



The Cuban Missile Crisis: Thirteen Days on an Atomic Knife Edge, October 1962 by Phil Carradice.

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Review by Robert Weisbrot, Colby College (rsweisbr@colby.edu).

“Forests have been felled to print the reflections and conclusions of participants, observers, and scholars” on the Cuban missile crisis, McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy’s National Security Adviser, observed over twenty years ago. Since then, the deforestation has accelerated in response to new archival evidence and international conferences. Do we really need historian Phil Carradice’s new survey of *The Cuban Missile Crisis*? The answer is a qualified “yes,” not as a work of scholarship, but to remind general readers that, in October 1962, the USSR and the United States verged on going to war. As former Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev recalled, “The smell of burning hung in the air.”

The missile crisis punctuated an era of rising Cold War tensions, centered on a nuclear arms race, Soviet threats over the US presence in West Berlin, and competition to influence developing countries like Fidel Castro’s Cuba. The missile crisis was precipitated by American pilots’ detection of Soviet shipments of nuclear missiles to Cuba, contrary to Khrushchev’s assurances and Kennedy’s warnings, which led to the US blockade of the island. On 27 October, the fatal downing of an American pilot over Cuba risked spiraling retaliation. But President Kennedy refrained and the next morning Khrushchev publicly agreed to withdraw the Soviet missiles while the United States privately pledged to remove its own missiles from Turkey. Since then, writers have variously interpreted this episode in nuclear brinkmanship as Kennedy’s finest hour, as an example of reckless posturing at the edge of Armageddon, as a model of “crisis management,” and as a study in mutual folly. Carradice considers all these positions, but without marshaling the sources needed to make a persuasive case for any of them.

The author rightly depicts the dangers of nuclear war during the crisis as greater than either side realized. It is clear that, had Kennedy ordered an invasion of Cuba, local Soviet commanders could have launched tactical nuclear warheads and sparked a catastrophic escalation. But Carradice adds an unconvincing and unsupported claim that Kennedy more than once considered a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union itself in concert with such an invasion of Cuba (67). His further assertion that Kennedy would have gone to war had the Soviets not backed down (110) ignores significant contrary evidence, such as his fallback plan to have the UN Secretary General propose publicly a reciprocal withdrawal of missiles from both Cuba and Turkey.

Carradice stresses the value of personal leadership in making policy, crediting Kennedy’s “courage and skill” (111) and painting Khrushchev as a “modern-day King Lear” (6), a tragic figure who gambled recklessly by placing nuclear weapons ninety miles from American shores, yet ultimately averted war by sacrificing his own prestige and that of the Soviet Union “for the good of mankind” (111). This is a familiar trope in the literature on the crisis, though other historians maintain that the vast US superiority in nuclear warheads and delivery systems as well as local conventional forces caused Khrushchev to back down.

A distinctive feature of Carradice's work is a chapter of personal recollections of the crisis, drawn from American, British, and Welsh interviewees. Apart from providing biographical context, he should have done more to explain and synthesize the block quotations into his narrative. Still, the selections well convey the dread of imminent apocalypse that gripped the West.

This well turned-out book features dozens of photos, some in color, that go beyond the standard shots of political and military leaders to include, for example, images of Fidel Castro as a persuasive teenager and hurling a baseball. Color sketches of US and Soviet military equipment, maps, and political cartoons are further enhancements.

Unfortunately, the limited use of primary and secondary sources, scant citations, and lack of an index reduce the book's scholarly value. So do frequent errors of fact: Congress passed the Platt Amendment, making Cuba an American protectorate, in 1901, not 1899 (13); Cuban exiles in the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion trained at CIA camps in Guatemala, not Panama (21); Khrushchev hoped to conceal the missiles from Kennedy until after the midterm elections in 1962, not the presidential election in 1964 (27); tensions flared over Cuba in 1962, not September 1963 (28). The author conflates two of Khrushchev's letters to Kennedy (68): one long, emotional missive (26 Oct.) offered to withdraw missiles from Cuba in exchange for a US pledge not to invade the island, and a terse, formal follow-up added a demand that US missiles be removed from Turkey. The distinctions between the letters are crucial to understanding the American response to Khrushchev's divergent diplomatic gambits.

The author's prose is blemished as well by clichés (Kennedy "on the horns of a dilemma" [60]); superfluous words ("the crisis had escalated *to a higher level*" [58]; "Khrushchev had several options *open to him*" [61]); passive voice ("determined to avoid a panic, it was decided" [45]); and self-evident adjectives and sentences ("Robert Kennedy could not have known it, but within ten years both he and his brother would also die at the hands of violent and deranged assassins" [77]). There are also outright contradictions, as when US missiles in Turkey are said first to have been equivalent to Soviet missiles in Cuba (70) and then to have been totally different, since they protected Europe while the Soviet missiles "could only be seen as part of an aggressive Russian plot to threaten the USA" (102).

The author's conviction that the missile crisis is one of history's great dramas is certainly as valid today as when it unfolded, though even some aides who exalted President Kennedy's leadership, such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, later rued the crisis as inherently unmanageable. Whatever Kennedy's and Khrushchev's missteps, the two men proved, as Phil Carradice shows, that leaders can resist the antagonisms and suspicions pulling them toward war. That achievement may gain new luster as nuclear weapons spread to other nations and perhaps to non-state actors, auguring two, three, many missile crises to come.