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How JFK Sacrificed Adlai Stevenson and the Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis

The standoff 60 years ago has newfound relevance as Russian President Vladimir Putin threatens to deploy nukes in Ukraine.

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John Kennedy Talking with Adlai Stevenson

Then-Sen. John F. Kennedy (left) met with then-Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson on the porch of Kennedy's house in 1960. Bettmann/Getty Images Archive

On Dec. 5, 1962, Adlai Stevenson, then-U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, received a [letter](#) from then-U.S. President John F. Kennedy about a story that was to circulate in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Titled "[In Time of Crisis](#)," the article was an insider account of how

Kennedy and his top aides had managed to peacefully resolve the most dangerous international conflict the world had ever faced—the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The piece depicted Kennedy as a courageous and decisive leader who “never lost his nerve.” By contrast, Stevenson was cast as a Chamberlain-esque appeaser. “Adlai wanted a Munich,” the article quoted one official as saying. The writers, Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, were both Kennedy confidants. They accused Stevenson of being the only presidential advisor who dissented from the consensus among Kennedy aides and “wanted to trade U.S. bases for Cuban bases.” As the article noted derisively, “there seems to be no doubt that he preferred political negotiation to the alternative of military action.”

The story was, to use a currently popular phrase, “fake news”—a mythical account of how the resolution of the missile crisis was achieved, albeit one that served the political purposes of Kennedy and his White House. It helped conceal what, at the time, was the politically inconvenient truth of the missile crisis saga: To avoid nuclear war, Kennedy had secretly adopted Stevenson’s sage advice to pull U.S. nuclear missiles from Turkey in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. Not only did “In Time of Crisis” unfairly malign Stevenson, whose persistent arguments to prioritize negotiation over the use of force made a major contribution to saving the world, but far worse, the misrepresentations set the stage for a generation of U.S. foreign-policy making based on inaccurate lessons from the missile crisis, arguably contributing to a reliance on force and war over the use of dialogue and negotiation.

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Kennedy—who, according to later accounts of the episode, had conferred with the reporters as they wrote their story—stopped short of an apology in [his letter](#) to Stevenson. “This is just a note to tell you again how deeply I regret the unfortunate fuss which has arisen over the statements contained in the *Saturday Evening Post*,” he wrote. “I know you share my confidence that this furor will pass as have all the others.”

The furor did eventually pass, but the Cuban missile crisis has remained a touchstone of American foreign policy for decades. Indeed, 60 years later, as fears escalate that Russian President Vladimir Putin will deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, it feels more relevant than ever. “For the first time since the Cuban missile crisis, we have a direct threat to the use of nuclear weapons if, in fact, things continue down the path they’d been going,” U.S. President [Joe Biden](#) warned this month, suggesting that the international community once again faces “the prospect of Armageddon.” As another “time of crisis” descends on the world, it would seem prudent to revisit the story of how and why Kennedy sacrificed both Stevenson and the truth about the resolution of the missile crisis and what lessons that history really holds. [Documents and transcripts](#) now accessible to the world from government archives allow us to tell the story more fully and accurately than ever before.



Adlai Stevenson, US Ambassador to the United Nations, makes a point of order at the start of the United Nations Security Council session concerning Cuba.

Stevenson makes a point of order at the start of a United Nations Security Council session concerning Cuba. The United States had urged the council to approve a resolution calling for the dismantling and withdrawal of Soviet-supplied missile bases from Cuba under the supervision of the international body. Bettmann/Getty Images Archive

Stevenson's Role

From the outset of the crisis, on Oct. 16, 1962, Stevenson established himself as the president's most consequential, if unacknowledged and unappreciated, advisor. The CIA briefed Kennedy for the first time that morning on the presence of the missiles in Cuba. Stevenson already had a meeting scheduled with him in the early afternoon. Fresh from his first crisis management meeting with the National Security Council's Executive Committee—a team of wise men picked by the president to be his special advisors on the missile crisis—Kennedy had a one-on-one meeting with Stevenson in the White House family quarters.

