REVIEW ARTICLE

JFK in Life and Death: What's Still Left to Say?

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Americans' fascination with things Kennedy seems endless, but do we need more books on well-worn topics like Cold War nuclear weapons, the Cuban missile crisis, the early Vietnam war, and the JFK assassination? In the four titles under review here, underutilized sources of information and new interpretive emphases make additional excursions over those familiar historical trails worth the time and effort.

'Who ever believed in the 'missile gap'? ' John Kennedy reportedly asked the National Security Council in late 1962. According to Christopher Preble in *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap*, Kennedy certainly did, and, in
Preble's estimation, exploited American voters' anxieties about nuclear war— in large measure fed by fears that the Soviet Union had more strategic weapons than the United States— to win the 1960 presidential election. As early as 1958, in the wake of the Sputnik scare, JFK claimed that 'the coming years of the gap present us with a peril more deadly than any wartime danger we have ever known', and Preble argues that '[t]he missile gap was a central theme in Kennedy's campaign to get the country moving again' as his quest for the White House picked up speed in 1960 (pp. 59, 3). By the time JFK won the Democratic nomination in July of that year, the Intelligence Community was moderating its ominous predictions of the immediate Soviet nuclear threat, and some senior Eisenhower administration officials had even concluded that there was no gap. However, as a CIA analyst later recalled, 'our findings were sufficiently scary that those who wanted a n administration to be elected were finding support in our estimates' (John Helgerson, Getting To Know the President, p. 57). Kennedy received classified briefings on those findings and in public continued touting the unnerving forecasts of panicky pundits and worst-case warfighters.

Eisenhower's recent experience with the 'bomber gap' controversy steered him to rely on his best judgment about what the Soviets would do to develop and deploy nuclear missiles. In contrast, Kennedy stressed what they could do, and he and assorted kindred spirits accused the Eisenhower administration of politicizing intelligence for economic reasons— in Sen. Stuart Symington's words, 'the intelligence books have been juggled so the budget books may be balanced' (p. 91).

Candidate Kennedy was not just a one-tune orchestra, though. Preble insightfully shows how he melded the missile gap with critiques of Eisenhower's economic and domestic policies into an all-purpose argument for lifting the nation's sagging prestige through 'military Keynesianism'. Increased defense spending, including crash programs to close the missile gap, would energize the sputtering economy, provide the means to pay for domestic programs, and raise America's stature in the post-Sputnik world. In a useful background chapter, Preble presents Kennedy's case as an amalgam of complaints that Democrats, intellectuals, economists, and dissonant military officers had been making for several years, but which had had little impact on their own. However in the late 1950s, the ambitious and charismatic JFK proved to be a most effective force multiplier for those who believed Eisenhower's 'New Look' policy was turning the United States into, in the words of Kennedy's favorite general, Maxwell Taylor, an 'uncertain trumpet'. The gap flap turned out to be unfounded, and when JFK's science adviser told him the true state of affairs, he responded 'with a single expletive 'delivered more in anger than in relief' (p. 154). As of late 1961, the issue was interred. By then, Preble argues, Kennedy was locked into a succession of higher defense budgets that, combined with the growing American commitment in Vietnam, put the US economy on a war footing for years to come.

Preble is the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think-tank that espouses 'limited government, individual liberty, free markets and peace', according to its website. With that as his philosophical plinth, Preble approves of Eisenhower's suspicion of what he famously called the 'military-industrial complex' and sees a direct link between Kennedy's missile gap alarmism and his application of counterinsurgency doctrine in the Third World. 'The economic philosophy underlying the New Frontier and Flexible Response opened the door to questionable military actions, including a deepening of the U.S. commitment in Southeast Asia' (pp. 16-17). Here Preble's ideological leanings show through. The New Look may have been cheaper, and Kennedy was enthralled with military special forces and clandestine operations, but Ike's foreign policy was hardly less adventurous than JFK's; the 1950s were a very busy time for the CIA's covert action offices.

Kennedy and the Missile Gap is a worthy addition to the 'Kennedy as Cold Warrior' literature. A published dissertation, it is well organized, clearly written, and solidly researched. (Preble even dredged up an article with Kennedy's by-line in a technical magazine called Ground Support Equipment; it can safely be added to the bibliography of JFK's ghostwriters.) Preble shows better than previous authors how much political mileage Kennedy got out of the missile gap, using the alleged one to get into the White House and the real one (in the United States' favor) to resolve the direst predicament he faced while there— the Cuban missile crisis.

