

Florida Atlantic University

Missiles in Cuba:

Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis

by Mark J. White

A Book Review Submitted To

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Book Review

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Mark J. White, author of *Missiles in Cuba: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis* is currently an American history professor at the Queen Mary chapter of the University of London. He has studied extensively at American universities, where he learned to specialize in twentieth century America, the Cold War, and the Kennedy presidency (QMUL web site). His book was included as part of publisher Ivan R. Dee's American Ways Series, which highlights critical and important events in American history (Ivan R. Dee's web site). Having written his dissertation on the causes that resulted in the Cuban missile crisis and its resolution, he is well qualified to have written this book. In addition to this work, he has edited several works, including *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* and *The Kennedys and Cuba: The Declassified Documentary History*. As a British native, his work in *Missiles in Cuba* attempts to provide an unbiased and balanced account of the events leading to the crisis itself, and the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis.

Unlike other books that solely explain the handling of the Cuban missile crisis, this book emphasizes the actions of John F. Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, and to a lesser extent, Fidel Castro that were responsible for triggering the crisis. He explains that Kennedy's actions before the missile crisis had a profound impact on Khrushchev's decision to place missiles in Cuba. However, he contends that Khrushchev, in his

excitement, may have overreacted in his decision to put missiles in Cuba when he could have used a less aggressive tactic to ensure that America did not invade the island-nation.

Dr. White explains that Kennedy was an ardent “cold warrior” whose actions established a confrontational relationship with the Soviet Union (White, 9). He explains that Kennedy strove to demonstrate American superiority over the Soviet Union and to end the influence that the Soviet Union had over Cuba. To begin with, upon becoming president, Kennedy learned that the missile gap that Eisenhower had claimed existed was really a lie. Kennedy used this knowledge to boast to the Soviet Union about America’s military dominance, while at the same time, increasing military defense spending (White, 11). This made Khrushchev believe that America was planning for a first strike against them.

In addition to this claim to dominance over the Soviet Union, Kennedy was determined to bring down the government of Fidel Castro in Cuba. Kennedy would not accept Communism spreading to the Western Hemisphere nor would he accept the influence that the Soviet Union had over Cuba. To end their friendship, Kennedy followed a confrontational approach with the Castro government, like he had with the Soviet Union. Kennedy developed his uncompromising views from the failure of Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policy during World War II. This failed policy made Kennedy realize that “when dealing with totalitarian foes, liberal democracies needed the strength of purpose and clarity of vision to increase military spending and adopt a generally tough, uncompromising outlook...”(White, 7).

In dealing with Cuba, Kennedy accepted President Eisenhower and the Central Intelligence Agency’s decision to invade the country by using a paramilitary force

comprised of Cuban exiles. White explains that Kennedy was not pressured at the last minute to follow through with the invasion, as popular accounts of the Bay of Pigs invasion detail. Instead, White claims that Kennedy had been briefed and had knowledge of the operation six months prior to becoming president (White, 13). He claims that Kennedy, as a cold warrior agreed to accept the plan of Eisenhower and the CIA, despite heavy opposition to the plan from advisors. White also asserts that Kennedy played a significant part in the subsequent plan to overthrow Castro, Operation Mongoose. In addition to Kennedy's desire to forcefully invade the island, Kennedy expanded the economic embargo placed on Cuba by Eisenhower so that only food and medicine would be provided to Cuba. He also pressured the Organization of American States to expel Cuba from the organization. White argues that these policies designed to topple Castro, drove Cuba into a closer relationship with the Soviet Union (White, 29). But White does not absolve Castro from fault in the ensuing crisis because he accepted the missiles when he could have rejected them (White, 42).

Khrushchev claimed that he placed missiles in Cuba for the sole purpose of defending Cuba from an American attack. However, while this could have been one of the reasons, author Mark J. White is skeptical that it was the only reason. He believes that the missiles were placed in Cuba so that the Soviet Union would appear stronger to Communist China, which questioned the nature of a peaceful co-existence between America and the Soviet Union. White also offers the possibility that by placing missiles in Cuba, "Khrushchev calculated that he could simultaneously modernize his nuclear arsenal, cut spending on conventional forces, trim overall defense expenditures, and invest the savings in the civilian economy" (White, 36). This seems to be a very logical

explanation, as it would have helped to offset the missile gap that Kennedy told the Soviets about. Khrushchev also believed that Cuba was strategically important because it could be used to spread Communism throughout Latin America. However, White argues that if Khrushchev had listened more to his advisors, who were telling him that America would not accept nuclear weapons in Cuba, that the missile crisis could have been averted (White, 44). White also adds that if the defense of the island-nation was the Soviets' only purpose, they could have achieved it with less risk by just using conventional weapons, as opposed to nuclear ones (White, 52).

