the real-time timer that he would need for selective recording. Moreover, even if he had had access to those controls, how would he have kept the participants from noticing what he was doing?

It is also manifestly clear that JFK did not, in his wildest imagination, ever conceive of permitting the public to hear these tapes. Given the law in 1962, he quite correctly thought of them as his private property. He could not foresee such developments as the Freedom of Information Act, the Watergate scandal, and the 1978 Presidential Records Act, all of which would facilitate the opening of such confidential materials. Undoubtedly, it was Kennedy's intention to cherry-pick from the tapes when he wrote his memoirs (his likely reason for making the tapes), ignoring references to classified information and eliding personal and/or political remarks that might be, in retrospect, embarrassing. Why would he need to "control" the content of the tapes from the outset when he was certain that historians and the public would *never* hear them, unless he or his estate granted access? As JFK, quite revealingly, told John Kenneth Galbraith after the crisis, "You will *never know* [emphasis added] how much bad advice I had."^[7]

The same logic, of course, explains why Richard Nixon—the president Safire worked for—repeatedly incriminated himself despite knowing that his words were being recorded. Well into the FBI’s Watergate investigation, and even as the Senate was beginning its inquiry, Nixon did not attempt to tailor his remarks for the tapes, with one notable exception.^[8] Obviously, Nixon never thought he would or could be compelled to release these personal records. If he had believed so early enough, he could easily have destroyed the tapes and in all likelihood saved his presidency.

However, the most important proof of the tapes’ validity is that JFK and the other ExComm participants *did not know the outcome of the crisis when they were in the middle of dealing with it*. Even if President Kennedy had tried, as Safire puts it, to “pose” for history, how could he have known which position to take, and what side of the discussion would ultimately be judged most favorably by historians? What if, for example, the Russians had responded to the blockade, as the Joint Chiefs had explicitly warned, by carrying out low-level bombing raids in the southeastern U.S. and/or by launching the operational nuclear missiles in Cuba at the American mainland? Historians today would be listening to the same tapes (assuming any tapes or historians had survived), but with a radically different outlook. The Chiefs would have turned out to be right: the blockade, as they predicted, *was* a feeble and inadequate measure, and air strikes to neutralize the airfields and missile sites—which Kennedy resisted—should have been ordered immediately. The same tapes, in other words, could now be interpreted to make Kennedy look appallingly weak and negligent rather than diplomatically reasonable, if the outcome had been different.

Robert Kennedy’s posture, as revealed by the tapes, further highlights that the participants could not know what position would seem “right” in the 20/20 vision of hindsight. RFK knew about the taping system, but he regularly took a hawkish, even reckless, stance during the meetings, pushing for a tough strategy that would remove Fidel Castro and demonstrate American resolve to the Soviets. Yet by early December, when *The Saturday Evening Post* published an “exclusive” article on the behind-the-scenes decision-making, RFK suddenly metamorphosed into a “leading dove” all along.^[9] And, when Robert Kennedy decided to run for president in 1968, he again downplayed his aggressiveness and painted himself as a dove and conciliator in *Thirteen Days*, the book (published posthumously) that was likely to function as his presidential campaign book. RFK knew only *after* the crisis had been resolved that a dovish position was “better” politically, and that having pursued a peaceful solution in 1962 would, in 1968, appeal to a nation divided bitterly by the Vietnam War. He could not manipulate his image on the tapes any more than his brother, since neither of them knew what was going to happen the next day or even the next hour. History is not a play. There is no script. As JFK told the ExComm when the risky naval quarantine around Cuba was about to be implemented, “What *we* are doing is throwing down a card on the table in a game which we don’t know the ending of.”^[10]

In fact, in and of itself, *Thirteen Days* is an enormous, if inadvertent, testament to the validity of the secret tapes as an objective source. *Thirteen Days* has never been out of print in the nearly 40 years since it was published and has undoubtedly been the most

influential book on the missile crisis. Derived from RFK's diary of those 13 days, and edited by Theodore Sorensen, the book has been the template for several television and film dramatizations of the crisis. The tapes, however, contradict the book in several fundamental ways and tell a very different story—one that is much more complex, interesting, and subtle. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the tapes actually expose *Thirteen Days* as not just selective or slanted history, which is the common affliction of personal diaries and memoirs, but rather as the capstone of an effort to embellish, if not manipulate, the history of the missile crisis to Robert Kennedy's perceived advantage.[\[11\]](#)

