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Will the Real Bobby Kennedy Please Stand Up? Robert Kennedy And The Cuban Missile Crisis

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"I wonder if we did not pay a very great price for being more energetic than wise about a lot of things, especially Cuba."
- Robert F. Kennedy, 1968

Mid-April, 1968. As the rain lashed down on Rapid City, North Dakota, Senator George McGovern stood before an expectant crowd of five thousand to introduce his, and their, candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. Addressing the rain-sodden audience, McGovern introduced the aspirant as having "the absolute personal honesty of Woodrow Wilson, the stirring passion for leadership of Andrew Jackson, and the profound acquaintance with personal tragedy of Lincoln," continuing:

You people know the affection and esteem I held for President Kennedy, but it is my carefully measured conviction that Senator Robert F. Kennedy, even more than our late beloved President, would now bring to the Presidency a deeper measure of experience and a more profound capacity to lead our troubled land into the light of a new day. . . . If he is elected President of the United States, he will, in my judgement, become one of the three or four greatest Presidents in our national history. ¹

The crowds piled on the acclaim in similar fashion right across the Democratic primaries of that spring ². Even those who held Robert Kennedy in a less than favourable light began to concede the strengths of his candidacy. Richard Harwood of the Washington Post, who had earlier in the year scorned the crowds flocking to see Kennedy, found himself "falling in love" with him ³. Writing retrospectively eight years later, Harwood spoke for the nation when he wrote: "We discovered in 1968, this deep, almost mystical bond that existed between Robert Kennedy and the Other America" ⁴. Radical critic Elizabeth Hardwick Lowell professed of Kennedy that he was "one of the few people in public life who had truly changed." She was sure that "this possibility of change would continue" ⁵.

Tragedy was to strike again in that peculiar Kennedyesque fashion. Yet the image of Bobby Kennedy as the man who touched "the lives of millions of people seeking hope out of despair," ⁶ as the civil-rights proponent who could not only lead America out of the tumultuous decade that was the 1960s, but also as the strong, moral leader who could extricate America from the quagmire of Vietnam, remains dominant. Whilst his older brother, President John F. Kennedy, has found his reputation - although far from ruined - somewhat tarnished over time, Robert Kennedy remains frozen in time. Thirty-two years after his assassination, it is time to reveal a new composition of Robert Francis Kennedy.

HISTORY AND THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

When Elizabeth Lowell talked of a Bobby Kennedy who had "changed," even "transcended the past," it would be salient to ask as to exactly when this journey took place - when Robert Kennedy grew from a young and inexperienced presidential adviser, thrust at a young age into the position of attorney general, into future presidential material himself. When was the "mystical bond" formed? To answer that question, history tells us that we need look no further than that seminal quandary of the 1960s, the Cuban missile crisis.

Bobby Kennedy's growth was solidified as early as 1966 when newsman Elie Abel published the crisis' first history. ⁷ Abel's book is unique. Because of the closeness to the event itself and because of the access available to Abel, the book was written with the most thorough list of first-hand accounts. The acknowledgements list reads like a veritable who's-who of the Kennedy administration. From Dean Acheson, through George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Douglas Dillon, John McCone, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, to Theodore C. Sorensen, to name but the prominent few. Primarily, however, Abel's account of the crisis remains, and will forever remain, the only account of the crisis that Robert Kennedy directly

contributed to, bar his own memoir. If not the most complete historical study of the crisis, it is the most primary.

One year prior to the release of Abel's *The Missiles of October*, former JFK advisers and close colleagues of Robert Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Theodore Sorensen, had both alluded to the influence the younger Kennedy had carried within the Executive Committee (ExComm). ⁸ Abel, however, was more explicit in his assemblage of Robert Kennedy's leadership qualities. In his rendering of the ExComm deliberations, Abel cast Robert Kennedy as "the most influential man in the room." More than that, Bobby was, in effect, the president of the ExComm. "With the president sometimes absent, Robert Kennedy soon emerged as discussion leader." According to one unnamed ExComm participant, having Bobby "there in the room was perhaps better, because it was less inhibiting than having the president there." ⁹ Bobby, himself, told Abel that he "felt that there was less true give-and-take with the President in the room." ¹⁰

Abel's account began the formation of an image of Robert Kennedy as leader and its publication in 1966 undoubtedly went on to contribute to Kennedy's strong political standing in 1968. Written in the few years following JFK's assassination, *The Missiles of October* was published as the war in Vietnam was rolling from one disaster to the next. The numbers involved in popular protests at home rose and rose and were becoming more and more violent. Abel's portrayal of Robert Kennedy as the "moralist of the Administration" struck home to an American population dissatisfied with President Lyndon B. Johnson's constant escalation of the Vietnam conflict. Here, in Bobby Kennedy, was the man who could carry both the moral high-ground and a way out from the decade of turmoil through which they were living. Although being part of a government that had all too often let people down in the 1960s, Robert Kennedy carried no stigma. Here was a man who had changed. More importantly, here was a man who could help America change, offering detachment from the Cold Warriors who had drawn American children into the deep mud of Vietnam. More than anything else, Kennedy retained the original promise of the Camelot legacy: "That special hubris about the American age remained with some of the Kennedy people long after it had all gone sour and indeed come apart," David Halberstam wrote. "In 1968," this was the case, "when the horror of the war and 'Gene McCarthy's success in New Hampshire had finally driven Robert Kennedy from his role of Hamlet to announcing that he would become a candidate.'" ¹¹