In his confessional press conference after the Bay of Pigs disaster, Kennedy remarked that 'victory has a thousand fathers'. The same can be said about historians and the United States' victory-of-sorts over the Soviet Union in October 1962. The Cuban missile crisis is the most studied event in Cold War history, despite the reservation political scientist Eliot Cohen expressed almost two decades ago: 'whether the uniqueness of the crisis does not destroy its value as an archetype, or worse, make it a profoundly misleading subject for reflection ... It is and will remain singularly unrepresentative of postwar crises, and it offers precious little historical guidance for American statesmen today' ('Why We Should Stop Studying the Cuban Missile Crisis', National Interest, Winter 1986, pp. 5, 6). Cohen's iconoclasm obviously is not widely shared, as the missile crisis remains a staple of publishers' lists and academic journals. Recent works on the topic fall into three categories: scholarly productions that draw on newly declassified materials in the United States and abroad, and on the recollections of an international cast of participants and their associates; accounts written for the mass market by journalists and contemporaries (such
as former *New York Times* editor Max Frankel’s new *High Noon in the Cold War*); and works relying heavily or exclusively on the transcripts and recordings of secretly taped White House meetings during the crisis.

Since the 1970s, with the disclosure of the Watergate tapes, such surreptitious presidential recordings have been among the hottest commodities for historians of recent US politics and diplomacy, providing fodder for many books, articles, annotated collections, conferences, panel discussions, CD-ROMs, websites, and Internet postings. The University of Virginia’s Miller Center for Public Affairs has dedicated major resources to its Presidential Recordings Program, whose website describes itself as ‘a unique and ambitious effort to transcribe, edit, annotate, and publish the secret White House recordings of Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon’.

The tapes of meetings of the NSC Executive Committee (ExComm) during the missile crisis, and their transcriptions, have become both indispensable material for scholars and a matter of dispute among them. They argue over the significance of omissions and inaccuracies in the published versions, as well as about the overall utility of tapes vis-à-vis other primary sources. This difference of opinion pervades *Averting the ‘Final Failure’* by Sheldon Stern, historian at the John F. Kennedy Library until 1999. Stern takes strong issue with the first JFK recordings compiler, Ernest May, Philip Zelikow, and Timothy Naftali, whose efforts have resulted to date in four published volumes of annotated transcripts (The *Kennedy Tapes* and *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises*). The latter two historians and Stern have engaged in a running disagreement about errors in their respective renderings and interpretations of the tapes. Their exchanges at times have taken on a snippy tone that suggests they have ‘issues’ beyond documentary accuracy.

Stern writes — oddly, it would seem for someone in his position then — that in 1997 he was ‘surprised’ to learn that *The Kennedy Tapes* was about to be published, and that, after over two years in which he ‘strongly applauded’ May and Zelikow’s work, he was ‘shocked and dismayed to discover that the transcripts were repeatedly and seriously inaccurate’. He further states that he came up with the idea for his own book nearly a quarter of a century ago when he first listened to the then-classified ExComm tapes, and that after they were declassified, he took early retirement as soon as he could to work on his book. Pointing out that the published transcripts ‘inevitably reflect the weaknesses and flaws of the tapes themselves’, Stern claims that his ‘interpretive narrative’ is a ‘lucid, user-friendly secondary source’ that ‘seek[s] to bring the discussions to life as a clear, coherent story for the first time, making the concentrated, distilled essence [of the tapes] completely understandable’ (pp. 427, 428, vii, xv, xvi).

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Did Stern make a good career move? Does ‘Final Failure’ add to our knowledge of what Stern calls ‘one of the most perilous moments in human history’ (p. xix)? On the whole, yes. Stern has produced an accessible, readable story that breaks no new interpretive ground but is the best single volume on the ‘Thirteen Days’ episode. The book’s introduction is an excellent overview of the historical setting in which the crisis played out, worthy of stand-alone use in the classroom. Stern corrects some misimpressions and misjudgments in other accounts, such as the portrayal of Robert Kennedy as a dove (actually he consistently advocated military action).

