
Declassified American, Russian, and Cuban sources have progressively complicated the narrative of the 1962 missile crisis so that the gravest clash of the Cold War is now still coming into historical focus. *Gambling with Armageddon* raises the scholarly bar with a magisterial synthesis that incisively portrays decision-makers on all sides yet gives pride of place to luck for averting a nuclear holocaust.

Martin Sherwin, a leading scholar of nuclear weapons, situates “the long missile crisis” (p. 29) in a 17-year history of nuclear terror. In 1945 President Truman’s decision to use atomic bombs on Japanese cities legitimated weapons of mass destruction as military and diplomatic assets. During the 1950s, President Eisenhower made nuclear weapons the nation’s chief deterrent to Soviet challenges by threatening “massive retaliation.” In 1957, in an instance of “brinkmanship blowback” (p. 186), Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, buoyed by the successful launch of a Soviet satellite, *Sputnik*, and tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles, pledged to incinerate the cities of capitalist warmongers. Only the sustained primacy of nuclear weapons in geopolitical competition, Sherwin argues, can explain Khrushchev’s “wild, brilliant gamble” (p. 183) in choosing strategic nuclear missiles to defend the Cuban Revolution.

Scholars privy to secret recordings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) have largely confirmed the claims of early presidential courtiers like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. that as the crisis deepened, President Kennedy did all possible to avoid war. Sherwin refines this portrait by depicting U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, a rare, much-maligned voice of caution within the ExComm, as the unacknowledged architect of Kennedy’s diplomatic tack. In conversations and writing, Stevenson conveyed “directly, and persuasively” to Kennedy “a viable alternative to military action” (p. 244), providing a template for negotiating with Khrushchev based on withdrawal of U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey and Soviet missiles from Cuba. Kennedy later savaged Stevenson to friendly reporters as an “appeaser” who had wanted a “Munich,” concealing that his own pact with Khrushchev pledged to remove the Turkish missiles. For Sherwin, Kennedy’s contradictory actions reflected courage and high purpose in resolving the missile crisis but pettiness toward a political rival whom he could not bear to credit “for pointing the way to his greatest foreign policy achievement” (p. 244).

Early in the crisis, Kennedy privately estimated the risk of war between one in three and even, but Sherwin says the dangers were greater still, mainly
from low-level decision-makers beyond the purview or knowledge of the White House and the Kremlin. Drawing on translated Russian sources, he cites, among other horrors, the case of a Soviet submarine captain in the North Atlantic who, on October 27, 1962, verged on launching a nuclear-armed torpedo at a U.S. destroyer, which would have triggered a war. Such incidents, he concludes, made the missile crisis “the most devastating event in world history ... that somehow didn't happen” (p. xvi) and vindicated the judgment of former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in crediting survival not to skilled crisis management but to “plain dumb luck” (p. 4).

Recent scholarship on the crisis has produced a freefall in Bobby Kennedy’s once-vaunted reputation as a presidential counselor and author of a definitive record of the events, Thirteen Days (1969), and led many historians, including Sherwin, to dismiss his testament as unreliable. Whereas Thirteen Days features Bobby passionately opposing an air strike on the missile sites as a Pearl Harbor in reverse that would betray American traditions, Sherwin rightly credits Under Secretary of State George Ball as the first sustained advocate of this position, scarcely noting Bobby’s presence in the debate. Yet in his memoir, The Past Has Another Pattern (1982), Ball himself marveled gratefully that Bobby belied his image as an inflexible anti-Communist hardliner and “restated my argument [against bombing] in much more vivid and compelling terms.” Perhaps, then, scholars might still value Bobby’s scripture as canonical while recognizing that, as with other memoirs, not every verse is literally true.

Underlying Sherwin’s gripping narrative is a sense of the contingency that shapes all history and exposes the fragility of life in the nuclear age. It may be tempting to conclude that Kennedy’s narrow avoidance of a cataclysmic war warrants cynicism rather than celebration as the bare minimum one should expect of any sane leader. Yet whatever Kennedy’s missteps, he proved, together with Khrushchev, that leaders can resist the lures of unchecked escalation even while mired in a climate of mutual suspicion, fear, and hostility. This achievement may yet gain new luster as nuclear weapons spread to other nations steeped in their own bitter rivalries, a development auguring two, three, many missile crises to come.

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