

# The Cuban missile crisis in historical perspective: some thoughts on the film *Thirteen Days*

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*Thirteen Days*, directed by Roger Donaldson, written by David Self.

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*"At the height of the crisis, John F. Kennedy mobilized a vast army of men and materiel that stood poised to attack Cuba and perhaps trigger a nuclear holocaust. The invasion plan called for the largest drop of paratroopers since the battle for Normandy in 1944; the Pentagon estimated that 18,500 Americans would be killed or wounded in the first 10 days of battle. The Strategic Air Command's fleet of 1,436 B-52 and B-47 bombers and 172 intercontinental ballistic missiles was moved to DEFCON 2, the highest military alert short of all-out war. One-eighth of the bombers were in the air at all times for 30 days, prepared to drop nuclear weapons on the targets in Cuba and the Soviet Union. The 579 fighters of the air force's Tactical Air Command were programmed to fly 1,190 combat sorties in the invasion's first 24 hours. ... More than 100,000 combat-ready army infantrymen were deployed to ports along the East Coast. A huge navy fleet, backed by 40,000 marines, was steaming, moments away from battle stations, through international waters in the Caribbean and the South Atlantic. The American war machine was at its 'highest state of readiness,' according to military documents made public years later, and awaited only a go signal from the White House."* [1] This was the Cuban missile crisis, 39 years ago.

The new movie *Thirteen Days* has an ambitious goal—to recreate what was one of the most dramatic episodes of the Cold War. To his credit, Australian director Roger Donaldson's approach to his film is serious. It is high time for a historical reckoning with this period. Unfortunately, the film fails to cast a critical eye on the role of the Kennedys, US policy on Cuba, or Washington's foreign policy in general.

The viewer ends up relieved that the world squeaked by, but not too disturbed about our future course. While it is a film that should be widely viewed, one hopes that some movie-goers will take it as a starting point to delve into the history and transcend in their understanding the one-sided picture of the crisis presented on-screen.

The film begins with the nuclear mushroom clouds that might have been and nearly were—evoking the fear that none of us who were alive at the time could ever forget. This atmosphere of chilling realism intensifies throughout the film as it reenacts the 13-day crisis, mid-October 1962, when American policymakers debated how to handle the discovery of Soviet missiles being installed only 90 miles from Florida.

Technically, *Thirteen Days* contains all the defects that seem to be required by Hollywood—playing to formula and including the requisite supply of gratuitous and overly sentimental moments. Its weakest plot element is the elevation of Kenny O'Donnell, a minor figure in the Kennedy entourage, to the position of central narrator and major player. (O'Donnell's son Kevin is an investor in the film producer's company). Kevin Costner, the big-name attraction, unfortunately provides the least

inspiring performance.

But the depiction of the Kennedy brothers is remarkable. Bruce Greenwood (John F. Kennedy) studied the existing archival tapes of the crisis and, with very little physical resemblance to the man, was able to capture the cadences, tone and spirit of Kennedy in a thoroughly believable fashion. Likewise with Steven Culp as Robert Kennedy. Without question, these outstanding portrayals carry the film.

The characterizations are based on the screenwriter David Self's study of historical records and documents, White House tapes, memoirs and interviews with some of the participants. It is fascinating to view the dramatization of the policy struggle between the White House and the military. Much of the dialogue is lifted directly from the transcripts of meetings of ExComm (Executive Committee of the National Security Council), where Kennedy and his advisers assembled. And, surprisingly for a contemporary Hollywood film, the movie refrains from demonizing either Castro or Khrushchev (although their actions and motivations are not seriously dealt with.)

One cannot leave the screening without shuddering at the thought of an unchecked military brass, or a civilian regime that provided greater latitude to the social and political types who inhabit such positions as the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Air Force General Curtis LeMay (Kevin Conway) is shown as the fascistic advocate of nuclear war that he was. (This is a man who commanded the firebombing raids against Japan in World War II, killing over 100,000 people. Later he was to advocate bombing North Vietnam "back to the Stone Age.")

