

REWRITING HISTORY:  
THE IMPACT OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS ON AMERICAN JOURNALISM

by

KELCIE E. FAY

Submitted to the Department of History of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for departmental honors

Approved by:

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Sheyda Jahanbani  
Thesis Adviser

---

David Farber  
Committee Member

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Jonathan Hagel  
Committee Member

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Date Defended

## Abstract

The Cuban Missile Crisis represented a unique moment in the history of American foreign policy because it was the first time that the world faced a nuclear standoff. The threat of a third World War allowed US government officials to deceive the press under the guise of protecting national security. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the release of thousands of documents from ex-Soviet and American archives, historians are rethinking the narrative of the Cuban Missile Crisis that has been presented in the press during and after the crisis. This paper will explore the relationship that President Kennedy cultivated with the press to promote his political agenda and the impact that this relationship had on the reporting of future foreign policy crises.

## Introduction

Most Americans are familiar with the legend of the Cuban Missile Crisis: the unforgettable myth of John F. Kennedy saving the world from nuclear war. However, recent reexamination by historians into the archives of Cold War history has revealed that the story of the Cuban Missile Crisis has largely been exaggerated. Administration officials praised Kennedy's toughness after the crisis. Kennedy's hired biographer, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., described the president's performance as "a combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve, and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated" that he "dazzled the world."<sup>1</sup> Secretary of State Dean Rusk similarly celebrated the boss's toughness: "we were eyeball to eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked."<sup>2</sup> The metaphor of a staring contest continued to be used for the handling of subsequent foreign policy crises. The lesson that appeared to be learned from Kennedy's "staring contest" with Khrushchev was that the key to resolving foreign policy crises is to take a tough stance and refuse to compromise under all circumstances.

Journalists also contributed to the Cuban Missile Crisis myth created by the Kennedy administration. Immediately after the discovery of missiles in Cuba, inquisitive investigators were ready to share the story with the American people, but Kennedy stopped them. Kennedy hinted to Philip Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*, that he would be embarrassed if the "real" activity was in Berlin instead of Cuba.<sup>3</sup> Another tactic Kennedy used to ward off journalists, whom he feared were getting too close to the truth, was to appeal to the journalists'

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 841.

<sup>2</sup> Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, ed. Daniel S. Papp (W.W. Norton, 1990), 237.

<sup>3</sup> Chalmers M. Roberts, *The Washington Post: The First 100 Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), 352.

sense of patriotic duty. When Kennedy got word that *The New York Times* was going to publish a story about the developing situation in Cuba, he immediately phoned Washington bureau chief, James Reston, and Kennedy entreated him to drop the story. “If you reveal my plan,” Kennedy told Reston, “Khrushchev could beat us to the draw.”<sup>4</sup> Kennedy’s shrewd news management tactics worked because the press did not release a word about the developing Cuban crisis until after President Kennedy’s Monday night speech.

Furthermore, once the press published articles about the Cuban Missile Crisis, they articulated the typical view advanced by the administration: the missiles were “unmistakably offensive in purpose,” an American invasion of Cuba was “an ingenious but preposterous tale,” and Soviet missiles in Cuba were capable of “changing the whole balance of power.”<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, all these assertions were carefully crafted by the Kennedy administration to justify Kennedy’s blockade of Cuba and potential call to action.

On Sunday, October 28, 1962, Khrushchev backed down, and the press hailed Kennedy as a national hero. The public believed that Kennedy had scared Khrushchev into submission. However, unbeknownst to the public, the press, and most of the Kennedy administration, Robert F. Kennedy orchestrated a secret deal with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador in Washington, to make a missile trade. RFK “made clear that if the Soviets withdrew their nuclear missiles from Cuba,” the United States would respond by withdrawing their Jupiter missiles from Turkey.<sup>6</sup> The deal was contingent on the Soviets staying silent, and the nine members of

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<sup>4</sup> Max Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1995), 247.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Lewis, “U.S. Imposes Arms Blockade on Cuba,” *The New York Times*, October 23, 1962; “The Backdown,” *Time*, November 2, 1962; “Anatomy of a Crisis,” CBS news special report, October 28, 1962, narrated by Charles Collingwood. CBS News Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Chang and Peter Kornblush, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New Press, 1998), 373-89.

ExComm (President Kennedy's ad-hoc Executive Committee of the National Security Council) who knew about the deal swore to tell no one.<sup>7</sup> Administration officials kept their promise to Kennedy, and they never explicitly revealed their participation in the Turkey deal. The press also perceived no connection between the Turkish bases and the resolution of the crisis. When the United States withdrew its Turkish missiles six months after the close of the crisis, the press failed to detect the significance of the event.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is not a story of victory, as it has been recalled in American popular memory; rather, the Cuban Missile Crisis is a tale of political perceptions. The Cuban Missile Crisis is a classic case study of how an administration can manipulate the press for political advantage, and the consequences that all Americans suffer when the press fails to perform its constitutional duty to report the news.<sup>8</sup> Continued secrecy undermined the credibility of insider historians, who confessed to censoring accounts of the crisis; continued secrecy undermined the credibility of journalists, who essentially became the voice piece for the administration during and after the thirteen days, and continued secrecy harmed the American people, who were deprived the knowledge of the subtleties of foreign policy negotiations.<sup>9</sup> John F. Kennedy was the only person to emerge from the crisis unscathed; in fact, the crisis strengthened his international reputation of toughness.

Critics argue that some level of government secrecy was necessary during the Cuban Missile Crisis to prevent a nuclear catastrophe. Secrecy was integral during the early days of the crisis because it allowed the members of ExComm to devise a plan without alerting the Soviets

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<sup>7</sup> McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), 32.

<sup>8</sup> James McCartney, "Rallying around the Flag," *American Journalism Review* 16, no. 7 (1994): 42.

<sup>9</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 53.

and without receiving criticism from domestic political opponents. Secrecy was also integral at the end of the crisis because it allowed Kennedy to orchestrate the missile swap without jeopardizing U.S relationships with foreign allies.<sup>10</sup> However, the Kennedy administration used secrecy to their political advantage to implant a story in American popular memory “of the United States regaining mastery over history.”<sup>11</sup> Before the crisis, Americans were fearful of Soviet economic and technological growth surpassing the American supremacy on the world stage. Kennedy had faced two major setbacks in the infancy of his presidency. Both during the Bay of Pigs and the Vienna summit, Khrushchev had emerged the victor. Republicans were vying for Kennedy to take an immediate and forceful response to the threat of Soviet missiles on the American border, and Kennedy had the sense that he would have been impeached if he had not immediately removed the Soviet missiles from the Western Hemisphere.<sup>12</sup> Thus, although initially the Kennedy administration had used secrecy to protect the American people, they also used their insulation to regain American mastery over history.

Most historians who have studied the Cuban Missile Crisis have focused on diplomatic and military events. Early accounts produced by top officials in the administration lionized President Kennedy for standing up to Khrushchev.<sup>13</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, Soviet and American administration officials conducted a series of meetings to revisit the details of the crisis. Information from these meetings revealed a far less flattering portrait of Kennedy; revisionists argued that the Cuban Missile Crisis was “a political trap of Kennedy’s own

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<sup>10</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 40.

<sup>11</sup>James A. Nathan, "The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour Now." *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 272.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (W.W Norton, 1969), 45.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore Sorenson, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*.

making.”<sup>14</sup> Kennedy had campaigned on the promise to take a tougher stance on Cuba than the Republicans, and he was worried that he would be impeached if the blockade against Cuba was unsuccessful.<sup>15</sup> Revisionists describe the president’s fallibilities, and his desperate attempts to bring the crisis to a peaceful resolution. In 1992, Barton J. Bernstein published an article about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Bernstein argued that Kennedy invaded Cuba for purely political reasons, and when the Bay of Pigs turned into a foreign policy disaster, Kennedy authorized covert activities to overthrow the Cuban government, which led Khrushchev to construct a defensive nuclear base on the island.<sup>16</sup> In *Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-1963*, Michael Beschloss suggested that Kennedy lacked subtlety in solving foreign policy crises. Kennedy’s anti-Soviet rhetoric and crusade against the Cubans tied Khrushchev’s hands to retaliate against the Americans with equally incendiary force.<sup>17</sup> Both scholars have neglected to take into account the press’s participation in promulgating the Kennedy legacy.

In the late 1990s, working with material from Soviet and American archives, scholars compiled more balanced and authoritative accounts of the crisis. In 1997, Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow published *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis*.<sup>18</sup> This book challenged previous conceptions of the administrative deliberations during the crisis. In all public accounts, administrative officials and the press emphasized JFK’s

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<sup>14</sup> McCarthy, “Rallying Around the Flag,” 42.

<sup>15</sup> Chang, *A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, 382.

<sup>16</sup> Barton J. Bernstein, “Reconsidering the Missile Crisis: Dealing with the Problems of the American Jupiters in Turkey,” In *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, edited by James A. Nathan (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 55-130.

<sup>17</sup> Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Ernest R. May, Philip Zelikow, and Anesuto Mei, *The Kennedy Tapes : Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997).

unyielding position with Khrushchev. Kennedy was tough, but he was also much more flexible than the public record indicated. According to EXCOMM transcripts, Kennedy was “the leading dove in the room.”<sup>19</sup> Also in 1997, Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali released *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy 1958-1964*. Drawing from Soviet archives, their work offered a fresh perspective. Instead of designating heroes and villains to the Cuban Missile drama as other historians had done, Fursenko and Naftali assigned equal culpability to all the actors involved.<sup>20</sup> Finally, in 1999, Laurence Chang and Peter Kornblush compiled documents from the National Security Archives into a documents reader. Like other works of this decade, their research challenged the official account of crisis management.<sup>21</sup> These works seek to draw a more balanced portrait of the crisis, but they do not examine how the Cuban Missile Crisis myth became embedded in American culture. My goal is to fill in the gap of how administrative officials were able to peddle their version of the crisis to the press for so many years.

More recently, the literature on the Cuban Missile Crisis has begun to investigate how the Cuban Missile Crisis impacted the average American. Alice L. George has focused on how Americans reacted during the thirteen days of the crisis. Her work reveals the cracks in American confidence; for years, Americans championed the pervasive belief that the United States was unique and untouchable, but the Cuban Missile Crisis detonated American exceptionalism. During the thirteen days of terror, Americans feared they would wake up to nothing left on earth.<sup>22</sup> Further research hints at the press’s role of propagating the myth. James McCartney’s

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<sup>19</sup> Journalists divided EXCOMM deliberators into two camps: “hawks” and “doves.” “Hawks” demanded for a “surgical strike” on Cuba, whereas “doves” opted for a blockade. Max Frankel, *High Noon in the Cold War* (New York: Presidio Press, 2005), 161.