The initial consensus of the "ExComm" advisors was to launch airstrikes to destroy the missile sites—a position the president strongly supported on that first day of crisis deliberations. "We're going to take out those missiles," Kennedy told the ExComm, in

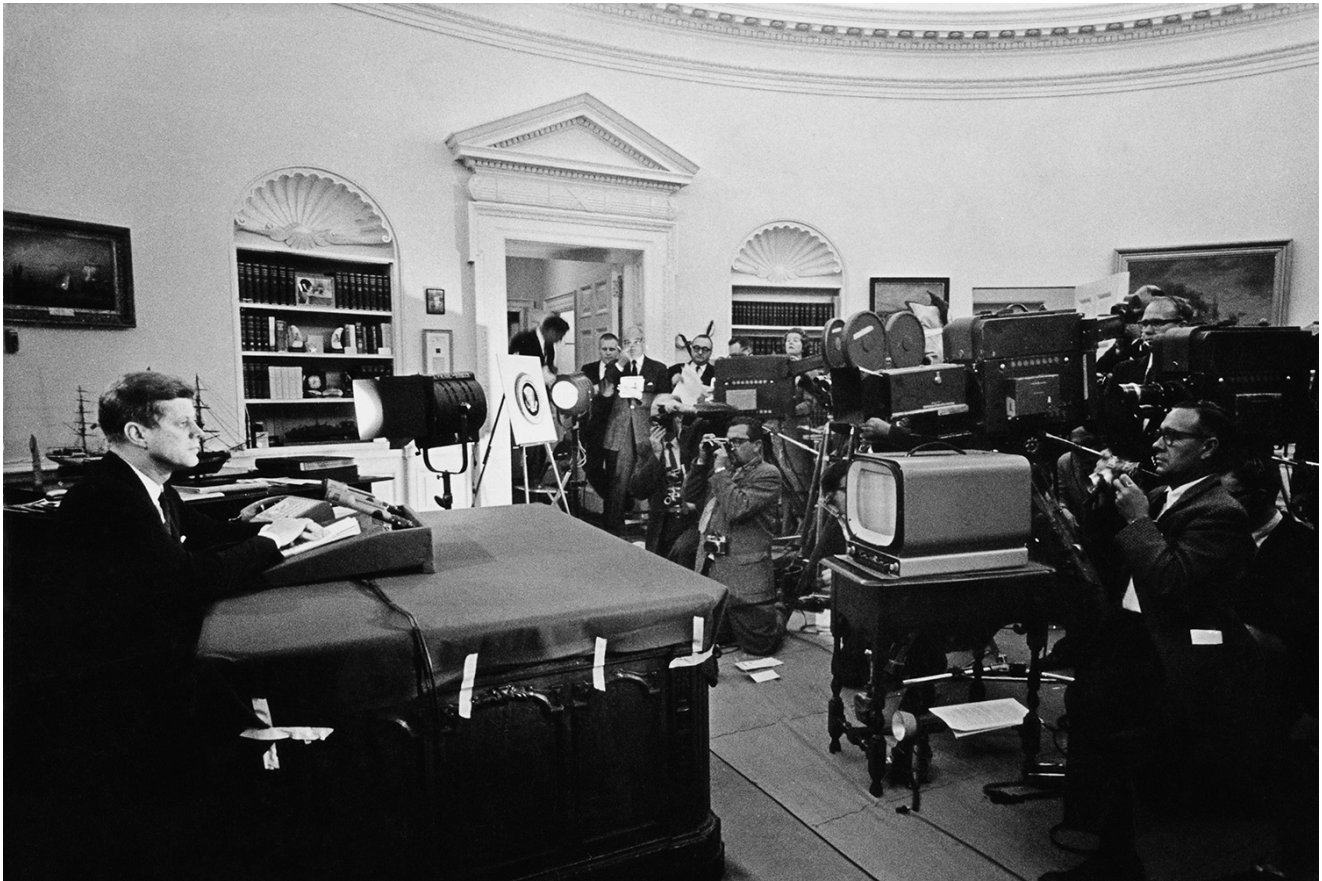
remarks captured by a taping system the president had secretly installed in White House meeting rooms only a few months earlier. “So it seems to me that we don’t have to wait very long. We ought to be making *those* preparations.”