Even here, the film somewhat tones down the facts. In the actual transcript of the ExComm discussions, LeMay's contempt for Kennedy's reluctance to risk nuclear war is more graphic. He declares at one point, "This blockade and political action I see leading into war. I don't see any other solution. It will lead right into war. This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich." [2]

*Thirteen Days* does depict LeMay in common company with Maxwell Taylor (Bill Smitrovich) and the other military officials who are continually bordering on insubordination in their demands for a free rein against Cuba. Kennedy later quipped (in the transcript, not the film), "The military are mad. They wanted to do this [invade]. It's lucky for us that we have [Secretary of Defense] McNamara over there," referring to McNamara's role in reining in the brass. Also omitted from the film is this statement by Secretary of State Dean Rusk during the first day of deliberations: "So I think we have to think very hard about two major courses of action as alternatives. One is the quick strike.... Or we're going to decide that this is the time to eliminate the Cuban problem by actually eliminating the island." [3]

The film's positive elements—its general adherence to the factual development of the crisis as played out in the White House, and its strong

evocation of the period—are, however, overshadowed by the fact that this is a political film with severe limitations. In the end, one feels that Costner & Co. aim to contrast America's "great presidents" of yesterday with their lesser counterparts of today. We are shown a Camelot-like portrait of decisive and intelligent men, who despite massive pressure—from the Joint Chiefs, Congress and senior statesmen—stand firm and prevent a nuclear holocaust. This has an element of truth, but it is only part of the story.

To understand the Cuban missile crisis, one requires a correct perspective. The film's vantage point, portraying a dispute within the confines of the White House, cannot elucidate the interests of the working class. The men we watch in this film represent not the American people, but the American bourgeoisie. The Kennedys are no exception. Nuclear brinkmanship was a key component of US foreign policy in 1962. This was not just bravado: it was only 17 years after the most brutal and destructive act of war in history, the US nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Unfortunately, the film rather predictably portrays the Kennedys as the selfless advocates of reason, without a look back at the overall role they and the American government played.

While the actions with regard to Cuba of both the US and USSR were criminally reckless and reactionary, the basic geopolitical facts and preponderance of power must be understood to assess responsibility for the events of October 1962. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States exercised unchallenged economic, political and military supremacy over two-thirds of the planet. The European states were bankrupted and compelled to liquidate their colonial empires. The US took on the role of world policeman against the working class in the advanced countries as well as the semi-colonial masses. The Cold War expressed the unrelenting military and economic pressure that the US exerted against the Soviet Union in its drive to reconquer those territories that had been lost to capitalism.

In that context, the Kennedy administration sought to provide a measure of reform, not so much for its own sake, but in order to make the hegemonic control of the United States more palatable, especially in light of the challenge from popular, radical regimes like that of Castro in Cuba. The new administration's initiative, the Alliance for Progress, for example, aimed to create conditions for economic aid and political reform in Latin American countries.

#### **Operation Mongoose: the backdrop to the missile crisis**

While all of the history we are reviewing here could not be encapsulated in a film such as *Thirteen Days*, it is nevertheless significant that the film makes only one cursory allusion to the US's counterinsurgency operations against Cuba. This can rightfully be described as a political cover-up, and it makes it impossible for the filmgoer to properly understand the events of October 1962.

The American government's obsession with Castro began with the 1959 Cuban Revolution. (More generally, the US considered Latin America a US preserve since the days of the Monroe Doctrine, and in the aftermath of World War II the US held undisputed sway on the continent.)

Fidel Castro led the movement that overthrew the corrupt and autocratic Batista regime. In June 1960 Castro expropriated the American sugar firms, and subsequently nationalized all banks and industrial enterprises, including oil refineries, most of which were American-owned. Tensions were exacerbated when Khrushchev, sensing an opportunity to challenge the hegemony of the United States in its own hemisphere, agreed to purchase half of Cuba's sugar and provide \$200 million in low-cost loans.