Stern’s version makes clear that the Kennedy brothers’ ‘preoccupation, if not an obsession’ with getting rid of Castro helped bring on the crisis, but that JFK was ‘eagly realistic in finding a way out of his conundrum. The ExComm was important both for its positive and negative contributions to the outcome of the crisis. ‘Final Failure’ clearly establishes that Kennedy did not use the group just to ratify what he had already decided to do, but that his ‘often rough give-and-take’ with it ‘played a decisive role in continuing to shape JFK’s perceptions and decisions’. Stern also writes, not contrarily, that the tapes show that the president ‘often stood virtually alone against war-like counsel from the ExComm, ICS [Joint Chiefs of Staff], and Congress’. In contrast to the missile gap, concerning which JFK embraced the military brass’s scare-mongering about nonexistent Soviet missiles, during the Cuban crisis he spurned their belligerent counsel on what to do about an actual strategic threat. Overall, the tapes (but not some other evidence offered, such as Kennedy’s World War II letters) bolster Stern’s rebuttal of ‘the surge of anti-Kennedy revisionism over the last few decades’ that he believes caricatures JFK as ‘an implacable, macho Cold Warrior’. From a historiographical standpoint, ‘Final Failure’ is one of the more important works in the emerging neo-orthodox view of Kennedy as, at least in this instance, a leader of ‘great deliberation and subtlety’ (pp. 14, 423, 426, 34, 32, xv).

Stern presents his book as a corrective to flaws in the published transcripts. In many instances that is so, but he adds his own slant to the ExComm proceedings when he summarizes what he regards as non-germane material and strings together excerpts from long quotes with his own interpolations, descriptors, and segues. Stern rightly observes that there is no substitute for listening to the tapes, and he enlivens the often-tedious transcripts by describing the atmospheres of meetings and the mood of ExComm members. Characterizing someone’s tone or attitude is a subjective exercise — other listeners may hear the ‘verbal body language’ differently — but given that Stern probably has listened to the tapes more than anyone else, readers can defer to his judgment until they put on the headphones themselves.
Stern sets right some officials’ faulty recollections and more than a few of May/Zelikow/Naftali’s misidentifications of speakers, but he adds others of his own, including one this reviewer came across while researching DCJ John McCone. During the 26 October discussion about UN ambassador Adlai Stevenson’s proposal to trade away the Jupiter missiles in Turkey, Stern identifies the participant who most vehemently disagreed as John McCloy. However, Undersecretary of State George Ball, who was present, said in his memoir that the speaker was McCone. The audio version of the meeting proves Ball was right.

The ExComm recordings undoubtedly will inspire further inquiries into how the missile crisis was resolved peacefully, although the point of diminishing returns may be approaching. At present, researchers have several ways to ‘sit in’ on the ExComm meetings: the tapes themselves, audio excerpts on CD-ROMs and websites, transcripts, and Stern’s hybrid primary-secondary source. ‘Final Failure’ will suffice as the ‘if you read only one book’ designee, but scholars will want to use it along with the other resources to hear the full story and tell it in their own words.

It is a historiographical oddity that an event of such Zeitgeist-altering proportions as the JFK assassination has received so little scholarly attention. Instead, in an intellectual corollary to Gresham’s Law, bad historical writing has driven out the good, and even the mediocre. Sensationalizers, political extremists, and ‘independent researchers’ (buffs and freelancers) quickly preempted the subject from historians as the assassination became, in Christopher Lasch’s apt phrase, ‘a rich field for the unchecked play of fantasy’ (‘The Life of Kennedy’s Death’, Harper’s Magazine, October 1983, p. 32). One of the few academic treatments of the killing itself, Michael L. Kurtz’s Crime of the Century, is over 20 years old. The conspiracist literature, in contrast, is voluminous, numbering thousands of books, articles and tracts that posit almost every theory imaginable, crop up on publishers’ new titles lists with amazing frequency, and range enormously in reliability.

Journalist Max Holland has been one of the few dependable JFK assassination scholars. His articles on the subject have appeared in opinion and historical journals and national-circulation newspapers, and his study of the Warren Commission — some of which is previewed in The Kennedy Assassination Tapes — is eagerly awaited. He is the most even-handed proponent of the ‘official’ view of the assassination: Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone, deranged gunman who killed JFK for his own reasons, and the Warren Commission did a creditable, though rushed and at times slipshod, job in investigating the murder and concluding that Oswald did it by himself. Holland is appropriately dismissive of wild-eyed theories about the assassination, including Oliver Stone’s cinematic fantasy JFK, calling it ‘the only American feature film produced during the Cold War to have, as its very axis, a lie manufactured in the KGB’s disinformation factories’ (p. 414).

