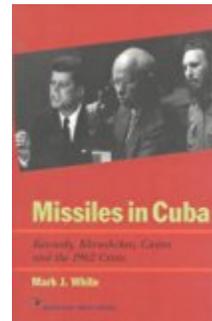


H-Net Reviews

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Mark J. White. *Missiles in Cuba: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1997. x + 170 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-156-3; \$22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-155-6.

Reviewed by Robert James Maddox (Pennsylvania State University)
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This is a brief, interpretive account of the Cuban Missile Crisis. A volume in the Ivan R. Dee American Way Series, it is intended for the general reader but will be of interest to all but the most knowledgeable missile crisis scholar. Author Mark J. White, who wrote the much more detailed *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, bases his work on primary as well as secondary sources. The result is a solid, carefully reasoned analysis of a complicated situation.

White begins with John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign, during which he criticized President Dwight D. Eisenhower for allowing a "missile gap" to develop between the United States and the Soviet Union and for permitting Fidel Castro to retain power in Cuba. Kennedy promised to remedy both. There was no missile gap (except in favor of the United States), but Kennedy's campaign pledges no doubt influenced him as president to adopt strong measures in an effort to topple the Cuban leader. These included mounting an invasion by Cuban emigres that resulted in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, authorizing operation Mongoose (a covert program that included a variety of schemes to undermine the Castro regime), and dabbling in assassination plots, as well as applying military, diplomatic, and economic pressures.

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who knew about most of these goings on, had good reason to believe that Kennedy might in the end resort to an outright invasion. To forestall such an eventuality, Khrushchev later claimed, he decided in the spring of 1962 to install nuclear missiles in Cuba. Although some scholars have derided this claim as a self-serving excuse, White believes it was a major factor in Khrushchev's thinking. The People's Republic of China, which at the time was challenging

the Soviets for leadership of the Communist world, had been accusing Khrushchev of being "soft" on capitalism. To stand idly by while a client regime was overthrown would seem to substantiate that charge.

Of course there were other expected dividends as well. Khrushchev, against strong internal opposition, had been trying to cut Soviet conventional forces in order to make more resources available for consumer goods. Having nuclear missiles only ninety miles from American shores would enable him to argue that Soviet security had been so enhanced that maintaining current force levels would be redundant. Khrushchev, prone to practicing "brinkmanship," also thought the installation of missiles in Cuba would provide him leverage in settling the prickly Berlin question on Soviet terms.

The Soviets began sending conventional forces to Cuba during the summer of 1962. This buildup enabled Republicans to criticize Kennedy not only for failing to carry out his campaign promises to oust Castro but for permitting the stationing of Soviet forces so close to the American mainland. Some of this criticism was clearly aimed at influencing the congressional elections in November. Kennedy, assured by the Soviets that the troops were for defensive purposes only, defended his inaction (he continued to hope the covert projects would work) on the grounds that conventional forces posed no threat to the United States. He thereby painted himself in a corner, for the implication was that nuclear weapons would constitute a threat and hence would require whatever steps necessary to remove them. On the morning of October sixteenth, when informed that the Soviets were placing missiles in Cuba, Kennedy exploded in rage against Khrushchev's duplicity.

White devotes two chapters to the crisis itself. "Week One: How to Respond" covers from October sixteenth to Kennedy's preparations for his televised speech to the American people on the evening of the twenty-second. "Week Two: How to Defuse" discusses the speech and takes us to the end of the crisis on the twenty-eighth. White discusses both the official deliberations and the backchannel negotiations. There are no surprises here, and the brevity of his accounts of the day-to-day meetings necessarily fails to convey the texture of the arguments back and forth and how they changed over time. Anyone interested in a fuller understanding of these sessions should read *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Ernest May and Philip Zelikow.

White's conclusions about the affair are balanced and unprovocative. He faults Kennedy for failing to realize that his rhetoric and actions toward Cuba might prod Khrushchev and Castro towards taking countermeasures, and he faults Khrushchev for sending the missiles when less provocative steps might have achieved his goals—at least with regard to defending Cuba. Both

men took belligerent positions at the beginning of the crisis, but sought accommodation when the enormity of what might happen became clear. Khrushchev especially deserves credit for agreeing to a settlement that he had to have known would open him to charges of having "backed down."

Although new sources no doubt will be found (especially in Moscow) that will enable us to fine tune our understanding of one or another aspect of the crisis, there is sufficient evidence available to present the broad picture as White has so ably done. My only real complaint is that the reader often cannot identify from which documents material is presented. One can understand the lack of footnotes or endnotes in this volume, given its intended audience, but there are less intrusive means of identifying sources which the publisher chose not to use.

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