The Eisenhower administration developed a plan for the overthrow of the Castro government, which was bequeathed to Kennedy when he assumed office in 1961. The CIA assembled and trained a crew of Cuban refugees which it transported on April 17 to Cuba's Bay of Pigs, the site of the military fiasco.

Despite the debacle, counterinsurgency efforts escalated dramatically under JFK. In January 1962, Robert Kennedy established "Operation

Mongoose," a secret anti-Castro terrorist operation. The younger Kennedy relayed the importance of this operation to CIA Director Richard Helms, stating that overthrowing Castro was "the top priority of the United States Government—all else is secondary—no time, money, effort or manpower is to be spared." [4]

Edward Lansdale, the infamous anti-hero of *The Ugly American*, who had overseen the crushing of the Filipino rebellion in the early '50s, was named to head the operation. The CIA quickly spent \$100 million to create a base for clandestine operations out of Miami. Code-named JM/WAVE, the Miami station had hundreds of agents, exotic weaponry, and its own fleet of airplanes and speedboats.

During the same period, the American government was devising various assassination plots against Castro, documented in 1975 by the congressional investigation led by Senator Frank Church. In one series of efforts, CIA official Richard Bissell (who also organized the murder of Congo President Patrice Lumumba) subcontracted with the Mafia for Castro's murder. This was not just an off-the-shelf policy. In August of 1962, Defense Secretary McNamara is on the record urging that Mongoose consider the "liquidation of leaders."

These were the conditions that convinced Castro, correctly, that he was facing a protracted and murderous assault from the US, and led him to ask Moscow for military protection. Both overt and covert pressure on Cuba was steadily mounting. Officially, the US tried to isolate Cuba by persuading other Western Hemisphere countries in the Organization of American States to cut off trade and diplomatic ties with the island nation. In April 1962, a huge military exercise was staged (attended by JFK), with 40,000 men conducting amphibious landings at beaches in North Carolina and off Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. Khrushchev, like Castro, came to believe that the US was readying a second invasion.

#### **The Cold War in 1962**

Kennedy was under pressure to have a showdown with the Russians over Cuba, not just from the military, but, above all, from political quarters. According to one study of the Cuban missile crisis: "In 1962, American leaders saw the Cold War as a long-term struggle for global preeminence. Kennedy's decision to let the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba fail was widely interpreted as showing a lack of will." [5]

To survive politically, Kennedy had to demonstrate the requisite "will." In one discussion between the Kennedys during the crisis, Bobby Kennedy agrees with JFK as to the domestic reverberations: "Well, there isn't any choice. I mean, you would have been, you would have been impeached." [6] Moreover, the Kennedys were keenly aware that the face-off with the Russians came only weeks before congressional elections. Any perceived "softness" on Cuba in this deeply reactionary climate would mean political suicide for the Democrats.

US policy under the Kennedy administration was militaristic, and, confident of its superiority, provocative. At this time nuclear capability was considered the main measure of national strength, and by any standard the US predominated. The imbalance was so great on the US side that Department of Defense officials boasted that even after a Soviet first strike, the US's "second strike" would devastate the USSR. US policy went by the name of "massive retaliation."

The USSR had 20 ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles), whose technical reliability was considered problematic, versus 180 American ICBMs, 12 Polaris submarines (each carrying 12 nuclear missiles) and 630 strategic bombers stationed in the US, Europe and Asia. Kennedy had announced that the US would, by 1964, triple its ICBMs.

Meanwhile, the intense series of negotiations between the Americans and Soviets over nuclear testing collapsed in April. The US then proceeded with a new round of nuclear explosions in the Pacific, demonstrating its military advantage. Moreover, in a further US military provocation against the Soviets, the deployment of Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Turkey began in November 1961, with

completion set for March 1962.

However, the major flashpoint in the Cold War throughout the early 60s was the divided city of Berlin, and this was a constant reference point in US policy toward Cuba. Khrushchev had issued several ultimatums to the US to remove Western troops from Berlin, the final one at the Vienna summit of June 1961. He gave the Allies six months to withdraw, and in mid-August the Berlin Wall was erected.

