

The Politics of Postmortems

By Max Holland

How objective and useful are intelligence postmortems of the kind produced in Washington?

The press usually accords them an exalted status from the moment they are released, whether they are produced by the executive branch, Congress, or semi-independent commissions. Postmortems are regarded as a reliable account of what went wrong and why, if not an authoritative and objective one.

But should postmortems be embraced at face value? Or are they subject to personal/political/institutional pulls and tugs that can easily distort their findings?

In the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, four separate postmortems examined the performance of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The first two were internal reviews; the third was coordinated within the intelligence community by the US Intelligence Board (USIB); and the fourth was conducted by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB).

Despite the sameness of the facts at issue, the four *ex post facto* analyses varied dramatically. They were subject to extraneous influences that distorted their findings and even their presentations of fact. The key conclusions depended on who wrote the postmortem, when, and for whom.

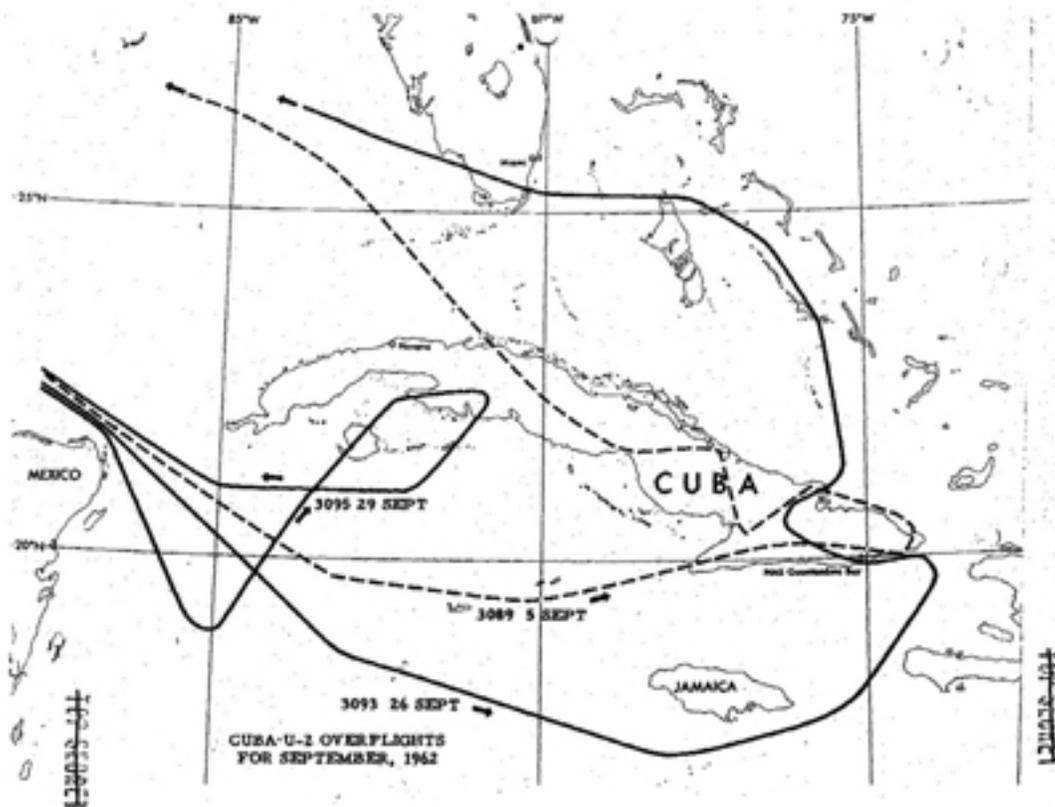
The lesson from these once-classified postmortems is that after-the-fact inquests in Washington should be viewed with the utmost caution.