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Meeting alone with Stevenson, Kennedy shared that position. “I suppose the alternatives are to go in by air and wipe them out or to take other steps to render the weapons inoperable,” the president told his U.N. ambassador. But Stevenson immediately advised Kennedy to consider diplomatic alternatives instead. “Let’s not go into an airstrike until we have explored the possibilities of a peaceful solution,” he replied. Before preemptively resorting to the high-risk option of military force, Stevenson argued, Kennedy should open back-channel communications with then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and then-Cuban leader Fidel Castro, consult with European allies who might view the situation differently, and create conditions for a negotiated settlement. “To start or risk starting a nuclear war is bound to be divisive at best, and the judgments of history rarely coincide with the tempers of the moment,” Stevenson gently warned Kennedy in a private, “eyes-only” memorandum delivered the next morning.

Stevenson’s secret memo provided a set of concerns and recommendations to manage the crisis in a sane and sensible way. First and foremost, he pressed the president to consider trading U.S. missile sites in Europe for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles in Cuba. “I confess I have many misgivings about the proposed course of action” to strike the missile sites, he wrote. “So I will only repeat that it should be clear as a pikestaff that the U.S. was, is and will be ready to negotiate the elimination of bases and anything else.” He boldly admonished the president to make that case to ExComm. Considering “such incalculable consequences” of an attack on Cuba, he emphasized, “I feel you should have made it clear that the existence of nuclear missile bases anywhere is negotiable before we start anything.” Stevenson reiterated his advice to open back-channel communications with both Khrushchev and Castro and suggested that when Kennedy was ready to go public, “it would be a mistake at this time to disclose that an attack was imminent.”

“Blackmail and intimidation never,” Stevenson signed off his private letter, referring to Khrushchev’s tactics; for the United States, “negotiation and sanity always.”



President John F. Kennedy, announces on television the strategic blockade of Cuba
Kennedy, announces on television the strategic blockade of Cuba, and he warns the Soviet Union of
missile sanctions on Oct. 22, 1962. Keystone/Getty Images

The Missile Trade

As the late nuclear war historian Martin J. Sherwin wrote in his comprehensive book, *Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette From Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis*, which was published in 2020: “Adlai’s strong and early advocacy of ‘[exploring] the possibilities of a peaceful solution’ provided Kennedy with a blueprint to do exactly that.”

Indeed, over the next 10 days, Kennedy followed nearly every one of Stevenson’s initial recommendations. Instead of an immediate airstrike, which was still supported by a number of hawks on ExComm, by Oct. 20, Kennedy had decided on an interim action promoted by then-U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, with strong endorsement from Stevenson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Undersecretary of State George Ball, and others—a naval quarantine of the island to buy time for negotiations to press Khrushchev to reconsider the folly of installing missiles in Cuba.

That same day, in an effort to convince the president to include “a political program” in his public response to the presence of the missiles, Stevenson presented a comprehensive negotiating plan to ExComm—which provided the fodder for the later political attack against him in the *Saturday Evening Post* article. His plan called for negotiating the “neutralization

and demilitarization” of Cuba, stationing United Nations peacekeeping and observer forces on the island and holding a summit between Kennedy and Khrushchev to address nuclear weapons. The plan included “an offer to exchange Guantánamo for removal of Soviet installations in Cuba” as “a gesture showing our wisdom and good faith” as well as holding out the option of later negotiations on U.S. missiles in Turkey and Italy. “Inclusion of a political program in the initial speech will drive home the essential point: that the United States wants a political settlement, not an escalated military involvement,” Stevenson argued in a memorandum. Kennedy discounted the broad proposal, though he held out the prospect of further discussion on a missile trade.

In Kennedy’s dramatic televised speech on Oct. 22, announcing the discovery of the missiles and the imposition of the quarantine, he warned of, but did not commit to, the military option: “We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth,” he said. “But neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced.” In addition to communicating directly with Khrushchev through a series of diplomatic letters, the White House opened several back channels to the Soviet leader, including using the president’s close friend, Charles Bartlett (who would go on to co-author the *Saturday Evening Post* article), to carry a message to a Soviet intelligence representative in Washington. And on Oct. 26, Kennedy authorized a secret communication to Castro, using the government of Brazil as an intermediary to transmit the message.