<sup>20</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *“One Hell of a Gamble”: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy 1958-1964* (New York: W.W Norton, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Chang, *The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962*.

<sup>22</sup> Alice L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

1994 article and James Graham's 1998 article deal most closely with the contents of this paper. McCartney concludes that during the Cuban Missile Crisis, "the American press abandoned its traditional role as a forum for debate and became part of the propaganda machine the administration artfully created."<sup>23</sup> Graham specifically focuses on how "the White House looked to the print press to shape American perceptions of Kennedy's handling of foreign policy."<sup>24</sup>

Scholars however, have yet to conduct detailed research into the impact that Kennedy's manipulation of the press had on the handling of future foreign policy crises by administration officials. The first chapter of this thesis examines Kennedy's relationship with the press. It argues that Kennedy developed a network of relationships with journalists to frame the publicized version of the crisis. Having established Kennedy's relationship with the press, the second chapter examines how Kennedy used his friendship with journalists to persuade publishers to withhold information about the developing crisis. Finally, the third chapter explores how Kennedy administration insiders were able to hide a secret deal with the Soviets from the press and the American people. This thesis concludes by arguing that press coverage of foreign policy crises has not changed dramatically since the early 1960s. Examples from recent foreign policy crises show that in times of war or national emergency, the press supports the policy of the current administration.<sup>25</sup>

The Kennedy era marked a transition period for American journalism. Television was a

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<sup>23</sup> McCartney, "Rallying Around the Flag," 42.

<sup>24</sup> Graham, "Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press."

<sup>25</sup> For example, President Reagan's 1983 invasion of Grenada and the coverage of the Persian Gulf War. These instances are explored in the conclusion. A counter-example is that after the Tet Offensive, journalists became more critical of Johnson's Vietnam policies. Brigitte Lebens Nacos, *The Press, Presidents, and Crises* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990): 157-183; Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (New York: Viking, 2004).

new medium, and Kennedy made few televised appearances throughout his presidency. Kennedy feared overexposure, so he looked to the printed press to shape the news.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, my thesis analyzes coverage of the missile crisis from popular newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. These publications demonstrate the extent of public knowledge throughout the crisis. A major limitation to these papers is that they have been heavily edited to align with government policy. Since Kennedy monitored the news during the crisis, information or opinions that deviated from the New Frontier agenda are sparse.<sup>27</sup> Memoirs from syndicated journalists, reporting at the height of the crisis, supplement the information contained in these periodicals.<sup>28</sup> Finally, biographies and accounts from Kennedy administrative officials provide a glimpse inside the White House during the most contentious moment of the Kennedy presidency.<sup>29</sup> These accounts must be read with extreme caution because many were published for the purpose of preserving the Kennedy legacy. Since the close of the crisis, administrative officials have admitted to fabricating details and facts contained in their books. To give one example, Ted Sorensen, Kennedy's speechwriter, confessed at a 1989 meeting in Moscow between Soviet and American officials that he had edited the secret missile swap out of Robert Kennedy's posthumous memoir, *Thirteen Days*.<sup>30</sup> Kennedy believed "that history would be based upon the

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Davis, *The Press and American Politics* (New York: Longman, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> See, Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times*; Roberts, *The Washington Post: The First 100 Years*; James Reston, *Deadline: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> For example, Graham Allison, *The Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971); Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966); Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: Norton, 1969).

<sup>30</sup> Center for Science and International Affairs, *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27-28, 1989*, ed. Bruce J. Allyun, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch (University Press of America, 1992).

printed word, “so he controlled the flow of information during the crisis not only to prevent nuclear war, but also to create a lasting legacy.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Graham, “Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press.”

## Chapter I: The President and the Press

The press coverage of presidents can make or break a presidency.<sup>32</sup> News media possess tremendous power to influence the public attitudes about a particular president. President Johnson and President Nixon cite the press as a primary reason for their unpopularity.<sup>33</sup> Secretary of State George Shultz complained about the biased media coverage of the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. He claimed that during World War II and earlier times “the press had always been on our side.”<sup>34</sup>

Although journalists were generally trusting of the president, most presidents have had some disagreements with the press.<sup>35</sup> The adversarial relationship between president and press stems from the president’s desire to release favorable information and withhold unfavorable information. All presidents have managed the news in some form, but Arthur Krock coined the term “news management” during the Kennedy presidency because of JFK’s skill at manipulating the press to effectively censor public information during most of his presidency.<sup>36</sup>

The positive reports printed about Kennedy during and after the crisis raises the question of how Kennedy was able to manipulate the news. The simple answer is that Kennedy cultivated friendships with journalists, editors, and publishers before he became president, so that once in office, he could appeal to his friends’ patriotic sensibilities. This answer raises more complicated questions such as, were there any journalists who opposed the president? Or, were members of the press aware of Kennedy’s information management strategy? Kennedy may have been more

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<sup>32</sup> Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980).

<sup>33</sup> Nacos, Brigitte, *The Press, Presidents, and Crises*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Harrison Raine, “Media always against us,” *Daily News* (New York), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Nacos, *The Press, Presidents, and Crises*, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 296.

flexible in his foreign policies than he was willing to let the public know, but one thing is sure: Kennedy was unmatched in his ability to control the story.

This chapter argues that following the Bay of Pigs embarrassment, Cuba became Kennedy's "heaviest political cross."<sup>37</sup> Kennedy learned his lesson from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, and in the months that followed, he tried to resurrect his public image. He blamed reporters for notifying Khrushchev and the Cubans about his operational plans.<sup>38</sup> From then on, Kennedy changed his media strategy: he became highly secretive about all activities occurring inside the White House, and he only granted media access to journalists, whom he knew would publish favorable stories.

First, this chapter begins by examining John F. Kennedy's symbiotic relationship with the press. There were a few terse moments when journalists became annoyed with Kennedy's media management, but, on the whole, the relationship between the president and the press was generally cooperative. The chapter argues that the press trusted the president's judgement during the pre-Vietnam era. Next, the chapter examines how the Bay of Pigs contributed to Kennedy's political agenda. Finally, the chapter closes by examining how the press changed their media strategy in response to the heightening of a potential showdown with the Soviets.

### *Carrot and Stick*

George Reedy, one of President Lyndon B. Johnson's press secretaries, described Kennedy and the Roosevelts as the only presidents "who truly understood the working of the press."<sup>39</sup> JFK modeled his media-relations strategy after Franklin Roosevelt, who had

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<sup>37</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 696.

<sup>38</sup> James Reston, *Deadline: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 326.

<sup>39</sup> Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *Three Press Secretaries on the Presidency and the Press*

successfully monitored the mass media to reap overwhelming public support.<sup>40</sup> Before becoming president, Kennedy had ardently read Richard Neustadt's *Presidential Power* to develop a media relations strategy. Neustadt argued that the key to a successful presidency was "the professional reputation and public prestige of the presidential power."<sup>41</sup> Kennedy took this message to heart, and he used public opinion to measure the success of his presidency. Most Americans read about the news in daily papers, so Kennedy influenced public perception by framing his agenda in the papers.

Before becoming president, Kennedy worked as a special correspondent for the *Hearst* newspaper; from his experience covering the Potsdam Conference, Kennedy learned how journalists collected information to write a story.<sup>42</sup> Upon entering the White House, Kennedy cultivated a network of journalists, editors, and publishers, whom he fed select information to shape his presidential legacy.<sup>43</sup> Kennedy ran the White House like a newspaper and every journalist wanted a favorable relationship with the president to gain access to insider information. One reporter described the White House as follows: "during the Thousand days of Camelot, reporters were romanced with invitations to glittering state dinners, luncheons, and receptions at the White House on a scale unmatched by previous administrations."<sup>44</sup>

But the relationship between the press and the president was not always so cooperative. Kennedy was "not only the friendliest, but the most thin-skinned of presidents."<sup>45</sup> One bad word

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(Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1983), 95.

<sup>40</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 714-16.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (Free Press, 1960).

<sup>42</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 310.

<sup>43</sup> Nacos, *The Press, Presidents, and Crises*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *Ten Presidents and the Press* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1983), 73.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

about Kennedy or any of his policies, and reporters would see their White House interview access revoked. Historians have described Kennedy's press management strategy as the carrot and stick approach. Kennedy would dangle the possibility of exclusive inside stories to reporters whom he deemed his "friends," while journalists who published stories that cast the Kennedy administration in an unfavorable light would struggle to get even a crumb of information.<sup>46</sup>

Kennedy mastered the art of media relations during his presidency; by influencing members of the press, Kennedy used the media to highlight his strengths and gloss over his weaknesses. When rumors began circulating that the White House had not been forthcoming during the missile crisis, Arthur Sylvester defended the government's "inherent right to lie" when faced with the possibility of nuclear war. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. further articulated the executive right to lie during foreign policy crises, but he warned that "when lies must be told, they should be told by subordinate officials."<sup>47</sup> John F. Kennedy was the first president to deal with the threat of a nuclear conflict; such a dire situation demanded a degree of executive secrecy for national security reasons. If President Kennedy had been entirely forthcoming with journalists, he may have precipitated a nuclear conflict. By framing the crisis in the press, he was able to secure the endorsement of Allies and to protect the American people. The press agreed that the White House had the right to withhold "sensitive" information during a "sensitive" situation, but that right expires as soon as the situation has been resolved. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the lies continued after Khrushchev agreed to remove his missiles. It was only in the aftermath of the Cold War that the *New York Times* realized that they 'had been used more

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<sup>46</sup> Nacos, *The Press, Presidents, and Crises*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Memorandum to President Kennedy, "Protection of the President, 10 April 1961, Box 62, Presidential Office Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

often than informed'.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Bay of Pigs*

The Cuban Missile Crisis began before the discovery of missiles in Cuba. In fact, Cuba was a major point of contention leading up to the 1960 election. Kennedy campaigned with the political promise “to take a tougher stance on Cuba than the Republicans” and to “eradicate communism from the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>49</sup> Once elected, both Republicans and Democrats expected Kennedy to fulfill his campaign promises.