The Critical Issues after October 1962

The public terms of the settlement all but guaranteed that the missile crisis would be perceived as a sorely-needed triumph for the Kennedy administration and the intelligence community, both of which were still smarting from the Bay of Pigs debacle of the previous year. As Richard H. Rovere, the *New Yorker's* Washington correspondent, observed in early 1963, "the handling of the October crisis was, of course, superb (an easy *ex post facto* judgment, based wholly upon success)."[\[1\]](#)

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Yet the CIA's margin of success had actually been dangerously narrow. When all the facts were in, the missile crisis could be fairly called a "near-failure of American intelligence . . . of the first magnitude," as the late Alexander George, a Stanford professor, put it in 1974.^[2] All the intelligence estimates prepared prior to mid-October predicted that the Soviets were not likely to implant surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) on Cuban soil. Of equal if not greater moment, the first hard evidence of the SSMs' deployment was not in hand until October 15, more than a month after they had arrived in Cuba and just days before the CIA would deem some of them operational. That meant Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had come shockingly close to accomplishing his strategic *fait accompli*.



The "photo gap": the CIA discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba belatedly because the Kennedy administration attenuated U-2 coverage in September 1962.

Both these intelligence deficits—one analytical, one a matter of collection—were hinted at in newspaper stories published just after the acute phase of the crisis peaked. As a October 31 article in *The New York Times* put it, the first question was whether intelligence "estimates [had been] tailored to fit top policy beliefs," or if administration officials had "reject[ed accurate] estimates as erroneous." Meanwhile, the collection issue—which would be dubbed the "intelligence" or "photo" gap—turned on why it had taken the administration so long to detect the SSMs' deployment. "[T]here is general

mystification about how the Russians could have built so many missile sites so quickly without warning,” the *Times* article noted.^[3]

All four secret postmortems would address these two primary questions. There was, however, a dramatic difference in the political consequences attached to each one.

With respect to the mis-estimates, unless it could be shown that the White House had tried to influence the analytical process—in particular, a mistaken [Special National Intelligence Estimate \(SNIE\) dated 19 September 1962](#)—or flatly ignored evidence presented to it in an estimate, only the intelligence community stood to be criticized.

But the exact opposite was true with respect to the photo gap. In this case, the administration would surely bear the brunt of criticism, because it was the White House and State Department that had effectively ordered the CIA to attenuate U-2 surveillance in mid-September, just as the SSMs were arriving in Cuba. The CIA might conceivably be criticized for acceding too easily to the administration’s dictates on overflight policy. Still, most of the onus for the fact that “American intelligence . . . went blind for five crucial weeks” would almost surely fall on policy-makers in the Kennedy administration—that is, if all the facts came out.^[4]

The photo gap thus represented a political problem for the administration. It left President Kennedy vulnerable to the charge that he had been taken in by the Soviets’ elaborate deception, to a point where the administration had even tried to foist a false sense of security onto the country. As Cynthia M. Grabo, a respected scholar of the intelligence process, would write in 2004, it really should not have mattered “what intelligence ‘thought’” about the likelihood of missiles being deployed in Cuba. “But it did matter, imperatively, that intelligence collect the data which would permit a firm judgment whether or not the missiles were there.”^[5]

The Lehman Report

[Richard Lehman](#), a 13-year veteran of the CIA, held the formal title of assistant for special projects in the Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) at the time of the missile crisis. On Saturday, October 27, 1962, the day that would later prove to be the turning point, OCI director Russell Jack Smith called Lehman into his office and said [John McCone](#), the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), wanted an analysis of the agency’s performance to date even though the end of the crisis was seemingly not yet in sight.

“McCone wanted to know how we had got[ten] there,” Lehman later recalled, “what we [had done] right, what we [had done] wrong, and so on.”^[6] (Indeed, the final version of the Lehman report would carry this handwritten notation: “Save for the Pearl Harbor hearings—if some, or any”). Lehman’s research was aided greatly by fact that McCone had a habit of keeping meticulous memoranda of actions, meetings, and conversations. Consequently, within four days, Lehman had a manuscript of nearly 100 pages on the

events leading up to the Soviet missiles' detection. The report was accurate, careful, and, if anything, understated. It was not exhaustive, but did reflect the gist of what had happened in the weeks leading up to the discovery of the missile sites.

