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The Cuban Missile Crisis is arguably one of the most explored political topics of the post-World War II era, and for good reason; it is widely regarded as the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war and possible total annihilation. One would think that with so much light shed on the topic there would be little left to explore. Theodore Voorhees Jr. somehow proves this notion wrong, making unique and compelling conclusions that will surprise many readers of history and politics alike. The Silent Guns of Two Octobers is an in-depth look at the two men who led their respective countries cautiously—and ultimately safely—through the Cuban Missile Crisis. Voorhees’s unique take on how American president John F. Kennedy and Soviet general secretary Nikita Khrushchev accomplished this astonishing feat starts with his recounting of an earlier crisis: the dramatic tank standoff at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin.

In October 1961, the Kennedy presidency was off to a rocky start. Having been embarrassed by the Bay of Pigs fiasco just months earlier, and the specter of an uncomfortable performance in his first meeting with Khrushchev still looming, Kennedy needed a win. Only a few months into his presidency, his political opponents saw him as someone “not tough enough” to handle the Soviets. Now a tense standoff between Soviet and American tanks was to test the president on the world stage. In the coming days, Kennedy and Khrushchev would successfully deescalate the situation without a shot being fired, thus establishing a template of sorts that they would reemploy just a year later. Voorhees describes the newfound crisis-handling modus operandi as having four distinct tenets: the use of a dramatic show of force; the use of back-channel intermediaries to negotiate instead of official diplomatic channels; the offering of generous concessions by both sides (even more than the other side might have reasonably expected); and perhaps most importantly, the use of secrecy.

A year later, in October 1962, a series of miscommunications and misplayed hands landed both countries in a standoff neither wanted. Months earlier, to counter Khrushchev’s trademark bluster, Kennedy felt the need to set the record straight regarding the underwhelming size and capability of the Soviet nuclear arsenal; there was no “missile gap.” With the strategic imbalance brought publicly to light, aggravated by nuclear “first use” innuendo, a battery of Jupiter nuclear-tipped missiles aimed at the Soviet Union, and
Kennedy's unabashed Cuban regime-change rhetoric on record, Khrushchev, already painfully aware of his nation's strategic inferiority, could no longer bear the situation. The missile site in Cuba would be a correction of that imbalance and a signal to the United States to not dare invade its Caribbean ally.

Before Voorhees walks us through the crisis, he explores the tenuous relationship the two leaders had leading up to it, paying special attention to the backdoor “handshake” deals made to preserve political capital on the American home front. Realizing he had painted himself into a corner with his recent “red line” speech, Kennedy sought to ease the tensions his rhetoric had created ahead of the upcoming congressional mid-term elections. Through intermediaries, Kennedy asked Khrushchev for a cooling-off period in Berlin until the elections were over. In exchange he offered a reduction in aerial surveillance over Cuba. It is a repeated theme throughout the book; Kennedy was more worried about the domestic political problems the Soviets were causing than security concerns. The crisis in Cuba would be no different.

Voorhees then takes the reader on a tumultuous journey, piecing together facts, notes, statements, recollections, memoirs, and recordings, trying to ascertain what each of the leaders was thinking during the tense thirteen days, ultimately drawing some groundbreaking conclusions. The most interesting conclusion he makes involves a surprising revelation about the famous Turkey for Cuba missiles trade. Voorhees suggests that the trade, which was a secret at the time, was not a Soviet-initiated demand but rather a back-channel Kennedy offering via three separate intermediaries. While there is no conclusive proof, Voorhees pieces together the facts in a convincing manner, theorizing that Kennedy himself was the initiator of the deal. Of note, today historians commonly attribute the deal as a Soviet demand that Kennedy wisely accepted, safely ending the crisis.

Historians have often used the Cuban Missile Crisis to paint Kennedy as the “wise hero” and Khrushchev as the unrefined, bellicose thug. Voorhees upends those arguments, giving equal credit to both leaders for safely resolving the crisis. In so doing, he portrays Kennedy less as a tough commander in chief of the most powerful military in the world and more as someone desperate to avoid war, nuclear or otherwise, and as willing to give almost any concession (even West Berlin!) to end the crisis. Voorhees describes Khrushchev not so much as having been forced to concede to Kennedy's resolute demands but rather as someone who was hyper-aware of his country's strategic inferiority and desperate to avoid a shooting war; Khrushchev knew almost immediately he would remove the missiles once he was caught.

Unique insights aside, the writing deserves one criticism: it is a bit repetitive. Voorhees (a lawyer by trade) painstakingly repeats his interpretation of the facts throughout the book. The result is writing that is somewhat circular in nature as he repeats large swaths of nearly identical text throughout. He obviously does so because he is trying to hammer home a point that is counter to the prevailing wisdom, but it can make for a “déjà vu” reading experience.

This criticism notwithstanding, the book's unique take on a seemingly old hat topic makes it a worthwhile read. Even well-read students can gain a deeper insight into this interesting, if not frightening, piece of political theater that was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Readers will gain a new appreciation for the unusual methods the two leaders used to message their willingness to negotiate and signal their intent. Readers may even come to believe the author's assertion that the wisdom of Kennedy was not in his posturing for a preventive attack, or his acceptance of a secret deal in lieu of attack, but rather his ability to effectively relay to Khrushchev his deep desire to avoid even the most minor of combat exchanges and preserving
his desired image of toughness while offering a generous concession. Perhaps most interesting, readers may even agree with the author that the world was not nearly as close to a nuclear exchange as the prevailing wisdom dictates.

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