Kennedy inherited the Cuban problem from his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and once comfortably seated in the presidential seat of power he was forced to confront the Cuban problem straight-away. In early 1960, Eisenhower had authorized a CIA-Cuban exile project to overthrow the Castro regime, and less than a few weeks into his presidency, Kennedy endorsed the plan. He did not want the world to interpret the paramilitary operation as a direct US attack on Cuba, so he revised the plan to make the American hand more invisible. He made two major revisions that sealed the fate of the operation. First, he changed the landing time of the operation from a daylight landing to an “unspectacular landing at night.”<sup>50</sup> Second, he changed the landing location from the insulated Escambray Mountains to the unprotected Bay of Pigs. This plan entailed new risks because if the counterrevolutionaries did not secure the beachhead before the Cuban forces arrived, then the guerilla fighters would be left defenseless. In addition, the “unspectacular landing at night” might not stir up the mass uprising necessary to make the

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<sup>48</sup> Thompson, ed., *Ten Presidents and the Press*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 65.

<sup>50</sup> *Operation ZAPATA: The “Ultrasensitive” Report and Testimony of the Board of Inquiry on the Bay of Pigs* (Frederick, Md., 1984), 67.

operation successful.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Kennedy had a deadline. He could either approve the plan or demobilize the forces. If Kennedy did not take any action toward Cuba, then Kennedy would demonstrate to the world that he tolerated Castro's communist regime. Therefore, Kennedy decided to go forward with the operation, which would become "the worst defeat of his career."<sup>52</sup>

The press detected that Kennedy was planning a covert invasion of Cuba, and Kennedy quickly put to use his media management tactics. He called and consulted with bureau chiefs and pleaded with them to change their story. Nobody wanted to be blamed for alerting Castro's forces of the invasion, so publishers edited out obvious references to the CIA or buried the story in the back of the paper.<sup>53</sup>

The Cuban defense forces were taken by surprise, yet Kennedy still found cause to blame the media for his defeat. He lamented in a speech before newspaper publishers, "America's enemies in the Cold War were able to gather information about covert operations by reading the newspapers."<sup>54</sup> This was hardly the case. Kennedy had doomed the operation when he made multiple changes to the CIA's original plan. Kennedy had faced a major embarrassment when Adlai Stevenson, U.S. ambassador to the UN, lied about U.S. involvement in a recent air attack. Kennedy did not want to suffer more negative publicity, so he canceled a second airstrike on Castro's air forces. This decision left a large portion of Castro's air force still intact, which enabled Castro to have the upper hand in the invasion.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 274.

<sup>53</sup> Chalmers Roberts, *First Rough Draft: A Journalist's Journal of Our Times* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 189.

<sup>54</sup> Reston, *Deadline*, 326.

<sup>55</sup> Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 93.

The Cuban exiles were easy targets for Castro's air force, and the CIA reported to Allen Dulles on April 17, 1961 that the operation was hopeless. Kennedy's decisions left the Cuban émigré air force and the U.S. backed armada open to attack.<sup>56</sup> Hesitant to risk direct U.S. involvement, Kennedy finally authorized six "unmarked" jets to defend the remaining Cuban exiles from air attack.<sup>57</sup> However, even this operation failed, and the White House had to face the reality of the situation: the covert overthrow operation had turned into an overt rescue operation. Ultimately, only 14 of the 1,400 exiles were rescued, and the Bay of Pigs became a sore spot in Kennedy's political career.<sup>58</sup>

### *Defeat is an Orphan*

Publicly, Kennedy accepted responsibility for the Bay of Pigs fiasco, but privately he blamed just about everybody else. In a meeting before newspaper publishers, Kennedy chastised them for publishing uncensored stories. He instructed them "to coordinate with the government when a story involved national security."<sup>59</sup>

Kennedy continued to put his spin on the story by having trusted members of his inner circle emphasize to journalists that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had sanctioned the operation. Over lunch, Robert F. Kennedy expressed this rationalization to Hanson Baldwin, the national security reporter for the *New York Times*. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. repeated the same sentiment to Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* and Robert Estabrook of the *Washington Post*. Even the

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<sup>56</sup> Richard M. Bissel Jr., *Reflections of a Cold War Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven, 1996), 184.

<sup>57</sup> JCS to CINCLANT, April 19, 1961, 3:37 A.M. National Security Files, Cuba Taylor Report, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>58</sup> Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 96.

<sup>59</sup> Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 148-151.

president, himself, circulated his condemnation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff among his journalist friends.<sup>60</sup>

Despite his attempts to play damage control, Kennedy could not prevent the press from publishing negative comments about his presidency. In *Time's* September 1961 issue of *Fortune*, Charles V. Murphy blamed the president for the Bay of Pigs failure. Kennedy covertly dispatched General Maxwell Taylor to meet with Henry Luce, the publisher. Luce was not happy to be scolded for his publication, but he agreed that unity was paramount to deter Khrushchev and the communists.<sup>61</sup>

The Bay of Pigs brought John F. Kennedy the worst possible outcome: Castro publicly declared himself a communist and Kennedy lost the faith of the American people.<sup>62</sup> Before a room full of reporters, Kennedy accepted personal responsibility for the Bay of Pigs disaster. "There's an old saying," Kennedy declared, "that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."<sup>63</sup> Privately, Kennedy avowed to defeat Castro and stamp out communism from Cuba. The Bay of Pigs was a foreign policy nightmare, but Kennedy had learned from his defeat how to proceed with his Cuba policy. Instead of advertising his foreign policy plans and accomplishments in the press, Kennedy decided to conceal details about an upcoming Cuban invasion. He devised a secret American program, codenamed Operation Mongoose, to topple the Castro regime, while publicly announcing an embargo on Cuba.<sup>64</sup> Unlike Operation ZAPATA,

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<sup>60</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Lunch Notes, June 30, 1961, Herbert Matthews Papers, Box 27, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>61</sup> Charles V. Murphy, "Cuba: The Record Set Straight," *Fortune Magazine*, September 1961; Henry Luce Oral History Interview by John Steele, New York City, November 11<sup>th</sup> 1965, Henry Luce Estate Papers, Time Life Archive.

<sup>62</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 794.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev*, 130.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas G. Patterson, "Fixation with Cuba: The Bay of Pigs, Missile Crisis, and Covert War Against Castro," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989),

Kennedy would proceed with caution, and he would wait until the time was right to disclose information about the operation. This time Kennedy would control the narrative, so that the next time the press published a story about Kennedy's Cuba policy, he would be the American hero.

### *The Cuban Question*

Over the summer, Cuba had transformed into the top issue of the 1962 election. Republicans were clamoring that offensive Soviet missiles were already in Cuba, but the president was too "soft-on-communism" to do anything about it.<sup>65</sup> The official White House stance was that Cuba did not represent a real threat, and Republican calls to action were "reckless" and "irresponsible."<sup>66</sup>

In the pre-crisis period, most of the editorials published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were supportive of Kennedy's Cuban policy while the editorials published in the *Chicago Tribune* were critical of Kennedy's Cuban stand.<sup>67</sup> This finding is not surprising because in the pre-election period the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published editorials in support of Kennedy's Cuban policies while the conservative *Chicago Tribune* was critical of Kennedy's policies.<sup>68</sup> Following a September news conference, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* defended the president's statement that "the Cuban question is complex" and "impulsive military adventurism" will endanger the safety of the nation.<sup>69</sup> In

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123-55.

<sup>65</sup> Nacos, *The Press, President, and Crises*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> From Transcript of Kennedy's press conference, *New York Times*, September 14, 1962.

<sup>67</sup> "Running Against Castro," *Washington Post*, October 19, 1962; "Cuba and the Doctrine," *New York Times*, September 1, 1962; "Mr. Kennedy Again Calls for Reserves," *Chicago Tribune*, September 8, 1962.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 33.

<sup>69</sup> Edwin Tetlow, "Kennedy Hits at War Talk," *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1962; John G. Norris and Carroll Kilpatrick, "President Urges U.S. to 'Keep Head' on Cuba," *The Washington Post*,

contrast, the *Chicago Tribune* charged that the Soviets were constructing military bases in Cuba, but the Kennedy administration was too “spineless” to do anything about it.<sup>70</sup>

As Republican calls for military intervention grew louder, President Kennedy promised to take action if Cuba became an offensive military base.<sup>71</sup> Despite this promise, White House spokesmen were careful to keep Operation Mongoose out of the press.<sup>72</sup> This section argues that Cuba was an important issue of the 1962 election, and Americans were divided over how the president should proceed. While the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune* published editorials both condemning and supporting the president’s policies, the majority of line coverage in the East Coast papers supported the President’s Cuba coverage, while most of the lines in the *Chicago Tribune* were spent criticizing Kennedy and Cuba. In addition, pro-administration stories more often appeared as the cover stories in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* while anti-administration stories managed to more often make the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* in the pre-crisis period.<sup>73</sup>

Kennedy was an expert at conducting the news. He cultivated an inner circle of journalists, editors, and publishers to preserve his legacy in the written record. Despite his attempts to control the story, he could not prevent right-wing conservatives from lashing out at him after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Kennedy attempted to restore his reputation by publicly taking responsibility for the operation, but privately planning how to defeat Castro and win back America’s trust. Popular opinion of Kennedy dropped to an all-time low in August 1962, and

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Sept. 14, 1962.

<sup>70</sup> “Our Baby,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1962.

<sup>71</sup> *Public Papers of the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1962* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 674-81.

<sup>72</sup> William LeoGrande, *Uneasy Allies: The Press During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: New York University Center for War, Peace, and the News Media, 1987), 5-6.

<sup>73</sup> Nacos, *The Press, Presidents, and Crises*, 13.

cries for military intervention in Cuba were growing louder and louder.<sup>74</sup>

Historians have focused on the military and diplomatic significance of Kennedy's presidency, but even more important than the Bay of Pigs and Kennedy's Cuba policies, is what the pre-crisis rhetoric illustrates about American sentiment in the early 1960s. Historical studies emphasized the diplomatic consequences of the Bay of Pigs instead of the political consequences on Kennedy's presidency. After the Bay of Pigs, Cuba was no longer a military problem, but a domestic political problem.<sup>75</sup> Newspaper coverage in the buildup to the crisis offer a rare opportunity to peer into the American psyche. Because the White House had not yet confirmed the existence of offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba, the president had no reason to censor or suppress the press. Thus, the pre-crisis period provides insight into the true American sentiment before Kennedy began to "manage" the news. The following chapters will examine how Kennedy's media strategy changed upon the discovery of missiles in Cuba. The press has a duty to report the news, but they are willing to hold back tidbits of information when the threat of nuclear annihilation is at stake.