Tapes is a collection of annotated transcripts of assassination-related telephone conversations between Lyndon Johnson and the dead president’s family and entourage, his own advisers, the directors of the FBI and CIA, journalists, and others. The tapes have been available in raw and published form for some time, but there is value in having transcripts on this unique subject collected in one place. Holland’s background sections and annotations are clear and helpful, and his use of the present tense imparts a ‘you-are-there’ quality that adds to the voyeuristic aspect of ‘listening in’ to what other people were saying.

From the standpoint of over 40 years later, Tapes shows what a remarkable amount of time and worry American leaders spent on minutiae like the ‘missing Bible’ used at LBJ’s swearing-in (it actually was a Catholic missal and never was lost), who ordered Air Force One to stay on the ground until Johnson had taken the oath (which constitutionally and legally he did not have to do), and the Kennedys’ insistence that he had been uncivil and insensitive toward the grief-stricken Jackie. For the most part Holland shows admirable selectivity and focus; he includes few conversations that are only peripherally related to the killing itself and deal mainly with LBJ–Kennedy family relations and Democratic Party politics.

Tapes affords many insights into LBJ’s personality and preoccupations that go beyond the ambit of this journal, but several will interest its readers. Among others: Johnson overcame his initial reluctance to form a blue-ribbon investigatory panel out of fear that free-wheeling congressional and state inquiries — conducted amid swirling rumors of communist, right-wing, and underworld plots — would point accusingly at the Soviet Union and Cuba and force him to respond in ways that risked superpower conflict barely a year after the missile crisis. When deciding whom to ask to serve on the Warren Commission, LBJ naturally asked Robert Kennedy to recommend someone. RFK chose former DCJ Allen Dulles, most likely counting on him to steer the investigation away from the CIA’s ‘regime change’ operations in Cuba. Johnson uncritically accepted what he heard about the assassination from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover — his preferred intelligence source, who on the tapes is a fount of misinformation, including that the CIA had photographed Oswald at the Soviet embassy in Mexico City just before he went to Dallas. That claim — characteristic of what Holland calls Hoover’s ‘false omniscience’, and shown to be wrong by Agency documents declassified under the JFK assassination records act — would become ammunition for a battalion of conspiracists in years to come. Despite the Warren Commission’s conclusions, LBJ doubted that Oswald had acted alone, and when he heard in 1967 that the CIA had plotted to kill Fidel Castro during 1960–63, he found his
suspicious confirmed: el jefe maximo had successfully retaliated against JFK for trying so hard to get rid of him.

One of the drawbacks of a book like Tapes is its deliberately narrow optic. Reading it is like peering through a keyhole of one door in a large house; the viewer should not draw many conclusions about what is going on elsewhere inside. Holland has claimed that these recordings show, contrary to conventional wisdom, that Johnson’s view of Kennedy’s murder burdened him as heavily as the Vietnam War. Perhaps, but a similar judgment probably could be made from a compendium of recordings just on, say, civil rights. In that sense, Michael Beschloss’s eclectic collections (Taking Charge and Reaching for Glory) give a better, broader view of LBJ’s leadership and psychology — although Holland rectifies some important transcription errors and misinterpretations in them.

While the JFK assassination presented Johnson with a slew of difficult personal and political problems, it was the war in Vietnam that imparted the most striking ironies to his twisted relationship with the Kennedys. JFK bequeathed to him a substantial and growing troop build-up that was making a satisfactory US exit strategy hard to devise, notwithstanding Kennedy’s insistence two and a half months before he died that the war was South Vietnam’s to win or lose. He tacitly assented to plots to oust President Ngo Dinh Diem; after that occurred just three weeks before his own death, South Vietnam fell into a spiral of instability that, it seemed, could only be forestalled by more US troops and a wider war. Lastly, Kennedy’s death, when viewed in the context of later events in Vietnam, raised the intriguing (and, to Johnson, haunting) possibility that had he lived, the United States might have avoided the quagmire altogether.