Abel solidified his portrayal of a moral Robert Kennedy with the first recount of what was to become the most famous ExComm clash. On 17 October, with the president absent, maintaining a busy daily schedule in the interests of secrecy, the remaining ExComm met in Under-Secretary of State George Ball's windowless office. This was the day that Abel cites as RFK's real emergence as discussion leader. Another notable personnel change came with the introduction of Dean Acheson (at JFK's request) to the ExComm. The meeting has become infamous for the supposed "Hawk Vs Dove" clash between Acheson and Robert Kennedy. Here was thirty-seven year old Robert Kennedy, of less than two years top-level government experience, clashing with Dean Acheson, "the sixty-nine year old, former Secretary of State, chief Architect of the Truman Administration's Cold War policies." ¹² In many eyes, there was a clear connection between Acheson's devout anti-communism of the early Cold War and the reasons American had found itself in Vietnam in the first place.

Acheson strongly rejected Kennedy's moral analogy that if the US were to strike Cuba without warning it would be like "Pearl Harbor in reverse". Acheson recalled instead the historical precedent of the Monroe Doctrine that made it clear that the United States would not tolerate the intrusion of any European power into the Americas. The President had issued enough warnings, Acheson insisted, so the question of surprise attack simply did not arise. Acheson supported a prompt air-strike with no attempt at prior negotiation.

Yet, contrary to popular myth, Acheson and Robert Kennedy were not so far apart in their opinions. Acheson challenged McNamara's proposal for a blockade, pointing out that it would have no effect on whatever Soviet missiles were in Cuba already. Acheson wanted more than a blockade. He wanted, if necessary, an invasion. Robert Kennedy's attraction to the invasion option was evident as early as the first ExComm meeting of the previous day. Indeed, when Robert Kennedy did come to endorse the blockade option, on 20 October, he urged his ExComm colleagues to consider "a combination of the blockade route and the air-strike route." ¹³ The portrayal of Acheson being the ultimate ExComm hawk was equally misread. As President Kennedy recorded privately on the Oval Office tape recorders, Acheson "was uncertain about any of the courses." ¹⁴

Echoing Abel, RFK set forth a similarly complementary portrayal of himself when writing his missile crisis memoir, which would go on to become the basis of *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* in 1967-1968. Here he presented himself as a cool and rational operator within the ExComm. ¹⁵ The

conclusion made on his performance was that here was a wise peacemaker who could disentangle the United States from Vietnam. So RFK allowed a strong hint of the negotiated Turkish missile trade to slip into his narrative, while omitting less well-considered moments, like his suggestion that the United States "sink the Maine or something." ¹⁶

In the years following his assassination, Robert Kennedy's place in the history of the Cuban missile crisis has not altered. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., following on from his biography on JFK's presidency, published his opus, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, in 1978. ¹⁷ Eager to show that RFK was "a dove from the start," Schlesinger overlooked Bobby's initial belligerence - but he did reveal the Turkish missile trade. ¹⁸ Seen for twenty years as the definitive work on RFK, Schlesinger had painted an equally moral and mature composition of Kennedy's crisis performance.

This portrayal of Robert Kennedy as crisis leader has come full-circle with the publication last year of Evan Thomas' *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. Whilst having less of the first-hand accounts to rely on that Abel had, Thomas has been the beneficiary of the mountains of new documentary evidence that has become available in the last decade. More than anyone since Schlesinger, the chief *Newsweek* editor was allowed unprecedented access to Robert Kennedy's papers and archives. In a pre-publication article abstract published in *Newsweek* in August 2000, Thomas rightly identified the contrasting portrayals that have built up over Kennedy:

Today, RFK is remembered as myth. He was either the bullying "Bad Bobby," his father's hatchet man and enforcer of his brother's will. Or he was the "Good Bobby," the martyred liberal, shot down before he could uplift the poor and close the nation's racial divide. The real RFK was a more complex figure.

Finding somewhat of a middle ground between these black and white depictions, Thomas portrays the Cuban missile crisis as the period of Bobby's enlightenment:

His true role in the Cuban missile crisis has only slowly emerged over time, as new documents and records have come to light. His story shows that public figures can learn and mature, even under the most stressful of circumstances. The Cuban missile crisis was, in a sense, a coming of age for Robert Kennedy. His particular abilities jelled at just the time they were needed most. His approach was subtle and variable, driven more by instinct and intuition than by fixed principles. ¹⁹

Robert Kennedy was indeed a complex figure - as tortuous and intricate an individual as American history has ever seen. But did Robert Kennedy really experience "a coming of age" in the events of and surrounding the Cuban missile crisis? That Bobby Kennedy grew as a politician and statesman by 1968 would be hard to argue against. Yet, this growth did not take place within the context of Robert Kennedy's dealings with Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution. The primary challenge to this so-far accepted portrayal of RFK comes from a greater consideration of the Kennedy administrations number one policy towards Cuba in 1962 - Operation Mongoose - the covert war aimed at overthrowing Fidel Castro.