Kennedy responded with a major military buildup, but the Allies were well aware that they could not win a battle in Germany with conventional weapons. Kennedy had already announced in May that should Berlin be attacked, he would be prepared to launch a nuclear first strike against the USSR. The outlook of “containment,” begun under Truman, was taking on a new aggressiveness.

Nevertheless, Kennedy had his limits. His “new military policy” abandoned the previous administration's plans to “transform NATO into a ‘fourth atomic power.’” This outraged the West German government, which continued to press for atomic weapons for the Bundeswehr (German army).

This world political crisis was not simply a remote backdrop to the missile crisis. The film *Thirteen Days* fails to in any way convey the global context of the debate raging within ExComm, and its ability to explain events suffers as a result. The fact is that at every point, ExComm, and particularly JFK himself, weighed the impact of any action in Cuba against its implications for world politics.

JFK says at one point: “The object is not to stop offensive weapons, because the offensive weapons are already there, as much as it is to have a showdown with the Russians of one kind or another.” “That's right,” agrees Special Assistant to the President for National Security McGeorge Bundy. “So, we may have the war in the next 24 hours,” Kennedy thinks aloud, “We have the prospect, if the Soviet Union, as a reprisal, should grab Berlin in the morning, which they could do within a couple of hours. Our war plan at that point has been to fire our nuclear weapons at them. But these are all the matters which are—which we have to think about.”[7]

At another point in the discussion, an ExComm participant, Republican Senator Bourke Hickenlooper, asks, “Is there any intelligence tie-up or information that indicates that this particular culmination in Cuba is associated with the Chinese operation [border war] against India as a basic worldwide movement?”[8] Secretary of State Dean Rusk further points out, “If we strike these missiles, we would expect, I think, maximum Communist reaction in Latin America. In the case of about six of those governments, unless the heads of government had some intimation requiring some preparatory steps from the security points of view, one or another of those governments could easily be overthrown. I'm thinking of Venezuela, for example, or Guatemala, Bolivia, Chile, possibly even Mexico.”[9]

Along these same lines, the US bourgeoisie was increasingly aware that it was becoming vulnerable internationally. This became another factor driving the US along the route of escalating militarism. While American economic and political power was at its height in the early 1960s, US policymakers sensed a growing weakness in the face of a wave of decolonization sweeping Africa and Asia.

For example, by 1960 the membership of the UN had doubled from its postwar size, including dozens of new African nations. Washington had already resorted to the military overthrow of the reform government of Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala in 1954, and it faced similar threats of independence from almost every corner of the so-called “developing” world. The Cuban Revolution was, therefore, considered a direct challenge to the world position of the United States and became a symbolic issue for US policymakers.

#### **The Stalinist mindset**

Notwithstanding the aggressive US posture, the decision of Khrushchev to place missiles in Cuba was both reckless and provocative. It reflected a

foreign policy that combined gross opportunism with adventurism. Given the policies of the United States throughout its history, from the Monroe Doctrine on, it was a serious political miscalculation to underestimate the US response to Soviet missiles on Cuban territory. Khrushchev's plan was to secretly install the missiles. Once they were in place he could use them as a bargaining tool. But he had no thought-out fallback position should the missiles be discovered en route.

Russian Premier Khrushchev was also under pressure from the emerging Sino-Soviet split, and was looking for safe avenues to appear militant and shore up the Warsaw Pact as well as its reputation in the Third World and nonaligned bloc. Khrushchev was being severely challenged by the Chinese and by senior figures in his own government for reducing Soviet military preparedness and not taking a sufficiently “revolutionary” stance in foreign policy. Cuba's fate was becoming a test of Soviet power and global credibility.