Tales from the Tapes

I first decided in the mid-1980s to write, once the tapes were declassified, a narrative of the missile crisis recordings, rather than a book of edited transcripts. The reason would be clear to anyone who had listened to the tapes. For the listener with a discerning ear, there was too much that could not be captured or rendered in a transcript, even the most accurate one. In JFK's case, for example, the nuances of his voice and temperament, his impatience, his Cold War convictions, his blind spots, his doubts, his political instincts, his quick mind, his dispassionate self-control, his persistence, his caution, his skepticism about military solutions to political problems, and his ironic sense of humor, can only (or best) be rendered in narrative form.

Despite contrary claims made in *Thirteen Days*, or in the early accounts of the crisis written by administration insiders or friends, the tapes demonstrate that:[\[12\]](#)

- Secretary of State Dean Rusk was an articulate, outspoken, and influential participant in the discussions. Indeed, JFK worked secretly with Rusk to create a fallback plan (the so-called “Cordier ploy”) that would utilize the UN secretary general to broker a settlement in case Moscow hardliners rejected the terms reached late on October 27 by RFK and Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. There is nothing on the tapes to suggest that Rusk was indecisive, reluctant to make tough decisions, or “had a virtually complete breakdown, mentally and physically” during the missile crisis, as Schlesinger wrote.[\[13\]](#)
- As noted earlier, Robert Kennedy was one of the most unwaveringly hawkish participants in the ExComm meetings. On October 16, the first day of the meetings, RFK suggested using the American naval base at Guantánamo to stage an incident that would justify military intervention: “You know, sink the *Maine* again or something.”[\[14\]](#) He also suggested that “we should just get into it [attack Cuba] and get it over with and take our losses.” On the final day of crisis meetings, October 27, RFK strenuously opposed any linkage between the Soviet missiles in Cuba and the U.S. missiles in Turkey.[\[15\]](#)
- Adlai Stevenson, far from advocating another “Munich,” as he was accused of doing in the same *Saturday Evening Post* article that labeled

RFK a “leading dove,” was a courageous proponent of Cuba-Turkey linkage.^[16] He was the first to propose a trade of the Cuban and Turkish missiles, and stood his ground against harsh criticism from ExComm’s hawkish majority. It is ironic, of course, that the proposal Stevenson advanced on October 26 was nearly identical to the one JFK secretly adopted the very next day.^[17]

- The tapes document growing tension between President Kennedy and McGeorge Bundy, his national security adviser. Bundy was doing his job by questioning JFK’s decisions. But, the former Harvard dean was brilliant, abrasive, arrogant, and sometimes seemed to forget that he himself was not the president. Two examples suffice to illustrate the point.

On October 22, JFK had just reiterated that all the missile bases could not be destroyed by air strikes. Bundy reacted in a condescending tone: “Entirely true, Mr. President. But I don’t think the next few days is the time to talk about it.” JFK responded irritably, “Well, I know, but I want everybody to understand it, Mac, if you don’t mind!”

On Saturday morning, October 27, the ExComm had just received Khrushchev’s public letter which offered to trade Soviet missiles in Cuba for U.S. missiles in Turkey. This proposal flatly contradicted Khrushchev’s secret Friday evening offer to remove the Cuban missiles in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba.

Against almost unanimous ExComm opposition, JFK insisted that “most people will regard this [trade] as not an *unreasonable* proposal. I’ll just tell you *that*.” Bundy replied disdainfully, “But, what ‘*most people*,’ Mr. President?” Kennedy shot back that it would be impossible to justify attacking Cuba after Khrushchev had said, ‘If you get *yours* out of Turkey, we’ll get *ours* out of Cuba.’ I think you’ve got a very tough one here.” “I don’t see why we pick *that track*,” Bundy repeated, “when he’s offered us the other track in the last 24 hours.” “Well he’s *now* offered us a new one!” JFK reiterated with unmistakable annoyance. “I think we have to,” Kennedy continued, only partially suppressing a derisive laugh, “be now thinking about what our position’s gonna be on *this* one, because this is the one that’s *before* us and *before* the world.”^[18]

