

The Cuban Missile Crisis Redux: Lessons from Two More Works

Blind Over Cuba: The Photo-Gap and the Missile Crisis, by David M. Barrett and Max Holland (Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 240 pp., photographs, endnotes, index

The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, by David Coleman (W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 256 pp., photographs, endnotes, index.

Reviewed by Thomas Coffey

Peacefully disarming your enemy is not what it's cracked up to be, judging by the two latest histories of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite averting a world-wide apocalypse in the course of getting the Soviet Union to dismantle medium range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, the cool-headed and indispensable John F. Kennedy still faced the need for a lot of damage control. Authors David Barrett and Max Holland recount in *Blind Over Cuba* how the Kennedy administration juggled explaining to Republican opponents in Congress why a U-2 overflight discovered the missile sites just in the nick of time, and preventing its prophetic Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) John McCone from telling the true story behind this "near intelligence failure of the first magnitude." Author David Coleman, in *The Fourteenth Day*, reminds the reader that these recriminations distracted the administration from the main tasks of negotiating a disarmament deal with a chastened but still dangerous Nikita Khrushchev and figuring out how to monitor any agreement given the resistance of the temperamental Fidel Castro.

It is all interesting material and the stories are well told. The sourcing in both books includes a healthy dose of primary documents. And there are lessons to be gleaned from the narratives. Yet there's something picked over about the topic, and these attempts at finding something new to say approach overkill, coming

across more like journal articles stretched into book length to mark the 50th anniversary of the event.¹

For example, who by now does not know McCone held lots of cards when it came to deflecting blame for the "photo gap," the six-week hiatus in intrusive aerial reconnaissance of the Cuban mainland that prevented US photo-interpreters from discovering the missile sites until 15 October, days before some of them would become operational. As *Blind over Cuba* explains, after the discovery of SA-2 antiaircraft missile batteries in late August, McCone became convinced Khrushchev planned to install nuclear missiles on the island. "Those batteries aren't there to protect the cane workers," he was quoted as saying. He wanted the pace of U-2 over-flights drastically accelerated. And then he went on his honeymoon.

However, at a meeting on 10 September, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk ordered, over the outranked Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Marshall Carter, the U-2's flight plans and frequency of missions severely restricted to avoid the downing of these aircraft. Both officials were jumpy after the Soviets had complained about one stray over-flight and the Chinese had just shot down a U-2 over their territory. They also were not convinced the sophisticated antiaircraft missiles were anything more than the typical military hardware the Soviet Union provided to its satellite countries.

¹ Max Holland's early exploration of the gap, "The 'Photo Gap' that Delayed Discovery of Missiles," appeared in *Studies in Intelligence* 49, No. 4 (December 2005), which is available online at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol49no4/Photo_Gap_2.htm.

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Upon returning from his honeymoon, McCone protested mightily and demanded restoration of sweeping overflights. What he got was a curtailed flight over western Cuba, where the SA-2s were first spotted, but it was enough: the pictures taken clearly showed nuclear missile sites under construction near San Cristóbal. Attorney General Robert Kennedy's coined phrase "Thirteen Days" of superpower confrontation and policy deliberations was about to begin.

After JFK got Khrushchev to back down, mostly Republican lawmakers wanted the Kennedy administration to explain its perceived slowness in discovering the missiles. And the player who would deflect enough attention from the near disastrous overflight policy order was none other than McCone.

Through countless testimonials on Capitol Hill, McCone unsuccessfully did his best to be seen as a team player for the administration while at the same time making known his grand foresight in predicting Soviet intentions. He obscured the story just enough so that lawmakers failed to get to the bottom of the photo gap, caused, not by bureaucratic infighting or bad weather, but by Bundy and Rusk's move to restrict the over-flights. However, the DCI could not help himself, coming across as an I-told-you-so maverick, something the president had problems tolerating.

Unfortunately, Barrett and Holland treat the failure to discover the photo gap as something of a cold case. They focus on McCone's internal assessment of missile crisis coverage, a CIA Inspector General investigation, a review board report, and congressional hearings. This overreliance on reports and prepared testimony, including quoting a whole paragraph from a Senate report just to make the case that a group of legislators must have signed off on its findings, makes the narrative sound like such a report. And how interesting can reports and congressional hearings that never really got to the bottom of a matter be? Accounts of partisan behavior by the chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) and democratic political operative, Clark Gifford, along with the attempts of Roger Hilsman, chief of State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, to blame the CIA for the photo gap can only hold attention for so long.