With respect to the collection deficit, Lehman correctly zeroed in on the events of September 10 as being absolutely “crucial to the record.”^[7] On that day, an extraordinary meeting had been convened at the White House by McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s national security adviser, in concert with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. The two men, still smarting over criticism that they had not done enough to protect the president before and during the Bay of Pigs debacle, were anxious to prevent an embarrassing U-2 incident over Cuba now that surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) capable of downing the high-altitude surveillance aircraft were being installed all over the island. Bundy and Rusk were deeply concerned that continuation of intrusive overflights would climax in a fatal incident that would put Kennedy in a double bind: abroad he would be criticized for violating sovereign airspace, while at home, conservative critics would claim the incident was a *casus belli* that provided the perfect opportunity to “do something” about the unprecedented Soviet military buildup on the Caribbean island.^[8]

In the absence of McCone, who was honeymooning in France, and under pressure from Bundy and Rusk, the CIA committee in charge of U-2 overflights agreed to attenuate the thorough, bi-monthly overflights of Cuba that had been routine since early 1962. The next four U-2 overflights would either pass quickly over discrete portions of the island or skirt it altogether. In this manner, the Kennedy administration degraded the one intelligence-gathering tool capable of delivering precisely the kind of dispositive information about possible missile deployments that it was simultaneously insisting upon. Together with delays caused by the hurricane season in the Caribbean, the net result was a dysfunctional intelligence regime in a dynamic situation.^[9]

Lehman’s blunt recollection in 2004 was that President Kennedy had “shot himself in the foot” by attenuating U-2 coverage over Cuba.^[10] In 1962, however, the OCI officer was much more circumspect about how he said the same thing in his report. Lehman noted then that the U-2 overflights permitted after September 10 were successful, inasmuch as they had established new facets of the Soviet military build-up. Yet the U-2 missions “did not—and since they were designed to avoid SAM-defended areas, could not—detect the ballistic missile deployments then under way.”^[11]

Lehman also observed in 1962, and quite correctly, that responsibility for the restrictive overflight policy might not appear to be as clear-cut as it was. Coming away from the September 10 meeting at the White House, the CIA had understood, in no uncertain terms, that intrusive overflights, if proposed, would not be sanctioned by the National Security Council’s Special Group Augmented (SGA) for submission to the president. The record thus showed that the SGA had not turned down any written requests from the CIA for more intrusive overflights, and that President Kennedy had authorized every overflight ever recommended.

A critical limitation imposed on the overflight regime for five weeks had been unspoken, in other words, and not actually captured on paper. This fact would assume ever-larger significance in succeeding postmortems.

The Inspector General's (Earman) Report

Days before Lehman completed his report in mid-November 1962, Jack Earman, the CIA's Inspector General (IG) since May, took up virtually the same task. The reason why McCone asked for two internal postmortems remains unclear; perhaps, as a relative newcomer to the CIA, he did not realize postmortems were normally the purview of the IG. Earman finished a draft of his more formal postmortem on November 20, about one week after Lehman put the final touches on his report.^[12]

Earman's first draft apparently glossed over the photo gap too quickly, or otherwise treated it in a manner that roused McCone's attention. Accordingly, the DCI instructed Earman to take another look at the factors behind the September 10 decision to attenuate U-2 coverage. In response, Earman described, in a November 26, 1962 memo only declassified in 2004, how he intended to incorporate McCone's criticism in a revised account.

We have been told by several Agency officers that there was a widespread understanding in CIA that overflights of known SAM sites were forbidden by the Special Group [Augmented]. I believe this understanding stemmed from the desires which Secretary Rusk expressed at the 10 September 1962 meeting in Mr. Bundy's office which was not in fact a duly constituted meeting of the Special Group [Augmented]. However, the records do not reveal that CIA pressed for additional missions or changes in coverage of overflights approved for September 1962.^[13]

Earman then went on to recount the history of September overflights in some detail, and recited his new conclusion—one that would not be that different from Lehman's, although Earman's point was not as sharp. Earman said his finding would be along the lines of "extreme caution with regard to U-2 flights . . . affected the planning of Cuban reconnaissance overflights during [September]."^[14]