Apart from these insights into the personalities involved, the deconstruction of the “Trollope ploy” is perhaps the most striking revelation on the tapes. This missile crisis myth, like so many others celebrated by gullible historians, missile crisis participants, and

film makers, originated in Alsop and Bartlett's *Saturday Evening Post* article, and was later given much greater credence in *Thirteen Days*.^[19] RFK and Sorensen, of course, unlike Alsop and Bartlett, knew about the secret American-Soviet understanding on the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey and had to find some credible way to conceal it. (That secret codicil to the overall deal would not be acknowledged publicly by a knowledgeable ExComm member until Anatoly Dobrynin, Moscow's ambassador to Washington in 1962, confronted Sorensen at a 1989 conference and elicited the admission that the trade had been explicit).

The allegedly brilliant tactic dubbed the "Trollope ploy" took its name from a plot device frequently employed by Anthony Trollope, a 19th century British author. Trollope's novels invariably contained a scene in which a marriage-hungry maiden seized upon a man's casual romantic gesture, choosing to interpret it as a proposal. In the context of the missile crisis, the notion of borrowing from Trollope was supposedly first suggested by Robert Kennedy. The attorney general allegedly proposed that President Kennedy respond to Khrushchev's two separate offers of October 26 and 27 by accepting the earlier message, while ignoring the second. But the secret tapes demonstrate conclusively that the "Trollope ploy" was a cover story from the start, a plausible explanation meant to mask the real terms of the settlement.

President Kennedy, as suggested in the October 27 exchange with Bundy cited above, stubbornly and persistently contended that Khrushchev's Saturday offer could not be ignored *precisely* because it had been made public. JFK repeatedly predicted that the Soviet leader would inevitably "come back" to his public offer on the Turkish missiles; therefore it was foolish and impossible to ignore it. After considerable haggling over the terms, JFK's eventual message to Khrushchev did not "ignore" the Soviet premier's Saturday proposal on Turkey, but deliberately left the door open to settling broader international issues once the immediate danger in Cuba had been neutralized. In other words, JFK offered the Kremlin—overriding the objections of Robert Kennedy, Robert McNamara, and most ExComm participants—a shrewd blend of Khrushchev's October 26 and 27 proposals: the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba; an American non-invasion pledge (contingent on UN inspection, which Castro subsequently prevented); a willingness to talk later about NATO-related issues; *and*, finally, a secret explicit commitment (negotiated directly between Dobrynin and RFK) to withdraw Washington's Jupiter missiles quietly from Turkish soil.

Moreover, as Dean Rusk revealed only in 1987, President Kennedy was even prepared to go one step farther, if Kremlin hardliners balked at the RFK-Dobrynin deal, via the "Cordier ploy."^[20] Named after Andrew Cordier, who was to be the secret intermediary between Washington and Secretary General U Thant, *this* ploy was real. U Thant was to propose, ostensibly spontaneously and of his own accord, that the UN oversee the swap of the offensive missiles in Cuba for the U.S. missiles in Turkey. Given the stakes, Kennedy reasoned, the Soviets might accept this neutral third-party, face-saving solution if all else failed.

Simply put, JFK was determined not to allow any reasonable chance for an accommodation to slip away if the probable alternative was war, and possibly a catastrophic nuclear one. As the president had reminded the gung-ho Joint Chiefs on October 19, an attack on Cuba that prompted the firing of the Soviet missiles could result in 80-100 million casualties. “You’re talkin’ about the destruction of a country,” observed Kennedy.^[21]

What is surprising, now that the truth is knowable, is how the “Trollope ploy” legend lives on. It has become an unshakable fixture in the lore about the missile crisis, even though it never happened. A year after the publication of *Averting ‘The Final Failure,’* I was contacted by a production company working on a television documentary about presidential correspondence. The producers were interested in having me discuss Kennedy’s letters during the missile crisis. Instead, I persuaded them that it would be much more interesting to expose the “Trollope ploy” myth. The producers, excited about having something genuinely “new” in their program, enthusiastically agreed and interviewed me for some 30 minutes. When the program aired, my wife and I waited expectantly, and finally, with less than 10 minutes to go in the program, I appeared on screen for about 4 seconds, as the talking head who introduced the Trollope ploy. I was immediately followed by actor Martin Sheen, who had played RFK in a 1974 dramatization of the missile crisis. Sheen extolled Bobby Kennedy’s brilliant proposal to ignore Khrushchev’s Saturday letter and respond only to the Friday letter!