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<sup>74</sup> Dr. George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll Public Opinion 1935-1971*, 1780.

<sup>75</sup> McCartney, "Rallying Around the Flag," 43.

## Chapter II: Secret Missiles

The discovery of offensive nuclear missile sites in Cuba confirmed Republican suspicions that the Soviets were indeed building a nuclear base only ninety miles away from the coast of Florida. Kennedy commissioned ExComm to determine how to respond to the Soviet threat.<sup>76</sup> The committee was limited to only twelve government officials to prevent U-2 photographic evidence from leaking to the press. Nevertheless, journalists also uncovered evidence of Cuban missile sites before President Kennedy disclosed this information to the public. In the interim period between the discovery of the missile sites and Kennedy's address to the nation confirming the existence of Soviet missile sites, the president and the press worked together to suppress the flow of information. While most reporters respected this arrangement given the magnitude of the situation, some columnists felt that the president was stripping journalists of their right to report the news.<sup>77</sup> Despite minor grievances, the press complied with the president's demands, and the nation was shocked when Kennedy confirmed that the Soviets were in the process of building offensive nuclear missile sites in Cuba. Government secrecy in the early days of the crisis was justified because it allowed ExComm the privacy to devise a plan. If journalists reported the news before President Kennedy devised a course of action, then the press could have endangered the lives of American citizens.

Following Kennedy's address to the nation, fear gripped the nation: millions of Americans fled their homes, troops prepared for battle, families stocked fallout shelters, "and parents in some cities bought dog tags to make identification of their children's bodies simpler." Fear was not lost on the politicians and journalists, who Alice L. George claims "rallied around

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<sup>76</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times*, 247.

Kennedy like frightened children, offering almost unqualified support.”<sup>78</sup>

During the thirteen days of the crisis, politicians and the press spoke together with one voice. The president personally monitored publications, and by personally calling reporters, Kennedy stopped the publishing of information that might threaten national security.<sup>79</sup> The White House’s control of the timing and flow of information allowed ExComm a sufficient amount of time to weigh U.S. options and reach a peaceful resolution.

For almost two decades, only Kennedy’s version of the Cuban Missile Crisis was known by the public. It was not until historians began examining the Soviet perspective that they realized there were many inconsistencies in Kennedy’s account. In recent years, journalists have also published memoirs of the crisis that challenged the Cuban Missile Crisis myth. In light of new information, historians have begun to rethink the news coverage of the crisis and President Kennedy’s motives for managing the news. Most scholars agree that the president’s tight reins on the press allowed ExComm to deliberate without domestic or foreign interference.<sup>80</sup>

However, just days after the crisis ended, *The New York Times* published an editorial which stated, “there is no doubt that a democratic government cannot work if news of and about the government is long suppressed, or managed, or manipulated, or controlled.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, there is a fine line between legitimate government oversight and undemocratic executive management.

Historians are divided over the president’s motives for managing the coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Some scholars argue that Kennedy’s executive oversight of the press protected American freedom by giving the ExComm the privacy to deliberate. The suppression

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<sup>78</sup> George, *Awaiting Armageddon*, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 403.

<sup>80</sup> Shalom Sokolow. "Publish and Perish? The Cuban Missile Crisis and Journalists' Right to Inform vs. Their Responsibility to Withhold." *New York History* 85, no. 3 (2004): 265-75.

<sup>81</sup> “Managing the News,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1962.

of information during the Cuban Missile Crisis was a diplomatic strategy that granted Kennedy the time to endorse the support of Allies while also strengthening the U.S. position in negotiations with the Soviets.<sup>82</sup> Others, like James Graham and Robert Smith Thompson argue that Kennedy manipulated the press for personal political advancement.<sup>83</sup> This thesis takes the middle ground in this debate: initially, some government secrecy was necessary to safeguard the lives of the American people; however, after the crisis ended, the Kennedy administration continued to suppress information and deliver disinformation to preserve the American myth of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This chapter examines President Kennedy's motives for managing the news at the onset of the crisis. Legitimate foreign policy concerns prohibited the press from printing until the president could deliver a streamlined message to America's foes and allies. These concerns were legitimate because premature leakage of inaccurate information could have prompted a nuclear war. This temporary secrecy protected American freedom. However, once President Kennedy's speech was delivered, the press continued to promulgate the president's message. Kennedy had relationships with publishers of the major newspapers, and McGeorge Bundy argues that the press trusted the president during the crisis because Kennedy dealt with it "directly and honorably;" Kennedy personally called publishers and reporters to appraise them of the situation, and because Kennedy took the time to inform journalists of the situation, the press trusted the president's judgement to report what they had been told.<sup>84</sup> William LeoGrande, a history

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 78-121, 349-425.

<sup>83</sup> Graham, "Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press.;" Robert Smith Thompson, *The Missiles of October: The Declassified Story of John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

<sup>84</sup> Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 403.

professor at American University, charged that the press refused “to question the basic assumptions and arguments advanced publicly and privately by administration spokesmen”; the press failed “to treat seriously the views of anyone who dissented from the administration position,” and the press “abdicated it’s role of independent watchdog.”<sup>85</sup> This chapter argues that initially President Kennedy controlled the news for national security reasons, but since the press wanted to help the White House win the war on communism, Kennedy was able to influence reporters to only print stories that cast him in a favorable light. First, this chapter will examine journalists’ discovery of missiles in Cuba, and President Kennedy’s strategies for convincing them to withhold the news. Next, the chapter will explore how Kennedy framed his political agenda in the papers, specifically with regard to Soviet intentions and American actions.

### *What’s Going on in Cuba?*

In early October 1962, journalists observed a frenzy of activity at the State Department’s Latin American Bureau, and they suspected that a crisis was developing in Cuba. Assistant Secretary of State Harlan Cleveland accidentally confirmed journalists’ suspicions when asked by Murrey Marder, a reporter at *The Washington Post*, how bad the Cuban situation looked. “Pretty bad,” Cleveland replied.<sup>86</sup> On Sunday, October 21, 1962, reporters at *The Washington Post* published a story, which described the sudden amassing of American forces in the Southeast and prescribed Cuba as the likely destination for a Caribbean confrontation.<sup>87</sup> President Kennedy was not pleased.

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<sup>85</sup> McCartney, “Rallying Around the Flag,” 42.

<sup>86</sup> Graham, *Personal History*, 297.

<sup>87</sup> Bob Reno and Jim Buchanan. “Marines Pile Equipment at Key West.” *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, Oct 21, 1962.

Just a few days prior, after authorizing the CIA to photograph Cuban missile sites, Kennedy's fears were confirmed: the Soviets were building nuclear missile sites just ninety miles away from the coast of Florida. The president immediately commissioned EXCOMM to devise a plan. During deliberations, "advisers were admonished not to talk to other government officials or the press."<sup>88</sup> To give the façade of business as usual, Kennedy kept his public schedule, including a black-tie ball for Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and a campaign trip to the Midwest.<sup>89</sup> If Kennedy canceled these public meetings, he would set off alarm bells of danger to the Soviets that the United States knew about the secret missiles. Kennedy's control of the flow of information in the first few days of the United States' discovery of missiles in Cuba, allowed ExComm the insulation from outside pressure to reach a well-informed consensus. Yet, despite President Kennedy's rigid information security measures, reporters from the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* pieced together that a Cuban crisis was brewing.

Kennedy convinced both the publisher of *The Washington Post*, Philip Graham, and *The New York Times* bureau chief, James Reston, to avoid publishing any stories about Cuba until he had the chance to publicly address the American people, the Soviets, and America's allies. Philip Graham was one of Kennedy's friends; in fact, they had just recently eaten dinner together. Kennedy persuaded Graham to withhold publishing about the Cuban missiles by appealing to the journalist's patriotic duty to protect the American people and by promising an exclusive once Kennedy informed the world of the situation. Philip Graham weighed his constitutional right to report the news against his right as a citizen to protect innocent American lives. Ultimately, Graham decided that suppression of the news would save more American lives.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 320.

<sup>89</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Graham, *Personal History*, 296.

Suppression or editing of the news is not a new practice in American history; most American presidents have managed the news in some form. Especially during foreign policy crises, presidents may control the flow of information to the press to protect national security concerns. President Eisenhower described the Cold War as a “life of perpetual fear and tension.”<sup>91</sup> Because of the constant national security threat during the Cold War period, Eisenhower monitored the delivery of news to the American people. For instance, President Eisenhower denied that the US was flying spy planes over Soviet territory, but when the Soviets shot down an American U-2 plane piloted by Gary Powers, Eisenhower admitted the truth.<sup>92</sup> By the time Kennedy came to office, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had augmented to such an extent that the appearance of strength was more important than actual strength.<sup>93</sup> For this reason, Kennedy’s job as president was not only to protect Americans from an impending nuclear conflict, but also to reassure Americans of the strength of American democracy.

Reporters at the *New York Times* were more skeptical than reporters at *The Washington Post* about Kennedy’s plan to suppress the Cuban coverage. After reading the *Washington Post*’s Sunday paper, Kennedy knew that journalists had learned about the developing situation in crisis. Not wanting the public to learn about the crisis prematurely, Kennedy instructed James Reston, *The Times* bureau chief in Washington, to notify the White House Press Secretary before *The Times* released a story.<sup>94</sup> When Reston called National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to inquire about the activity at the State Department, Kennedy realized that journalists at the

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<sup>91</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Chance for Peace,” April 16, 1953, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953* (Government Printing Office, 1960), 182.

<sup>92</sup> Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 78.

<sup>93</sup> Hugh Sidey, *John F. Kennedy, President* (New York 1964), 127.

<sup>94</sup> Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times*, 246.

