

The Cuban Missile Crisis, Harvard-Style

By Max Holland

The 50th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis in October 2012 is being commemorated with documentaries, conferences, and new books. Several educational institutions are also making primary sources and other historical materials available for educators on websites—among them the [Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs](#) at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

The “[For Educators](#)” link on the site ranks Graham T. Allison’s book, *Essence of Decision*, (first published in 1971; second edition, 1999, with Philip Zelikow) number one on its list of Top 10 books on the subject. *Essence* “continues to be the definitive analysis of the decision-making that prevented a nuclear catastrophe,” according to the [August 6 press release](#) launching the website. There is no question but that *Essence* has been one of the most widely read books about the missile crisis—a political science best-seller—and extraordinarily influential. But what does it signify to call a book “the definitive analysis?” And does *Essence* merit that distinction and the number one ranking?

While scholars have praised the book, an equal number have long questioned both its methodology and conclusions. In 1977, one critic of the first edition asserted that the book was “plagued by inconsistencies and contradictions” and that its three models (rational choice, organizational behavior, and bureaucratic politics) “turn diplomats and officials into prisoners and servants of the state and render the concept of the responsible decision maker meaningless.” More than 20 years later, another pair of scholars noted that “unsuspecting readers may be led into . . . believing that the models are better constructed than they are.”^[1]

University of Pennsylvania historian Bruce Kuklick’s 2001 assessment of both editions of *Essence*, especially its social science and philosophy-of-science theorizing, was more acerbic. “When all the huffing and puffing is done, the message is very simple, and grasping it does not require a PhD in international relations theory, or an endless review of the literature of political science. . . . Allison, and Allison and Zelikow, don’t advance the discussion much beyond sophomores who, with some reason, say ‘It’s all relative’ or ‘I’m OK; you’re OK.’” Kuklick concluded that we still do not really understand “what constitutes a good [international crisis] decision. . . . Even at Harvard, future policymakers might be taught to be very, very humble.”^[2]

The most thorough deconstruction—if not dismantling—of both *Essences* was achieved, however, in 2000 by Stanford University historian Barton J. Bernstein. In a 30-page review essay published in [International Security](#), Bernstein, a member of *Washington Decoded's* editorial board, zeroed in on book's controlling notion, the one insight most readers allegedly gain from reading *Essence*, namely, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” (This was modified in the 1999 edition to read “Where one stands is influenced, most often influenced strongly, by where one sits.”) Robert Kennedy's persistent hawkishness, Bernstein noted, did not stem at all from the fact that he was the attorney general—and that was but one example of how *Essence's* supposedly key contribution was at odds with the facts. Ultimately, Bernstein concluded that Allison/Zelikow's seductive but reductive interpretation was of dubious value, and in fact, remarkably unhelpful in understanding the positions staked out by the ExComm participants. Instead, Bernstein offered another model: “Maybe the dictum should be that an adviser's personality and general experience, far more than bureaucratic affiliation, often heavily influence that individual's perceptions and advice, especially in potentially deadly crises.”[\[3\]](#)

Bernstein also took note of the problems attendant to issuing a revised *Essence*, instead of letting the badly-dated book die a natural death. To name just two: How would the co-authors deal with the substantial scholarly criticisms that had accumulated over a quarter-century? And how would sometimes dramatic new evidence that had surfaced in the meantime be integrated?[\[4\]](#)

The new edition turned out about one-quarter longer and “considerably richer” in evidence and interpretation, Bernstein found. But for the most part the book simply flicked off thoughtful criticisms as if they were pieces of lint. Allison's famous models remained more or less intact, even though, as Bernstein noted, “the models, despite the authors' hedges, serve virtually as substitutes for adequate evidence in some important situations. Put bluntly, the ‘lens’ or model creates evidence that cannot be found.” Overall, Bernstein concluded

The revised volume seems hasty and less like a thorough revision, and more like a patchwork operation: inserting new material, adding qualifiers, acknowledging much of the new history, but not dealing thoroughly, and often not adequately, with the many criticisms published since the 1971 edition.[\[5\]](#)

Bernstein's judgment does not comport with a book deserving of the appellation “the definitive analysis.” Given the historiography of the missile crisis, it would have been entirely appropriate to include *Essence* in the Top 10 ranking because of its role as a catalyst, inciting scholars to think about decision-making. Its standing on the Belfer website would seem, in the end, to have everything to do with the fact that Graham Allison is the director of the Belfer Center rather than the actual merits of the book.

