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Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Counsel for the New President (SPRING 1989), pp. 337-346
Published by: Wiley-Blackwell on behalf of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40574677
Accessed: 31/10/2012 21:17

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Constraining Presidents at the Brink: The Cuban Missile Crisis

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Abstract

In the Fall of 1962, the world stood on the brink of a nuclear holocaust as the United States and the Soviet Union attempted to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis. For thirteen days, John F. Kennedy and 15 high-level advisers met in seclusion and ultimately made the critical decisions for the more than 200 million United States citizens whose very lives hung in the balance. This article examines the role played by the general public in the course of such foreign policy crises. It also looks at how that role could be strengthened, given their tremendous stake in these decisions.

Americans have been gradually compelled to confront the reality of nuclear war. Nevertheless, as that reality sinks in, it is easy to react fatalistically. It is not difficult to envision a president and his or her advisers clandestinely meeting and quietly making these critical decisions in a secluded war room. In such a situation, there would seem to be little role for the average citizen. Once the crisis had begun, those citizens would be left to wait for the ultimate policy decisions and their aftermath.

But do governmental elites actually resolve serious international crises in that degree of isolation? And what, if anything, can be done to increase informed popular input at those moments? The following case study of a well known and serious foreign policy crisis should help shed light on these questions.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

In the Fall of 1982, almost 20 years to the day since the Cuban Missile Crisis, I found myself lecturing in the Soviet Union to a group of law students. The subject of John Kennedy came up, and I was quite surprised by their infatuation with our second youngest president. "But what about the Cuban Missile Crisis?" I asked naively. To which they responded, "The Cuban what?" It was more than a problem of translation. Our two nations had stood face to face in October of 1962, bringing the world closer to annihilation than at anytime in its history; yet, more than 200 million Soviet citizens apparently had virtually no way to constrain their leaders at that moment. With control over media coverage as the events unfolded, and with little chance of being held strictly accountable by domestic historians, a few isolated Soviet elites seem to have made extremely critical judgments with implications for the very lives of the entire Soviet citizenry.

In the United States, at least part of that story is different. It should have been clear to the American decision makers involved that media analysts and historians would ultimately know and critically discuss most of what was going on. That knowledge allowed the public to apply at least a very indirect general constraint on their decisions.

But what about direct and immediate constraints as those events developed? Did the American public have any realistic opportunity to provide input as the crisis unfolded? To do so would have required timely information and a forum for conveying their views. Their primary avenue to such power resources was the mass media. Consequently, media accounts will be examined to determine:

(1) What factual information was available?
(2) When was the information available?
(3) And if the information was available and timely, did the mass media allow the public to convey its reaction to the governmental elites before those elites reached their decisions?

Research Approach

James Rosenau presents a valuable model which posits a four-step flow of political information. "Opinion makers"—such as presidents, senators, corporate leaders and bureaucratic officials—convey a message. Their views are then relayed and interpreted by "opinion leaders,"—e.g., reporters, editorialists, and columnists in the mass media—and disseminated more broadly. Much of what is conveyed will only be directly consumed by the "attentive public," e.g., those people who carefully monitor news stories. This latter group, in turn, relays the information to the less attentive "mass public"—which Rosenau estimates to be some 75–90 percent of the American citizenry.[1]

Rosenau's model will be extended to provide the conceptual framework for this "study." Besides the core of his model described above, "opinion leaders" are seen as being involved in a two-way flow of communication. Specifically, they provide the "attentive public" and "mass public" with information when they report and interpret events, but also when they speculate about developments and when they debate alternatives. In addition, they convey public sentiment to governmental policy makers by publishing public opinion polls, reporting on demonstrations and counter-demonstrations, and speculating on the public mood.

In the political arena, then, this process can be seen as contributing to democracy by facilitating the flow of political information and providing a forum for popular input. Thus, the "mass public" has a greater opportunity to set outer limits of public policy, while the "opinion makers," "opinion leaders," and "attentives" set inner parameters.

