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Sheldon M. Stern. *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. xxx + 459 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4846-9.

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No Invasion over WMD: JFK and the Cuban Missile Crisis

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The Cuban Missile Crisis is probably the most studied event of the Cold War, and for good reason, since it was the closest the world has ever come to nuclear Armageddon. In mid-October 1962, high-flying American reconnaissance planes photographed Soviets constructing nuclear missile sites in Cuba. President John F. Kennedy, once he was briefed on the photographs, met privately in the White House with the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm, several times over a crucial two-week period to deliberate and figure out how to respond. Since Kennedy surreptitiously taped most of the ExComm discussions, historians have the opportunity to "witness" the decision-making process and the making of history from an insider's perspective. In this book, Sheldon M. Stern uses the tapes to provide the first narrative account of those meetings.

From 1977 to 1999, Stern was the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library Historian. He was likely the first non-ExComm participant to listen–two decades ago–to the Cuban Missile Crisis tapes, the last of which were declassified in 1997. Stern's knowledge of the ExComm meetings, along with his admiration of President Kennedy, are evident throughout this extensively researched and detailed account of nuclear war avoided.

Stern argues that the tapes "present historians with a unique opportunity to accurately assess presidential leadership in the most perilous moment of the Cold War," a moment, he observes, when "a peaceful resolution was far from inevitable" (p. xx). Responding to historians skeptical of whether the ExComm discussions had much influence on Kennedy, Stern writes that there is "no question" the tapes show that ExComm played a "decisive role" in shaping the president's "perceptions and decisions" (p. 423). While acknowledging Kennedy's culpability in instigating the missile crisis, Stern praises the president for rising above "the Cold War rhetoric he had exploited from the 1960 campaign" to avoid the "final failure" (of nuclear war). Stern writes, "These recordings conclusively prove [Kennedy] succeeded to a remarkable degree–although not without some 'help' from [Nikita] Khruschev *and* genuine luck" (italics in original, p. 425).

With the publication of Ernest May and Philip Zelikow's *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1997)–a book consisting of annotated transcripts of the ExComm meetings along with an extensive introduction and conclusion, chapters which Stern himself has called "the finest concise analysis of the crisis yet written"–one might question the need for yet another book detailing the same conversations from the same tapes.[1] Stern offers two major reasons for writing his book: to correct the numerous flaws in May and Zelikow's transcripts (which are based on the authors's transcription of the original tapes), and to pass along insights to readers that can only be gleaned from listening closely to the tapes.

Stern presents a stunning number of corrections to May and Zelikow's transcripts. The Kennedy quote about "final failure" that Stern uses in his title, for example, was incorrectly quoted by May and Zelikow in *The Kennedy Tapes* as "prime failure." Since the publication of their book, May and Zelikow have re-transcribed the tapes for a three-volume collection of Kennedy transcripts, but Stern, in an appendix, offers several pages of corrections to those new transcripts as well.[2] May and Zelikow's errors consist of misidentifying or misquoting speakers, with results that sometimes alter the historical record. For instance, they quote McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President on National Security, as declaring, "I myself would send word back by phone." Yet according to Stern, Bundy actually stated, "I myself would send back word by [Washington-based senior Soviet intelligence officer Aleksandr] Fomin" (p. 437). At another

point, May and Zelikow write that Kennedy, while warning Congressional leaders that nuclear missiles might be launched from Cuba in response to a U.S. invasion, said, "so that's a gamble we should take," while Stern quotes Kennedy asking, "is that really a gamble we should take?" (p. 436). Stern, who relied on the tapes that the Kennedy Presidential Library provides to the public (which he then dubbed, unadulterated, onto compact discs), suggests that the expensive digital filtering used by May and Zelikow might have distorted the sound quality of their tapes, unintentionally resulting in their many errors.[3]

By presenting the tapes in narrative rather than transcript form, Stern seeks to capture the flavor of the meetings, describing the tone, mood, emotion, and even dark humor among the ExComm participants. For example, he highlights how the conversations turned more informal when the President or his brother Robert, the Attorney General, left the room (pp. 90, 352). When ExComm participants speak, Stern often depicts them as having "murmured," "whispered," or spoken their words "in a particularly somber tone of voice," descriptions which give the reader a sense of either the intensity, exasperation, or light-hearted banter of various exchanges, important atmospheric touches absent from transcripts. Stern also provides context for some conversations, such as when Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay told President Kennedy that choosing to blockade Cuba rather than intervene militarily was "almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich." Stern observes that LeMay took "their generation's ultimate metaphor for shortsightedness and cowardice" and "flung it in the President's face." Furthermore, Stern explains that LeMay's remark also raised the embarrassing specter of Kennedy's father who had supported Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, a memory which had "cast a long shadow over John Kennedy's political aspirations." LeMay's comment to Kennedy, who did not particularly care for the general, resulted in several seconds of "awkward silence" (pp. 123-124).