A HIDDEN AGENDA

To invade, or not to invade? That was the question. At least so for many historians who have so far considered Robert Kennedy's decision-making process during those thirteen days. The true picture is much more complex. The primary evidence for considering those deliberations within the ExComm came in 1997 with the publication of Ernest May and Philip Zelikow's *The Kennedy Tapes*. Prior to its release, historians had to rely primarily on the 16 October and 27 October transcripts that had been declassified in the 1980s. The Kennedy Tapes filled in many gaps and added vital nuances to our previous conceptions of the decision-making process within the ExComm. ²⁰

The book revealed that the question over invasion was in some ways a central one. By reading the transcripts of the first two ExComm meetings on the 16 October, Robert Kennedy's attraction to invading Cuba is clearly evident. When Bobby makes his voice heard for the very first time in the opening meeting, he does so to point out to the president the available option not so far discussed, "which is the invasion." ²¹ RFK's leanings were re-emphasised seconds later when he challenged Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's claims that at least a week would be needed between an air-strike and an invasion. "Is it absolutely essential that you wait 7 days?" he pressed. Bobby believed that the air-strike could be aided and the removal of the Soviet missiles better executed if they "could get in, get it started so that there wasn't any turning back ..." ²² Kennedy elaborated no further. What exactly he was alluding to - what could get the invasion started - he never clarified. Robert Kennedy ended the meeting again pressing for

answers, this time towards his close ally and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maxwell Taylor. Taylor enquired over whether if what Bobby was really interested in was the time-scale needed for an invasion. In essence, Kennedy wanted more specific information. He wanted to know "how long it would take to take over the island?" ²³ His mind undoubtedly seemed preoccupied on issues others simply were not considering.

"Oh shit. Shit! Shit! Those sons a bitches Russians." ²⁴ Robert Kennedy greeted the news of the Soviet missiles with intense anger. He carried this rage into the initial ExComm meetings. In the early evening hours of 16 October, RFK's incensed annoyance blew up into recklessness. After again suggesting that they should "just get into it, and get it over with", the attorney general went further, raising the possibility of "getting involved in this through Guantanamo Bay or something. Or whether there's some ship that ... you know, sink the Maine again or something." ²⁵

With such a provocative stance, it is hard to parallel this Robert Kennedy with the one Abel cites as "moralist of the administration." ²⁶ Much vaunted as an explanation for Robert Kennedy's hawk-to-dove flip is that his demands over invasion details and calls to provoke an incident were simple brainstorming. RFK was the goad and gadfly of the administration. He posed awkward questions and challenged others simply to make sure that all options had been debated before a decision was made. This portrayal has run from Abel to Thomas' latest conclusion: "He asked awkward questions and tested and quarrelled with assumptions. . . . He did not hesitate to reverse field or rethink an answer, in part to stimulate discussion." ²⁷

The answer also apparently lies in RFK's suspect temper. His keenness for an invasion, shown so clearly on 16 October, were just initial outbursts of fury. "RFK's predictable immediate reaction," Thomas has written "was to get even with the Soviets, to want to strike back." ²⁸ Robert Kennedy's fits of pique were notorious. Getting on the wrong side of the attorney general was inadvisable, to say the least. Testifying to this were his many infamous clashes with Chester Bowles, Richard Bissell, Adlai Stevenson, McGeorge Bundy, and even with close ally John McCone.

"But then he changed," according to Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. ²⁹ The history of the Cuban missile crisis tells us that Kennedy was able to "blend high moralism and shifty pragmatism." ³⁰ Rather than wishing to "sink the Maine again," Robert Kennedy was now adamant that his brother would "not be the Tojo of the 1960s." To invade Cuba with U.S. forces would be "a Pearl Harbor in reverse." ³¹ Such stands "made Christians" of the rest of the ExComm ³², allowing Robert Kennedy to lead towards a blockade consensus and away from the dangerous approach to the brink of nuclear war.

If and how this transformation from invasion-conspirator to blockade-builder occurred needs closer examination. The answer can be found within the unique machinations of Operation Mongoose ³³. Operation Mongoose has never held the prominent position the evidence demands it should in the history of the Cuban missile crisis. Largely due to reasons of government secrecy, neither Abel, Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days*, nor Robert Kennedy decided to mention it in their crisis accounts. A decade later, Arthur Schlesinger's RFK biography and David Detzer's *The Brink: Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, began to at least disclose Mongoose's existence, but then dedicated only a few pages and footnotes to it, giving it no prominence within the decision-making process of Robert Kennedy during the crisis itself. Only in the last few years has significant attention begun to have been paid to the covert operation, primarily in Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali's *"One Hell of a Gamble"* and with Thomas's RFK biography.

Still Operation Mongoose's role in the Cuban missile crisis and primarily within Robert Kennedy's psyche needs further examination. Too many recounts of the crisis concentrate solely on what was happening within the ExComm but not on what was happening elsewhere. Saliently, further reflection is needed not on RFK's position within the ExComm, but on his position in the hierarchy of the American foreign policy and intelligence establishment - as the primary person in charge of covert operations in 1962.

Contrary to Robert McNamara who later recalled that it "wasn't worth a damn," or Kennedy administration intelligence researcher Roger Hilsman, who recollected that "in its totality, it was nothing more than a pin-prick," ³⁴ Operation Mongoose was among, if not, the biggest venture in CIA history. When Robert Kennedy referred to an operation that "could get in, get it started," he was referring to Operation Mongoose.