Details of the governmental elites' decision-making process during the Cuban Missile Crisis have been extracted from works such as Graham Allison's *The Essence of Decision*,[2] Elie Abel's *The Missile Crisis*,[3] and Robert F. Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*.[4] Then, in trying to discern the interplay between these elites, intermediaries, and the larger American public, major press forums of the day have been analyzed. Coverage

of these events in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* has been reviewed. These dailies and weeklies were chosen because of their national circulation, breadth and depth of coverage, and common use as a forum by "opinion makers." Granted, the "attentive public" is more likely to read these sources than are their "mass public" counterparts; however, as Rosenau indicates, the messages do get relayed to the larger audience.

The Crisis

The first events of the crisis itself were developing amidst a heightening off-year, congressional election campaign. Soviet intentions in Berlin and Cuba had become major issues, and many Republicans were critical of John Kennedy's inaction in both areas. The president had sent a high-level emissary to Havana, for instance, in an attempt to negotiate the release of a number of counter-revolutionaries seized by Fidel Castro's forces during the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion. Yet, difficulties in securing an agreement only strengthened the Republicans' case.

Cuba had been in the news for some time, especially as more became known about the build-up of Soviet-made armaments on the island. But in the first two weeks of October, besides Republican use of this issue for political purposes, little occurred to attract the close attention that the U.S.-Soviet confrontation over Berlin was receiving. Just prior to recess, however, the United States Senate voted 86–1 to use any force necessary to stop the "advance of communism" in the Western Hemisphere. That move was answered by a Soviet declaration that any attack on its ally, Cuba, would be seen as an act of aggression against the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Soviets publicly admitted that they had indeed been sending sizable numbers of arms and technicians to Cuba.

This all fit nicely into the Republican campaign. Senator Homer Capehart, for example, called repeatedly for an invasion of Cuba; while Senator Jacob Javits, although refusing to touch directly on such an issue of national security, assailed the president as an "ineffective leader." Kennedy, in response, praised the Congress but called the Republicans "obstructionists," and lambasted Capehart for his "irrational" proposal. On October twelfth, James Reston attacked Republicans for irresponsibly twisting and jumbling a very sensitive Cuban issue; at the same time, he noted that the administration was only inviting such attacks by its conspicuous silence on the precise size and nature of the Soviet presence there.

Monday, 15 October. As the first photographic evidence of offensive weapons was presented to the inner circle of elite decision makers late that evening, constant surveillance was ordered, although the president was not awakened.

Meanwhile, earlier that day, *Newsweek* had run a major article entitled "What to do about the Arms Build-up in Castro's Cuba?" A few Republican candidates, as well as some of the press, called Kennedy "a profile in American indecision" and demanded either a blockade or an invasion immediately. Kennedy, on the other hand, was quoted as stating, "If at any time the communist build-up in Cuba endangers our security in any way we will do whatever must be done to protect our security and that of our allies." Rumors of a "deal" involving a reduced Soviet presence in

Cuba in return for a reduction of the American presence in Berlin also appeared in the press; however, Secretary of State Rusk attacked such rumors as "ridiculous" and suggested instead that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev would be coming to terms in both areas after the November sixth election in the United States.

Tuesday, 16 October. The entire inner circle, essentially sixteen men, first met to consider the newest photographic evidence. The group included President John F. Kennedy, Dean Rusk (Secretary of State), Robert McNamara (Secretary of Defense), General Maxwell Taylor (Chairman, Joint Chiefs), Robert Kennedy (Attorney General), John McCone (Director, CIA), McGeorge Bundy (Assistant for National Security), Douglas Dillon (Secretary of Treasury), Roger Hilsman (Director, Bureau of Intelligence and Research), George Ball (Undersecretary of State), U. Alexis Johnson (Deputy Undersecretary of State), Edwin Martin (Assistant Secretary of State), Roswell Gilpatric (Deputy Secretary of Defense), Paul Nitze (Assistant Secretary of Defense) Theodore Sorensen (Special Counsel), and Llewelyn Thompson (Soviet expert). Essentially, they outlined 5 basic alternatives: (1) do nothing; (2) work through political and diplomatic channels; (3) a surgical air strike; (4) an invasion; or (5) a blockade.