For the most part, Stern avoids detailed commentary and lets the ExComm participants's words speak for themselves. As a result, much of the book reads like a transcript in narrative form, with single, long paragraphs frequently consisting entirely of dialogue among as many as four participants. Stern's commentary on disputes over the historical record, including the errors made by ExComm participants in their previous accounts and oral interviews, are usually placed in the footnotes or the introduction or conclusion. While Stern, like Zelikow and May in their own volume, prefaces each meeting with a short summary of ongoing domestic and worldwide events, his narrative is devoted to presenting the details of the taped discussions. Despite the often dramatic conversations and Stern's efforts to include only the most important material, the book is sometimes tedious, dense, and repetitive.

In his introduction, Stern addresses–and attempts to rebut–what he calls the "surge of anti-Kennedy revisionism over the last few decades." Concerned with portraits which have painted Kennedy as an "implacable, macho Cold Warrior," Stern spends several pages presenting biographical evidence which purportedly reveals Kennedy's "lifelong distrust of military leaders and military solutions to political problems," and his "horror at the prospect of total war, especially nuclear war" (pp. 32, 34). Stern's reliance on long excerpts from letters Kennedy wrote while fighting in World War II as well as admiring block quotes from the journalist Hugh Sidey, while interesting, will not sway skeptics. Robert Dallek, Kennedy's most recent biographer, offers a similar though more compelling defense than Stern, who does not even mention Southeast Asia, a rather large blind spot when dealing with Kennedy's alleged Cold War sins.[4] Stern does criticize Kennedy, especially for his rhetorical, military, and covert harassment of Cuba in the days, months, and years prior to the missile crisis, calling the administration's hope of getting rid of communist Cuban dictator Fidel Castro "a preoccupation, if not an obsession" (p. 14). Nonetheless, Stern clearly hopes to bolster Kennedy's historical stature by showing him reluctant to plunge the nation into war.

Despite Stern's overly enthusiastic brief for the president, it is difficult to quarrel with his assessment of Kennedy during the crisis itself. A strength of Stern's narrative is that one can follow the contributions and viewpoints of various ExComm members from one meeting to the next. Kennedy distinguished himself as thoughtful and independent-minded, willing to challenge assertions made by both his military and civilian advisors. Had decisions been made by majority vote, military action against Cuba would likely have resulted, rather than the mostly diplomatic gambit favored by Kennedy. (Some proponents of military action, such as Senator William Fulbright, argued–incredibly–that an invasion would not have been an affront to the Soviets.) Given that the island contained nuclear missiles and more than five times the number of Soviet personnel than had been estimated by U.S. intelligence, the consequences of a U.S. attack on Cuba would have been horrifying. Kennedy, admitting the difficulty of having to make a decision one way or the other, told those who favored an invasion: "The people who are best off

are the people whose advice is not taken because *whatever* we do is *filled* with hazards" (italics in original, p. 173). Unswayed by tough-talking hawks, he successfully proceeded with the naval blockade, negotiations with Khrushchev's underlings, and attempts to get inspectors into Cuba to remove the missiles.

Kennedy's calm was a key part of his leadership during the crisis. Time and again, Kennedy emphasized that the "Cuban" missiles were more of a political than a military problem. He observed that the Soviets have "got enough to blow us up now anyway" and that the existence of the missiles "*adds* to the danger, but doesn't create it," an attitude that was at odds with the thinking of the Joint Chiefs (italics in original, pp. 82, 127). Sensitive to international opinion, Kennedy correctly anticipated that the United States probably would not garner much sympathy from European allies who were themselves accustomed to living in close proximity to Soviet missiles, a sentiment born out in a letter sent by the British prime minister to Kennedy in the midst of the tensions (p. 170). Most impressively, the tapes demonstrate Kennedy's ability to offer a detached and critical analysis of his own mania over Cuba. Kennedy argued that an invasion would strain American relationships with allies who already thought that the United States was "demented on this subject" and that "a lot of people would regard this [an invasion] as a *mad* act by the United States" (italics in original, p. 100). Here, Kennedy's insight was remarkable, especially since he and his brother were among those most fixated on Castro, and it certainly contributed to his reluctance to intervene militarily.

