Books

90 Miles from Oblivion

High Noon in the Cold War: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, by Max Frankel ’52CC, ’53GSAS (Ballantine Books, 2004. 206 pages, $23.95).

By
Mark Falcoff
|
Spring 2005

On Monday night October 22, 1962, Americans switched on their television sets to hear “a major announcement”— as the newspapers that morning had advanced it — by the president of the United States. On the flickering black-and-white screens, John F. Kennedy informed his fellow citizens that U.S. intelligence flights had discovered that the Soviet Union was assembling intercontinental ballistic missiles in Cuba, a mere 90 miles off the American mainland. The presence of such offensive weapons, he went on to say, was clearly unacceptable, and he announced a “quarantine” of the island to block the arrival of further Soviet shipments. He demanded that the Soviets immediately dismantle the missile sites and he warned that any attack on the United States from weapons based in Cuba would be immediately retaliated on the territory of the Soviet Union.

Thus began a 10-day crisis during which the fragile global peace that had prevailed since 1945 was in the balance. In *High Noon in the Cold War*, Max Frankel, who covered the story in Moscow, Havana, and Washington for the New York Times, returns to those fateful days to produce a brisk account of what went on in all three capitals and to explain how the crisis was resolved with a minimum of political fallout for both sides. In many ways it is the most readable and immediately accessible account of the affair. It builds on a vast amount of literature that has appeared since 1962, including memoirs and the conversations that President Kennedy covertly recorded in the Oval Office.

Frankel’s main point is an important one — that the crisis actually had its origins in Europe, where the Soviets were determined to eliminate the presence of the

Western powers in Berlin and, even more, to secure the removal of NATO Jupiter missiles in Italy and Turkey. It was to bargain these pieces off the chessboard that Soviet Premier Nikita Khruhschev placed the missiles in Cuba in the first place. It was not, as Castro's government and its foreign apologists have subsequently claimed, to protect the nascent Communist regime on the island from an American invasion.

Although in many ways President Kennedy was in an overwhelmingly superior position to confront his Soviet counterpart — the U.S. arsenal contained many times the number of ICBMs as Moscow's, and the proximity of Cuba was essentially irrelevant from a strategic standpoint — he understood the enormous psychological impact of the news, both on the U.S. political community and the U.S. public generally. Ironically, the Jupiter missiles were already obsolete but could not be publicly traded for Cuba's missiles without upsetting crucial defense relationships with Turkey and to some extent other NATO allies. The result was a complicated round of negotiations, largely conducted by Teletype, in which both leaders eventually found their way to the end of the tunnel. Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles, and Kennedy agreed to dismantle the Jupiters after a delay sufficient to de-link the two in the public mind. The Soviets consented to inspections that — since Castro refused to admit foreign personnel to the sites — had to take place on the high seas, while Kennedy offered a public pledge not to invade Cuba. As Frankel concludes, both governments had fully absorbed the lesson that "war between the two superpowers had become unprofitable and that they were obliged to prevent peripheral issues from ever again creating a comparable risk of a military clash." He even suggests that both men were so deeply impressed by their journey to the brink that they might well have further reduced Cold War tensions had one lived and the other not been subsequently deposed.

To some extent Frankel adheres to what might be called the Standard Revised Version of Cold War History, which is to emphasize the symmetries between Washington and Moscow, and even more, between Kennedy and Khrushchev, both of which, he sympathetically writes, had to face down "hard-liners" in their military establishments who pressed for a more violent confrontation (and in the case of Kennedy, Republicans in Congress like New York Senator Kenneth Keating, who had the temerity to be right about the missiles before the White House was ready to publicly admit their existence). Occasionally he exhibits an irritating condescension toward the actors — but then, writing more than four decades later, he knows now

what they did not. While Frankel provides a useful bibliography, it would have been easier for readers to have provided an essay on sources, since on almost every page of this book he chooses sides in an ongoing historiographic controversy.

Perhaps because Frankel didn't cover the story there, the weakest aspect of High Noon is its treatment of the Latin American setting. His characterization of Latin America ("where military juntas ruled in the service of U.S. Corporate interests") is certainly a strange way to describe Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela, all of which at the time were governed by democrats, most of them left of center. And there is virtually no mention of Castro's activities in promoting revolutionary violence throughout the region, efforts that, when combined with a strategic alliance with the Soviets and massive shipments of East bloc weaponry, constituted something more than a minor irritant to be dismissed by foreign policy sophisticates.

All told, Frankel should be congratulated for reminding us that presidential leadership is crucial in moments of crisis and that the right choices depend upon human qualities. As he writes, "luck played a role" in the peaceful outcome of the missile crisis. "But," he adds, "it was not dumb luck."

Mark Falcoff is the author of Cuba the Morning After: Confronting Castro's Legacy *and is working on a book about the Bay of Pigs disaster.*

Read more from
Mark Falcoff

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from
Mark Falcoff