At the height of the crisis, Khrushchev put the missile swap on ExComm’s agenda with a message broadcast on Radio Moscow at 9 a.m. EST on Oct. 27. It stated that the Soviet Union would withdraw the missiles from Cuba if “the United States, for its part ... will remove its analogous means from Turkey.” Only the night before, the White House had received a private letter from the Soviet leader indicating that he would withdraw the missiles if Kennedy would publicly guarantee that the United States would never invade Cuba. Now, the Soviet leader was raising his demands.

Many of Kennedy’s top aides opposed the missile trade, arguing that abandoning a NATO ally in the midst of a crisis would be a mortal blow to the NATO alliance. But the White House taping system captured the president thinking ahead about how “good” this proposition would look after a war between the superpowers had broken out.

“I am just thinking about what we’re going to have to do in a day or so, which is 500 sorties ... and possibly an invasion all because we wouldn’t take missiles out of Turkey,” he said. “We all know how quickly everyone’s courage goes when the blood starts to flow, and that’s what is going to happen to NATO. When [the Soviets] start these things and they grab Berlin, everybody’s going to say, ‘Well [the Turkey trade] was a pretty good proposition.’ ... That’s the difficulty. Today it sounds great to reject it, but it is not going to after we do something.”

Unbeknown to most of his top aides, including Stevenson, Kennedy quietly determined that the missile swap, if conducted in secret, was a relatively cheap price to pay for avoiding nuclear Armageddon. On the evening of Oct. 27—known as “Black Saturday” because of the shoot down of a U-2 spy plane over Cuba by a Soviet anti-aircraft battery and a confrontation on the high seas between U.S. naval ships and a Soviet Foxtrot submarine equipped with nuclear-tipped torpedoes—Kennedy dispatched his brother, Robert Kennedy, to propose a secret agreement with Anatoly Dobrynin, then-Soviet ambassador to the United States. Robert Kennedy promised him that, within a few months, the United States would begin to dismantle its Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Because of NATO obligations, however, the Kennedy administration would never publicly acknowledge this quid pro quo.

Khrushchev, who was searching for a way out of the crisis as much as the U.S. president was, responded quickly. On the morning of Oct. 28, as Kennedy was dressing to go to Sunday mass, Radio Moscow broadcast a new message from the Soviet leader: “The Soviet government,” it said, “has issued a new order on the dismantling of the weapons which you describe as ‘offensive’ and their crating and return to the Soviet Union.” Kennedy then released a statement hailing Khrushchev’s decision as “an important contribution to peace.” The existential threat of a nuclear conflagration passed. The world breathed a collective sigh of relief.



U.S. United Nations ambassador Adlai Stevenson (right) and Soviet ambassador Valerian Zorin (left) look at display of aerial photos showing Soviet missile bases in Cuba at a Security Council meeting.

