

Thirteen Days: 50 Years Later

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis Has Undergone A Political Transformation During The Past Half-Century

BY JON WIENER
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In 2007, when President George W. Bush's White House representative Dana Perino was asked a question about one of the biggest foreign policy crises in American history, she drew a blank. "I was panicked a bit because I really don't know about ... the Cuban missile crisis," she later told NPR. "It had to do with Cuba and missiles, I'm pretty sure."

Perino was 35 in 2007, and thus had been born about a decade after the famous "13 days in October" 1962 when President John F. Kennedy confronted Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev over Moscow's installation of missiles in Cuba. The history books describe it as the closest the world has come to nuclear war.

Perino's ignorance revealed a striking shift in conservative perception. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis, Republicans expected that it would be remembered for generations as a moment when a Democratic president squandered a historic opportunity. Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan and William F. Buckley all suggested at the time that Kennedy's handling of the crisis represented a capitulation to the Soviets; that the president had bowed to Soviet threats when he promised not to invade Cuba. They believed Kennedy's actions had guaranteed that a communist outpost would remain, 90 miles from our shores, and that the president should have taken the opportunity to liberate the Cubans from their communist overlords.

These days, most conservatives wouldn't make such arguments. Even the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, Calif., gave no hint of the views Reagan once held on the matter in a Cold War exhibit it had up until a few months ago. There was a single panel of text about those 13 days in October, and it informed visitors: "Kennedy took decisive action. His firm stand, based on excellent intelligence and analyses, resolved the Cuban missile crisis."

But at the time, it wasn't just Reagan, Goldwater and Buckley who favored U.S. intervention; inside the circle of Kennedy's advisers, advocates of an attack on Cuba were led by Gen. Curtis LeMay, chief of the Air Force, who proposed bombing 1,000 sites in Cuba, to be followed seven days later by a ground invasion by U.S. troops. (LeMay had risen in power in World War II for devising and carrying out the strategy of fire-bombing Japanese cities, which killed more civilians than the atomic bombs.)

How would LeMay's Cuba plan have worked? The Soviets might have retaliated as the first bombers approached Cuba. Even if Khrushchev did not order the firing of missiles, a Soviet commander in charge of a missile base in Cuba could have ordered a launch. They had eight of their big missiles fueled, targeted and armed with nuclear warheads that October — missiles that could have reached Manhattan. If all eight R-12s in Cuba had been launched, the total payload would have been eight megatons — "an explosive force equivalent to all the



President John Kennedy meets with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in the Cabinet Room of the White House on Oct. 29, 1962. It has been 50 years since a stand off between the United States and Russia over missiles in Cuba pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war.

bombs ever dropped in the history of war," according to one account of the crisis. If only a single R-12 missile reached a U.S. city, it would have hit with 1 megaton of explosive force — about 80 times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. Even if the targeting were off, the city probably would have been destroyed.

But the Soviets might not have attacked cities on the East Coast; they might have retaliated by launching their short-range tactical nuclear missiles at the U.S. base at

The conventional wisdom these days is that Kennedy was the big winner, Castro the big loser. Kennedy's prestige soared while Castro was humiliated and shown to be irrelevant, even to his Soviet overlords. But the conventional wisdom doesn't survive scrutiny. The next year, Kennedy was assassinated by a pro-Castro activist, and soon after that, Khrushchev was deposed by hard-liners opposed to his loss of face. Meanwhile, 50 years later, Castro is still there.

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which could have killed all the Americans there. Then Kennedy would have had to retaliate — by attacking a military base or a major city in the Soviet Union.

For the last 30 years, historians have largely ignored the conservative critiques of the time. Kennedy's actions have been challenged instead from the left, by those who question whether the missile crisis was necessary. The Kennedy advocates have held that the successful resolution of the crisis demonstrated his mastery of world politics, showing how he struck the perfect balance between steely determination and strategic flexibility. As a result, they say, he prevented nuclear war while removing the threat posed by the missiles in Cuba.

His critics have argued for the last three decades that Kennedy's taking the nation to the brink of nuclear war was an irresponsible and unnecessary risk, and that the crisis should have been resolved by less dangerous methods involving normal diplomacy and negotiation. The Soviet missiles in Cuba, they note, did not represent an increased threat to the U.S. — "a missile is a missile," Kennedy himself said, and it didn't matter whether it was coming from Siberia or Cuba. The missiles in Cuba did nothing to change the strategic balance of power — that's what Secretary of

Defense Robert McNamara told Kennedy at the beginning of the crisis: "I don't think there is a military problem." And the U.S. already had missiles based in Turkey, closer to the Soviet Union than the missiles in Cuba were to the U.S., so we had set the precedent for moving missiles up to our enemy's border.

The Cuban missile crisis exhibit at the JFK museum in Boston, of course, celebrates Kennedy's steely resolve and tactical flexibility, and pretty much ignores his critics on the left and right. But by focusing on the 13 days in October, it fails to explain the big picture, the larger context. It avoids asking a big question, an obvious question: Why did Khrushchev move missiles to Cuba in the first place?