At 72 pages, the IG survey turned out appreciably longer than Richard Lehman's 33-page analysis (and would be exceeded in length only by the 90-page USIB Report, the third postmortem). Earman obviously considered the collection deficit one of the most prominent issues, perhaps due to McCone's prodding. Discussion of the overflight restrictions began on page 11, and if the annex is counted, no other aspect of the CIA's performance was examined at greater length in Earman's report. The final language put the consequences from the attenuation of overflights this way: "Thus, it took nearly a month [from September 10 to October 14] to get the coverage CIA had sought to get in a single [U-2] mission."^[15]

McCone essentially put the Lehman and IG reports into consonance on the reasons for the photo gap. Neither of these postmortems internal to the CIA unfairly attempted to shift responsibility onto the State Department and/or White House for the collection deficit. They were simply candid about the fact that analytical errors, together with the administration's overweening concern about an international incident, had led to a significant degradation of intelligence-gathering precisely during the period when the first offensive missiles were being trucked into place.

The USIB Report

On November 14, the same day Lehman turned in his report to McCone, Dr. James Killian, chairman of the [President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board](#) (PFIAB), asked the CIA to produce an "all-source, all-agency" postmortem.^[16] The PFIAB was an elite, ostensibly non-partisan panel that had been established by President Eisenhower in 1956. It consisted of experienced officials currently working outside the government, supplemented by some of the nation's best scientists. PFIAB's purpose was to advise the president directly on all matters concerning US intelligence, from the most arcane technical issues to mundane counterintelligence matters. The panel's standing as one of the only external overseers of the intelligence community, along with its direct access to the president, guaranteed that the political stakes in the third postmortem would be high.

McCone transmitted Killian's request to the US Intelligence Board the very next day. This inter-agency body, in existence since 1958, represented the pinnacle of the intelligence community at the time, having as its principal members the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). The USIB postmortem would thus not bear the CIA's imprimatur alone, but represent the coordinated and considered judgment of the entire intelligence community, just as most of the community had been engaged, one way or another, in the intelligence coverage prior to the missiles' discovery.

McCone then picked Jack Earman to lead the USIB working group designated to draft the report. On the surface, this made the third postmortem simply an elaboration of the internal analysis Earman was six days away from wrapping up. Yet the USIB inquest also promised to differ in two dramatic respects. All the participants in this postmortem would, in effect, be grading their own and (perhaps more importantly) their comparative performance. And although the USIB findings would still be highly classified, they would nonetheless be circulated outside the originating body, unlike the first two postmortems.

A problem with establishing the facts soon surfaced within the USIB working group, particularly with respect to the most politically sensitive issue of all, the photo gap. As Lehman had been the first to point out, the September 10 decision to degrade U-2 overflights was imperfectly reflected in the written record. The documentation that did exist left the implication that the CIA had not been very exercised by the limitation on

overflights imposed from the White House. It was true that at one USIB meeting on September 19, Lt. General Marshall Carter, the CIA's deputy director, had remonstrated about the attenuation of U-2 overflights. "We cannot put a stop to collection," Carter had fumed. "Otherwise, the president would never know when the point of decision was reached."^[17] But Carter's protestations had not gone any further than that meeting. Consequently, it could easily be made to appear as if the CIA had gotten exactly the photo coverage it had asked for.

Then too, an incomplete paper trail might have been less of a problem but for the predispositions Roger Hilsman brought to the postmortem. Hilsman, the INR director, viewed the postmortem as nothing less than a crucial engagement in his ongoing war with the CIA. He had come into the administration believing that the CIA had gotten so powerful during the 1950s that "it was running the foreign policy of the United States." And one of the tasks Hilsman had privately set for himself was "cutting [the agency] back in power," while "sav[ing] the [State] Department from the CIA" by reducing the latter's alleged policy-making proclivities and overweening influence.^[18]

Hilsman was intent on using this opportunity to scrub the USIB postmortem for anything that smacked of the CIA patting itself on the back at the expense of the State Department, or the administration in general. This goal was all the more urgent, of course, because only McCone, from among all those on the president's national security team, had anticipated the emplacement of Soviet missiles in Cuba and distinctly warned Kennedy of that possibility.