*New York Times* were close to figuring out the truth, so Kennedy immediately employed his press management strategies.<sup>95</sup> When Kennedy called Reston, the journalist revealed that reporters at *The New York Times* had figured out that offensive missiles were located in Cuba. Kennedy confirmed the journalist's suspicions, and the president provided Reston with more information about the Cuban crisis: "Do you know what I'm going to do about it? I'm going to order a blockade- a blockade of all Soviet shipping to Cuba. If you reveal my plan, or print that we discovered their missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev could beat us to the draw."<sup>96</sup> Kennedy further instructed Reston to withhold publishing until Kennedy had the "chance to address the country and the Russians."<sup>97</sup>

Not everyone at the *New York Times* agreed with the president's plea to suppress the news. The journalist who had pieced together the story, Max Frankel thought it was unconstitutional for the *New York Times* to purposefully keep the public in the dark. Frankel argued that journalists at the *New York Times* had "a right to report the discovery of the missiles, which we'd doped out ourselves."<sup>98</sup> In the end, national security concerns convinced Frankel that withholding the news was the right thing to do temporarily. Journalists were Americans first, and in the early 1960s, they were committed to helping the president preserve democracy from the clutches of communism. Many journalists, including Max Frankel, realized the mistakes they had made in the preamble to the Bay of Pigs invasion which may have alerted the Soviets to an American attack. Both Kennedy and members of the American Press Corps learned after the

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<sup>95</sup> Reston called the National Security Adviser instead of the White House Press Secretary because Reston had no memory of the agreement between him and the president to notify Pierre Salinger before publishing a story. Reston, *Deadline: A Memoir*, 294.

<sup>96</sup> Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times*, 247.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times*, 247.

failed invasion to be more careful about the information that they made public. Consequently, Orvil Dryfoos, the *New York Times*' publisher, changed Monday's story to speculate about a possible Cuban crisis.<sup>99</sup> Kennedy's friendship with influential publishers, and journalists' desire to prevent a nuclear war allowed the president to contain information about the Cuban crisis until EXCOMM determined an appropriate course of action.

### *'Offensive' Missiles*

President Kennedy suppressed the news of the crisis until Monday night to frame the situation in America's favor: "Within the past week unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere."<sup>100</sup> Kennedy's speech left no room for doubt. Premier Khrushchev had declared war with the United States when he placed a series of 'offensive' missiles aimed at America's heart.

The morning after Kennedy's speech, the American press corps published various statements of support for the president's highly questionable propositions. The press did not challenge any of Kennedy's bold assumptions, nor did they consider alternative viewpoints of the situation; instead, members of the press offered unqualified praise for the president and his policies. The *New York Times* set the tone: in his editorial on October 23, 1962, Anthony Lewis reiterated the president's claim that the missiles "are unmistakably offensive in purpose." He further suggested that the press did not need to investigate the Soviet motives for installing

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<sup>99</sup> "Capital's Crisis Air Hints at Development on Cuba," *New York Times*, Oct 22, 1962.

<sup>100</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Address During the Cuban Missile Crisis," October 22, 1962, John F. Kennedy Library.

missiles in Cuba because the president's speech "confirmed" Soviet intentions.<sup>101</sup> Other journalists ridiculed the possibility that the missiles could be defensive despite Khrushchev's insistence that the missiles were intended to deter an American attack. William LeoGrande argues that the press treated the Soviet assertion that the missiles were purely defensive as a "Soviet lie."<sup>102</sup> *Time* magazine articulated the typical attitude among journalists: "Soviet assertions that their motive was the defense of Cuba constituted an ingenious but preposterous tale."<sup>103</sup>

Scholars now concede that Khrushchev's primary motivation for the installation of nuclear weapons was the defense of Cuba.<sup>104</sup> The Soviets had every reason to believe that the United States "would repeat the Bay of Pigs, but not make mistakes anymore."<sup>105</sup> Cuban intelligence had infiltrated CIA-exile groups, and they learned of a covert U.S. operation to invade Cuba in October 1962. Administration officials codenamed the top-secret program Operation Mongoose, and the objective of the program was the complete capitulation of the Castro regime. Notes from Justice Department meetings reveal that the United States intended to use all resources necessary to bring about "the overthrow of Castro's regime." Official guidelines for the operation stated, "that final success will require decisive U.S. military intervention."<sup>106</sup> This evidence suggests that Khrushchev had good reason to fear an imminent U.S. invasion.

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<sup>101</sup> Anthony Lewis, "U.S. Imposes Arms Blockade on Cuba on Finding Offensive Missile Sites, *The New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1962.

<sup>102</sup> McCartney, "Rallying Around the Flag," 42.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Chang, *Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*.

<sup>105</sup> Sergo Mikoyan's response at a 1987 conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts between former Soviet and U.S. officials. Mikoyan's father served as Soviet First Deputy during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The mediator had asked Mikoyan why Khrushchev installed the missiles in Cuba.

<sup>106</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, 1961-1962, eds. Daniel J. Lawler and Erin R. Mahan (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 314.

Despite Khrushchev's belief that the United States planned to invade Cuba, the American public had no knowledge of Operation Mongoose. William LeoGrande thinks that the press's failure to consider the placement of missiles from the Soviet perspective is the reason why Kennedy's actions were "so quickly and universally supported."<sup>107</sup> While I agree that the press's unilateral coverage of the crisis bolstered the public's support in Kennedy's response, I think there are many other factors that influenced the public's faith in the righteousness of the American action. Tensions were high, and the threat of a nuclear war was a novel situation; the public was looking for a strong leader to protect the tenets of American democracy.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, I believe that even if the press addressed the Soviet perspective in their articles and editorials, the public would have accused the press of being anti-American.

The press also failed to ask the pivotal question of why Soviet missiles in Cuba were automatically "offensive" while American missiles in "Turkey" were instantly "defensive." James McCartney argues that this is another instance where the press failed to exercise independent judgement from the Kennedy administration, but I do not think that the press can entirely be blamed for not asking this question.<sup>109</sup> First, the press lacked the capability to fully investigate whether this claim was true: communist countries were off limits to American reporters during the Cold War.<sup>110</sup> In addition, McCartney is assuming that journalists have access to classified government documents to check the veracity of the president's statements. This is simply not true. Journalists were working in a period before the Vietnam-Watergate era shook the public's confidence in American democracy. The public generally trusted the president

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<sup>107</sup> William LeoGrande and Peter Kornblush, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, 2014.

<sup>108</sup> "How U.S. Voters Feel About Cuba," *Newsweek*, October 13, 1962.

<sup>109</sup> McCartney, "Rallying Around the Flag," 45.

<sup>110</sup> Davis, *The Press and American Politics*, 98.

during this period, so there was inadequate infrastructure in place for journalists to check the facts purported by the Kennedy administration. Nevertheless, ExComm advisers prepared a statement of defense in case the public ever questioned why Soviet bases in Cuba were automatically offensive and American bases in Turkey were automatically defensive, but neither the press nor the public ever questioned the administration's assumption.<sup>111</sup> Besides not questioning the administrative position, journalists went further to defend the administrative position against possible objections. *Time* magazine argued that "the U.S. bases...have helped to keep the peace since World War II, while the Russian bases in Cuba threaten to upset the peace."<sup>112</sup> The *New York Times* took the position that "the Western powers moved to restore a balance of power and did not move into new territory." Whereas, the Soviets moved with the explicit purpose of "disrupting world peace."<sup>113</sup> The journalists' automatic defense of American missiles helped the administration conceal its plan to trade the American Jupiter missiles for the Soviet Cuban missiles because a few months after the crisis was over, the administration quickly dismantled its Turkish missiles, and the press perceived no connection between the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the sudden withdrawal of the American missiles in Turkey.

Another belief perpetuated during the Cuban Missile Crisis was that the placement of missiles in Cuba disrupted the nuclear balance. James McCartney argues that the press never questioned Kennedy's claim that the missiles "were an unacceptable danger to the United States." Instead the press exaggerated the danger, so that Kennedy would have no choice, but to respond to the placement of missiles in Cuba.<sup>114</sup> In a CBS news documentary, "Anatomy of a

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<sup>111</sup> McGeorge Bundy and James G. Blight, "October 27, 1962: Transcripts of the Meetings of the ExComm." *International Security* 12, no. 3 (1987): 30-92.

<sup>112</sup> "Their Bases and Ours," *Time*, November 2, 1962.

<sup>113</sup> Max Frankel, "Blockade Starts," *New York Times*, October 25, 1962.

<sup>114</sup> McCartney, "Rallying Around the Flag," 45.

Crisis,” reporter Charles Collingwood planted the belief that the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba disrupted the “whole balance of power.”<sup>115</sup> John W. Finney of the *New York Times* also reported that in the opinion of high administration officials, the placement of missiles in Cuba would tip the nuclear balance of power in favor of the Soviets.<sup>116</sup> Although the missiles did not actually change the balance of power, the placement of nuclear weapons in Cuba seemed to strengthen the Soviet retaliatory power, and as Kennedy noted during the crisis “appearances contribute to reality.”<sup>117</sup> Appearances of strategic inferiority contributed to the administration’s assessment that the public desired an “energetic response” to Cuba.<sup>118</sup>

These ideas fueled by the press were intended to force the president’s hand in military action against Cuba. However, according to McNamara, U.S. nuclear superiority was never in question: the U.S. had seventeen nuclear weapons for every one of the Soviet weapons.<sup>119</sup> Even the president conceded that Khrushchev’s strategy was more of a political play than a military challenge.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, some members of the press presented the placement of nuclear missiles in Cuba as a challenge to American nuclear superiority. Therefore, Kennedy believed a show of strength was necessary to reaffirm American superiority.<sup>121</sup>

From the first moment that Americans learned of Soviet missiles in Cuba, the press was on the administration’s side. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the press stopped operating as a forum for debate, and, instead, the media became a mouthpiece for the administration. In his

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<sup>115</sup> “Anatomy of a Crisis,” CBS News special report, October 28, 1962, narrated by Charles Collingwood, CBS News Archives.

<sup>116</sup> John W. Finney, “U.S. Atomic Edge Believed In Peril,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1962.

<sup>117</sup> Interview, December 17, 1962, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy (Washington D.C., 1963), 898.

<sup>118</sup> Nathan, “The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour,” 265.

<sup>119</sup> Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation* (New York, 1967), 195.

<sup>120</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents*, 898.

<sup>121</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 391.

Cuban Missile Crisis address, the president made many offensive statements, which were intended to sway world opinion to the defense of America. Instead of challenging the highly questionable propositions of the Kennedy administration, the press defended these propositions without a reasonable justification. Members of the press did not examine alternative viewpoints of the crisis, nor did they check the veracity of the president's statements; they simply reiterated word by word, lie by lie, all the 'facts' that the administration took to be true. Without questions or challenges from the media, Kennedy sold his version of the crisis to the public, and he was able to win back the hearts and minds of the American people while also reestablishing his international image of American toughness.