That is the thesis of Howard Jones’s Death of a Generation, as declared in its subtitle, How the Assassination of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War. Jones’s is the latest of several hefty, deeply researched narratives on early US involvement in Vietnam that include David Kaiser’s American Tragedy and Robert Mann’s A Grand Delusion. Like Stern’s book, Death addresses the unintended consequences of a Kennedy administration foreign policy. In Vietnam, the two converse phases of that policy were captured in the contemporary catchphrases ‘sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem’ and ‘the Ngos must go’. Unlike in Cuba, however, JFK was not around to deal with the problems his course reversal contributed to. For years, his defenders and detractors have debated what he would have done about Vietnam had he lived. The most persuasive argument that he would not have withdrawn US troops is Noam Chomsky’s Rethinking Camelot. Jones, a history professor at the University of Alabama who previously has specialized in the Civil War and slavery, purportedly draws on ‘new evidence’ — including, the dust jacket announces, ‘a startling revelation’ about the administration’s involvement in Diem’s killing (that this reader never found) — in claiming that Kennedy would have pulled out most US forces after his reelection in 1964 and sought a diplomatic solution.

Besides begging the question that JFK would have won the election — as of late 1963, by no means certain — Jones does not prove his case despite imposing documentation (the notes and bibliography comprise one-sixth of the book) that leads him to say both too much and too little. Death covers much the same historical ground as Kaiser and Mann did, and its Kennedy counterfactual has been examined several times elsewhere — most recently, and more modestly, in Robert Dallek’s An Unfinished Life. Jones’s evidentiary linchpin is an NSC meeting on 2 October 1963, at which Kennedy made the ‘unconditional’ decision to withdraw the first US troops, ‘the initial step toward a major disengagement’ (p. 377). But there actually were two conditions, one stated, the other not. At that same meeting, JFK noted that ‘[i]n the more difficult question is what means are we going to use to bring pressure to change the political atmosphere’ (p. 381) in the United States — a clear acknowledgement that he might not be able to get away with his decision. The other condition, apparently unrecognized by Kennedy and the NSC, was some measure of stability in South Vietnam, which the administration was undermining by its simultaneous endorsement of coup plotting. However, or if ever, JFK’s plan of extrication might have been put into practice, it became moot after Diem’s death at the hands of US-inspired conspirators.

What seems more arguable from the mass of evidence that Jones and his fellow tome writers have gathered is that as of late 1963, Kennedy and his best and brightest remained as muddled about what to do in Vietnam as the unclear intelligence picture they were receiving. That he and some of his advisers suborned the coup that killed Diem shows how badly they misread the ‘ground truth’ in South Vietnam. Had Kennedy lived, given his fascination with counterinsurgency and covert action, he almost certainly would have approved Operations Plan 34A, the expanded joint covert offensive by the CIA and the military that would soon be on the books, offering a tempting low-profile way to try to stabilize the South in the months before the presidential election. The political exigencies that compelled LBJ to expand the war would also have affected JFK in his second term. Asked a few years later if the United States would have sent in more troops to prevent South Vietnam’s defeat, Robert Kennedy, who knew his brother’s thinking better than anyone, said they would have faced that when they came to it. What emerges from Jones’s exhaustive narrative is the story of a war founded on a mishmash of ideology, social science, murky intelligence, and short-term political calculation, and run by a coterie of assertive but uncertain overachievers who were formulating policy on the fly. No doubt that is not
the tale Jones intended to tell, and his effort to revise the JFK revisionists falls short.

LBJ’s abiding bitterness over Diem’s ouster and the troubles it caused him was evident more than two years later in taped Oval Office conversations that Holland mentions. In one, Johnson asserts that ‘We all got together and got a goddamn bunch of thugs and assassinated him. Now, we’ve really had no political stability [in South Vietnam] since’ (p. 300). If Johnson thought that the CIA had been the Kennedy administration’s ‘agent’ in eliminating Diem and thus – albeit unintentionally – had contributed to the chaos that followed, there is little wonder that he ignored the Agency’s analyses that indicated his Vietnam policy was failing and tuned out the DCI (McCone) who was telling him so. Speaking truth to power can be hazardous when the powers that be do not like what they hear. It was a lesson that subsequent DCIs painfully had to relearn – in some cases, too well.

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NOTE
The views expressed here are the reviewer’s own and do not necessarily express those of the CIA.

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