



"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964

Aleksandr Fursenko, Timothy Naftali

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No other book offers this inside look at the strategies of the Soviet leadership. John F. Kennedy did not live to write his memoirs; Fidel Castro will not reveal what he knows; and the records of the Soviet Union have long been sealed from public view: Of the most frightening episode of the Cold War--the Cuban Missile Crisis--we have had an incomplete picture. When did Castro embrace the Soviet Union? What proposals were put before the Kremlin through Kennedy's back-channel diplomacy? How close did we come to nuclear war? These questions have now been answered for the first time. This important and controversial book draws the missing half of the story from secret Soviet archives revealed exclusively by the authors, including the files of Nikita Khrushchev and his leadership circle. Contained in these remarkable documents are the details of over forty secret meetings between Robert Kennedy and his Soviet contact, records of Castro's first solicitation of Soviet favor, and the plans, suspicions, and strategies of Khrushchev. This unique research opportunity has allowed the authors to tell the complete, fascinating, and terrifying story of the most dangerous days of the last half-century.

"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964 Details

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From Reader Review "One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964 for online ebook

Dana says

Pretty exciting for a history book, you almost forget that you know the outcome.

Daniel Esquivel says

Excellent book, really gives a good perspective on the whole situation, and even hints on JFK's enemies and potential conspirators at the end of the book. If you think about it the Russians simply reciprocated on what the US did placing nukes in Turkey, kind of Russia's backyard. Very interesting. We were VERY close to the end.

Bill Manzi says

Another book on the Cuban Missile Crisis might seem to be overkill, but Fursenko and Naftali, the Russian and American co-authors, have delivered a terrific book that relies on newly accessible Soviet archives, and expands the period covered so we have a fuller understanding of what brought on the crisis. We have a good look at the inception of the Castro regime, with the book providing some interesting detail on the initial politics involved inside Cuba. The broader reach of the book presents us with a unique perspective, showing us the miscalculations on both sides that ultimately brought the world to the brink of war.

JFK, and Attorney General Kennedy, have always gotten well deserved great marks for the handling of the crisis, but the book shows us some errors on the U.S. side, as well as the Soviet side, in the run up towards crisis. For those looking for cheerleading this is not the book for you. The authors points to a conversation between JFK and Khrushchev son in law Aleksei Adzhubei that likely set off alarm bells in the Kremlin: JFK, in a record of the conversation in Kremlin archives, told Adzhubei a story.

"Kennedy: 'At the time I called Allen Dulles into my office and dressed him down. I told him: you should learn from the Russians. When they had difficulties in Hungary, they liquidated the conflict in three days. When they did not like things in Finland, the president of that country goes to visit the Soviet premier in Siberia and all is worked out. But you, Dulles, have never been capable of doing that.' "

Giving the Soviets the idea that Cuba might be comparable to Hungary, and subject to U.S. invasion on the basis of "sphere of influence" politics might not have been the best idea in a conversation designed to impart the thoughts of the U.S. President in a "backchannel" conversation.

"Despite his keen interest in foreign affairs, in the spring of 1962, John Kennedy had no idea of the dangerous shifts taking place in the Kremlin's understanding of the balance of power. He would have been surprised to learn that Khrushchev was as pessimistic about the Soviet Union's international position as he was about that of the United States."

Khrushchev made multiple errors of his own, including buying into the concept that the United States would

not detect the Cuban missile build up until it was too late to act. The book covers the fact that even back then intelligence bureaucracies would tell the powers that be what they wanted to hear.

"The Soviet Union's chief military representative in Cuba, Major General A. A. Dementyev, raised this issue with Rodion Malinovsky before the Presidium conditionally approved the Anadyr plan. "It will be impossible to hide these missiles from American U-2s," Dementyev warned the Soviet defense minister. The comment provoked an angry response from Malinovsky. According to Alekseev, who was sitting nearby, the defense minister kicked Dementyev under the table to register his disapproval. The defense minister, perhaps like his patron Khrushchev, clung to the thesis that U.S. intelligence would not detect the missiles until it was too late to do anything about them."