It’s not just television “documentaries” that perpetuate this kind of fiction. Just this year, David Talbot, author of *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years*, declared that President Kennedy’s “only key support [for a non-military solution] in the increasingly tense Cabinet Room meetings came from his brother Bobby and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.”^[22] Talbot claimed that RFK “matured from a knee-jerk hawk to a wise and restrained diplomat” during the ExComm meetings.^[23] In fact, Robert Kennedy, along with McNamara, consistently opposed any terms involving the U.S. missiles in Turkey well into the final hours of “Black Saturday,” so-called because if a deal failed to materialize, a superpower clash seemed imminent and unavoidable. Talbot’s account attempts to legitimize the myths in *Thirteen Days*.

McNamara’s own behavior has also been mystifying. Although he has, at least, shied away from writing a self-serving memoir about the missile crisis, in Errol Morris’s 2004 Academy Award winning film, *The Fog of War*, McNamara promoted the false notion that he had been, all along, in the front ranks of those promoting a peaceful resolution of the missile crisis, even if it involved a missile swap. It’s incredible that McNamara even invoked the “Trollope ploy” in Morris’s documentary.^[24] Either the aging former secretary of defense could not genuinely remember what had happened, or the persistent repetition of the legend had actually displaced the truth in his own mind.

Before listening to the ExComm tapes, I had taken for granted that John Kennedy was a tough and relentless Cold Warrior. And, without question, JFK and his administration bear significant responsibility for precipitating the missile crisis. Kennedy had approved the Bay of Pigs operation in early 1961 and later aroused Khrushchev’s ire (and fear) by

activating the Jupiter missiles in Turkey, raising the prospect of a nuclear attack on Moscow within minutes. And, of course, the president had also sanctioned Operation MONGOOSE, which RFK directly oversaw, to sabotage the Cuban economy and overthrow (if not kill outright) Fidel Castro.^[25]

The ExComm tapes, nonetheless, prove conclusively that President Kennedy consistently dug in his heels despite the pressure exerted on him to use force. Often, Kennedy stood virtually alone against war-like counsel from the ExComm, the Joint Chiefs, and the leaders of Congress during those historic 13 days. He repeatedly acted to prevent or delay provocative and dangerous measures that were suggested, such as:

- mining international waters around Cuba;
- resisting Soviet efforts to inspect U.S. truck convoys into Berlin;
- declaring war in conjunction with announcing the quarantine;
- extending the quarantine to Soviet aircraft flying to Cuba (stopping a plane, in effect, meant shooting it down);
- using unnecessarily belligerent language in diplomatic exchanges;
- seizing a Soviet ship that had reversed course near Cuba;
- enforcing the quarantine by attacking a Soviet submarine in Cuban waters;
- initiating night surveillance over Cuba using flares;
- immediately destroying a surface-to-air missile site (or all the SAM sites) if a U-2 was shot down over Cuba.

In the private councils of government, in other words, JFK consistently rose above the simplistic, black-and-white Cold War rhetoric he had employed in his October 22 address announcing the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba—the very speech that prompted me to take a last walk around Cambridge. And, to a remarkable degree, President Kennedy succeeded—although not without some “help” from Khrushchev and some genuine luck.

Of course, Kennedy never abandoned his commitment, even *after* the missile crisis, to undermine the Cuban regime and get rid of Fidel Castro. It was one thing, however, for JFK to support efforts to overthrow or eliminate the Cuban leader, and quite another for him recklessly to risk unleashing the nuclear holocaust he feared would turn out to be “The Final Failure.”

[1] McGeorge Bundy, a member of the ExComm, was granted permission in the early 1980s to listen to the tapes as part of the research for his 1988 book, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House,

1988). He did listen to several (but certainly not all) of the recordings. We sometimes had lunch together at the Kennedy Library, and he often complained about how hard it was to decipher the tapes; he was especially irritated because he could not identify the voices of several former colleagues.