#### *American Action*

Kennedy's speech on October 28, 1962, was explicitly shrouded in incendiary language for the purpose of appeasing his political opponents and regaining international favor. Kennedy had campaigned on the promise to be tougher on Cuba than the Republicans and to eradicate communism from the Western Hemisphere. Americans, especially Republicans, were disappointed that the president had failed to live up to his 1960 promise. Although still quite high, a 1961 Gallup poll showed Kennedy's popularity dipping below the 70 percent mark after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion.<sup>122</sup> When U-2 surveillance photos showed missiles in Cuba, Kennedy had one more chance to stand up to Castro and Khrushchev, and he had one more opportunity to imprint his lasting legacy in history.

Consequently, when ExComm members were discussing possible responses to the Cuban crisis, diplomacy simply wasn't an option for domestic political reasons. The committee

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<sup>122</sup> Gallup, *The Gallup Poll Public Opinion 1935-1971*, 1780.

considered an air strike, invasion, or blockade in response to Khrushchev, and the group was divided between a blockade and an air strike. Kennedy leaned more towards moderate action, but for the sake of America's international credibility, it was paramount that the administration make a show of strength.<sup>123</sup>

After the blockade went into effect, Kennedy scrambled to control the Cuban missile narrative. Kennedy exercised tight management over the press and the stories they were reporting. Kennedy's oversight bordered close on censorship, but the press tolerated the president's executive management of the papers because they believed that they were helping the White House win the war on communism. After the president's Monday night speech, the State Department granted interviews to 125 reporters. Publishers and journalists, who Kennedy knew personally, such as Stewart Alsop, James Reston, Walter Lippmann, and Philip Graham, were given private interviews by EXCOMM members. Finally, journalists that Kennedy considered close friends, such as Charles Bartlett, had the privilege of receiving exclusive information about the crisis from the commander-in-chief.<sup>124</sup> The key to information access during the Cuban Missile Crisis was political favor; reporters who wrote insensitive stories about the Kennedy administration were left in the dark.

One such journalist who was reprimanded by the Kennedy administration for writing unflattering articles about the president was Arthur Krock of the *New York Times*. Krock argued that the Kennedy administration had known about the missile sites weeks in advance of the public. The announcement of Soviet missiles in Cuba was conveniently timed to influence the election. Kennedy did not take public criticism lightly, so he dispatched John McCone, director

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<sup>123</sup> Sheldon M. Stern, "Time Line for Press Briefing On the Release of Cuban Missile Crisis Meeting Tapes," October 24, 1996, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>124</sup> Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 236-37.

of the CIA, to educate Krock about how quickly missile sites can be set up.<sup>125</sup> Although Krock was correct: the administration had known about the missiles many days before informing the American people, he was publicly ridiculed for not understanding the severity of the situation.

By the middle of October 1962, Kennedy learned that the Soviets had deployed missiles into Cuba. The president found himself in uncharted territory: no former commander-in-chief had to deal with the threat of impending nuclear conflict. The rhetoric of the Cold War required that Kennedy put on a show of strength. Clark Clifford advisor to Harry Truman informed the president in the early days of the Cold War: “Compromise and concessions are considered, by the Soviets, to be evidence of weakness and they are encouraged by our ‘retreats’ to make new and greater demands.”<sup>126</sup> This sentiment carried over to the Kennedy presidency, and especially after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy had the impetus to show Khrushchev that despite the failed invasion, the American president would not capitulate so easily. Therefore, publicly, Kennedy used the press to present the strength of “American will and resolve,” while privately he used private channels to secure a diplomatic solution with Khrushchev. This strategy allowed the president to insulate foreign policy from domestic politics while he secured support from America’s allies. In times of a national crisis, information control is necessary, if not required, to safeguard the lives of the American people. The difference between the Cuban Missile Crisis and other foreign policy crises was that Kennedy and members of his administration continued to control the flow of information long after the crisis ended. Information that was omitted or changed for national security reasons soon became embedded in the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis to protect the sentiment of American superiority.

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<sup>125</sup> Arthur Krock, “The Preparations Were Anything But Secret,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1962.

<sup>126</sup> Arthur Krock, *Memoirs* (London, 1968), 228-29.

### Chapter III: Secret Deal

As the crisis continued and a peaceful outcome seemed uncertain, the public trembled on the brink of nuclear war. However, only a few members of the Kennedy administration were aware of all the precautions the president had taken to prevent nuclear war. While the press presented a tough image of Kennedy to reassure the American public and NATO, privately Kennedy worked through back channels to strike a deal with Khrushchev. The missile crisis reached its climax during the weekend when Khrushchev sent two private letters to the president. Departing from diplomatic tradition, Kennedy publicly responded to the letter with more favorable terms.<sup>127</sup> This left Khrushchev in the uncomfortable position of accepting the president's offer or preparing for military confrontation. On Sunday, October 28, 1962, Khrushchev accepted Kennedy's offer, and the public celebrated on what appeared to be an American victory. Statesmen and journalists celebrated the United States reaffirming mastery on the global stage. In a *Life* editorial, Henry Luce rearticulated the responsibility of America as the dominant global power "to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence" to bring about a more peaceful world order.<sup>128</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, a member of the Planning Council of the Department of State declared that the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated the limits of the Soviet nuclear capabilities. He concluded that "the U.S. is today the only effective global military power in the whole world."<sup>129</sup> In the aftermath of the crisis, Kennedy used the reemerging confidence in American military superiority to craft his version of the Missile Crisis. Advisers to the president spoke of Kennedy's nerve and wisdom, and they deliberately deemphasized the

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<sup>127</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 714.

<sup>128</sup> Henry Luce, *Life*, February 17, 1941.

<sup>129</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Implications of Change for United States Foreign Policy," *Department of State Bulletin*, LVII, July 3, 1967, 19-23.

role of back-channel diplomacy in resolving the crisis.<sup>130</sup> Kennedy continued to preserve his legacy as a Cold War warrior by restricting information access after the crisis was over. The president granted an exclusive interview to Charles Bartlett and Stewart Alsop; their “Profile in Courage” became the official account of the crisis, and Kennedy had the benefit of editing their story before it was published.<sup>131</sup> Thus, the missile crisis became a tale of heroic military leadership, and the lessons that appeared to be learned from the confrontation was that crises could be mastered. Some foreign policy analysts argue that this pervasive belief continues to harm U.S. foreign relations today.

This chapter first examines how journalists worked with the president to help him attain a diplomatic solution. Kennedy nurtured close friendships with many reporters to help him defeat communism. Then, it examines the secret missile deal that Robert F. Kennedy made with the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin. Finally, it examines how President Kennedy covered up the missile deal in the press and how he was able to write his tough version as the historical account of the Cuban Missile Crisis. When Kennedy was assassinated shortly after the missile crisis, the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis that Kennedy and his advisers had constructed became enshrined in the history of the Kennedy legacy.

### *Back-Channel Diplomacy*

In the heat of the crisis, back-channel diplomacy was an effective way for Kennedy to convey to Khrushchev that he was willing to trade missile bases in Turkey for missile bases in Cuba. Kennedy couldn’t publicly admit that he was contemplating a diplomatic solution because

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<sup>130</sup> Schlesinger, *One Thousand Days*, 840-41.

<sup>131</sup> Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, “In Times of Crisis,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 8, 1962.

“America’s international credibility required demonstrating America’s strength and resolve to the world.”<sup>132</sup> Consequently, Kennedy dispatched trusted journalists to convey his willingness to trade missiles to KGB agents.

Journalists used two strategies to help resolve the missile crisis: they either met with Soviet agents to suggest diplomatic solutions, or they published articles, which urged the president to consider peaceful options. Robert Kennedy later observed that “the luckiest thing in the world” had been the president’s control of the timing and flow of information in the press.<sup>133</sup> Kennedy’s ability to keep up a tough public image while privately negotiating a diplomatic solution allowed the U.S. to secure the endorsement of allies and to strengthen the U.S. position with the Soviets.

Although Kennedy believed his efforts at back-channel diplomacy to be successful, recent evidence suggests that KGB agents did not consider journalists as a reliable conduit to the president, so they did not report information from their meetings with American journalists to the Kremlin. Nevertheless, the Kennedy brothers thought that back-channel meetings between American journalists and KGB agents would successfully resolve the crisis because these meetings allowed Kennedy to convey his flexibility to Khrushchev without appearing weak to the public. On October 23, 1962, both Charles Bartlett and Frank Holeman met with Georgi Bolshakov of the KGB to inform him that the president wanted to trade missiles in Cuba for missiles in Turkey.<sup>134</sup> On October 24, 1962, after the blockade went into effect, Robert Kennedy dispatched Bartlett once again to meet with Bolshakov. This time, Bartlett informed Bolshakov

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<sup>132</sup> Graham, “Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press.”

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 249-51.

that despite JFK's tough rhetoric, "the President does not want to invade Cuba."<sup>135</sup> The Kennedy brothers believed that their diplomatic endeavors had found fertile ground when Khrushchev agreed to a compromise; however, the information from these meetings never left Bolshakov's desk.

Historians continue to debate the role that journalists played in resolving the crisis. Specifically, historians have questioned whether John Scali of ABC news helped resolve the crisis. Initially, historians thought that Scali brought information about a missile swap to the Kremlin's attention. Alexander Fomin, the KGB station chief at the Soviet Embassy in Washington reached out to Scali to inform him that "missile bases would be dismantled under United Nations supervision and Castro would pledge not to accept offensive weapons of any kind, ever in return for a pledge not to invade Cuba."<sup>136</sup> Shalom Sokolow argues that Scali could have reported this information on live television, but Scali, knowing the delicate nature of foreign policy negotiations, took this information straight to Roger Hilsman, the director of Intelligence at the State Department.<sup>137</sup>

Upon analysis of Soviet cables sent during the crisis, historians debate the importance of Scali and other journalists in helping to resolve the missile crisis. Soviet documents reveal that Scali contacted Fomin, and Khrushchev did not view Scali or other journalists as a channel to Kennedy. In addition, the pledges made by Scali and Fomin appear redundant because by the time Fomin's cable reached the Kremlin, Khrushchev and Kennedy already agreed to trade missiles in Cuba for missiles in Turkey.<sup>138</sup> Even though Scali's meetings with Fomin may not

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<sup>135</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *'One Hell of a Gamble,'* 250-251.

