



Sheldon M. Stern, The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths Versus Reality, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.

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The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 remains one of the most highly contested episodes of the Cold War. Both academic and general historians alike continuously attempt to reconstruct the events that occurred during those harrowing two weeks as well as the subsequent aftermath. Historical examinations have unravelled some of the

mystery which emerged from questions asked of the crisis and the subsequent period following its closure, but an abundance of scholarship on the topic has produced historical fallacies as well. It is for this reason that Sheldon Stern, official historian at the John F. Kennedy Library from 1977 to 1999, wrote The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality.

The traditional narrative of the Cuban crisis suggests that it began when American U-2 spy planes discovered evidence that the Soviets had secretly installed medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missile launch sites on Cuba, at which point US President Kennedy issued a full-scale blockade of Soviet shipments to the island and placed his nation's NORAD (air defence) squadrons on maximum alert. After nearly two weeks of tense deliberation and negotiation, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed to back down and remove the missile threat from Cuba. The crisis created an atmosphere of global anxiety which has since captivated the minds of historians and general researchers alike.

The missile crisis remains highly contested in scholarship because of the unique body of evidence available to researchers. Since 1997, scholars have had access to forty-three-plus hours of declassified recordings that President Kennedy secretly made of meetings with his top advisers during the two weeks in late October and early November 1962. The material on these tapes account for slightly more than half of all audio recorded at the White House during the infamous thirteen-day crisis. To put the value of these recordings in perspective, consider that archival documents from the Kremlin have been less influential on our understanding of the missile crisis than have Kennedy's secret tapes. As Stern makes clear, the tapes are the "closest thing imaginable to a verbatim record of the crisis ... no secondary source (transcripts of a narrative), no matter how reliable, can stand in for this unique primary source" (3). Yet despite declassification of the tapes by the Kennedy Library in 1997, the crisis remains widely misunderstood.

The source of confusion, according to Stern, are historical accounts published by members of Kennedy's administration that were privy to the secret White House meetings, otherwise known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). Since the crisis, many ExComm members (including then Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State

Dean Rusk, Presidential Advisor McGeorge Bundy, and Security Advisor Paul Nitze) have published their own recollections of the events in personal memoirs. As some of the first historical records released of Kennedy's inner circle during the crisis, these ExComm publications have had a tremendous impact on the history of the crisis and how it has been remembered.

As the official historian at the Kennedy Library, Stern was the first scholar to transcribe and analyze the ExComm tapes in their entirety, and he is one of a number of historians who have worked tirelessly to set the record straight. In this book, Stern uses the secret Kennedy tapes to investigate the historical reliability of publications produced by the ExComm members, and his findings reveal an inherent contradiction across all accounts. In their memoirs, each ExComm member took the liberty to portray themselves as promoters of peace during the crisis. Yet, according to Stern's analysis of the tapes, nearly all of them were prepared to initiate a nuclear exchange with the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, the secret recordings contradict a traditional narrative deeply rooted in American historiography which suggests the missiles placed on Cuba altered the military balance of power in favour of the Soviets.

Stern relies solely on the ExComm tapes to construct his understanding of Kennedy's administration during the crisis, and although his study reveals misconstrued events, his findings must be understood within the context of a limited resource base. The historical value of the ExComm tapes is questionable, in that only the president and his brother Robert knew of the recording process. In fact, the control switch for the tape machine was under the table in front of the president's chair in the Cabinet Room, and he alone was responsible for turning the recording on and off. Stern refutes any plausible deniability of the historical authenticity of the ExComm tapes on the grounds that the recordings were the private property of Kennedy at the close of the missile crisis. The Freedom of Information Act and the Presidential Records Act have since opened these confidential tapes to the public but, according to Stern, during the crisis neither Kennedy nor his brother could have conceived that the tapes would be heard by any outside their inner circle (9).

As a work of historiography more than history, The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory takes aim at scholars of the crisis who, in the author's opinion, have distorted the historical record. Arguing bluntly, Stern claims that "Robert Kennedy's Thirteen Days cannot be taken seriously as a historical account of the ExComm meetings" (viii). Of the ExComm, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Congress, Stern

suggests President Kennedy was the sole individual to resist the advocates of military escalation. This is indicative of Stern's evaluation and approach toward the former president, whom throughout this book he paints with a very favourable brush. Stern depicts the former president not only as a strong leader but also as the one individual who pulled the world back from the brink of annihilation.

The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory builds on Stern's two narrative accounts of the ExComm meetings to debunk myths that have shaped the dominant understanding of the crisis. The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis (2005) is a revised and condensed version of Stern's Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings (2003). Both works explore the events that unfolded in the White House during the two weeks of secret deliberations by Kennedy's administration, yet they differ from Stern's most-recent publication in that they attempt to examine the missile crisis in its historical entirety. Stern's historiographical approach in this book enables the reader to develop a nuanced understanding of Kennedy's administration during those terrifying two weeks, and this work combines strong evidence with succinct prose to debunk myth and historical fallacy. Seasoned scholars of the crisis will find little new in this book, however. Readers seeking a deep historical understanding of Kennedy's administration during the crisis may find Stern's earlier publications more useful.

Ultimately, Stern's book stands as an example of proper historical inquiry. Rather than base an understanding of the ExComm meetings on flawed and unreliable transcripts, he suggests historians develop their own interpretation of the crisis by personally listening to the recordings. Indeed, this is a methodology that can and should be employed with regularity. As historians we are permitted to ask questions, and especially questions of our sources. The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory is an excellent reminder of that lesson.

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