The answer is not hard to find: The U.S. had sponsored an invasion of Cuba by CIA-trained Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs just two years earlier, attempting to overthrow Fidel Castro by force. The threat that the U.S. might invade again was what motivated Khrushchev, and especially Castro; they wanted a bargaining chip to trade for a U.S. agreement not to invade. And they got that agreement from Kennedy.

That raises the question of winners and losers. The conventional wisdom these days is that Kennedy was the big winner, Castro the big loser. Kennedy's prestige soared while Castro was humiliated and shown to be irrelevant, even to his Soviet overlords. But the conventional wisdom doesn't survive scrutiny. The next year, Kennedy was assassinated by a pro-Castro activist, and soon after that, Khrushchev was deposed by hard-liners opposed to his loss of face. Meanwhile, 50 years later, Castro is still there.

The conservatives, who argued at the time that Kennedy's no-attack pledge guaranteed the survival of Castro's regime, turned out to be right — about that, at least.

Jon Wiener is a professor of history at UC Irvine and the author, most recently, of "How We Forgot the Cold War: A Historical Journey Across America." He wrote this for the Los Angeles Times.

numbers reached more than 600. Since moving to a Wednesday night open house, we have seen increasing numbers.

We are able to contact a good number of the kids at the schools before Wednesday night and the teachers help us by getting the word out to the students. We appreciate the schools allowing the firefighters the time to come to the schools during Fire Prevention Week to present fire safety information to students from preschool to third grade. The level of training is matched with the age group starting with stop, drop, and roll and cool a burn. The training increases as the students get older and ends with the third grade touring a fire engine at the school.

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OPINION | OTHER THOUGHTS

Benghazi: Answers And Accountability

THE DAILY NEWS, Bowling Green, Ky. (Oct. 12): Just how damn stupid does the Obama Administration believe the American people are?

The answer is pretty damn stupid based on the highly implausible and absurd fairy tale spouted for days by administration officials that the attack on our consulate in Benghazi, Libya, was the spontaneous reaction to an obscure video.

White House spokesman Jay Carney and United Nations Ambassadors Susan Rice were among the high administration officials who were parroting this party line regarding a violent attack that took the life of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three more Americans.

Americans, however, are a lot sharper than this administration gives them credit for. Many citizens were not buying the Obama narrative from day one. It seemed more than passing strange that this attack occurred on the anniversary of 9/11 and that the spontaneous mob was conveniently armed with automatic weapons and grenade launchers and from all accounts were well organized.

These facts strongly suggested a coordinated terrorist attack to the man on the street who was also hearing media reports that the president of Libya was very adamant that this was not a spontaneous event related to the video.

Now we learn that our State Department has broken with the administration and says it never believed the Benghazi attack was a film protest.

Good for the State Department. We commend them for not falling on its sword to provide cover for the utter stupidity demonstrated by its administration. ...

Americans over a certain age remember the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Iran during the presidency of Jimmy Carter.

That brings to mind a bumper sticker we saw that suggests that Obama's presidency represents Carter's second term.

It certainly appears in the aftermath of Benghazi that the sticker is on target.

Immigration: Open-Mindedness

SIOUX CITY (Iowa) JOURNAL (Oct. 12): If you listen carefully, you occasionally will hear a reasoned, calm voice within all of the unreasoned, red-faced shouting so common to national discourse today.

Such was the case on Oct 8 when former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush spoke about immigration at the annual Siouxland Chamber of Commerce dinner.

As part of his blueprint for economic growth, Bush — who is considered a potential future presidential candidate — includes immigration reform. In Bush's view, reforms should include a way to untap the potential of undocumented immigrants who already live within our borders for economic reasons. Due to declining birth rates and the retirement of Baby Boomers, he said, America will need more immigrants to help fill future jobs.

"It's impossible for me to imagine a country that allows people to live in the shadows rather than maximizing their potential," Bush said.

We will withhold an opinion on Bush's full immigration plan until we read all the details, but we appreciate his contribution to the debate over this vexing issue. In our view, he offers valuable food for thought and asks for the kind of open-mindedness so crucial to a comprehensive solution.

Illegal immigration is a complicated subject with legal, social, security and, yes, economic ramifications. Unfortunately, as we see all too often on big issues of the day, Washington — reduced to near-paralysis by partisanship and intransigence — appears incapable of meeting this challenge. ...

This problem begs for a middle-ground solution to which all sides must cede some turf for the greater good of the nation ...

TODAY IN HISTORY

By The Associated Press

Today is Thursday, Oct. 18, the 292nd day of 2012. There are 74 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On Oct. 18, 1962, James D. Watson, Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins were honored with the Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology for determining the double-helix molecular structure of DNA.

On this date: In 1685, King Louis XIV signed the Edict of Fontainebleau, revoking the Edict of Nantes that had established legal toleration of France's Protestant population, the Huguenots.

In 1812, during the War of 1812, the British ship *HMS Frolic* was captured off the Virginia coast by the crew of the *USS Wasp*, which was in turn captured by the *HMS Poictiers*.

In 1867, the United States took formal possession of Alaska from Russia.