Interestingly, the Soviet ambassador to the US, Anatoly Dobrynin (accurately portrayed in the film as the pivotal go-between in making the final deal), as well as the Soviet representative to the UN, Valerian Zorin (also accurately portrayed), were not informed of the missiles nor consulted in the decision. Dobrynin writes in his memoirs, “But he [Khrushchev] grossly misunderstood the psychology of his opponents. Had he asked the embassy beforehand, we could have predicted the violent American reaction to his adventure once it became known. It is worth noting that Castro understood this.”[10]

After JFK announced the blockade of Cuba and warned the USSR that the US would make a “full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union” to any attack, Khrushchev was apparently dumbstruck. Dobrynin writes, “Even then Moscow continued to tell our embassy nothing. No instructions to answer Robert Kennedy. Complete silence. Vasily Kuznetsov, our deputy foreign minister, later told me that my lack of concrete information could be explained by the sense of total bewilderment that enveloped Khrushchev and his colleagues after their plot had taken such an unexpected turn.”[11]

This rash gamble expressed the bankrupt and reactionary mentality of the Soviet bureaucracy, one that conceived of the defense of the USSR in bourgeois and nationalist terms, as a matter of Great Power diplomacy. To engage in the politics of brinkmanship and nuclear threats with the United States—the world's most ruthless imperialist power and a state that had proven its readiness to unleash thermonuclear destruction—was an act of stupidity and political indifference. It was indicative of the Stalinist bureaucracy, for whom foreign policy was a pragmatic maneuver aimed, above all, at maintaining its own privileged status in the USSR. Far from seeking to expose the predatory aggression of the United States and rally workers and the oppressed masses against imperialism, Khrushchev attempted to reply in kind.

The role of the bourgeois nationalist leader Fidel Castro was similarly reckless and hostile to the interests of the working class. In a letter to Khrushchev on October 26, at the height of the crisis, he urged the Soviets to carry out a nuclear attack on the United States: “The Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialist countries could launch the first nuclear strike against it.” Should the US invade Cuba, “that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other.”[12] Clearly, neither Khrushchev nor Castro sought to politically warn and mobilize the working class against US provocations or the danger of a nuclear attack.

#### **Romanticizing the Kennedys**

*Thirteen Days* romanticizes the Kennedys once again. It serves a contemporary political purpose to periodically update and revitalize the Kennedy legend, because it forms a vital part of the myth of liberalism and the more general myths of the American bourgeoisie.

As the leaders of the world's preeminent military power, the Kennedy

brothers were defending their class interests in a period of America's hegemony. They were more astute and measured in their approach than many of their contemporaries. The heyday of liberalism consisted of complex elements of class rule. It combined the Cold War with "human rights," counterinsurgency and CIA murders with the "Alliance for Progress" and the Peace Corps, anticommunism with a measure of support for civil rights.

In the early 1960s, America was only beginning to face the economic drain of Vietnam, mounting deficits and the dollar crisis. Hence, there was still money for social reforms. The Kennedys were able to shrewdly combine anticommunism, diplomatic flexibility, adventurism and restraint, thereby providing the bourgeoisie with political leadership. It was a specific and short interlude in American governmental policy.

In the final analysis, the world was brought to the brink of thermonuclear disaster because of the drive of world capitalism to secure its interests: to "contain communism," prevent the spread of revolution, and, ultimately, overturn the gains of the October Revolution. Subsequently, the contradictions within Stalinism led to the self-dissolution of the USSR and the reestablishment of capitalist property relations within the former workers state.

In the aftermath of the Cold War US military policy has evolved, but it remains driven by essentially the same political and economic needs: to secure the maximum projection of US influence around the world and create the best conditions for the extraction of profits by American business. While the political forms have changed, American militarism remains as starkly dangerous to mankind and its future as was revealed during those fateful 13 days in 1962.

#### Notes:

1. Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot*, (Little, Brown & Co., 1997), p. 341.
2. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 178
3. *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 54
4. Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy, His Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2000) p. 149
5. Graham Allison & Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision, Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Longman, 1999), p. 89.
6. *Essence of Decision*, p. 113
7. *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 264
8. *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 257
9. *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 83-84
10. Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, (Times Book, 1995), p. 79.
11. *In Confidence*, p. 83
12. Letter from Fidel Castro to Nikita Khrushchev, October 26, 1962 reproduced at [www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba\\_mis\\_cri/08-01.gif](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/08-01.gif)



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