

## The Cuban Missile Crisis

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## **Review Essay**

### **The Cuban Missile Crisis**

Hillsman, Roger. *The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Struggle over Policy*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996.

White, Mark J. *The Cuban Missile Crisis*. London: Macmillan, 1996.

The Cuban Missile Crisis remains one of the most intriguing events of the Cold War. And many aspects of those tense days when the world came closer to the threshold of nuclear holocaust than at any other time in modern history remain controversial. Not surprisingly, the Crisis is a frequent target for both revisionism and sombre reflection in the effort to provide better explanations of those complex events.

The recent books by Roger Hillsman and Mark White make interesting companion volumes not only because they reflect the prevailing dichotomy over the way the Americans handled the Crisis but also of trends in revisionist history. Hillsman writes from the perspective of one who actually took part in the decision-making process now given the opportunity to talk freely as a result of declassification of much source material. His aim is to provide a better explanation of how decisions were actually reached under stress and at times without full information on Russian and Cuban actions. White, on the other hand, challenges the competence of the crisis management process through a re-examination of the White House tapes and from a mass of background material on the key participants.

The contrasts are extreme and, at times, troubling. For instance, while there is reason to question many of President Kennedy's personal traits, his respect and commitment for the office of President has never been seriously in doubt. Yet White's assertion that Kennedy's early reactions to the Crisis may have been influenced by amphetamines (p. 118) begins to paint a picture that some will not accept. Admittedly, there are many who remain faithful to the Kennedy legend, warts and all, and Hillsman is probably one, but for assaults on that legend to be credible they must be carefully substantiated. White's very negative picture of Kennedy is not. And although Hillsman's portrayal of Kennedy is far kinder, it fully acknowledges that tensions existed and that the decision-making process was frustrating, frequently because of the lack of accurate information, and because opinions were sharply divided on the solution to a unique situation. The two books thus take very different perspectives of Kennedy and his key advisors.

Herein lies the difficulty. For someone who has no prior knowledge of the Crisis, the arguments presented by Mark White could seem compelling. Yet, for anyone with some

knowledge of those events, especially of the workings of Kennedy's Executive Committee (the ExComm) formed to handle the Crisis, White's work is suspect on several counts. First, he relies very heavily on the open parts of the White House tapes to draw assumptions about the various discussions and on the motives of specific participants in the decision-making process, yet those tapes are not fully declassified. Second, he does not adequately explain why his assumptions are better than the conventional wisdom. He simply introduces too much new material without convincing the reader that his views are right and others are very wrong.

On the other hand, White's "in-your-face" analysis raises some fascinating questions. But without time and resources to examine them fully, there is just too much that challenges the conventional wisdom to accept his interpretation at face value. There are several instances though where White's views can be quickly checked against Hillsman's book. One of these is the role played by Senator Keating as a Republican "spoiler." White casts Keating in an almost noble role, speaking out against a Kennedy conspiracy of silence on the threat posed by Russian re-armament of Cuba. This is very different to the view of Hillsman who dismisses the Senator as a merely political opportunist. One has to wonder whether Hillsman is still repeating the Democratic Party's line or if White is making far too much out of the political opposition to Kennedy in Congress.

In some respects, one can come to a conclusion that White also has his own agenda in writing the book. For instance, he focuses on select issues rather than on the overall decision-making process. One of these is the discussion on the blockade of Cuba to which, in fact, he devotes a chapter without mentioning the fact that a blockade was never established it became a quarantine on military equipment. Nor does he point out that the serious implications in international law of declaring and/or establishing a blockade were well-known, as the vast majority of earlier works on the crisis make clear. Hillsman, however, discusses the blockade and quarantine in the context of the ExComm's discussions on how best to solve the problem. The missiles had to go, we all know that, but "how?" was the issue they agonized over. Here, both accounts make interesting reading, but it is Hillsman who is able to present the case for the option that allowed the Russians a way out. As he points out, despite strong military calls for an attack on Cuba, there was an equally strong voice against that course of action. And both authors establish that Robert Kennedy in particular did not want to commit the United States to an act he saw as comparable to Pearl Harbor. While Hillsman describes this aspect of the ExComm process in fairly moderate terms, White records the debate as a monumental clash of wills between the main "protagonists" where perceived ideological clashes seems more important than finding a solution to the problem.

It is such stark contrasts that mark the difference between the two books. Hillsman, albeit still a Kennedy loyalist, attempts to provide a better insight into the decision-making process by expanding on what has been written already. He does this through the use of newly declassified material. As such it is a credible addition to the enormous volume of work on the Cuban Missile Crisis. White attempts to prove that defects in the personalities of both Kennedy and Khrushchev directly led to the 1962 crisis. In this, he

attacks conventional wisdom in a manner that makes his book read more like the script for an Oliver Stone movie than a useful contribution to the literature on the Crisis.

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