As they met, former President Eisenhower, campaigning for Republican candidates, publicly criticized the foreign policy efforts of both President Kennedy and U.N. Ambassador Stevenson. Kennedy, however, was quoted as strongly opposing any proposal either to recognize Cuba or escalate the pressure on that country. In a *New York Times* letter to the editor, a Columbia University professor concurred with the president, calling for U.S. restraint in dealing with the Cuban predicament.

Wednesday, 17 October. The elites began meeting almost continuously under the veil of the strictest possible secrecy, e.g., all pre-existing appointments were being kept in an effort to project the facade of "business as usual." Sentiment soon drifted toward a surgical air strike; although Robert Kennedy argued against a "Pearl Harbor in reverse," and Robert McNamara was beginning to side with him.

In the press, Republican campaign chiefs declared that Cuba had become the primary issue of the campaign. John Kennedy was being referred to as "tragically irresolute." And the Bay of Pigs was being called the biggest communist victory in a decade. All the same, a Gallup Poll showed 60 percent of the public fearing that an invasion would trigger a larger war, and subsequently opposing such a move.

Thursday, 18 October. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko had been questioned closely, and he continued to deny any offensive intentions. Unconvinced, the American elites decided to impose a blockade—an option which did not preclude any of the others.

The press that day featured the President's trip through Connecticut. He had drawn some scattered jeers, but the crowds had generally been quite large and supportive. Meanwhile, the Soviets claimed to have had nothing to do with any talk of a Cuba-Berlin deal; and *The Washington Post* editors accused both Eisenhower and Kennedy of producing far more rhetoric than concrete plans in terms of these highly important foreign policy issues.

Friday, 19 October. The president left the campaign trail in Chicago, claiming to have a "cold." He then rushed back to Washington for further high-level meetings.

Friday's edition of *Time* featured the details of the Kennedy administration's failed efforts to secure the release of the Cuban-held counter-revolutionaries. Yet on the same day, with obviously different partisan intentions, *The Washington Post* accused Republicans of running against Fidel Castro instead of their Democratic opponents.

Weekend, 20–21 October. Even though the elites continued to conceal their activities and had shown considerable unity of purpose by avoiding major leaks to the press as they argued behind the scenes, the press had already begun to see through the facade. Thus while they ran routine stories about regularly scheduled meetings and military "maneuvers" in the Caribbean, by Sunday they had pieced together most of the larger story. Yet, at that point, the president directly appealed to the publishers, urging them to wait until he could first notify the U.S. Congress and major allies. The publishers deferred to his judgment and held off, knowing that an address to the nation was scheduled for the following evening.

Monday, 22 October. The briefings began, and the president prepared to announce the blockade that would commence the following morning. Meanwhile, there were many rumors about an impending showdown and the likelihood of a presidential address to the nation that evening.

Interestingly enough, *Newsweek's* cover story that very day was entitled, "Castro's Cuba—How Do the Voters Feel?" In the article, *Newsweek* cited the sharp criticisms of "[Senator] Keating and Company," and noted that their own national poll had found nearly all Americans deeply concerned. Nevertheless, a full 90 percent of those polled had opposed an invasion, even though they expressed some confusion over just what "short of war" might work. Another article saw Cuba as an "albatross" around Kennedy's neck since his inauguration; but the author believed that an invasion would only cause a Berlin crisis on the top of it all.

The daily press included rumors of offensive missiles, while the White House denied any intention of an invasion but otherwise remained silent. Eisenhower publicly declared that such critical matters of foreign policy should no longer be campaign issues. Roscoe Drummond called for the Soviets to get out of the Western Hemisphere. In the traditionally isolationist Midwest, a Quayle and Harris poll found a "new belligerency," with more than two-thirds of the people now ready for some type of military action. A letter to the editor attacked Walter Lippmann for "appeasement." And George Sokolsky echoed an earlier notion that Eisenhower and Kennedy should publicly debate the issue, even though they were equally responsible for the situation because of their "do nothing" policies.

Tuesday, 23 October. With the blockade in place, aerial reconnaisance indicated rapid construction efforts. In addition, it was learned that Soviet submarines were accompanying their ships in clear defiance of the president's warning.