Head of Mongoose operations was formally a counter-insurgency specialist, Edward Lansdale. In reality, it was under the effective command of Robert Kennedy. "Robert Kennedy's involvement in organising and directing Mongoose became so intense that he might as well have been deputy director of plans for the operation," recalled former CIA operations head, Richard Bissell. Edward Lansdale was nothing more

than RFK's "official instrument." ³⁵ Whilst somewhat downplaying Lansdale's role, Bissell was correct when he placed Robert Kennedy at the centre of all commands. Despite his decision not to accept the directorship of the CIA, Bobby remained his brother's chief watchdog over US intelligence.

Launched in November 1961, after much internal introspection following the Bay of Pigs invasion, Operation Mongoose was to be the policy that showed the Kennedys were still as determined as ever to oust Fidel Castro from power. Mongoose was to operate "within the strict requirements of the project directed by the President. . . . The President's memorandum . . . stated that it had been decided that the United States will use all available assets in a project to help Cuba overthrow the Communist regime." ³⁶ By February 1962, Lansdale had put forth a detailed timetable for Mongoose's implementation. Lansdale's prescription aimed "for a revolt which can take place in Cuba by October 1962." The final two stages of the plan set forth:

Phase V, Revolt, first two weeks of October 1962. Open revolt and overthrow of the Communist regime.

Phase VI, Final, during the month of October 1962. Establishment of new government.

October was an estimated culmination date. Lansdale admitted that the "course of action set forth herein is realistic within present operational estimates and intelligence. Actually it represents the maximum target timing which the operational people jointly considered feasible . . . it is a series of target actions and dates, not a rigid timetable."

Despite not fixing an exact date, this was the clearest known planned culmination date for Operation Mongoose. Rather than just being one memorandum out of many, this "total plan" was "EYES ONLY." When considering the pressure and resources the Kennedys were prepared to put into Mongoose, if it were "feasible" then they would no doubt expect it to happen. ³⁷

Importantly, Operation Mongoose did not just encompass the collection of intelligence, sabotage and infiltration. Jim Hershberg has written that Mongoose "opened a new phase in U.S. sponsored operations," including paramilitary subversion; sabotage; economic, political and psychological warfare. In truth, its nature may have been even more all-encompassing - including consideration of assassination. A memorandum of 18 January 1962, listed as an aim the "fracturing of the leadership cadre within the regime." ³⁸ Lansdale had no doubts that "the project for disposing of Castro envisioned the whole spectrum of plans from overthrowing the Cuban leader to assassinating him." ³⁹

Of no coincidence, considering the planned culmination date of Operation Mongoose, the real pressure from the Kennedys to implement Mongoose came in October 1962. ⁴⁰ Despite several attempts to kick-start the operation, Mongoose floundered between February and October. Yet, by the beginning of October, the Kennedys were still more preoccupied with attempts to overthrow Castro than by the prospect of Soviet missiles being stationed ninety miles from Florida. Despite the inaction so far, the Kennedys still treated Mongoose as their primary Cuban policy. "Operation Mongoose was closely monitored by the chief of state, and all actions received his explicit authorisation," Richard Bissell recalled, adding that there was also "tremendous pressure on the agency to accomplish even more" from Robert Kennedy ⁴¹. Lansdale too was feeling the heat, being "often in conversation with President Kennedy and his brother." ⁴²

In a highly emotional meeting of the Special Group (Augmented) - the body responsible for Mongoose's development - on 4 October, Robert Kennedy blasted the lack of progress in the sabotage field, refuting claims that any operations were "withheld." CIA director, John McCone, noted that there followed "a sharp exchange which was clarifying inasmuch as it resulted in a reaffirmation of a determination to move forward." McCone continued:

As a result, General Lansdale was instructed to give consideration to new and more dynamic approaches, the specific items of sabotage should be brought forward immediately and new ones conceived, that a plan for mining harbors should be developed and presented, and the possibility of capturing Castro forces for interrogation should be studied. ⁴³

On the day the Cuban missile crisis broke out, 16 October, Robert Kennedy held an equally cathartic session on Operation Mongoose. Pointing out the "general dissatisfaction of the President" with the operation so-far, Robert Kennedy stated that "he was going to give Operation Mongoose more personal attention." "In order to do this," the record reads, "he will hold a meeting every morning at 0930 with the

Mongoose operational representatives." Kennedy clearly believed that Mongoose had a role to play in the days ahead: "The Attorney General spoke favourably of the sabotage paper which had been presented by General Carter this morning to the meeting." Bobby then added "a plea for new ideas of things that could be done against Cuba." Most importantly, Robert Kennedy "made reference to the change in atmosphere in the United States Government during the last twenty-four hours, and asked some questions about the percentage of Cubans who we thought would fight for the regime if the country were invaded." Clearly Kennedy saw no need to sideline Operation Mongoose even with the outbreak of such a serious crisis. Indeed, he believed that at last the operation might be implemented as originally intended. To placate the attorney general, Helms guaranteed that the CIA "were prepared to get on with the new action program" and that they would "execute it aggressively." ⁴⁴