In 1892, the first long-distance telephone line between New York and Chicago was officially opened (it could only handle one call at a time).

In 1912, black boxer Jack Johnson was arrested in Chicago, accused of violating the Mann Act because of his relationship with his white girlfriend, Lucille Cameron. (The case collapsed when Cameron refused to cooperate, but Johnson was later re-arrested and convicted on the testimony of a former mistress, Belle Schreiber.)

In 1922, the British Broadcasting Co., Ltd. (later the British Broadcasting Corp.) was founded.

In 1931, inventor Thomas Alva Edison died in West Orange, N.J., at age 84.

In 1944, Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia during World War II.

In 1961, the movie musical "West Side Story," starring Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer, premiered in New York, the film's setting.

In 1969, the federal government banned artificial sweeteners known as cyclamates because of evidence they caused cancer in laboratory rats.

In 1971, the Knapp Commission began public hearings into allegations of corruption in the New York City police department (the witnesses included Frank Serpico).

In 1972, Congress passed the Clean Water Act, overriding President Richard M. Nixon's veto.

In 1977, West German commandos stormed a hijacked Lufthansa jetliner on the ground in Mogadishu, Somalia, freeing all 86 hostages and killing three of the four hijackers.

In 1982, former first lady Bess Truman died at her home in Independence, Mo., at age 97.

In 2001, CBS News announced that an employee in anchorman Dan Rather's office had tested positive for skin anthrax. Four disciples of Osama bin Laden were sentenced in New York to life without parole

for their roles in the deadly 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa.

Ten years ago: The Vatican demanded that America's Roman Catholic bishops revise their hard-line crackdown policy on sexually abusive priests, saying that elements conflicted with universal church law. (In 2005, the U.S. bishops voted overwhelmingly to stick with the main points of the discipline plan.)

Five years ago: Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan, ending eight years of self-imposed exile; a suicide bombing in a crowd welcoming her killed more than 140 people, but Bhutto escaped unhurt. (However, she was slain in December 2007.) Former Joint Chiefs chairman William Crowe died in Bethesda, Md., at age 82. Manager Joe Torre, rejecting a pay cut, left the New York Yankees.

One year ago: Fifty wild animals were released by the owner of an eastern Ohio farm, Terry Thompson, who then committed suicide; authorities killed 48 of the creatures, while the remaining two were presumed eaten by other animals. The Republican presidential candidates laced into each other in their latest debate, held in Las Vegas; Mitt Romney emerged as still the person to beat, even as he was called out on the issues of illegal immigration, health care and jobs. Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit emerged from five years in captivity as Hamas militants hand him over to Egyptian mediators in an exchange for 1,000 Palestinian prisoners.

Today's Birthdays: Rock-and-roll performer Chuck Berry is 86. Sportscaster Keith Jackson is 84. Actress Dawn Wells is 74. College and Pro Football Hall-of-Famer Mike Ditka is 73. Singer-musician Russ Giguere is 69. Actor Joe Morton is 65. Actress Pam Dawber is 62. Author Terry McMillan is 61. Writer-producer Chuck Lorre is 60. Gospel singer Vickie Winans is 59. International Tennis Hall of Famer Martina Navratilova is 56. Boxer Thomas Hearns is 54. Actor Jean-Claude Van Damme is 52. Actress Erin Moran is 52. Jazz musician Wynton Marsalis is 51. Actor Vincent Spano is 50. Rock musician Tim Cross is 46. Tennis player Michael Stich is 44. Singer Nonchalant is 39. Actress Joy Bryant is 38. Rock musician Peter Svenson (The Cardigans) is 38. Actor Wesley Jonathan is 34. Rhythm-and-blues singer-actor Ne-Yo is 33. Country singer Josh Gracin is 32. Country musician Jesse Littleton (Marshall Dillon) is 31. Jazz singer-musician Esperanza Spalding is 28. Actress-model Freida Pinto is 28. Actor Zac Efron is 25. Actress Joy Lauren is 23. Actor Tyler Posey is 21.

Thought for Today: "Slow down and enjoy life. It's not only the scenery you miss by going too fast — you also miss the sense of where you are going and why." — Eddie Cantor, American comedian-singer (1892-1964).

FROM THE BIBLE

The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Psalm 92:12. Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis

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PHONE:
(605) 665-7811
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YOUR LETTERS

Open House A Success

Larry Nickles, Yankton

Deputy Fire Chief, Yankton Fire Department

Yankton Fire Department open house was held Wednesday, Oct. 10, at Fire Station No. 2. The event started at 5:30 p.m. with hotdogs, balloons, fire safety kits and fire hats for future junior firefighters as well as fire apparatus and the fire safety house. There was also an antique toy fire truck display presented by Paul Goetsch of Yankton featuring toys from early 1900's.

In past years our best numbers reached about 400 attendants at the 90-minute open house, but this year,

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SEN. TIM JOHNSON: 136 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510; Washington Phone: (202) 224-5842; Sioux Falls Phone: (605) 332-8896; email: <http://johnson.senate.gov/emailsform.html>

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