Hilsman's influence on the USIB process can best be understood by comparing the postmortem to his controversial 1967 memoir, *To Move a Nation* (controversial, because so-called "kiss 'n' tell" memoirs, which unilaterally reveal classified information, had not yet become commonplace). Hilsman devoted an entire chapter in his book to the aftermath of the missile crisis, which he entitled "The Intelligence Postmortem: Who Erred?" Referring to the USIB report, Hilsman characterized it as one of "two attempts by insiders to allege that policy [had] interfered with intelligence." McCone instituted the USIB study, Hilsman wrote,

immediately after the crisis to determine if the missiles would have been discovered sooner if the Secretary of State had not requested on September 10 that the next [U-2] flight be broken up into four separate flights. For a while there was some uneasiness at the possibility of some real alley fighting developing. But it was not difficult to show, first, that any delay caused by making four flights instead of one was negligible; and, second, that there had never been a turndown of any flight that intelligence had asked to be approved, but that on the contrary both the White House and the State Department had actually pushed for more intelligence all along.^[19]

Incorrectly attributing the USIB postmortem to McCone was not Hilsman's only or worst error. It was disingenuous to claim the September 10 decision had not markedly interfered with the collection of hard intelligence, i.e., U-2 photographs that would almost

certainly have led to the missiles' discovery prior to October 15. Only by characterizing the delay as "negligible," was Hilsman able to posit the dubious conclusion that the U-2 flight on October 14 had "found the missiles at just about the earliest possible date."[\[20\]](#)

Hilsman's position was that of loyalty to the administration rather than the facts, in accordance with his goal of insulating the State Department and White House from criticism for having degraded, at a critical time, the one intelligence-gathering tool that was indispensable.

As but one member of the USIB committee, of course, Hilsman could not unilaterally impose his peculiar views. Yet when Hilsman's 1967 memoir and the USIB postmortem are juxtaposed, it is clear that his version carried the day; indeed, the September 10 "special meeting" was not even mentioned until page 69 of the 90-page USIB study. "The procedures adopted in September delayed photographic intelligence," concluded the USIB report, "but this delay was not critical, because photography obtained prior to about 17 October would not have been sufficient to warrant action of a type which would require support from Western Hemisphere or NATO allies."[\[21\]](#)

This finding was in marked contrast to the Lehman and IG reports, which made no such specious claim, and indeed, suggested the opposite. But all the USIB members harbored a shared interest in propagating this finding to anyone outside the immediate intelligence community, even the PFIAB, if only because this conclusion was indistinguishable from the public explanation given by the administration whenever it was asked about the photo gap.[\[22\]](#)

In contrast to the Lehman and IG reports, the USIB report was a negotiated (if not compromised) postmortem, the product of a bargain between competing and conflicted government elements. The USIB report gave the appearance of presenting the facts in an unvarnished manner. But when a problem arose, the language was massaged until the postmortem was acceptable to vested interests—bureaucratic as well as those of the incumbent administration.

The PFIAB Postmortem

Despite the intense bargaining over the USIB postmortem, it was never viewed as an end in itself by those who had commissioned it—the nine men who constituted the PFIAB. Mindful of their access to the Oval Office, the PFIAB members always intended to gather additional information as necessary and submit their own findings to the president.

PFIAB members decided on this approach, in part, because they recognized the USIB's coordinated postmortem was likely to represent a "best foot forward" by the intelligence community and its titular head, the DCI. Yet they were also inclined to file a

separate analysis because relations with John McCone—at least from PFIAB’s perspective—were uneasy at best.

DCIs, in general, tended not to like having an independent board looking over their shoulder, “encroaching on their prerogatives.”^[23] This was particularly true of McCone, who, at one point, had suggested abolishing the PFIAB. In addition, McCone had a true nemesis on the panel: Clark Clifford, the archetypal Washington lawyer, and a skilled, consummate defender of partisan political interests.