Kennedy historian Philip Zelickow has portrayed this meeting as somewhat impromptu, claiming it was only natural that "some wondered whether Mongoose should now be ramped up in order to use it to help deal with or retaliate for the Soviet missile deployment." ⁴⁵ Zelickow believes this portrays only Robert Kennedy's initial anger. This is somewhat misleading. The pressure on Operation Mongoose to be "ramped up" had been coming for several months. National Security Memorandum No. 181, approved by the President on 23 August 1962 had called for a second, more intense stage of operations. Anxious to see more from the covert program, Kennedy ordered Maxwell Taylor to develop "with all possible speed" various activities "projected for Operation Mongoose." This new Plan "B plus" would allow the administration to deliberately seek to provoke a full-scale revolt against Castro that might require U.S. intervention to succeed. ⁴⁶ Neither did the high emotion and sharp exchanges of 4 October originate as a retaliation to the Soviet missile deployment - as clearly the missiles had yet to be revealed.

As far as the record shows, Robert Kennedy did not hold his scheduled daily meetings on Operation Mongoose following the 16 October. The planning did continue, however, and often with the attorney generals involvement and approval. On 17 October, Robert Kennedy contacted a close ally and veteran of the Bay of Pigs failure, Roberto San Román about the possibilities of staging a provocation. In a 1999 interview with Evan Thomas, Román admitted planning to "badly damage a Russian ship approaching port." Kennedy had put Román in contact with Lansdale, sanctioning this risky mission and another aimed at the mining of Cuban harbours. ⁴⁷ The operations never went ahead, but not because RFK did not want them to. In truth, it was the CIA who stood the operations down.

Robert Kennedy was apparently furious when he found out that reconnaissance teams were still flooding into Cuba during the crisis. He had a famous confrontation with Task Force W Chief William Harvey on 26 October. Harvey has supposedly jumped the gun in sanctioning missions without RFK's approval. Harvey could not quite understand the dressing-down he was getting, feeling that the CIA was working "within its sphere of responsibility" considering the many calls from Kennedy to up the pressure on Mongoose. Harvey reiterated, the intelligence operations were considered to be a simple "continuation of previously approved operations." ⁴⁸

It is easy to see where his confusion came from. Robert Kennedy had himself approved a sabotage raid on 19 October to blow up the Matahambre mines near the costal port of Pinar del Río - an area so important to Castro that it was under Che Guevara's direct command. Surely this was more dangerous, Harvey pondered, than his intelligence gathering operations? Equally, where was the wisdom in cancelling Harvey's operations but authorising the continued planning for similar manoeuvres under Edward Lansdale? The very next day Lansdale had prepared an operational plan, stating that if approved, the "CIA is prepared to dispatch four intelligence collection teams in the immediate future." In total, the CIA had "twenty teams ready for infiltration into Cuba." ⁴⁹ And as McGeorge Bundy's prepared notes for the 26 October meeting revealed, there were already Mongoose teams in Pinar del Río (COBRA team) and the Oriente Province (AMTORRID team) - an equally important area under Raul Castro's control. ⁵⁰ As Bundy noted, all of these teams had "W/T (weapons-training?), arms, explosives." Bundy then went on to note that "other action (was) pending." ⁵¹

Indeed, Operation Mongoose in its original format did not progress beyond the end of 1962. Without doubt, it was a failure as an operation. Yet failure does not reflect enthusiasm, just as it does not reflect intent. Neither does it distort the picture that Robert Kennedy believed it could work and that he fully desired such an outcome.

By bringing Operation Mongoose into the Cuban missile crisis, and more centrally into Robert Kennedy's psyche, the moral leadership and the subtle and discerning advice he apparently symbolised in October 1962 must be brought into question. The truth was that, despite his constant pushing, Robert Kennedy had realised that Operation Mongoose was not ready to be implemented, as originally planned, in October 1962. His innate desires to see Castro overthrown quickly turned to the more realistic and

sensible policy of defusing the crisis with a naval blockade of Cuba, followed by the trade of the obsolete U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

In no way, however, had Robert Kennedy abandoned his yearning to overthrow Fidel Castro. Rather than displaying moral leadership in the events and surrounding months of October 1962, Robert Kennedy followed an inconsistent and dangerous policy towards Cuba. Operation Mongoose was not disbanded because of its unscrupulous nature. Rather it was abandoned because of the frustration both Kennedys felt over its failure. As with the post-Bay of Pigs investigation, nobody came back to the administration to say that the policy itself was wrong. Rather, as had happened to Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell in 1961, individuals were blamed for the failure of covert operations towards Cuba. This time Harvey and Lansdale were out. In came new men, including Robert Kennedy's personal choice, Desmond Fitzgerald. The Kennedys' keenness to overthrow Castro continued well into 1963. President Kennedy refused to offer an iron-cast non-invasion guarantee to Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro. The covert planning continued with Robert Kennedy once again at the forefront of the planning, proposing "a program with the objective of overthrowing Castro in eighteen months." ⁵²

CATHARSIS

It has been all too easy for historians to place Robert Kennedy's "coming of age" within the confines of the Cuban missile crisis. The seminal event itself is a paradigm of change. President Kennedy talked of "a climatic period" when looking back on the events of the fabled thirteen days in October. "Future historians looking back at 1962 may well mark this year," the president mused, "as the time when the tide . . . began (to turn)." Harold MacMillan told the House of Commons that the crisis represented "one of the great turning points in history." ⁵³ Robert Kennedy talked of the crisis resolution as being "a triumph for the next generation." ⁵⁴