<sup>136</sup> John A. Scali, 26 Oct., 1962, as cited in Chang, Laurence, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, 184.

<sup>137</sup> Sokolow, "Publish and Perish?" 273.

<sup>138</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "Using KGB Documents: The Scali-Feklisov

have been the primary factor to resolve the crisis, these meetings may have prepared the Kremlin to accept a diplomatic solution.

Finally, Walter Lippman of the *Washington Post* published a column on October 25<sup>th</sup>, which described his desired outcome of the missile crisis: a missile swap. Lippman had learned in a private briefing with the president that Kennedy was contemplating a missile swap to trade the aging Jupiter missiles for the newly constructed Soviet missiles.<sup>139</sup> James Graham argues that this article was significant because although it deviated from Kennedy's public image as tough and uncompromising, Kennedy did not demand Lippman to retract his story.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, historians believe that Khrushchev learned of Kennedy's willingness to trade missiles through Lippman's column. Khrushchev was aware of Kennedy's friendship with journalists, so the fact that Kennedy did not refute Lippman's article may have indicated to Khrushchev that Kennedy was willing to consider a diplomatic solution. Journalists helped resolve the missile crisis, but not in the way that historians originally believed; publications, not meetings, brought the possibility of a missile swap to the attention of the Kremlin.

### *Secret Deal*

Kennedy's efforts at back-channel diplomacy worked, and on Friday, October 26<sup>th</sup>, Khrushchev agreed to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba if the president promised not to attack Cuba. The president rejoiced, he had achieved the public outcome he had desired. However, the next day on Radio Moscow, Khrushchev broadcast the second letter he had sent to Kennedy; in this letter, Khrushchev declared that he would only remove his missiles from Cuba

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Channel in the Cuban Missile Crisis," Cold War International History Project Bulletin 8 (Spring 1995): 58-61.

<sup>139</sup> John Luskin, *Lippman, Liberty, and the Press* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1972).

<sup>140</sup> Graham, "Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press."

if Kennedy removed his missiles from Turkey.<sup>141</sup> This demand put the president in a difficult situation. Publicly, he could not agree to the terms of Khrushchev's request. For foreign policy reasons, Kennedy could not dismantle the Jupiter missiles because if he did, the US role of protectorate would be called into question by America's allies.

On Friday, October 26<sup>th</sup>, the president received startling news; U-2 photos showed that the Cuban missile sites were operational, and the Soviets would be able to launch an attack against America within a few days. The "hawks" in Kennedy's committee pressed for the president to launch an invasion or an air strike, but the president was hesitant to take military action that might endanger the lives of the people. If the president heeded his advisers advice not only would America receive bad public opinion for "conducting a Pearl Harbor in reverse," but also dropping a bomb would give Khrushchev reason to escalate.<sup>142</sup> Kennedy knew that taking such reckless military risks would only hasten a nuclear war, so he tried to convince the members of ExComm that a diplomatic solution was the best strategy.

Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations discussed possible diplomatic solutions with ExComm. Stevenson advised for the United States to lift its quarantine on Cuba, pledge not to invade Cuba, agree to make the Western Hemisphere a nuclear-free zone, and suggest the possibility of a missile swap.<sup>143</sup> Many of the "hawks" in the committee adamantly disagreed with Stevenson's suggestions. John McCone, director of the CIA, articulated the typical argument of dissenters that it was too dangerous for the US to remove all of its defensive capabilities when the Soviets were prepared to launch a missile strike against the United States at any minute. For the most part, Stevenson's suggestion for a missile swap was

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<sup>141</sup> Chang, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, 373-389.

<sup>142</sup> McCartney, "Rallying Around the Flag."

<sup>143</sup> Graham, "Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press,".

dismissed by ExComm committee members as a pacifist strategy, and the committee continued to plan military strategies to forcibly remove the Cuban missiles.<sup>144</sup> The idea of a missile swap dissipated from everybody's minds-except for the Kennedy brothers.

Without the public, the press, or ExComm knowing, the Attorney General met with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador in Washington, on Saturday evening, October 27, 1962. Robert Kennedy told Dobrynin, "the President said that we are ready to consider the question of Turkey, to examine favorably the question of Turkey."<sup>145</sup> Robert Kennedy conveyed that if the Soviets agreed to withdraw their missiles from Cuba, the United States would dismantle its Jupiter missiles a few months after the resolution of the crisis. However, the deal was contingent on the Soviets not disclosing that a compromise took place. Robert Kennedy also warned Dobrynin that if Khrushchev did not accept this deal, the United States would be forced to escalate its response.<sup>146</sup>

Khrushchev agreed to the terms of the missile swap, but at the time, the public did not have any knowledge of this secret arrangement. Kennedy responded with a public letter to Khrushchev, in which he pledged not to invade Cuba in exchange for the Soviets to remove their missiles from the Western Hemisphere. Khrushchev accepted the terms of the letter, and from the public's perspective, the epistolary exchange between the superpowers effectuated the end of the crisis.<sup>147</sup>

This secret deal is an anomaly in foreign policy negotiations for the fact that it was insulated from members of the White House, including ExComm and the vice president, for

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<sup>144</sup> Zeiklow, *The Kennedy Tapes*.

<sup>145</sup> Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 78-121.

<sup>146</sup> Frankel, *High Noon in the Cold War*, 147-63.

<sup>147</sup> Chang, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 373-89.

several decades. Only nine people knew about the missile swap, and they did not disclose this secret until 1982 when the surviving participants to the deal jointly wrote a letter to *Time* magazine, in which they described their knowledge and participation in the secret missile swap.<sup>148</sup> Other presidents have kept secrets from the public for national security reasons or to protect a political reputation. The Cuban Missile Crisis is an exceptional case of government secrecy because members of the Kennedy administration kept the truth from the American public for over two decades, and today scholars, journalists, and national security advisors continue to correct the misconceptions of the crisis.

Schwarz argues that there were legitimate foreign policy concerns for keeping the deal secret immediately after the missile crisis, but adherents to the deal harmed the public by keeping the deal a secret for several decades. Although the Jupiters were “a pile of junk”, removing them too quickly after the missile crisis would weaken NATO and make US allies doubt US resolve.<sup>149</sup> Consequently, most historians and foreign policy analysts agree that Kennedy had substantial reasons for initially keeping the missile deal a secret. However, the prolonged secrecy of the missile swap appears to be largely motivated by political interests. During the crisis, only a small group in the White House knew about the existence of Soviet missiles in Cuba before the president’s official announcement. Even White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger was unaware of the missiles in Cuba.<sup>150</sup> Kennedy purposely kept Salinger in the dark, so if pressed by reporters, Salinger would not accidentally leak any information to the press.

If discovered by the press and the public, the secret missile deal would be detrimental to

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<sup>148</sup> Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, George W. Ball, Roswell L. Gilpatric, Theodore Sorensen, and McGeorge Bundy, “The Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Time*, September 27, 1982, 89.

<sup>149</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 52.

<sup>150</sup> Salinger, Pierre, *P.S. A Memoir*, 114.

Kennedy's reputation. Most papers published during the crisis helped to restore Kennedy's reputation as tough on Communism and Khrushchev. If the public found out that Kennedy had not actually defeated Khrushchev, but compromised with him instead, Kennedy's political reputation would be ruined. In the Cold War era, there were no middle-of-the-road diplomatic strategies. The public, the press, and members of ExComm only perceived certain policies as "hard" or "soft." This dichotomy permeated into the negotiating room, where Kennedy was forced to choose between a "hard" military strategy and a "soft" negotiation strategy. Lippman urged the president to use his platform to educate the average American citizen about the subtleties of foreign policy negotiations. Lippman asked Kennedy, "How do we describe our policy...to make people realize what they don't realize at all, what it means to conduct great diplomatic affairs in the new and revolutionary nuclear age."<sup>151</sup> The era of a quick military victory was over. With the creation of nuclear weapons that have the capability to destroy the world, negotiations became the only viable strategy to resolve foreign policy crises. Despite the changing international landscape, Kennedy chose not to use his platform to educate the American public about the "differences between appeasement and negotiation." Instead, Kennedy took advantage of the favorable political climate to privately brag that "[he] had cut his balls off."<sup>152</sup>

Instead of using the press as a platform to teach the American people about the complexities of foreign policy negotiations in the nuclear age, Kennedy omitted unsavory details from the public record to present his administration in a favorable light. Kennedy knew that the details published in newspapers would eventually become part of the historical record, so he

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<sup>151</sup> Graham, "Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press."

<sup>152</sup> In reference to Khrushchev, William Manchester, *One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy* (Little Brown, 1983), 215.

aimed to make his version the historical account of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

### *An American Hero*

On Sunday, October 28, 1962, Khrushchev publicly announced that he would withdraw his missiles from Cuba in exchange for a non-invasion pledge by the United States. The fear that had gripped the nation for the past thirteen days suddenly dissipated, and the press hailed John F. Kennedy as an American hero. Kennedy's successful standoff with the Soviet Union was declared by *Time* magazine as "one of the decisive moments in the twentieth century."<sup>153</sup> The *New Yorker* credited Kennedy's "steady nerves "for bringing Khrushchev to his knees."<sup>154</sup> And even the conservative *Chicago Tribune* seemed to have moved past criticizing Kennedy for his weak resolve, and instead had moved on to praising Kennedy for his "fighting attitude."<sup>155</sup> Unbeknownst to the public and the press was the secret deal that Kennedy had planned to secure a successful resolution. In addition, Kennedy was willing to make the missile trade public if Khrushchev did not agree to his initial proposal. He had secretly contacted U Thant at the United Nations and told him to propose a missile trade if it seemed possible that Khrushchev was unwilling to back down. As Graham states, "the world trembled on what appeared to be the brink of nuclear war while only a few White House advisers saw all the cards in Kennedy's hand."<sup>156</sup> Stepping back from the brink, Kennedy once again began offering exclusive interviews to publicize his tough version of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Kennedy offered an exclusive interview to his friends Charles Bartlett and Stewart Alsop

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<sup>153</sup> "The Backdown," *Time*, November 2, 1962.

<sup>154</sup> Richard Rovere, "Letter from Washington," *New Yorker*, November 3, 1962.

<sup>155</sup> Walter Trohan, "Report from Washington," *Chicago Tribune*, October 27, 1962.