In the administration reshuffling that occurred after the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy had offered Clifford the DCI’s job, only to have him decline the honor. Instead, Clifford accepted an appointment to the PFIAB with the understanding that he would become chairman once James Killian stepped down. Clifford’s appointment marked the first time that someone known largely for being a partisan “Washington fixer” had ever been named to the prestigious board. Moreover, Clifford knew he had been Kennedy’s preferred choice for DCI, and he did not regard the notoriously inflexible McCone as a very good second choice. McCone’s standing as a rich Republican businessman who had served the Eisenhower administration and remained close to Richard Nixon, piled on top of McCone’s reputation as an ideological anti-Communist, inclined Clifford to be critical and wary of the DCI. The friction between the suave lawyer and blunt, engineer-turned-tycoon would reach, in Clifford’s words, a “crescendo” during the PFIAB’s postmortem into the missile crisis.^[24]

When the PFIAB members began their review, they “were faced with a dilemma,” according to Clifford’s 1991 memoir:

We did not wish to criticize the president, who had handled the crisis brilliantly once the Soviet missiles had been positively identified by American intelligence, but we felt the length of time it had taken to discover the missiles was dangerously and inexcusably long. We were particularly disturbed that there had been no overflights of Cuba between August 29 and October 14 despite public charges that offensive missiles were being installed.^[25]

In other words, Clifford and the other PFIAB members correctly identified the key collection deficit early on, and instantly recognized its political sensitivity.

PFIAB’s deliberations began in earnest in early December 1962, when McCone appeared to discuss the ongoing USIB postmortem and answer the board’s questions. The DCI mounted a stout defense of the intelligence community’s performance, minimizing the analytical and collection deficits, in something of an “all’s well that ends well” perspective. At this juncture, retired ambassador Robert Murphy asked, “[Had] any handicaps been placed on the collection of intelligence about Cuba?” Here, if the DCI wanted it, was an opening to apportion responsibility for the degradation of U-2 surveillance in September. But McCone eschewed the opportunity to criticize policy-makers for putting blinders on the CIA. “No,” he answered flatly.^[26]

The questioning then became more pointed, according to internal CIA documents that recorded the gist of these meetings. Clifford brought up the issue of McCone's personal warning to the president about Soviet offensive missiles, first enunciated in August, and also asked about the so-called "honeymoon cables," September telegrams McCone had sent from the French Riviera in which he repeated his concerns. Former Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, Jr., another PFIAB member, then asked the key question point-blank: How much earlier than mid-October might the U-2 have discovered offensive missiles? The DCI accurately responded that uncovering the missiles was conceivable from about September 20 onwards, but then obfuscated by claiming that nothing clinching the case was likely until mid-October. McCone was essentially foreshadowing the negotiated finding of the USIB postmortem.

The most that McCone would admit to was that some "timidity" and an "attitude of caution" had existed in September, but he was very relaxed about its consequences—a posture diametrically at odds with his alarmist position at the time. It was also incongruent with his post-crisis opinion, for as he had observed in response to Earman's first draft, the CIA "had been remiss in proposing something less than complete coverage."[\[27\]](#)

PFIAB members found McCone's appearance wholly unpersuasive. They probably regarded it as evidence of the DCI's belief that any postmortem conducted by PFIAB was duplicative, and more of a bother than a help. If anything, McCone's testimony served primarily to harden their inclination to treat the USIB's postmortem with the utmost skepticism.

McCone presented the USIB findings to the PFIAB on December 26, and after he left, Clifford declared himself profoundly unimpressed. Clifford bluntly labeled the USIB report a "snow job" because of the way it depicted the photo gap, and criticized the excessive "delicacy" with which the issue of U-2 overflights had been addressed.[\[28\]](#) To a degree, of course, the urbane Washington lawyer was right. The USIB report was a compromised narrative and analysis. Still, the direction in which the postmortem had been bent insulated the Kennedy administration from criticism more than it benefited the intelligence community.