The authors also felt the need to scan existing books and research on the missile crisis for references to the photo gap. This commendable review of scholarship

yields the supposedly startling finding that many books did not mention the photo gap in any depth. But why would experts expend any more time than they have to on an intelligence failure that did not happen, no matter how much of a near thing it was?

The *Fourteenth Day* does a nice job of cataloging the weaponry Kennedy wanted to open up to scrutiny and the means available to monitor their withdrawal. Besides the medium-range missiles, the Kennedy administration wanted other weapons out of Cuba, especially long range IL-28 bombers, as well as MiGs, cruise missiles, and Luna artillery launchers, which could be used for battlefield nuclear weapons. The presence of 41,000 crack Soviet soldiers was also a concern.

Coleman provides a thorough overview of the atmosphere in which Kennedy operated—including an aggressive press that he illegally spied on, a State Department without direction, and a condescending and trigger-happy military. But instead of amplifying, the excessive coverage of these elements actually distracts from the main story of disarmament. The book also would have benefited from more coverage of Khrushchev and Castro—the latter is practically absent from the story.

Lessons

Taken together, these books provide some lessons on coordinating intelligence collection and policy, warning, and policymaker support.

Develop an intelligence collection plan. The Kennedy administration sought a more rigorous policy for collection in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. As the president said to fellow Executive Committee officials, "we can't have this thing every morning whether we are planning to fly planes or not." Securing greater certainty on collection depended on the administration's coming to agreement on what weapons Cuba hosted, which ones had to go, which ones would be nice to have out of Cuba, and which ones were not worth the risk of blowing a disarmament deal. Under this framework, high- and low-altitude flights would initially swarm over the island, and then be undertaken more selectively. For example, once aerial surveillance of Soviet ships revealed the Kremlin was acting in good faith in dismantling the nuclear missile installations, Kennedy stopped monitoring compliance on these weapons and went on to get a better

intelligence handle on other objectionable weapon systems in Cuba.

Recognize collection gray areas. Having policy officials narrow the list of weapons to be dismantled and, by doing so, lower the risk of a shoot-down is simpler than it sounds, for in making this list, officials sometimes need intelligence on the status of the weapons systems. There's a continuous feedback loop. The IL-28 bomber, for example, was a particular concern, and officials hoped Khrushchev would take their hints about sending them out of Cuba, piece by piece. But overflights of these bases showed the planes were still being assembled, forcing Kennedy to decide whether to press for their removal, and thus necessitate monitoring Soviet compliance, or let the matter drop. The last thing Kennedy wanted was to upset Khrushchev and induce him to hand over the SA-2 missile sites to the trigger-happy Cubans.

Special care is needed when analysis hinges on US policy. Analysts who overestimate the influence of the United States on the behavior of other leaders or countries risk misleading their readers by making their analysis appear more actionable than it is and by giving US policy officials a false sense of comfort. These books make clear that analysts were convinced the Cuban military buildup was defensive and would stay that way as long as Moscow understood Washington's vehement opposition to an offensive buildup. All US officials had to do was warn Moscow away. But a multitude of factors influenced Khrushchev. These included his desire to redress the strategic balance while protecting Cuba, his expectation that he could pull a fast one by installing the missiles quickly, and his belief that once the missiles were operational, Ken-

nedy would live with the fact just as Khrushchev himself had lived with missiles in Turkey.

Another pitfall of ascribing too much influence to US policy is that analysts sometimes wrongly assume they know what US policy is or can anticipate what it will be even when crucial decisions have not yet been made. Board of Estimates Chairman Sherman Kent and his analysts later bragged about correctly calling the no-compromise position the Kennedy administration adopted on the missile deployments, but they brushed off their failure to see Khrushchev's Cuban gamble. And despite his bragging, Kent may have blown even the call on the administration's position, not knowing of Kennedy's decision to pull US Jupiter missiles out of Turkey as part of a more concessionary bargain.

Beware of the risk of confirming policymaker views. The policymaking and intelligence communities, with the exception of the DCI, agreed the Soviets would not do anything so stupid as to put nuclear missiles in Cuba. Right for the wrong reason is how many experts described McCone's foresight. Kent asked the drafters of a key estimate on the subject whether they agreed with McCone; none did and no notation of this alternative view went down on paper. Policy officials applied no pressure on CIA to give the matter another look since they agreed with the majority view. Only through McCone's steadfastness and access to the president did that crucial U-2 flight over western Cuba take place. Most crucial intelligence calls lack such high-level contrarians, making it imperative that policy officials see a minority view either in the body of an analytical piece or separately in an alternative analysis-like publication.

