

# The Cuban Missile Crisis

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[See table of contents](#)

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## REVIEW ESSAY

### The Cuban Missile Crisis

Fursenko, Aleksandr, and Timothy Naftali. *"One Hell of a Gamble": Krushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958-1964: The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Stern, Sheldon M. *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

The events of 11 September 2001 have had such a tremendous impact on the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century that the Cold War now seems rather unimportant. Yet, in October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union almost went to war over Soviet nuclear missiles clandestinely transported to Cuba. The world stood on the brink of a massive thermo-nuclear exchange between the superpowers and the final determination not to wage war manifested itself in the personal decisions of President John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev. For years numerous books on the Cuban Missile Crisis saw print bereft of archival research in the Soviet Union or the unknown tape recordings that President Kennedy made of the crisis management team he assembled to deal with the missiles in Cuba. Kennedy's team was known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, scholars have been probing Soviet archives and the information available on the ExComm tapes has received wider attention. The two books under discussion utilize these new sources and help Crisis scholarship leap forward.

The first work under consideration is *"One Hell of a Gamble": Krushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958-1964: The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali. Fursenko is a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Naftali is an historian at Yale. As the book's title implies the missile crisis is examined within the larger context of the Cuban-American antagonism dating from 1958. They contend that the missile crisis produced neither heroes nor villains, "just human beings, who are flawed, sometimes dangerously so, and whose dramatic risk-taking created equally dramatic history." (p. xi) Using newly accessible Russian sources the authors build a new profile of President Kennedy's leadership and contend that, allowing for the possibility of bias, "Soviet archives constitute a remarkable repository of every American initiative, probe, or gaff associated with the superpower relationship." (p. x)

Specifically, the new Soviet archival sources have led Fursenko and Naftali to sharpen the image of Kennedy's personal foreign policy initiatives with the Soviets in the 1960s, executed primarily between his brother Robert and Georgi N. Bolshakov, a Soviet military intelligence officer. Kennedy's back-channel diplomacy ultimately failed as the Soviets played a deadly game of chess in the backyard of the United States. The authors contend that Krushchev was in a state of disbelief when he finally realized that Kennedy was taking active measures to meet the Soviet threat. There is good information regarding the Soviet military's perception of possible American responses. An airborne assault was envisioned as far more likely than an amphibious assault and Krushchev even identified the possibility of a full naval blockade. Unfortunately, the focus on Soviet archival sources led the authors to perhaps under-utilize the tape recordings President Kennedy secretly made of the ExComm meetings beginning on 16 October. They identify the changing nature of opinions within ExComm and the fact that Kennedy was conditioned by an adherence to international morality, but their analysis of ExComm, covering only 18 pages, is not as comprehensive as that provided by the author of the next book under consideration.

Sheldon M. Stern's work, *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* is much more focused on the events of October 1962. As the head historian at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library from 1977 to 1999 Stern was in an unequalled position to conduct an intensive re-evaluation of Kennedy's ExComm tape recordings. They represent *the* principal primary American source for the decisions reached at the time. Stern argues that the ExComm tapes "provide an incomparable chance to scrutinize history exactly as it unfolded" and to "document the substance and quality of JFK's leadership." (p. xiv) However, *Averting 'The Final Failure'* is not a complete presentation of the actual transcribed recordings. To the contrary Stern chose to present his evidence in narrative form. He offers that "I was definitely the first professional historian to review these tapes" (p. xvii) and that is probably why he feels confident enough to select such a methodology.

Stern demonstrates little sympathy for the previous crisis scholarship because "virtually none" of it "has systematically included or investigated the incomparable evidence found on these tapes." (p. xv) He criticizes the two previous published transcriptions, Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow's *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1997) and their subsequent edition based upon work at the Presidential Recording Project at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs as "seriously inaccurate." (p. 428) Stern even includes examples of the differences in transcription between the Miller Center's edition and his own in segments at the end of the book devoted to unclear transcription, missing words, phrases, sentences, and speakers, and mistranscriptions which alter the historical record. Indeed, this last segment is the most intriguing. To cite one specific example, the Miller Center edition transcribed Kennedy's words in once instance as: "If we go

into Cuba we have to all realize that we are taking a chance that these missiles, which are ready to fire, won't be fired. So that's a gamble we should take." Stern agreed with this passage except for the last sentence, which he transcribes as: "So that's . . . is that really a gamble we should take?" (p. 436) In fact, Stern's transcription of this exchange between Kennedy and the Congress directly contradicts Fursenko and Naftali's transcription which frames the President's words in the form of a statement of policy, not a question as to whether it should be so. (p. ix)

Both books serve their purpose. "*One Hell of a Gamble*" is principally underpinned by Soviet sources while *Averting 'The Final Failure'* is a virtual case-study of the Kennedy tapes. Anyone seeking to expand their understanding of the missile crisis would do well to entertain the arguments contained in both books. Soviet archival research will only continue to redefine certain aspects of the crisis from the Soviet perspective. Conversely, it now stands to reason that Stern's work must be taken into account if one is to undertake any serious investigation of decision-making on the American side. Indeed, simply as a corrective to Robert Kennedy's own crisis memoir, *Thirteen Days*, Stern's work is indispensable. Both books are highly recommended.

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