The consensus-building position occupied by Robert Kennedy between the hawks and doves of the ExComm was not one of playing Devil's advocate, but rather a contradictory approach by a man following a contradictory set of policies. Far from being a unifying force in the Cuban missile crisis, RFK acted surreptitiously on both Operation Mongoose and the Turkish missile trade - two major decision making processes that were hidden from the majority of the ExComm. The effect of the Kennedys' continued covert war (and, more saliently, the contradictions at the heart of the administration's policies) was to subvert any chance of reconciliation with the Soviet Union over Cuba and with Fidel Castro himself.

Nikita Khrushchev and his intelligence services soon learned of the resumption of US covert pressure on the island of Cuba, creating a barrier between any possible thawing of the superpower relationship in the fall of 1963. Added to President Kennedy's refusal to approve a firm non-invasion pledge against invading Cuba, the signs in Moscow were ominous. As a result, attempts towards a rapprochement with Cuba were doomed to failure. In contrast to the continuing effort to harass Castro, the Kennedy administration had pursued another clandestine strategy in the fall of 1963, this one aimed at generating a dialogue with Castro. William Atwood, a US official at the United Nations was centrally involved. Yet once again, the Kennedys' concentration on covert warfare undermined any hopes of conciliation towards Cuba and a thawing of the US-Soviet confrontation. This was not a clearly thought-out two-track strategy or a "carrot-and-stick" approach. This was a case of an ill-thought and irreconcilable policy. Atwood's concerns with this approach - the dual policy of undertaking both sabotage and dialogue - were summarised in his memo to Gordon Chase on 8 November 1963. According to Atwood, "Castro expressed desire for reaching an accommodation with the United States." Yet, Atwood continued, "the exile raids were an obstacle since they strengthened the hand of the hard-liners both with Castro and the public." Atwood summed it eloquently - the covert raids were, as ever, "an obstacle" to peace. ⁵⁵

According to the legend advanced by his supporters, the death of JFK transformed Bobby. He became independent, laden with a profound tragic sense of life, which erased his priggishness and engendered a deep identification with life's underdogs. ⁵⁶ Arguing this line of thought somewhat simplifies Robert Kennedy the man. He had always shown the potential for growth, displayed first and foremost in his dedicated, if rather reactionary, attempts to progress the civil rights movement under his brother's presidency. Whereas JFK would pay relatively little attention towards the burning issue, Bobby did at least accept that there was a fundamental problem at the heart of the struggle.

That Robert Kennedy did grow as a man and as a politician by 1968 is hard to dispute. His sheer popular appeal and magnetism towards so many lays testament to that. Covering the 1968 election campaign for London's Evening Standard, reporter Max Hastings recorded how it "was amazing to see the extent to which Kennedy could exist on the unseen magic alone." ⁵⁷ Yet there was more than just "unseen magic" to it. Unlike no other, Kennedy understood the mood of the radicals, both black and white, and the

distress of the disenchanted middle class. Like McCarthy, Kennedy appealed strongly to the young and to the anti-war movement. But unlike McCarthy, he also had the overwhelming support of the minorities. And, although white working-class voters generally backed the war and were usually in the vanguard of the white backlash, they, too, liked Bobby Kennedy.⁵⁸ RFK had the unusual ability to pull all these groups together and it was this promise of union that he campaigned on. One election poster professed that Robert Kennedy stood for "the reconciliation of men."⁵⁹

By 1968, RFK had also grown as a statesman. Whilst admitting that mistakes had been made on Cuba in his brother's administration, he would also now concede that their "assumptions in the early sixties about Vietnam, were just wrong."⁶⁰ He promised a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, aiming for a moral plateau in his foreign policy mandate. Announcing his candidacy, Robert Kennedy argued that what was "at stake is not simply the leadership of our party and even our country. It is our right to the moral leadership of this planet."⁶¹

To place Robert Kennedy's personal journey of growth within his dealings with Cuba, however, is to misjudge the historical record. The history of the ExComm obscures what was really going on within RFK's inner psyche. A reliance primarily on the history of the ExComm deliberations acts as a cover for Operation Mongoose and for Robert Kennedy's obsession with crushing Castro's Cuban revolution. Being at the brink of nuclear war had not convinced either Kennedy that their covert war on Castro was misjudged. Rather, once the Soviet's had "blinked," the covert war was once again renewed. Rather than displaying the "high moral standards" his brother claimed he possessed,⁶² Robert Kennedy's performance in the Cuban missile crisis and his dealings with Cuba in the following months, showed RFK to be a dissolute cold warrior and a hard-liner.

Kennedy was a transitional figure in the most turbulent of decades. "He seemed constantly to be changing, learning, becoming more aware," Jim Heath has written. Admiring biographer Jack Newfield concluded that RFK was "a changeling who matured late."⁶³ Theodore Sorensen echoed that Kennedy had "an unusual capacity for growth."⁶⁴ Under this figure of change and growth, many began to believe that anything was possible, including an end to the great unrests of 1960s American - domestic upheaval and racial violence at home and the constant stream of body-bags returning from Vietnam. "As those who mourned Kennedy most deeply could never forget," Allen Matusow remembered, "if he had lived, anything might have happened."⁶⁵ History did not provide us with such conclusive proof - as it rarely does. All we can conclude on is what did happen and the fact is that Robert Kennedy's "coming of age" did not occur during the Cuban missile crisis.