The Soviets also had to deal with an unruly Fidel Castro, who had to be pacified, politically, in the run up to the crisis, and during the crisis itself. Those interactions are covered, in some detail, in the book. They are of great interest historically, and certainly lend a greater understanding of the events leading up to the crisis, and the pressures Khrushchev faced on his side.

The movement of the U.S. Jupiters based in Turkey were in fact an integral part of the solution. The book shows us the acceptance, by JFK, of the functional equivalence of the Cuban deployment with the U.S. deployment in Turkey. The wink and nod given to the Soviet government on the ultimate removal of the U.S. Jupiters is covered, as JFK covered his political flank by not making that trade-off explicit.

Great book that brings a fuller historical understanding and wider context to the Cuban Missile crisis. It brings us all the way to Dallas, and to the removal of Khrushchev after the assassination of JFK. If this era is of interest it comes highly recommended.

Joe says

A very descriptive account of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Though at times I felt like I was drowning in useless information, a lot of the information is relevant and new.

Joshua Degraff says

This is it. If you wished to dive into the Cuban Missile Crisis then you have found your starting point. Both American and Russian archives lend this work an unprecedented amount of detail. One small caveat: I wish the Cuban side of the crisis was fleshed out further following the decision to send nuclear weapons to the island. But Fursenko and Naftali did not have such clearance with the Cubans so they can hardly be blamed. Despite such detail, One Hell of a Gamble does not plod along. It is a fantastic book that history nerds and regular readers will enjoy alike.

Courtney says

This book is incredibly dense, but so well researched and thoughtfully organized. Context is brought to so many of the decisions made at the time and so many primary resources were used. This is THE book to read if you're interested in understanding the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Kristen says

I don't usually like to read about history but this was really intriguing! I think it was enlightening for me to hear an inside account of how Kennedy handled this crisis as a young, new president.

Shelly says

Gained a lot more respect for Castro and insight on a behind the scene read on the Cuban Missile Crisis

Jan-Maat says

Written in 1997 the book was the fruit of co-operation of an American and a Russian historian and the product of research in the archives of both countries. As a result this narrative provides insight in the thinking and fears of both sides as the crisis develops out of the strategic possibilities arising from Castro's success in Cuba. It is a fairly lively tale starting with the Castros coming to power, the Kennedy election and the bay of pigs, ending with the fall of Khrushchev, the focus is on the Russians and the Americans, what the Cubans thought or pushed for is seen through the prism of Soviet or American opinion.

John Fahey says

fascinating and informative.

I??I says

This book is pretty much what one should read if he ever wants to dive into the Cuban Missile Crisis and the American-Soviet Relations in general, and the fact that it is the result of a collaboration of a Russian and an American author makes it more reliable with regard to its way of depicting history.

I read this book on recommendation - a book that I probably could not have found on my own, and it reads like - dare I say it? - a novel. You got the avid actors - Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro in the lead as the title hints - and a quite intriguing plot to go along.

Looking at the historical value of it, you get to see how much historical awareness and the likely reaction of the public posed an important factor in Kennedy's decision-making process. Also, I didn't know there was an impulsive side of Fidel Castro. Who would have thought his inclination to recklessness nearly dragged the two major powers into a hot war. It was indeed "one hell of a gamble" that no one hesitated to raise in.

John Melvin says

Unique

Unique information and points of view overcome a slightly awkward prose style and set it apart from most accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Meg G says

This book was an interesting approach to the Cuban Missile Crisis. While it did an excellent job of portraying events in Moscow and Washington, D.C. I found the portrayal of Fidel Castro as overly simplistic. The approach taken casts Fidel as a prisoner of his own thought, indecisive, and an incapable leader as he forged a path to communism in Cuba in the early 1960s.

Max Price says

I read this as a textbook for a history class at Pacific University, and it got me hooked on the Cuban Missile Crisis. It's well-written, and the content is amazingly thorough.