<sup>156</sup> Graham, "Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press."

of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Their retelling of the crisis soon became the official narrative of the thirteen days. Kennedy specifically chose these men to “provide an authoritative account of ExComm’s top secret sessions” because they promised to emphasize how the commander-in-chief ran an “effective operation.”<sup>157</sup> The article emphasized the president’s toughness, and it declared “a President’s nerve is the essential factor when the two great nuclear powers are ‘eyeball to eyeball.’”<sup>158</sup> The article also criticized Adlai Stevenson for proposing to “trade American missiles in Turkey, Italy, and Great Britain for Soviet missiles in Cuba.”<sup>159</sup> Kennedy specifically asked Bartlett and Alsop to include the criticism of Stevenson’s proposal in their article because it provided a cover-up for the missile swap that had resolved the crisis.<sup>160</sup> Details that did not fit with the narrative of political toughness were edited out of the account, and Kennedy restricted this exclusive only to the few journalists he could trust.

Although Kennedy had a press secretary, he continued to monitor the coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis himself. As Salinger recalled, “Kennedy was in reality his own press secretary...He believed he could do it better than anyone else.”<sup>161</sup> Kennedy continued to control the Cuban Missile Crisis narrative by commissioning Hugh Sidey, a reporter for *Time*, to write a campaign biography about his heroic handling of the missile crisis. In his interview with Sidey, Kennedy called the resolution of the crisis “easy” and he called the quarantine of Cuba “exciting.”<sup>162</sup> Exempt from the record was the uncertainty and pressure that members of EXCOMM felt in their deliberations about Cuba. Accounts from ExComm administrators

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<sup>157</sup> Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, “In Times of Crisis,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 8, 1962.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Graham, “Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press.”

<sup>161</sup> Thompson, *The White House Press on the Presidency*, 11.

<sup>162</sup> Sidey, *John F. Kennedy*, 321.

emphasize how “calm and controlled” Kennedy acted throughout the duration of the crisis, but this is an inaccurate picture of how the deliberations proceeded. After an Assistant Secretary drove into a tree at 4:00 in the morning, Robert Kennedy stated, “the strain and the hours without sleep were beginning to take their toll...that kind of pressure does strange things to a human being.”<sup>163</sup> John F. Kennedy was also beginning to wonder whether his advisers had suffered a mental collapse.

Kennedy planned to use his renewed popularity in the next election cycle, but unfortunately, his political aspirations were cut short by his assassination in 1963. Kennedy took the secret of the missile swap with him to his grave, and his loyal advisers who had been privy to the secret denied in every forum that such a deal had taken place. President Kennedy, like most presidents, desired a favorable press, but his media management techniques went beyond merely mediating the truth to outright creating his own version of history. Kennedy may not have been as “tough” as reporters described him, but his media management techniques of restricting access to favorable reporters and influencing the story that they reported were so successful that Kennedy created his own personal legacy in the press.

Although Kennedy died before the truth could be revealed, Kennedy’s lie had detrimental foreign and domestic policy consequences. The press’s portrayal of a nuclear standoff as a staring contest with winners and losers, and Schlesinger’s pernicious illusion that a tough resolve and cool control won foreign policy crises gave Americans an inaccurate understanding of the true nature of foreign policy crises. Foreign policy experts contend that the “no compromise” myth of the Cuban Missile Crisis continues to harm foreign policy negotiations today. For example in an article published in *Foreign Policy*, Leslie Gleb argued that because of the no-

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<sup>163</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 207.

compromise myth of the Cuban Missile Crisis it “would be near political suicide to publicly suggest letting Iran enrich uranium up to an inconsequential five percent...though the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty permits it.”<sup>164</sup>

Historians, such as Frederick Schwarz and James McCartney, also argue that Kennedy’s lionization in the press pushed President Johnson to live up to Kennedy’s legacy. The press praised President Kennedy for refusing to compromise to Khrushchev, so if President Johnson made any compromises during the Vietnam War, the public would have perceived him as weak. I think that the strong media image of Kennedy may have been one of the factors that pushed Johnson to appear equally as tough in his foreign policy strategies, but I also think that a myriad of other factors contributed to Johnson’s Vietnam policies. Schwarz argues that “this was an extraordinary misuse of secrecy” because Johnson was deprived of the knowledge of how foreign policy negotiations were conducted. If he had been equipped with this knowledge, he may not have escalated the war so quickly. Nevertheless, Johnson’s motives in Vietnam are too complex to warrant a singular explanation.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Leslie Gleb, “The Myth That Screwed Up 50 Years of U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2012.

<sup>165</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 54.

## Conclusion

John F. Kennedy succeeded in building a legacy of savior, and after his assassination in 1963, he became almost a martyr to the American people. If Kennedy had lived, the tough reputation he built during his short-term presidency would have certainly been tested. Technology was improving to such an extent that television news became the dominant communications medium after Kennedy's assassination. This new technology offered reporters a way to test the president's bold statements.<sup>166</sup> If this technology had existed during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the public would have seen that the resolution was not as decisive as the president had declared because the Soviets still had 17,000 troops stationed in Cuba.<sup>167</sup> While during the early 1960s, the press generally trusted the president, this sentiment changed during the Vietnam War, and journalists became more cynical of the president's motives. Kennedy used the lack of intrusive technology to his advantage; he controlled the flow of information through the American printing press, but, Johnson and Nixon would have to deal with television technology that contradicted their claims.

Kennedy's media management techniques saved the world from nuclear war, but also the deliberate disinformation put forth by the Kennedy administration planted the myth that international crises could be solved by using the right amount of force. Kennedy's influence over the media allowed him to withhold information until he was ready to share it, and his close friendship with Charles Bartlett and Stewart Alsop allowed him to edit the official narrative of the Cuban Missile Crisis. By emphasizing his strengths and omitting his weaknesses, Kennedy

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<sup>166</sup> Kern Montague, Patricia Levering, and Ralph Levering. *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, the Presidency, and Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 166.

<sup>167</sup> Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy*, 131-132.

learned that he could use the press to shape the way that he would be remembered in history. Although, the Cuban Missile Crisis could most accurately be described as a draw, Kennedy was able to emerge from the crisis politically unscathed. He planned on taking this public adulation with him to the polls, but his political motivations were stopped because of his death. Nevertheless, Kennedy's assassination made him even more of a hero, and journalists continued to write about his victory after his death.

Kennedy's media management techniques also had the negative consequences of pushing him to policies that he did not want to pursue. Cuba became the dominant concern of the 1962 election, and Kennedy campaigned on the platform of a tough Cuban policy. When the public became aware of Soviet missiles in Cuba in October 1962, it was paramount that the Kennedy administration get them out. As ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith stated, "once [the missiles] were there, the political needs of the Kennedy administration urged it to take almost any risk to get them out."<sup>168</sup> The military significance of the missiles was almost immaterial to the Kennedy administration's desperation to remove the missiles because national reputation was at stake during the crisis as much as any actual threat. Political concerns were so significant to Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis that he confided to his brother his worries that he would have been impeached if he had done nothing about the missiles.<sup>169</sup>

Many historians have come to the consensus that journalists are to blame for letting the Cuban Missile myth exist in the historical record unchecked. Graham argues that Bartlett and Alsop neglected their constitutional duty by letting the president edit the first account of the crisis, and James McCartney argues that journalists embellished the myth by advancing the

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<sup>168</sup> Ronald Steel, *Imperialists and Other Heroes* (New York, 1971), 119.

<sup>169</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 45.

propaganda of the Kennedy administration.<sup>170</sup> While journalists helped to advance the administration's agenda, they cannot be entirely blamed for filtering information during a national security crisis. Kennedy was a master manipulator and he perfected the art of media relations. He cultivated a circle of elite journalists, and he incentivized them with tidbits of information for favorable press coverage. Kennedy used the papers as a forum for framing his political agenda; he emphasized his successes and omitted his shortcomings from the public record.

Many historians have questioned whether such deception could happen now, and the conclusions they have reached are mixed. On the one hand, since the late 1960s, journalists and government investigations have decreased the level of secrecy. Government secrets are intended to protect the American people, but Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair are two striking examples of a president misusing his presidential power. Presidents have also taken a proactive approach to limiting government secrets through the creation of Jimmy Carter's Information Security Oversight Office and the establishment of Bill Clinton's commission on government secrecy.<sup>171</sup> In addition, the technological revolution of the post-9/11 period has rendered it almost impossible for the government to keep secrets from its people.<sup>172</sup> Yet, there are still instances of unchecked government secrecy as Edward Snowden's 2013 allegations against the NSA illustrate.<sup>173</sup> The invention of computers and cell phones allows information to be shared almost instantaneously, and digital storage makes it impossible for a file to ever truly be

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<sup>170</sup> Graham, "Kennedy, Cuba, and the Press"; McCartney, "Rallying Around the Flag," 43.

<sup>171</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *Information Security Oversight Office, Annual Report to the President, Fiscal Year 1979* (1980); *Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy*, S. Doc. No. 105-2 (1997).

<sup>172</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 41.

<sup>173</sup> Schwarz, *Democracy in the Dark*, 4.

destroyed.

On the other hand, secrecy is a central component of the modern state. “Secrecy begets higher levels of secrecy” as more and more documents are labeled classified and codeword protected from prying eyes.<sup>174</sup> The historical record also indicates that in every foreign policy crisis since the Cuban Missile Crisis, the critical faculties of the media shut down during terse foreign policy negotiations. The American media continued its press strategy of supporting the president during the Vietnam War, and it was not until the Tet Offensive that journalists became more skeptical of the president’s policies. Notwithstanding, the government continued to monitor press coverage during President Reagan’s Grenada Invasion, President Bush’s invasion, and the coverage of the Persian Gulf War. Eliot O. Cohen, a professor of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University declares the Persian Gulf War as “a victory over journalists.”<sup>175</sup> The lessons learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis was that whenever national security is at stake, the press should support the president’s policies to protect the safety of the nation. As the press continue to be an active participant to the conversations surrounding foreign policy, there continues to be debate about the role that the press should play during foreign policy crises. The Cuban Missile Crisis is unique to the extent that press coverage of the crisis was predominantly in the printing press, and the president cultivated a special relationship with influential journalists to shape his legacy. Nevertheless, foreign policy crises continue to plague our society, and the solution is not as black and white as disclosing all secrets or creating an insular governing elite. Rather, the press and the public should have access to classified information once a crisis has passed. Otherwise, society runs the risk of never truly understanding the complexities of foreign policy

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> McCartney, “Rallying Around the Flag,” 46.

and American democracy.

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