[2] John Kifner, “Kennedy Aides Unaware That Talks Were Taped,” *New York Times*, 19 July 1973. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. reflected the reaction of many former Kennedy administration officials to the news about the Nixon tapes by flatly dismissing the possibility that JFK had secretly taped meetings and telephone conversations. It was “absolutely inconceivable,” Schlesinger insisted initially. “It was not the sort of thing that Kennedy would have done. The kind of people in the White House then would not have thought of doing something like that.” JFK’s brother-in-law, Steve Smith, promptly called Schlesinger and told him that “before [Schlesinger] went farther out on a limb, [he] should know that there were some Kennedy tapes.” Schlesinger privately noted that “I think it is a poor idea to record other people’s conversation without their knowing it.” Ibid, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Journals: 1952-2000* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 528.

[3] The delay in processing the tapes, an extremely labor-intensive task, resulted from archival staff cuts in the early Reagan years.

[4] To his credit, about six months after the 1996 release of missile crisis tapes, this historian left a message on my answering machine acknowledging that he had been wrong about JFK. Although the Kennedy Library began releasing recordings in 1983, more than 17 hours of taped conversations were not released until 1996 and 1997. For an account of the difficulties involved in processing and transcribing tapes, see Sheldon M. Stern and Max Holland, “[Presidential Tapes and Transcripts: Crafting a New Historical Genre](#),” History News Network, 21 February 2005.

[5] Historians, for example, learned that Nikita Khrushchev had secretly sent more than 40,000 Soviet combat troops to Cuba. The issue of Soviet tactical nuclear weapons on the island also took on renewed importance, although this was not quite the sensational revelation that it initially appeared to be. For a recent essay that clarifies some of what was, and wasn’t, new knowledge, see David G. Coleman, “[The Missiles of November, December, January, February . . . : The Problem of Acceptable Risk in the Cuban Missile Crisis Settlement](#),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 2007), 8-12.

[6] William Safire, “[White House Tapes: A History of Betrayal](#),” *New York Times*, 12 October 1997. Variations on this same theme can also be found in Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), 7-8, 351; Zachary Karabell, “Roll Tape . . . Inside the White House with JFK, LBJ – and Overhearing Everyone Else,” *Boston Globe*, 19 October 1997; and Gil Troy, “JFK: Celebrity-in-Chief or Commander-in-Chief?” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1998), 634.

Initially, Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, the editors of the first book to exploit the ExComm tapes, speculated that Kennedy might have been “selectively choosing what to

record for posterity.” Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 691. A year later, however, they wrote, “Kennedy could not know how the crisis or discussions would come out, so he would not know what to say that would make him look good.” Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, “Camelot Confidential,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1998), 649. Three years later they reiterated that JFK could not predict which position taken at the ExComm meetings “would look good to posterity.” Philip Zelikow, Tim Naftali, Ernest May, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: Volumes 1-3, The Great Crises* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) v. 3, xxiii.

[7] Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 217.

[8] Owing to the oddity and manipulateness of some of Nixon’s remarks, then-counsel John Dean came to believe in early 1973—and so testified before the Senate—that the president might be secretly tape-recording their meetings at the White House. But Dean had no idea the taping system was omnipresent. The Nixon tapes would reveal that the president believed, ironically, that Dean was also secretly tape-recording their meetings. John W. Dean, *Blind Ambition: The White House Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 269, 331; Samuel Dash, *Chief Counsel: Inside the Ervin Committee—The Untold Story of Watergate* (New York: Random House, 1976), 159.

[9] Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, “In Time of Crisis,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 8 December 1962, 20.

[10] Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting ‘The Final Failure’: John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 181.

[11] One of the most oft-repeated ExComm anecdotes in the first wave of histories depicted Robert Kennedy as bravely rebutting Dean Acheson on October 17, after the former secretary of state argued persuasively in favor of an immediate air attack. “My brother is not going to be the Tojo of the 1960s,” Robert Kennedy allegedly responded, taking a moralistic and then-lonely stand against a surprise raid. An account of the Acheson-Kennedy face-off, or variations of it, initially appeared in the article by Alsop and Bartlett; Theodore Sorensen’s 1965 book about President Kennedy; Elie Abel’s 1966 history of the missile crisis (which benefited from privileged access to Robert Kennedy); and then in *Thirteen Days*. But, as Professor Dominic Tierney recently pointed out, nothing like this exchange—RFK protesting against a “Pearl Harbor in reverse”—appears in the transcript of the October 17 meeting at the White House, nor in the tape recordings. Indeed, the tape recordings depict Robert Kennedy as generally believing, at this juncture, that a blockade in place of an immediate invasion of Cuba would mean “a very slow death” for the administration. Alsop and Bartlett, “In Time of Crisis,” 20; Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 684-685; Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1966), 64-65; Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 37-38; Document 22, “[Memorandum of Meeting](#),” 17 October 1962, and Document 23, “[Memorandum for](#)

[the File](#),” 17 October 1962, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), 94-100; Stern, *Averting The 'Final Failure'*, 98-102; Dominic Tierney, “[Pearl Harbor in Reverse': Moral Analogies in the Cuban Missile Crisis.](#)” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 2007), 63.