Endnotes

1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (London: Andre Deutsch Limited) p. 899. [\[back\]](#)
2. Robert Kennedy would go on to win five out of the six Democratic primaries he stood for. [\[back\]](#)
3. Richard Harwood's article, "Crowd Madness and Kennedy Strategy" was published in March, 1968, and accused Kennedy of playing the "demagogue" in his criticisms of Lyndon Johnson. Despite starting off on the wrong foot, Harwood was soon welcomed into the Kennedy camp by RFK himself. Harwood apparently earned Kennedy's respect after a particularly vicious game of touch-football between the two. Tough-guy Harwood's conversion was such that within months he had asked to be taken off the Kennedy campaign as he was apparently "falling in love with this guy." Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life - Advanced Uncorrected Proof* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). p. 377. All references from the book are used with the author's permission. Harwood would stay so close to the Kennedy campaign that it was his arms that would eventually hold the dying RFK after his assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, had struck. [\[back\]](#)
4. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* pp. 890-891. The quote originates from: Richard Harwood, Remarks at RFK Journalism Awards Luncheon, Washington D.C., May 14, 1976. [\[back\]](#)
5. Ibid. p. 897. [\[back\]](#)
6. Ibid. p. 891. The origin of the quote comes from the aforementioned Harwood article referenced in endnote 4. [\[back\]](#)
7. Elie Abel, *The Missiles of October* (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1966). All references refer to the British edition. The book was published in the same year in the United States by MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, under the title, *The Missile Crisis*. Schlesinger wrote that RFK was "the turning point" towards the blockade choice. Arthur M. [\[back\]](#)

8. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) p. 690. Sorensen equally concluded that Bobby was "the best performer" in "shaping our deliberations." Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) p. 679. [\[back\]](#)
9. Abel, *The Missiles of October* pp. 57-58. [\[back\]](#)
10. *Ibid.* p. 71. [\[back\]](#)
11. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) p. 41. The first edition of the book was released in 1969. [\[back\]](#)
12. Abel, *The Missiles of October* p. 63 [\[back\]](#)
13. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow. (eds). *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis*. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1997) p.196. [\[back\]](#)
14. *Ibid.*, p. 171. [\[back\]](#)
15. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1969). The book was not published until after RFK's assassination. Based on Kennedy's original manuscript, the book was formally written by former JFK adviser and speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen. In a more recent essay, Timothy Naftali has also cited evidence that shows that whilst writing the manuscript, Robert Kennedy had the first access to the ExComm recordings and transcripts. Timothy Naftali, "The Origins of "Thirteen Days"," *Miller Centre Paper*, Summer 1999. [\[back\]](#)
16. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy* p. 232. Kennedy also included the clash with Acheson, portraying him as the primary ExComm antagonist. Acheson responded in an article that the ExComm was a "disorganized mess" and RFK "naïve." Dean Acheson, "Dean Acheson's Version of Robert Kennedy's Version of the Cuban Missile Affair," *Esquire*, February 1969. [\[back\]](#)
17. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (London: Ballantine Books, 1996). [\[back\]](#)
18. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy* p.232. [\[back\]](#)
19. Evan Thomas, "Bobby at The Brink," *Newsweek*, August 2000. [\[back\]](#)
20. The accuracy of the transcripts contained within *The Kennedy Tapes* has been brought into question by various historians since its publication in 1997. For the best of these arguments see Sheldon M. Stern, "What JFK Really Said," May 2000. Available from <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/stern.htm> [\[back\]](#)
21. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes* p. 66. [\[back\]](#)
22. *Ibid.* pp.67-68. [\[back\]](#)
23. *Ibid.* p. 74. [\[back\]](#)
24. Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1991) p. 223. [\[back\]](#)
25. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes* p. 100. This was not the first time that Robert Kennedy had suggested provoking an incident at Guantanamo whilst using the Maine analogy. For a brief history of RFK's attraction to this, see Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* p. 205. [\[back\]](#)
26. Abel, *The Missiles of October* p. 63. [\[back\]](#)
27. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* p. 210-211. [\[back\]](#)
28. *Ibid.* p. 210. [\[back\]](#)
29. *Ibid.* p. 214. [\[back\]](#)
30. *Ibid.* p. 210. [\[back\]](#)
31. Neither Robert Kennedy, nor John McCone (as suggested by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, Kennedy, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1958-1964 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997) p. 227.) were the first to use the Pearl Harbor analogy - George Ball was the previous day (16 October) in the evening ExComm meeting. Ball asserted: "This coming in there, a Pearl Harbor, just frightens the hell out of me as to what goes beyond." May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes* p. 115. [\[back\]](#)
32. Abel, *The Missiles of October* p. 57. [\[back\]](#)
33. Testament to the size and seriousness of Operation Mongoose comes in the voluminous documentation available in the two FRUS series' on Cuba. See *Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume X Cuba, January 1961-September 1962*; and *Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume XI: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath, 1961-1963*. Mongoose itself was launched in November 1961 and entrusted to a newly founded CIA Task Force W, whose Miami headquarters became the largest CIA station in the world with four hundred American staff, two