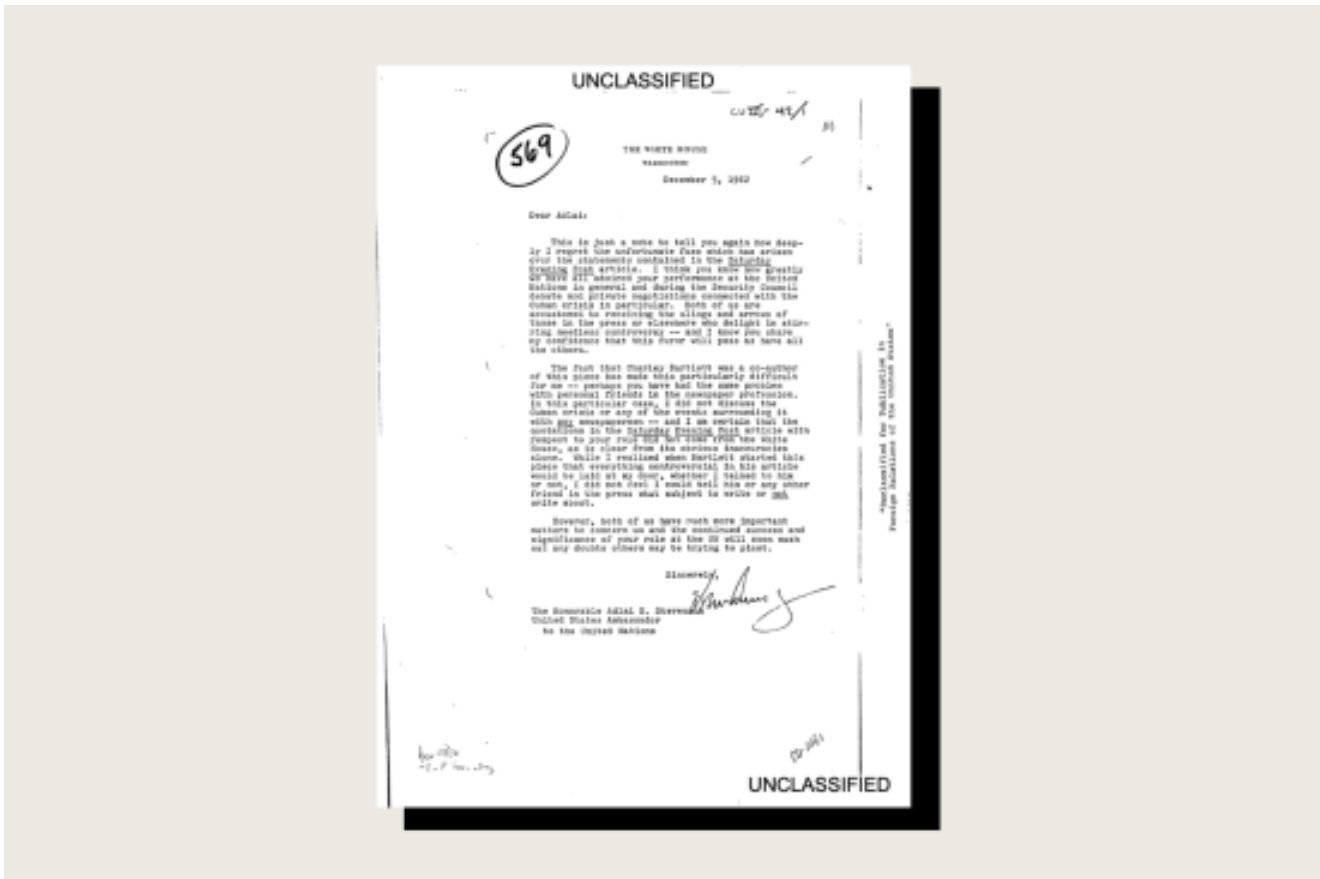
Stevenson (right) and Valerian Zorin (left), then-Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, look at a display of aerial photos showing Soviet missile bases in Cuba at a U.N. Security Council meeting. Bettmann/Getty Images Archive

Obfuscating the Lessons of History

Diplomacy, negotiations, and compromise resolved the Cuban missile crisis. But that fact became the biggest secret of this near-catastrophic episode. To guard that secret, the White House spun the narrative that the Soviets had retreated in the face of the Kennedy administration's steely resolve. The opening line in the *Saturday Evening Post* story, attributed to Rusk—"We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked"—immediately became the iconic summary of how the crisis concluded. As missile crisis historian Sheldon Stern observed, the article "squared perfectly with the emerging administration cover story that the president had rejected a Cuba-Turkey missile trade and had forced the Soviets to back down." By casting aspersions on Stevenson for advancing sensible ideas—ideas that Kennedy secretly implemented—the White House further distanced itself from the reality of how nuclear war was avoided and the crisis ended.

In the days following the publication of the *Saturday Evening Post* story, the press pushed rumors that Kennedy was about to dismiss Stevenson—even as he was in the middle of negotiating a U.N.-sanctioned accord to formally conclude the missile crisis. "I have been to the U.N. for lunch, and it has been shattering," Stevenson told Ball at the U.S. State Department. "I had no idea the effect [the article] had. ... It did incalculable damage."

Declassified White House and State Department documents reveal that both Ball and Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger Jr. pressed the president to defend his U.N. ambassador. Schlesinger went directly to the Oval Office, advising the president that the "Alsop-Bartlett story on Stevenson seems to be wrong in almost every particular" and recommending language for a variety of denials the White House could issue to label the story "false and malicious." When then-White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger failed to knock down the story at a press conference the next day, Schlesinger sent an even stronger memo to Kennedy arguing that the president himself should issue a denial of the accusations against Stevenson and allow Schlesinger to engage in "counter-leakage" by sharing portions of Stevenson's own secret memoranda during the crisis with the *New York Times*.



