

H-Net Reviews

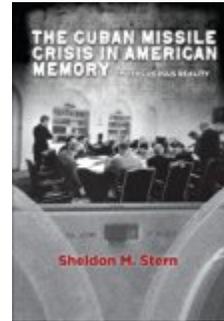
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sheldon M. Stern. *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality*. Stanford Nuclear Age Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. viii + 196 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8376-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-8377-4.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



In this book, Sheldon M. Stern reexamines how the Kennedy administration handled the Cuban missile crisis. He examines it using recently declassified and newly released recordings from the White House. Included in the more than forty-three hours of recordings are most of the meetings held by the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). ExComm was the primary advising group to President John F. Kennedy during this crisis and was composed of some of the Kennedy administration's leading figures, from Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, to Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense. Stern listened to the actual recordings and did not rely on transcripts. Due to his direct access to the recordings, Stern argues that many ideas and interpretations both scholars and the general public have about the Cuban missile crisis are skewed or completely wrong.

Stern's main focus is to portray President Kennedy as willing to make a deal rather than to attack and invade Cuba. The author depicts Kennedy as more of a peacemaker than a war hawk. Furthermore, Stern's depiction, with the aid of the recordings, is of a president surrounded by individuals who, with few exceptions, wished to launch an attack against Cuba; his was the strongest voice in seeking a peaceful way out of the crisis. One of the main advocates of attacking was President Kennedy's brother Robert. Stern argues that Robert Kennedy's portrayal of himself, most notably, in his book *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1969), as a man trying to find a peaceful solution to the crisis is inaccurate. Instead, he was a strong advocate of an invasion of Cuba and objected to the idea of removing missiles in Turkey aimed at the Soviet Union for the missiles in Cuba. Stern goes into great detail to show how Robert Kennedy's rec-

ollection of events does not correspond to the events as recounted in the White House recordings.

Stern also used the recordings to correct erroneous perceptions or interpretations about many people involved in the crisis. For instance, Dean Rusk was not a passive, often absent, ill-informed secretary of state who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown as depicted in *Thirteen Days*. The recordings reveal a man present at nearly all of the meetings who offered his diplomatic insight and experience to the discussions. Furthermore, from the recordings and other sources, no evidence can be found to substantiate a claim of Rusk's physical or psychological breakdown. McNamara's recollections of working with the president to prevent war are also not supported by the recordings. McNamara, like many ExComm members, often favored invading Cuba rather than negotiating a deal regarding missiles in Turkey. Furthermore, he advocated actions that could have led to conflict, such as using depth charges and flares to enforce the blockade against Cuba.

Stern does a great job in providing the background for the Cuban missile crisis as well the background for ExComm participants. Though many members are familiar to the general public and scholars, some are not. Stern's biographical sketches help to familiarize readers with these individuals, which facilitates a better understanding as to why some ExComm members took the positions they did.

Due to Stern's approach, this book would be great to use in historiography classes. The author offers his own interpretations to refute some of the major assessments of the Cuban missile crisis that have been strongly influ-

enced by the experiences and recollections of some of the participants. The recordings also illustrate the potential flaws in participants' written recollections. Thus, the use of the actual recordings helps to strengthen the argument that getting to the original sources provides the best opportunity for accurate interpretation. Furthermore, the actual spoken record is much more valuable than transcripts that, though they do exist, are full of errors and also do not articulate the voice nuance and inflections that can alter meanings.

Though Stern does an excellent job of narrating the events of the crisis, readers could become lost with the repetition of events that the author retells each time he describes the contribution of a particular member of ExComm. For example, Stern explains the reason and events of October 27, 1962, at least eight times in the

book. Though Stern handles this repetition well, readers could potentially become confused about who said what and when.

The title of the book is potentially misleading. The title's emphasis on American memory made me think that the book was going to examine how the American public, culture, and media remembered the Cuban missile crisis versus how it actually occurred. Thus, a better title should have been created for this work.

Stern's book is a great example of how much is being discovered and revised regarding the Cold War and its major events as more archival sources are declassified. This work is a must read for any scholar of the Cuban missile crisis or the Kennedy administration. It provides a complicated and broad understanding of both the crisis and the Kennedy presidency.

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