Promoting a Discredited Work

Notwithstanding the hyping of *Essence*, it is the number two book on the Belfer Center's Top 10 list that should really raise eyebrows: Ernest R. May and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, which was published by Harvard University Press (HUP) in 1997.

The John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL) began processing the recordings of the ExComm meetings in 1981, and started to release them to the public two years later. Yet owing to the difficulty of the review process—the audio quality was frequently very poor—more than 17 hours (77 percent) of the ExComm recordings were not released until October 1996 (15+ hours) and February 1997 (2 hours). Given its experience, the JFKL estimated some 100 hours of listening would be required to produce a reliable rendering of one hour of conversation.[\[6\]](#)

Notwithstanding the JFKL's ratio, HUP published May and Zelikow's volume a mere eight months after the February 1997 release, declaring that "These are the full and authenticated transcripts of those audio recordings." The stunning and speedy achievement was explained by stressing the editors' "monumental efforts over the past months" to transform "these crackling, rumbling, and hissing tapes . . . into readable transcriptions." Reviewers of *The Kennedy Tapes* took the assurances of these Harvard scholars—that they had personally engaged in this demanding, laborious labor—at face value.[\[7\]](#)

Three years later, historian Sheldon M. Stern, writing first in *The Atlantic Monthly* and subsequently in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, exposed the emperors as having no clothes. Stern, the JFKL historian for 23 years, a member of *Washington Decoded's* editorial board, and the first non-member of the ExComm to listen to all the tapes, persuasively challenged the accuracy and reliability of the HUP transcripts.[\[8\]](#)

At first, editors May and Zelikow tried to stonewall (and bully) their way out of the controversy by minimizing the significance of the Stern's claims, insisting that any errors were trivial and historically insignificant. An impartial arbiter, University of North Carolina political science professor Terry Sullivan, came down strongly on Stern's side in a subsequent review.

Sullivan had listened to hundreds of hours of LBJ and JFK tapes, and recalled that when first reading *The Kennedy Tapes* in 1997 he had been struck about how often "the speakers were not making sense." He had been especially troubled by the lack of non-sense in the LBJ conversations "when juxtaposed with those in *The Kennedy Tapes*," and cited case after case where "non-sense [was] transformed into perfect sense" by Stern's amendments.[\[9\]](#)

For example, JFK's previously nonsensical: "We got the [unclear] signs of life to begin this air strike" became the straight-forward: "We had decided Saturday night to begin this air strike on Tuesday." Similarly, Sullivan singled out a seemingly cryptic May/Zelikow passage that had the president saying, ". . . I think we get shocked, and the [damage to the] alliance might have been nearly fatal. Particularly [since] I think we would have excused very drastic action by Khrushchev." In Stern's version, the president actually spoke with clarity, saying, "I think the shock to the alliance might have been nearly fatal, particularly as it would have excused very drastic action by Khrushchev."[\[10\]](#)

Eventually, May and Zelikow acknowledged methodological errors, such as using court reporters to produce a flawed first draft of the transcripts, which were clearly not revised with any diligence or conscientiousness. In 2001, May and Zelikow (with Tim Naftali, who was not involved with the 1997 version) produced significantly improved transcripts, published by W. W. Norton in conjunction with the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs.[\[11\]](#)

The Belfer Center website regrettably never mentions this historically substantive and very public controversy, thereby touting an out-of-print book when a markedly better alternative is available to educators.