[12] For a detailed summary of these new insights, see the conclusion to *Averting 'The Final Failure'*: “Listening and Learning: Insights from the JFK ExComm Tapes,” 413-426.

[13] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 507.

[14] Nor did RFK’s desire to provoke a clash end there. Just how reckless RFK was in October 1962 is underscored by a revelation contained in Don Bohning’s 2005 book about U.S. policy toward Cuba. Bohning, the former Latin American editor for *The Miami Herald*, interviewed Rafael Quintero, a leader among the Cuban exiles opposed to Castro. According to Quintero, he and Roberto San Roman went up to Washington at RFK’s behest after the U.S. blockade of the island had been imposed. When they met the attorney general, he told them, “what you have to do is get yourself a boat and try to sink one of those Russian ships trying to break the blockade . . . on your own.” Thus, at a time when President Kennedy was doing everything in his power to avoid a military confrontation, RFK was still trying to provoke an armed clash. Don Bohning, *The Castro Obsession: U.S. Covert Operations Against Cuba 1959-1965* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 124.

[15] The fact that Robert Kennedy made no effort to alter or destroy the tapes—even though they contradicted his dovish self-portrait in *Thirteen Days*—further underscores the fact that the tapes were considered private property that the owners never thought would be made public.

[16] Alsop and Bartlett, “In Time of Crisis,” 20.

[17] Stevenson had first proposed a Cuba-Turkey missile swap in a note to the president on October 17 and repeated it at the unrecorded 2:30 P.M. meeting on October 20. The UN ambassador surely sensed that the ExComm was stacked against him. Bundy, C. Douglas Dillon, John McCloy, and John McCone were Republicans. RFK had worked in Stevenson’s 1956 presidential campaign, but concluded that the candidate was weak and indecisive and voted for Eisenhower. And, JFK himself had never forgiven Stevenson’s quixotic effort to win a third presidential nomination in 1960. The antagonism in the room directed toward Stevenson was almost palpable. Stevenson later left the meeting to take a call from the UN in the Oval Office. He must have experienced mixed emotions as he talked alone in the Oval Office, possibly from the president’s desk. There is abundant evidence of the less than cordial feelings between JFK and his UN ambassador and it must have been very difficult for the twice-defeated presidential candidate to sit alone in the office he clearly felt *he* deserved to occupy. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure,'* 271-

278. After the news of JFK's assassination, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. noted in his private journal that Stevenson was "smiling and chipper," something it will "take me long to forgive." Schlesinger, *Journals*, 208.

[18] Kennedy valued Bundy's intelligence and candor. Despite the testiness apparent on the tape recordings, their relationship did not deteriorate in the year after the missile crisis.

[19] Alsop and Bartlett, "In Time of Crisis," 18.

[20] Eric Pace, "[Rusk Tells a Kennedy Secret: Fallback Plan in Cuba Crisis](#)," *New York Times*, 28 August 1987. Cordier was a former UN official attached to Columbia University in October 1962.

[21] Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*, 127.

[22] David Talbot, "[The Lessons of JFK: Warrior for Peace](#)," *TIME*, 21 June 2007, 49.

[23] David Talbot, [Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years](#) (New York: Free Press, 2007), 170.

[24] For a deconstruction of McNamara's selective memory, see Fred Kaplan, "[The Evasions of Robert McNamara: What's True and What's a Lie in The Fog of War](#)," *Slate*, 19 December 2003.

[25] As Dean Rusk repeatedly stated at the ExComm meetings, Havana's acceptance of offensive nuclear missiles, especially covertly, furthered Soviet strategic interests but actually threatened the survival of the Cuban revolution. But Castro's realistic fear of U.S. intentions, and his romantic notion of socialist solidarity, blinded him to this danger.