Meanwhile, the president's speech dominated the papers, and it received editorial endorsement from both the *Times* and the *Post*. The speech itself was essentially factual in nature, and the public was about as informed of the administration's intentions as anyone else at that point. The president emphasized that he had monitored the situation carefully, as he had promised; and that these new developments demanded

a firm response. He concluded by expressing his faith that Americans would once again be willing to pay the necessary "cost of freedom."

The stock market plummeted. The *Post* conducted a small "man on the street" survey and found mixed emotions—fear, relief, concern, pride, distress, confusion, and so on. Chalmers Roberts viewed the president as "heeding history's lesson" about standing idly by—referring to World War II. But Walter Lippmann called our missiles on the Soviet border in Turkey an albatross, and warned that we could not expect to have both the Monroe Doctrine in this hemisphere and the Truman Doctrine in theirs.

At the same time, George Sokolsky cited a Senate Judiciary Committee report to demonstrate that "subordinate officials on the fourth floor of the State Department can act independently of the president . . . and the Secretary of State, and that these officials may not know that the actions (of subordinates) have been taken." He was referring specifically to a case where Roy Rubottum and William Wieland, at their own discretion, withheld already authorized arms from Cuba's beleaguered anti-communist dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Later, as if to confirm Sokolsky's fears, this same type of bureaucratic problem actually surfaced in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis when Navy commanders disagreed with the president on blockade strategy and procedures and obstructed the implementation of some very significant commands concerning the blockade.

Wednesday, 24 October. Khrushchev used diplomatic channels to issue a counter-threat, although apparently he had already ordered the advancing cargo ships to delay. Meanwhile, U.N. Secretary General U-Thant proposed that both sides halt in place; but Kennedy continued to demand immediate removal of the now nearly operational offensive missiles.

The press, on the other hand, contained numerous stories, rumors, and editorial opinions. Kennedy aide Pierre Salinger had briefed the news chiefs on security information policy—"not censorship." The political parties were said to be reassessing how all of this would affect the campaign. Fall-out shelter plans were being accelerated. The *Post* ran a question-answer feature to try and clarify some of the issues at hand. The stock market took its worst drop in four months. A Gallup poll showed 84 percent of Americans supporting the president's approach, and only 4 percent opposed to it. However, both Gallup's poll and the *Post's* "man on the street," indicated a feeling that the action should have come sooner; and the *Post* concluded on an interesting note, stating that ". . . when crisis is daily bread, it apparently loses the taste of terror."

On the editorial pages, James Reston emphasized Soviet misjudgments, and Joseph Alsop called this a reassertion of posture in the face of Soviet arrogance. Dissenting somewhat, however, a Columbia University professor proposed that both sides dismantle the weapons next to each other's borders, while a Methodist Bishop blamed the U.S. for denying Castro the help he had previously come to the United States asking for. Finally, Marquis Childs stated, "The step that President Kennedy has now taken cannot be separated from the current congressional campaign . . .," as he was under attack by his own party for both economic problems and the minimal interest Democratic voters seemed to be showing in the upcoming elections.

Thursday, 25 October. Soviet oil tankers continued toward Cuba; and the "Bucharest" was hailed, then allowed to proceed. Domestically, the stock market edged back up; the "man on the street" appeared anxious but supportive; while press editorials also conveyed support. Yet, it was reported that British pacifist Bertrand Russell had written to Khrushchev urging him to exercise restraint in the face of these "unjustifiable acts"; and Walter Lippmann openly proposed a Cuba-Turkey missile swap.

Friday, 26 October. Tension mounted in the inner circle as missile construction sped forward. A crucial decision would have to be made shortly concerning an air strike or an invasion. The Soviets, however, ordered their cargo ships back; and through diplomatic channels, they offered to withdraw the missiles if the U.S. promised not to invade Cuba. That option was essentially acceptable to the U.S. side, and Khrushchev then sent an official cable formally proposing that alternative.

On the home front, newspaper editors continued to endorse the president's actions. Yet, campaign rhetoric was beginning to reappear, e.g., from Eisenhower and Senator Everett Dirksen. In addition, letters were printed which sharply debated the blockade choice from a variety of perspectives.

