



Volume 132 >> Issue 48 : Friday, October 26, 2012

PDF of This Issue

## BOOK REVIEW: Remembering the days the abyss gazed back

New volumes explore different angles of the Cuban missile crisis

By **Roberto Perez-Franco**

STAFF WRITER

October 26, 2012

When a reporter mentioned the Cuban missile crisis during a White House briefing, then-press secretary Dana Perino “panicked a bit” because she didn’t know what it was. “It had to do with Cuba and missiles, I’m pretty sure,” she ventured. One day in particular, Oct. 26, 1962 (exactly 50 years ago) was arguably the single most dangerous moment in human history, with the United States and the Soviet Union on the verge of unleashing upon each other thermonuclear Armageddon. Ms. Perino’s candid admission is often depicted as a funny, self-deprecating anecdote. Call me paranoid, but it gave me goose bumps: I think such a pivotal event, and the lessons it taught us, should not be forgotten.

If you do not know the incident, I ask you to do yourself a favor: Pick up a good book about the subject and read it. There are many good ones: *One Minute to Midnight* (Vintage, 2009), *One Hell of a Gamble* (Norton, 1998) and *Essence of Decision* (Pearson, 1999) stand prominently in my personal library. As the world marks half a century since the Cuban missile crisis, some fine new volumes have been published. I want to highlight four below, each presenting new angles on this perilous event.

The first is *Cuban Missile Crisis: the Essential Reference Guide*, edited by Priscilla Roberts (ABC-CLIO, 2012). If you don’t know how Operation Anadyr, Operation Mongoose, the Berlin Crises and the Bay of Pigs Invasion relate to the Cuban missile crisis, this is the book for you. It has an eight-page long, no-nonsense summary of the causes, course, and consequences of the crisis. This is followed by almost two hundred pages of entries on key people, institutions and concepts. The primary documents in the book include letters between Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro, and other primary players, and the famous telex that the Soviet Premier sent to the American President on Oct. 26 warning against pulling “on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war,” lest it become “necessary to cut that knot.” A detailed chronology starts with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and ends with Castro’s resignation in 2008.

Many have argued that the Crisis, far from being Kennedy’s “finest hour,” was the result of his own miscalculations. *Blind Over Cuba: the Photo Gap and the Missile Crisis*, by David Barrett and Max Holland (Texas A&M University Press, 2012), interprets the nuclear build-up by the Soviets in the Caribbean as the result of a miscalculation of the Kennedy administration: The missiles were sent as a response from Moscow to Kennedy’s 1961 declaration that the United States enjoyed a decisive nuclear superiority.

The book also blames the willingness of Cubans to become a nuclear outpost for the Soviet Union on Kennedy’s disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion and the subsequent efforts to assassinate Castro through Operation Mongoose. The Kennedy administration’s decision to limit surveillance flights over Cuba for five weeks in the late summer and early fall of 1962, dubbed by JFK’s detractors as the “photo gap,” allowed Soviets to sneak the nuclear weapons into the island. The authors claim that even once

### Article Tools

[Post Comment](#)

[E-Mail](#)

[Print](#)

[Write the Editor](#)

[Sharing](#)

Search

Only Vol. 132

[View Archives](#)

[Previous Issue](#)

### The Tech Job Board

[Software Engineer/Sr. Software Engineer](#)

[WhaleShark Media](#)

[Senior Engineer](#)

[Synacor](#)

[Web Designer](#)

[Acquity Interactive](#)

[Online Marketing Manager](#)

[Acquity Interactive](#)

[Junior Online Media Buyer](#)

[Acquity Interactive](#)

[See all jobs](#) [Post a job](#)  
Powered by [Personforce](#)

the crisis began, a failure of US intelligence, due to Washington's self-deception as much as to Moscow's duplicity, almost resulted in a catastrophe. Had the terms under which the crisis was settled been clearly understood by the public at the time, the authors claimed, a different interpretation of who had swerved in this nuclear game of chicken would have resulted.

*The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, by David Coleman (W.W. Norton, 2012) reminds us that the tensions and difficulties were not over after the thirteenth day, now the stuff of legend, but persisted for several months afterwards. Coleman focuses on the period from Oct. 29, 1962 through February 1963, "a crucial and often overlooked period of change in the Cold War," particularly on "how Kennedy and his advisers grappled with the issues and challenges raised and changes wrought by the Cuban missile crisis." This "remarkable window into Kennedy's presidency" is possible thanks to President Kennedy himself, who — possibly with a memoir in mind — serendipitously had begun to secretly tape his presidency. Fortunately for historians, "Kennedy's most prolific period of taping was during and immediately after the Cuban missile crisis."

Yet more important for Coleman's goal, Kennedy kept the tapes rolling in the following months, a decision that affords us now a fly-on-the-wall perspective, with more "nuance and objectivity," of how intense Kennedy's battles with the press after the crisis were, and how intimately involved he was in these struggles.

Finally, *October 1962: The "Missile" Crisis as seen from Cuba*, by Tomas Diez Acosta (Pathfinder Press, 2012), is an account of the crisis from the perspective of Castro's Cuba: It serves as a sort of antidote to Robert Kennedy's hagiographic account of the event, *Thirteen Days*. The latter is written from a self-serving perspective flattering to those in the Oval Office, with the transparent objective of using it in Kennedy's own presidential campaign in 1968. The former is written by one who participated in the mobilization of Cuban forces as a 16 year old and then spent his life as part of Cuba's military. Unapologetically aligned with Castro's rhetoric, the book has to be read, just as any other, with a healthy pinch of salt. But it represents an opportunity to understand how the events were presented to — and even today are understood by — a large swath of the Cuban population. This in itself is a useful reminder that, in complex geopolitical situations, truth is often a relative term, events are interpreted differently by different players, and history is written with different ink in different places.

After reading and thinking about the Cuban missile crisis, I can't help but feel that Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro were victims of their own ideologies. In one of my favorite films of all time, Errol Morris's "The Fog of War," Robert McNamara speaks about the lessons he has derived from his life. Regarding the Cuban missile crisis, he has a chilling confession: "At the end we lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end ... Rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies, and that danger exists today." Every time I hear that, I think of Nietzsche's famous aphorism, warning those that fight monsters to make sure they not become monsters themselves, and warning that if we gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze back into us. Fifty years ago, it did. And we forget it at our own peril.

[Post a comment on this article](#)