- thousand Cuban agents, its own navy and air force and an annual budget of anything between \$50-100 million. [\[back\]](#)
34. Roger Hilsman, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Struggle over Policy* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996) p. 31. [\[back\]](#)
 35. Richard M. Bissell, Jr. with Jonathon E. Lewis and Frances T. Pudlo, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). pp. 201-202. [\[back\]](#)
 36. Brig. Gen. Lansdale, Memorandum from Chief of Operations, Operation Mongoose, December 7, 1961. Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume X Cuba, January 1961-September 1962. [\[back\]](#)
 37. Brig. Gen. Lansdale, "The Cuba Project," 20 February 1962. John F. Kennedy Library, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, File: Special Group (Augmented) - General - 1/62-6/62. [\[back\]](#)
 38. Brig. Gen. Lansdale, Program Review by the Chief of Operations, Operation Mongoose, January 18, 1962. Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume X Cuba, January 1961-September 1962. [\[back\]](#)
 39. Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1993) p. 245. An investigation into plots to murder foreign leaders culminated in a 1975 report by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, headed by Senator Frank Church of Idaho With regard to its original objective - discovering whether John F. Kennedy authorised or knew of the plots to kill foreign leaders, including Fidel Castro - the committee arrived at no conclusive result. [\[back\]](#)
 40. Adam J Grossman, "US Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis," 3 May 2000. Available from <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~diplo>. [\[back\]](#)
 41. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior* p. 203. [\[back\]](#)
 42. Currey, *Edward Lansdale* p. 240. [\[back\]](#)
 43. John A. McCone, Memorandum by Director of Central Intelligence, Memorandum on Mongoose Meeting Held on Thursday 4 October, 1962. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath pp. 11-13. [\[back\]](#)
 44. Richard Helms, Memorandum for the Record, Mongoose Meeting with the Attorney General, October 16, 1962. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath pp. 45-47. [\[back\]](#)
 45. Philip Zelikow, "US Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis," 5 May 2000. Available from <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~diplo>. [\[back\]](#)
 46. National Security Action Memorandum No. 181, 23 August 1962. John F. Kennedy Library, Papers of President Kennedy, Countries, Box 125a, File: USSR - Security, 1962. [\[back\]](#)
 47. Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy* p. 234. [\[back\]](#)
 48. Thomas A. Parrott, Operation Mongoose, Memorandum for Record, 26 October 1962. Subject: Minutes of the Meeting of the Special Group (Augmented) on Operation MONGOOSE, 26 October 1962. John F. Kennedy Library, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, File: Special Group (Augmented) - General - 10/62-12/62. [\[back\]](#)
 49. Brig. Gen. Lansdale, Memorandum for the Special Group (Augmented), 27 October 1962. Subject: CIA Intelligence Collection Teams, Cuba. John F. Kennedy Library, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, File: Special Group (Augmented) - General - 10/62-12/62. [\[back\]](#)
 50. A declassified CIA document on Operation Mongoose of a later date makes reference to "the COBRA team in Pinar del Rio." Helms Memo for McCone - Subject: Operation MONGOOSE - - Support of Assets inside Cuba, 7 December 1962. John F. Kennedy Library, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, File: Special Group (Augmented) - General - 10/62-12/62. [\[back\]](#)
 51. McGeorge Bundy, Operation Mongoose, Main Points to Consider, 26 October 1962. John F. Kennedy Library, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, File: Special Group (Augmented) - General - 10/62-12/62. [\[back\]](#)
 52. Bromley Smith, Summary of the 2d Meeting of the Standing Group of the National Security Council, Washington, 23 April, 1963, 5pm. John F. Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, Standing Group Meetings, Box 328, File: 4/23/63. [\[back\]](#)
 53. Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) p. 719. [\[back\]](#)
 54. *Kennedy, Thirteen Days* p. 125. [\[back\]](#)
 55. Memorandum from William Atwood to Gordon Chase of the National Security Council Staff, New York, November 8, 1963. Foreign Relations of the United States: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath, 1961-1963, Vol. XI. pp. 878-883. [\[back\]](#)

56. This observation was put forward by, David Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995) p. 29. [\[back\]](#)
57. Max Hastings, *America 1968: The Fire This Time* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1969) p. 111. [\[back\]](#)
58. Jim Heath, *Decade of Disillusionment: The Kennedy-Johnson Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975) p. 279. [\[back\]](#)
59. "I run for the Presidency because I want the United States to stand for the reconciliation of men." RFK election poster, May 1968. Ibid. p. 101. [\[back\]](#)
60. John Morton Blum, *Years of Discord: American Politics and Society, 1961-1974* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991) p. 51. [\[back\]](#)
61. David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wangm 1994) p. 215. [\[back\]](#)
62. Benjamin C. Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (London: Quartet Books, 1975) p. 142. [\[back\]](#)
63. Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1978) p. 5. The first edition was published in 1969. [\[back\]](#)
64. Theodore C. Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy* (London Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1969) p. 17. [\[back\]](#)
65. Allen J. Matusow, *The Unravelling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row) p. 410. [\[back\]](#)