Clifford then posed a direct question to his colleagues: if a similar situation were to be encountered again, would anyone on PFIAB argue that the President had been well served by the intelligence community? There was silence—until Clifford answered his own question. The successful outcome of the missile crisis should not "lull us into a false sense of comfort," he argued. The Republican National Committee had leveled a "preposterous" allegation against President Kennedy, namely, that he had deliberately withheld and/or manipulated information about the missiles in order to gain a political advantage in the November election. The facts proved otherwise, said Clifford, and had to be brought out in PFIAB's own report since the intelligence community was obviously unwilling to face up to its own shortcomings.[\[29\]](#)

Clifford took the position that the “delays had been caused by decisions made *within the intelligence community* [emphasis added] for internal reasons.” The collection deficit was just another reflection of the “state of mind within the intelligence community . . . which rejected the possibility of offensive missiles in Cuba,” and Clifford expressed concern that the president “would be hurt by the CIA’s efforts to protect itself.”[\[30\]](#) In sum, Clifford sought to place the onus for the photo gap onto the CIA, if not the Republican DCI who had sounded the tocsin about the Soviet missiles in the first place.

On March 9, 1963, the PFIAB submitted its findings directly to President Kennedy during a 79-minute meeting. The postmortem read more like a lawyer’s brief rather than a disinterested analysis, and Clifford’s handiwork was manifest. The analysis was almost transparent in its effort to absolve policy-makers from any responsibility for the photo gap. The longest paragraph in PFIAB’s 10-page postmortem pertained to the September 10 meeting. Owing to the paucity of records, the board claimed, it was “impossible to determine whether or not there was a restriction” that prevented intrusive overflights of Cuba, although PFIAB did allow that the CIA was clearly under the “impression” that such an injunction was imposed.[\[31\]](#)

But rather than apportion responsibility for the photo gap in a fair manner, PFIAB only found fault with the intelligence community. In what was by now a familiar litany, the president “granted authorization for all U-2 flights which were recommended to him by . . . the SGA, which “was not made fully aware of the delaying effects on the acquisition of aerial intelligence” that stemmed from the September 10 decision.[\[32\]](#) This characterization of what happened alone betrayed a definite bias. As everyone involved in the U-2 program knew, one of the fundamental ways the SGA and president imposed managerial discipline on the overflight regime was to insist upon completion of approved flights before new requests could be submitted.

PFIAB’s postmortem cast a jaundiced eye on the intelligence community’s performance. That was fair enough, especially in light of the coordinated USIB report, which tended to explain (and implicitly excuse) all the deficits. Yet the PFIAB was hardly objective in comparison. It is impossible to separate out the harshness of PFIAB’s findings from the fact that many board members were “averse” to John McCone, as Attorney General Robert Kennedy would put it in 1964 interview.[\[33\]](#) And in its eagerness to diminish the CIA’s finest hour, and cut down McCone’s newly-won reputation for prescience, the PFIAB erred in the other direction, taking the deficits out of the context in which they had occurred, as if the intelligence community operated in a vacuum, immune from the pressures or considerations of policy-makers. Rather than producing an accurate and dispassionate postmortem, worthy of an elite body, the PFIAB produced a handy tool for rebutting Republican charges about the administration’s performance, which certainly served what was Clifford’s primary interest.

An interesting postscript to the PFIAB postmortem occurred in April 1963, when Clifford was elevated, as planned, to the panel’s chairmanship. It is not known whether *The New York Times* knew about the dispute raging internally over the PFIAB

postmortem, but the paper ran a critical editorial in April that certainly read as if it did. Clifford “has a brilliant mind,” observed the *Times* editorial,

but as a long-time trouble-shooter for the Democratic party, he is inextricably associated with partisan politics. The selection is at best unfortunate. It is bound to give the impression that our intelligence activities will now be monitored—not by a chairman who is an expert in the field—but by one who is essentially a politician.^[34]

Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit

The government’s seeming inability to be consistently objective in 1962-63 is a sobering thought during a period when looking backwards is a growth industry.

Two internal CIA postmortems, the Lehman and IG reports, were in close agreement over the plain facts and their meaning. But as responsibility for an *ex post facto* analysis moved outside the confines of the agency, both facts and their meaning became increasingly contested. The analyses careened from two that simply recounted the messy, non-textbook manner in which the missiles had actually been discovered, to one that papered over the collection deficit, and finally, to one that asserted the nation had in fact experienced a nearly catastrophic intelligence failure owing solely to the CIA’s dereliction of its responsibilities. The four postmortems bring to mind Akira Kurosawa’s film masterpiece, *Rashômon*. When each postmortem is deconstructed, it cannot be separated from the person(s) who wrote it or for whom and what purpose it was written.