Kennedy letter to Stevenson in Dec. 1962.

Kennedy's letter to Stevenson, written in December 1962, is pictured. Read the [full letter](#).

Instead, Kennedy decided to draft a letter of support to Stevenson and task Schlesinger to leak it to the press. The president wrote that he had “not talked to any newspapermen” about the missile crisis. Since Bartlett was known to be a very close friend, “I realized that ... everything that was controversial in his article would be laid at my door, whether I talked to him or not,” Kennedy advised Stevenson. But “I did not feel I could tell him or any other friend in the press what subject to write or not write about.”

In truth, the president had talked to Bartlett specifically about the passages in the article relating to Stevenson and knew what the article would say about him. In an [oral history](#) on file at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Bartlett described how he showed Kennedy that section of the article in advance of publication, giving him the opportunity to confirm or deny. “And he sort of had that wary look, you know, but he said, ‘Did you hear about that?’ I said, ‘Yes, we got it.’ He said, ‘Are you going to put it in the article?’ I said, ‘Yes.’” Asked point-blank by the interviewer if Kennedy “ever took you aside and said, ‘Look, you got this wrong or that wrong,’” Bartlett replied: “No, I think his feeling was that the article was accurate. I think he would have stood behind every aspect of the article.” Bartlett’s co-author, Alsop, would later write in his memoirs that Kennedy had actually edited drafts of the article, removing a paragraph favorable to Stevenson and leaving the Munich reference in place.

A full generation of scholars, analysts, foreign-policy makers, and even presidents learned the wrong lessons from the most significant superpower conflict in modern history.

In the wake of the article, Kennedy held a press conference on Dec. 12 and was peppered with questions about Stevenson and the positions he took during the crisis deliberations. The president refused to “describe, verify, or in any way discuss positions” taken by his advisors. “I think this matter should be left to historians,” Kennedy said.

It took historians some 27 years to fully uncover the record of the missile swap. At a Moscow conference on the missile crisis in 1989 attended by former Soviet and Kennedy administration officials, Dobrynin shared for the first time the cable he had sent to Moscow reporting on his just-concluded Oct. 27, 1962, meeting with Robert Kennedy. On Turkey, “President Kennedy is ready to come to agree on that question with N.S. Khrushchev,” the cable quoted Robert as saying. “I think that in order to withdraw these bases from Turkey, R. Kennedy said, ‘we need 4-5 months.’ However, the president can’t say anything public in this regard about Turkey, R. Kennedy said again. R. Kennedy then warned that his comments about Turkey are extremely confidential; besides him and his brother, only 2-3 people know about it in Washington.”

Theodore Sorensen, who acted as the postmortem editor on Robert Kennedy’s widely acclaimed memoir, *Thirteen Days*, after he was assassinated in 1968, also attended the conference. “I have a confession to make to my colleagues on the American side as well as to others who are present,” he announced. “I was the editor of Robert Kennedy’s book. It was, in fact, a diary of those 13 days. And his diary was very explicit that [Turkey] was part of the deal; but at that time, it was still a secret even on the American side. ... So I took it upon myself to edit that out of his diaries.”

In those interim years, the fictional story of how the missile crisis was resolved became foreign-policy folklore. None of the early memoirs by top Kennedy aides, such as Schlesinger and Sorensen, contained the real history. These incomplete accounts became the basis of the foreign-policy models and paradigms in political scientist Graham Allison’s highly influential book, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. A full generation of scholars, analysts, foreign-policy makers, and even presidents learned the wrong lessons from the most significant superpower conflict in modern history.

Sixty years later, however, the Biden administration at least has a more complete record of history to draw on as U.S. policymakers and the world confront another time of crisis in the nuclear age. How applicable the lessons of the missile crisis will prove to be in preventing an escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war remains unknown. But the mantra of reason that Stevenson shared with Kennedy in October 1962 seems more relevant than ever: “Blackmail and intimidation never, negotiation and sanity always.”

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