The tapes reveal the ExComm membership to have been predominantly hawkish. Most everyone involved in the discussions, including the president, at times vacillated between favoring a military strike or naval blockade (or both). However, several, if not most participants, including Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon and Robert Kennedy, consistently voiced their support for military action and articulated their skepticism over ending the crisis with a proposed trade whereby obsolete NATO missiles would be removed from Turkey after the Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba. Some scholars, such as historian Mark White, suggest that ExComm lacked ideological breadth, a weakness that meant the debate was not as wide-ranging as it should have been.[5] Indeed, the only authentic "dove" was Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations who favored a diplomatic solution. Oftentimes the only voices that halted the pro-war momentum of the conversations were those of the president or Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense whose viewpoints sometimes clashed with those of the more hawkish Joint Chiefs. Were it not for the assertiveness of the president, things would have turned out much differently. There is little doubt that President Kennedy, for all the blame he warrants for helping to incite the crisis, also deserves a bulk of the credit for resolving it peacefully. As Stern writes, "JFK often stood virtually alone against war-like counsel from the ExComm, JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff], and Congress during those historic thirteen days" (p. 426).

Kennedy's independence does seem to undercut Stern's assurances about how much influence ExComm had on the president, however. Kennedy might have appreciated the give-and-take among his advisors, but he ultimately did not heed their advice at one of the most important points in the crisis. On the pivotal afternoon and evening of Saturday, October 27, most ExComm members urged the president not to agree to the missile trade (which he ultimately endorsed) and even urged him to consider military action. Some historians, as Stern acknowledges, suggest that Kennedy might have already made up his mind at this point and merely been using these discussions as a last-ditch–and fruitless–effort to gain a consensus. Stern instead concludes that "President Kennedy's inclination to pursue the Turkish option actually seems to have hardened in response to the dogged intractability of his advisers. The tapes indicate that the ExComm continued to have a major impact, especially during the final meetings, simply by repeatedly and all but unanimously *opposing* JFK's preferred course of action" (italics in original, pp. 424-425). One is left to wonder what evidence would ever convince Stern that ExComm might not have had a "major impact" on the president's October 27 decision.

Nevertheless, Stern's narrative of the ExComm tapes is a welcome single-volume source of the American side of one of the most important and dangerous moments in recent world history. He offers just enough of a guiding hand to make sense of the conversations and exercises enough restraint to let the evidence speak for itself, allowing room for divergent conclusions on various matters. Stern offers an unmistakable portrait of Kennedy as an almost dovish hero instead of the macho cold warrior his detractors present. In the specific–and significant–case of the missile crisis, Stern persuasively revises the anti-Kennedy accounts.

Stern's interest is narrowly focused on the taped ExComm conversations and he does not connect the Cuban Missile Crisis to subsequent U.S. foreign policy nor does he attempt to draw lessons from the ExComm discussions. In fact, Stern, quoting historian Barton Bernstein,

doubts "whether generalizations from that crisis period would fit more normal times and situations" (p. 424).

Yet one cannot help, while reading this book, but think about current events, when threats to national security, both real and perceived, receive so much attention. We know that Kennedy was a curious individual interested in current events who did overrule the war hawks surrounding him in the fall of 1962. Even when weapons of mass destruction were undoubtedly in Cuba, Kennedy successfully sought to remove the missiles without resorting to a unilateral war. One wonders whether the current president of the United States–a man who prides himself on not reading newspapers–hears enough disparate opinions on matters of foreign policy or whether he has ever rejected the counsel of his closest, most hawkish advisors.

Notes

[1]. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Also see Sheldon M. Stern, "Response to Zelikow and May," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (December 2000): pp. 797-799.

[2]. Philip Zelikow, Ernest May, and Timothy Naftali, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: Volumes 1-3, The Great Crises* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

[3]. My cursory listening to parts of two tapes issued by the Kennedy Presidential Library confirm Stern's account of conversations that May and Zelikow either label "[unclear]" or incorrectly transcribed. See John F. Kennedy Library, Presidential Recordings, October 18 and 19, 1962, Item #31.1 and #31.2; John F. Kennedy Library Presidential Recordings, 10/22/62, #33.1, 33.1A. But Stern does have a distracting tendency to overuse italics when quoting speakers. For instance, Stern quotes Bundy at the 3:00 p.m. meeting on October 22 as stating, "They have *ample* means of surveillance, but *inspection* is *not* the word we want to use." Only the word "ample" was given any emphasis, and it was minimal at that. He quotes Kennedy as responding moments later, "They *do* let them," even though Kennedy did not stress the word "do."

[4]. See Robert Dallek, "JFK's Second Term," *Atlantic Monthly* (June 2003): pp. 58-66 for a concise "defense" of Kennedy in a vein similar to Stern's. Dallek's recent biography of Kennedy presents the same evidence found in his article. See Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003). Dallek wrote the foreword for Stern's book.

[5]. Mark J. White, *Missiles in Cuba: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro, and the 1962 Crisis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), p. 98.

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