What makes this finding all the more sobering is that this intense struggle occurred completely behind the scenes, and over a crisis that was widely considered an unmitigated triumph for the incumbent administration. If there was so much disagreement and hard bargaining over an intelligence success, it must be incomparably more difficult to reconcile competing interests when a failure is the subject of an inquiry, and when the exercise is conducted in public.

Postmortems are desirable and clearly necessary exercises. Yet the lesson from the analyses conducted in 1962-63 would seem to be that all such inquests must be viewed critically and with the utmost caution. They can easily be as flawed as the events they purport to recount and judge, if not more so.

After all, not knowing the future imposes a certain degree of honesty. With the benefit of hindsight, everyone knows what side to be on.

[1] Richard H. Rovere, “[Letter from Washington](#),” *New Yorker*, 2 March 1963.

[2] Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 473.

[3] Hanson Baldwin, "An Intelligence Gap: Experts Ask if Reports on Cuba Were Poor or Adapted to Policy," *New York Times*, 31 October 1962.

[4] Max Frankel, *High Noon in the Cold War: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Ballantine, 2004), 27.

[5] Cynthia M. Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 140.

[6] Richard Kovar, "[Mr. Current Intelligence: An Interview with Richard Lehman](#)," *Studies in Intelligence*, Summer 2000, No. 9, 57.

[7] Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, "CIA Handling of the Soviet Build-up in Cuba, 1 July-16 October 1962," 14 November 1962 (hereafter Lehman Report), CIA Records Electronic Research Tool (CREST), National Archives (NARA), 12.

[8] Max Holland, "[Politics and Intelligence: The Photo Gap that Delayed Discovery of Missiles in Cuba](#)," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2005, 19-20.

[9] [Ibid.](#), 18-22.

[10] Holland interview with Richard Lehman, 3 June 2003.

[11] Lehman Report, CREST, 29.

[12] "Inspector General's Survey of Handling of Intelligence Information During the Cuban Arms Build-up, August to mid-October 1962," 20 November 1962 (hereafter IG Report), CREST, NARA.

[13] Memorandum for DCI, "Inspector General's Report on Handling of Intelligence Information During the Cuban Arms Build-up (Revised), dated 20 November 1962," 26 November 1962, CREST, NARA.

[14] [Ibid.](#)

[15] IG Report, CREST, 11.

[16] Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence, "Department of State's Objections to the Report on the Cuban Arms Build-up," 12 March 1963, CREST, NARA.

[17] Mary McAuliffe, ed., [CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis](#) (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), 42.

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- [18] Roger Hilsman Oral History, 14 August 1970, John F. Kennedy Library, 4, 15.
- [19] Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 187-188.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 196.
- [21] “Report to the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board on Intelligence Community Activities Relating to the Cuban Arms Build-up (14 April through 14 October 1962) by the Director of Central Intelligence,” 26 December 1963 (hereafter USIB Report), CREST, NARA, 89.
- [22] At an [NSC meeting on 22 October 1962](#), Robert Kennedy raised the issue of the photo gap and effectively laid down what would become the administration’s position. The fact that there had been a delay would be obfuscated, and attributed whenever possible to adverse weather. Indeed, the administration would misleadingly claim that it had *increased* U-2 surveillance in September. US Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office 1996), 154.
- [23] Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 353.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 355.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 357.
- [26] Memorandum for the Record, “DCI Meeting with PFIAB, 7 December 1962,” 10 December 1962, CREST, NARA.
- [27] *Ibid.*; John A. McCone, “Notes for Mr. Earman,” 17 December 1963, CREST, NARA.
- [28] Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 358.
- [29] *Ibid.*
- [30] *Ibid.*
- [31] McAuliffe, ed., [CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis](#), 365.
- [32] [Ibid.](#), 364.
- [33] Edwin Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (New York: Bantam Press, 1988), 254.

[34] Editorial, “Cloudy Intelligence,” *New York Times*, 29 April 1963.

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