Khrushchev felt that he "had every right to [place missiles in Cuba] because Turkey had missiles [and] Italy had missiles" pointing at them (White, 39). White does not accept the traditional view that Kennedy ordered the missiles out of Turkey before the missile crisis began. Instead, he insists that Kennedy only considered the option, but concluded that it would have appeared to be "a sign of weakness" (White, 71). After learning about the missiles in Cuba, Kennedy realized that Khrushchev had deceived him because he had been secretly installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, even though he claimed otherwise. This secrecy weighed heavily on Kennedy's mind. It subsequently resulted in thirteen days of high anxiety and fear in the entire world (White, 79).

During the missile crisis, White contends that both Khrushchev and Kennedy conducted actions that sought to minimize confrontation, as opposed to the confrontational relationship that was previously ensuing between them. Communicating through their ambassadors and through private correspondence, both countries expressed respect for each other's actions and power. They also tried not to humiliate each other because neither side wanted to risk a nuclear war. Kennedy established a naval

quarantine to prevent new missiles from being delivered to Cuba and Khrushchev abided by it (White, 120). After a Soviet ship that was testing the extent of the blockade stopped its forward progress, Secretary of State Dean Rusk told Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, “We’re eyeball to eyeball and I think the other fellow just blinked” (White, 120). After long tense negotiations between both parties, an informal agreement was reached to end the crisis. Kennedy promised publicly that America would not attempt to invade Cuba again and agreed privately to remove the Jupiter missiles from Turkey. In exchange, Khrushchev promised to remove the nuclear missiles from Cuba and agreed not to invade Turkey (White, 135). Missiles were supposed to have been removed under the watchful eye of the United Nations, but Castro did not accept that provision because he was angry that he had been left out of the peace settlement (White, 146).

After the missile crisis, White maintains that Kennedy and Khrushchev worked together to try to ensure that another nuclear standoff could never take place. A nuclear test ban treaty was signed that banned the testing of nuclear weapons in outer space, under water, and in the atmosphere. Also, a “hot line” agreement was conceived, establishing a direct connection between Moscow and Washington DC so that communication during another potential crisis could be taken care of much quicker (White, 150-51). White also explains that the policy of mutually assured destruction, or MAD was created after the missile crisis. This policy reasons that the US would not attempt a first strike against the Soviet Union and use their missile gap advantage because the Soviet Union was capable of retaliation. This policy was in play for both superpowers. In a June 1963 speech, Kennedy insisted that “We can seek a relaxation of

tensions without relaxing our guard...we labor on – not toward a strategy of annihilation but toward a strategy of peace” (White, 150). However, since the Soviets had to back down during the missile crisis because of the missile gap, they continued to increase their defense spending until they reached parity with the United States in the 1970s (White, 152). Overall, White believes that the missiles crisis occurred because Kennedy and Khrushchev “miscalculated the consequences of their policies in 1961 and early 1962” (White, 153).

Author Mark J. White has written an intriguing and thought provoking analysis of the Cuban missile crisis. He has effectively placed the crisis within a historical realm that brings greater understanding to the missile crisis. He has reasoned and logically concluded that it took the actions of all three men, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro to bring the Cuban missile crisis to fruition. His explanation of an immense amount of detail into a smooth flowing narrative exemplifies a talent that deserves praise. For his book, White used the Soviet archives, US government documents from the Kennedy administration, oral histories, books, magazines, and newspapers. Instead of footnotes, these sources are thoroughly documented in an index, entitled “A Note on Sources.” While his facts appear to be accurate, the book could have been improved through the use of footnotes so that any reader who wishes to could review the source of any questionable comment in his work. But this was probably done intentionally so that the book’s target audience, students, would be able to achieve a more fluid understanding of the crisis without worrying about getting distracted by notes. Despite this flaw, it has successfully communicated that confrontation is a two-way street.