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Thirteen Days: A Memoir Of The Cuban Missile Crisis



THIRTEEN DAYS

A Memoir of
the Cuban Missile Crisis

With a new foreword by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

ROBERT F. KENNEDY



Synopsis

In October 1962, when the United States confronted the Soviet Union over its installation of missiles in Cuba, few people shared the behind-the-scenes story as it is told here by the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy. In this unique account, he describes the hour-by-hour negotiations, with particular attention to the actions and views of his brother, President John F. Kennedy. In a foreword to this edition, the distinguished historian and Kennedy adviser Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., discusses the book's enduring importance and the significance of new information about the crisis that has come to light from the former Soviet Union.

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Customer Reviews

RFK's chronological account of events and the decision making process is gripping, sobering, and terrifying. It should be required reading for all incoming presidents. The forward by Arthur Schlesinger is likewise full of insight but also interesting facts that came out years later (for example, the Russian troops in Cuba had tactical nukes ready to deploy against any invasion, yikes), don't be tempted to skip over it. The afterword, which is as long or nearly as long as the main book, meh. It tries to apply the lessons and issues of the crisis to the Vietnam conflict, which was current at its writing. Seemed mostly dry to me, though the arguments regarding degrees of congressional involvement in approving armed conflict were interesting and are still relevant. I confess that I began skimming through the afterword after the first 10 minutes or so of reading it. It would be interesting to read firsthand accounts from others in the "Ex Comm". I am sure that RFK was at least slightly

biased with regard to his assessment of JFK's (and his own) performance, despite his genuine attempts otherwise. Overall: Excellent, and an easy, quick read,... highly recommended.

At the beginning of *Thirteen Days*, Robert Kennedy relates something of what it felt like when he and his brother, President John F. Kennedy, and several other high officials of the U.S. government first heard the facts. On Tuesday, October 16, 1962, experts from the U.S. Intelligence Community revealed to the group that the Soviet Union was building a missile base on the island of Cuba, and that atomic weapons and large missiles were already there. During the weeks leading up to that meeting, Soviet representatives, including Chairman Nikita Khrushchev himself, had consistently assured American leaders that they had no intention of sending surface-to-surface missiles or offensive weapons to Cuba. Remembering the moment when the truth became clear, Kennedy writes: "Now, as the representatives of the CIA explained the U-2 photographs that morning, . . . we realized that it had all been lies, one gigantic fabric of lies." There at page 27, I was hooked and kept reading to the end. What a riveting story, told so well. From there, Kennedy describes some of the initial deliberations of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (the "Ex Comm"). He tells about the competing recommendations they offered, which invariably led to the excruciating decisions that finally only the President could make. The first major decision took up the question of an appropriate initial response. After President Kennedy rejected the plan of a military strike and adopted the idea of naval blockade of Cuba, there were other questions to answer. Many of these were related to the task of striking a balance. On the one hand, it was imperative that the U.S. forcefully confront Khrushchev over the treachery and provocation of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it was also necessary to leave room so that the Chairman could retain honor and respectability while backing down. As Kennedy describes it, this balancing act was performed by the President as he stood between the implicit threats from the Soviets on one side, and calls from U.S. military leaders and hawkish members of Congress for at least a strike, or even a full invasion of Cuba, on the other side. Kennedy relates a number of nail-biting episodes as the crisis unfolded. He tells, for example, about the President meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko two days after U.S. officials became aware of the build up, and how Gromyko denied any such activity. He also reports how, at his brother's request, he made a visit to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin who, like Gromyko, held to the same official line: no long-range missiles had been delivered to Cuba, and the Soviet government had no intention of doing any such thing. Kennedy gives the reader a good sense of what it was like for the President to hear from the Ex-Comm about every possible contingency before making day-to-day and sometimes

minute-to-minute decisions that brought with them huge consequences. Finally, Kennedy relates the official agreement according to which the Soviet Union would remove their weapons systems from Cuba and the United States would end the quarantine and pledge not to invade the island nation. In addition to a sense of relief, I had several reactions as I finished this book. First, I was impressed at how well it is written. Throughout, Kennedy exhibits a crisp, easy-to-read style, the eloquence of precise and clear language. Second, I was struck by the consistent humanity of this unique story. For example, if they go on long enough, even the most grave circumstances get interrupted by humor and the ridiculous. The Cuban Missile Crisis was no exception. Kennedy relates some of this. For example, upon realizing that something would have to be done in response to the aggression and deceit of the Soviets, Robert passed a note to his brother saying, "I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor" (31). And I had to smile when reading the story of how, instead of traveling in a long line of limousines which would have tipped off the press, ten men crammed into Kennedy's car for a ride to the White House (43). Third, I felt suspicious whenever I sensed that Kennedy's own presidential aspirations and his natural desire to preserve his brothers' dignity overwhelmed the narrative. For example, he chalks up the Bay of Pigs debacle to a failure to solicit a variety of competing opinions. That action was precipitated by a unanimity of thought, says Kennedy, which closed off the possibility of a better decision (112). It also seemed more than a coincidence that Kennedy never mentions his official title, U.S. Attorney General. From beginning to end, he casts himself primarily as the President's brother, close advisor and assistant. An uninformed reader might be forgiven for concluding that Robert was the Vice President, instead of Lyndon Johnson to whom the author grants nothing more than a cameo appearance. Most of all, I was glad I had read this book. In it, Robert Kennedy accomplished exactly what he set out to do: to tell the incredible story of the Cuban Missile Crisis from his own singular perspective.

This was a short, but very clear and terrifying account of what actually went on in Washington during the Cuban missile crisis. President Kennedy was determined to have the Soviet missiles removed peaceably and set out to do so by creating a group of advisors called Ex Comm. This team was guided by Kennedy's admonition to give Khrushchev every opportunity to back down as possible. And during these days on the brink of nuclear war these were some key factors: some on the Ex Comm team advocated invading Cuba, some members switched positions from Hawk to Dove in a single meeting, President Kennedy maintained his regular schedule and the Ex Comm team met without the knowledge of anyone, a secret meeting between Robert Kennedy and Dobrynin negotiated a trade of U. S. missiles out Turkey for U.S.S.R. missiles out of Cuba, and so much

more. Reading this book illustrated the true ability of Kennedy as a thoughtful leader, a keen student of history who was able to apply the lessons of the past to a modern crisis. It also illustrated the part that personalities and sheer chance played in saving our world from catastrophe.

Informative with insights unavailable to other writers on the same topic. Well-written and nicely-paced - holds the reader's interest. Advisors of stature, but the book so intimately reflects that with all the help of others, including that of his confident brother Bobby, it was still Jack Kennedy who had to make the unbelievable tough decisions as the world stood on the brink of nuclear disaster. As one of the President's favorite poems said so well "Bullfight critics row on row - crowd the enormous Plaza de Toros - but only one is there who knows - and he is the one who fights the bull."

A well written account of the incident that almost caused a nuclear war to start 90 miles off of our shores. A very informative insight into the discussions and actions that took place during this critical time in our recent history.

Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), the then-president's brother and attorney general of the U.S., gives an unadulterated close look at the pressures BOTH sides faced during this crisis. The USSR also had its "military-industrial complex" pushing for a tough stance by their leader (Khrushchev) nearly resulting in nuclear war. A powerful historical commentary by a man who was part of the process.

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