Other Problems

The Belfer Center's recommended reading list also is outdated, not cognizant of some of the latest scholarship, and haphazardly thrown together from an educational perspective. The list, for example, does not include key sources on the Soviet perspective, such as *Khrushchev Remembers: the Glasnost Tapes*, and Sergei Khrushchev's *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower*. Equally noteworthy is the lack of any source on the Cuban point of view (for example, James Blight and Philip Brenner's, *Sad and Luminous Days*). Also, the 1999 edition of Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh's *Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archives Document Reader* is far more up-to date than David Larson's 1986, *The 'Cuban Crisis' of 1962: Selected Documents and Chronology*. The inclusion of David Coleman's forthcoming [*The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis: the Secret White House Tapes*](#) should have been balanced by also listing Sergo Mikoyan and Svetlana Savranskaya's forthcoming, [*The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November*](#).

Finally, it has become irrefutably plain to missile crisis scholars, since the release of the ExComm conversations, that Robert Kennedy's missile crisis memoir, *Thirteen Days*, is inaccurate, misleading, and often directly contradicted by the tape recordings. RFK's book is clearly an important part of the history of the missile crisis, but it can no longer be regarded as a reliable memoir. Nonetheless, the Belfer Center ranks it as number four on its Top 10 reading list, while failing to include a caveat that its veracity has been gravely undermined by the ExComm tape recordings.[\[12\]](#)

It seems entirely reasonable to ask, in light of the educational parochialism and academic in-breeding discussed above, whether the Belfer Center "[For Educators](#)" link is actually focused on assisting teachers. Or is its top priority really the ongoing promotion of people and publications associated with Harvard University and the Belfer Center itself?

Max Holland was a research fellow with [Presidential Recordings Program](#) at the Miller Center of Public Affairs when the controversy over the missile crisis transcripts erupted in 2000.

[1] Miriam Steiner, "The Elusive Essence of Decision," *International Studies Quarterly*, June 1977, 389, 395; Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," *American Political Science Review*, June 1992, 301-302.

[2] Bruce Kuklick, "[Reconsidering the Missile Crisis and Its Interpretation](#)," *Diplomatic History*, Summer 2001, 517-523.

[3] Barton J. Bernstein, "[Understanding Decision-making, Explaining US Foreign Policy and the Cuban Missile Crisis: A Review Essay](#)," *International Security*, Summer 2000, 157-158.

[4] *Ibid.*, 145-146.

[5] *Ibid.*, 147, 155.

[6] *Ibid.*, 147.

[7] Sheldon M. Stern and Max Holland, "[Presidential Tapes and Transcripts: Crafting a New Historical Genre](#)," HNN, 21 February 2005.

[8] Sheldon M. Stern, "[What JFK Really Said](#)," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2000, 122-128 and "[Source Material: The 1997 Published Transcripts of the JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes: Too Good to be True](#)," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, September 2000, 586-593.

[9] Terry Sullivan, "[Confronting the Kennedy Tapes: The May-Zelikow Transcripts and the Stern Assessments](#)," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, September 2000, 594-597.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Tim Naftali, Ernest May, and Philip Zelikow, eds. *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001). Educators should be excused if they are confused, because May and Zelikow actually have published four distinct versions of "authoritative" missile crisis transcripts. HUP published two, a hardcover volume in 1997 and paperback in 1998, and Norton, in addition to the aforementioned hardcover, published in 2002 a still-in-print concise paperback that uses the HUP title (*The Kennedy Tapes*) but the Miller Center transcripts. Amendments and

corrections were incorporated in these various volumes without any notation or explanation, leaving it to scholars to sort out the muddle.

In February 2003, Zelikow, then the director of the Miller Center, announced the creation of a website to allow scholars unaffiliated with the Center to amend the published missile crisis transcripts and download corrected versions. “Scholars,” Zelikow affirmed, “should invite further comments and criticism and . . . try to welcome them. . . . That’s the way that scholars work.” Philip Zelikow, remarks at 2003 JFKL conference on presidential tapes.

See also http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/presidentialrecordings/trans_updates. Unfortunately, the updates and corrections site is still not interactive.

[12] A just-released book by Sheldon M. Stern, [*The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality*](#), includes a rigorous critique of *Thirteen Days*.