Saturday, 27 October. The crisis was at its crescendo. What seemed all but settled hours before, was now coming undone. Khrushchev had sent a second cable, this time taking a much more belligerent stance and demanding that U.S. missiles be simultaneously removed from Turkey. Cargo ships were once again steaming toward Cuba, and a showdown on the high seas seemed inevitable. Then, a United States U-2 reconnaisance plane was shot down over Cuba and another accidentally wandered over Soviet air space. Nonetheless, at Robert Kennedy's suggestion, the U.S. responded to Khrushchev's first proposal, and this soon defused the crisis.

Yet, as the crisis reached its climax there were the first reports of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations in front of the White House. Congresspersons were seen as "hitching onto" the Cuban theme, although with quite varying approaches, e.g., Senator Barry Goldwater attacked both Eisenhower and Kennedy for years of inaction. However, the newspaper editorials, as well as columnists Reston and Krock, continued to support the president's demand for immediate withdrawal of the missiles; and Roscoe Drummond even saw this as the turning point in the Cold War—where either the U.S. would capitulate or the Soviets would be set back and the Cold War would begin to ease.

Sunday, 29 October. The Cuban Missile Crisis came to an end, as Khrushchev accepted the original terms—withdrawal in return for a "no invasion" pledge. Meanwhile, unaware of its resolution, the nation continued to debate alternatives. Reston and the *Times*' editors weighed both sides of the "missile swap" without drawing any clear conclusions; while former Vice President Richard Nixon and the *Post* editors supported Kennedy's hard line. Demonstrations continued on Saturday. Author James Newman called the whole tribulation not worth the risk. Congressional leaders grumbled about being rushed back to Washington only to find a blockade decision already made. And one of the key stories of the day concerned an Eisenhower speech in which he ". . . in a stinging attack on the Kennedy administration (Saturday), said the Cuban Missile Crisis is no excuse for one-party government or reducing the American people

'to the level of regimented herd'," as he urged support for Republican candidates in the congressional elections which were then scarcely more than one week away.

Monday, 29 October. The texts of the final communiques were printed. News analyst Alfred Friendly conjectured that Khrushchev must have "gotten the message" as the U.S. deadline neared. The U-2 events were reported and mapped. And Congress, like the "man on the street," was left expressing ambivalent feelings—relief, hope and caution were the primary sentiments expressed. At least two scoldings were also considered in order:

Marquis Childs stated, "The president had hardly finished speaking when certain of his more cynical critics were saying that the time of the crisis had been dictated by political considerations," an accusation he felt to have been in bad taste. The *Post* editors went even further, stating "It is regrettable that a few public figures and some sections of the press demonstrated a meanness of spirit during the worst of the crisis, although the public as a whole has given the president hearty support. In the present exultation it is well to remember that the national unity is still imperative."

Analysis

There were three particularly momentous elite decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In view of the reconnaisance reports that began arriving on the 15th of October, an agenda was set by the 16th and the blockade decision was made on the 18th. The solution—withdrawal for a "no invasion" pledge—was then worked out between the leaders of both countries over the weekend of the 26th and 27th.

The public seems to have been relatively well informed, but generally not until after each major decision had been made. Therefore, when the "opinion leaders," "attentive public," and "mass public" expressed views on an issue prior to the elites' decisions, these were based largely on relatively stale information and considerable speculation. Overall, then, much of the information was available, but it was not timely enough to allow informed popular input prior to the critical decisions.

The opinion forums were certainly available and utilized, however. A variety of views were printed, even in the heat of the crisis, in the face of some clear editorial disapproval, and after the Republican leadership had set the central issue aside. And although a certain degree of unanimity seemed to exist immediately following the president's Monday night address, there was considerable debate as the crisis reached its most critical stages on Friday the 26th and Saturday the 27th.

Editorialists and partisan politicians, in particular, had been offering conflicting policy views for months prior to the crisis. Besides opinions concerning policy towards Cuba, this even included discussion of what to do should the Soviets counter U.S. moves by occupying Berlin. Prior to announcement of the blockade, public opinion polls were published on the 17th and 22nd, focusing on the invasion alternative. "Man on the street" surveys appeared for three consecutive days following the president's speech, and another poll was published two days after his announcement. In addition, Walter Lippmann actually raised his own policy proposal—the missile swap—and it can still be argued that his columns encouraged Khrushchev to take the harder line

in his second cable. Lastly, demonstrations took place and received considerable coverage at the very peak of the ordeal.

Overall, then, the initial elite decisions took place under some public pressure for action—or at least an accounting. Yet, considerable insulation surrounded the agenda and blockade decisions; and thus the main course was set without much direct public input. Once the blockade was announced, however, a variety of views were published concerning the existing course of action, as well as alternative courses. These discussions may have set certain broad parameters around the final decision, although there is no direct evidence of such constraints. If there had been massive popular opposition to the "blockade until withdrawal" strategy, that might well have affected Kennedy's negotiating posture. But given considerable support, or at least a mixed or uncertain response, the elites would seem to have been relatively free to press their selected course of action. How far the public was willing to go, and how far the elites would have gone in the absence of popular support, was never actually put to a test.

It should also be remembered that even though the press clearly provided an effective forum for some remarkably open discussion and debate at a most crucial time, some of this could conceivably be laid to the fact that the Cuban Missile Crisis happened to occur at the height of a congressional campaign. Nonetheless, with elections for national government positions every two years, there is really very little time—save for the president's post-inaugural "honeymoon period"—that partisan mobilization is not taking place. Therefore, although there was somewhat more intensity than normal at this particular moment, it was still essentially politics as usual.

Lastly, there is the bureaucratic check mentioned by Sokolsky and evident in the battle between the administration and the Navy. Such a check provides an additional avenue for public input; although it is quite indirect, does not involve elected officials, and is limited by the bureaucrats' views of their own autonomy.

Conclusions

Does the mass media allow the public to apply informed constraint on presidential decisions during foreign policy crises? Evidence from the Cuban Missile Crisis would seem to indicate that the opinion forums were available and vigorously utilized. Yet, as the elites managed to withhold most important information until after major decisions had already been made, the role of the pundits and the public was reduced to advising based on speculation and judgment after the fact. Nonetheless, the public probably had about as much opportunity for input as is possible given what elites will almost inevitably see as a need for secrecy and latitude once such a crisis begins. However, there are steps that could be taken to enhance popular input in these circumstances if that is desired.

In particular, the media must continue its aggressive reporting, editorial debates, and timely polling in the midst of such events. But more important than that, they need to provide in-depth reporting of potentially dangerous problems prior to their reaching crisis proportions, and thus prior to more compelling arguments for secrecy. They clearly have a major educational responsibility beyond their reporting function.

In addition, they could do more pre-crisis contingency polling: "If this were to occur, what policy should the elites follow?"

Nevertheless, it is quite clear that despite all of this, a small group of political elites can launch the United States down the path of nuclear destruction simply by virtue of the authority it commands and the insulation that is presently inherent in crisis decision making. Therefore, some pre-conditions appear to be necessary if the president and his or her advisers are to be constrained.

To begin with, significant arms reductions seem absolutely essential. These would reduce the level of destructive power at the president's command, not only reducing the stakes but buying more time for open discussion.

Secondly,

> . . . given that the U.S. sees its military aggressions as defensive and Soviet's as offensive, and the Soviet Union sees its as defensive and the American's as offensive, something has to give. In my own view, both nations must keep their troops within their own boundaries or risk an escalation into a world war which will indeed be "the war that ended all wars."

That was the conclusion of one of the final lectures I prepared for delivery in the Soviet Union. Upon translation, I had it and all of my remaining lectures canceled. It was a message that at least some Soviet authorities obviously did not want presented. Unfortunately, it is a message that is probably not much more welcome by governmental authorities in the United States. Yet, if both sides were eventually to heed that warning, it might significantly reduce the need for foreign policy crises decision making in the first place.

Notes

1. Rosenau, James, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*, New York: Random House. 1961. Also see Gabriel Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy*, New York: Praeger, 1960.
2. Allison, Graham, *The Essence of Decision*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1971.
3. Abel, Elie, *The Missile Crisis*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966.
4. Kennedy, Robert, *Thirteen Days*, New York: Norton, 1969.