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# Kennedy's Crisis: How John F. Kennedy Used History to Prevent Armageddon

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**Kennedy's Crisis:**

**How John F. Kennedy Used History to Prevent Armageddon**

**Jordan L. Cerbone**

**Senior Honors Thesis: History Major**

**Fall 2016**

**Kennedy's Crisis: How John F. Kennedy Used History to Prevent Armageddon**

The year was 1962. The month was October. United States President John F. Kennedy prepared to address his country; the citizens of the United States, Russia and the rest of the world listened intently to his words, for the challenge he now faced affected everyone everywhere. Kennedy would have the task of navigating humanity away from the most ominous moment in the history of mankind, the Cuban Missile Crisis.

What might have culminated in a nuclear war with the Soviet Union instead resulted in a peaceful agreement between the leaders of both countries to remove key nuclear weapons. John F. Kennedy's role in resolving this crisis was outstanding. Pressured by his advisors to engage the Soviet Union in conflict due to their placement of missiles on the island of Cuba, Kennedy nonetheless doggedly sought, and found, a diplomatic solution to the threat. This thesis will examine how the youngest elected president in our country's history had the perception to understand what could result from an uncompromising and forceful response to its most powerful adversary. Kennedy had a profound sense of both political history and international relations; he was also famously interested in decisions made by previous negotiators. The answer to Kennedy's unique level of gumption and discretion may lie in his past; the role of his father during his youth, certain authors and politicians whom he admired, as well as his own experience in the U.S. Navy as a relatively young man. This nurturing created a man who could rise to the challenge of guiding stubborn nations away from destroying one another.

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The crisis at hand was as suspenseful as the resolution was spectacular, beginning when the island of Cuba was drawn into the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1959, the guerilla leader Fidel Castro ousted military dictator Fulgencio Batista. Sheldon M. Stern reports that despite Batista's "close ties" to businesses and mafia enterprises in the United States, his rival Castro was initially hailed as "a heroic figure [by] many Americans," and elicited cheers in New York City when news came of his victory.<sup>1</sup> However, once Castro consolidated power, he ruled Cuba as a dictator for many decades. It was Castro's ascension to power in Cuba that brought into motion the chain of events leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The United States and the Soviet Union had been fighting the Cold War for over a decade, vying for control of countries in Europe and Asia in the aftermath of World War II. When Castro assumed power, however, it became apparent during the United States presidential elections that our country, which allowed Castro to establish power, could no longer tolerate his continued rule.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, outgoing President Dwight D. Eisenhower severed ties with Cuba, while Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev embraced a potential ally in the Caribbean and sought to establish a diplomatic relationship with his country.<sup>3</sup>

Incoming President John F. Kennedy inherited from the Eisenhower administration a proposal which would later result in the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. The plan called for a brigade of 1,500 Cuban exiles to launch a guerilla assault against Castro's government by

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<sup>1</sup>Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>2</sup>Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1966), 11.

<sup>3</sup>Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 15.

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invading the Cuban Bay of Pigs with secret training and support from U.S. forces.<sup>4</sup> The operation was a “disastrous” failure: all of the trained guerillas were captured or killed, and Kennedy’s “image as a knowing, sure-footed young leader” was affected early in his presidency.<sup>5</sup> Castro responded to this attack by establishing even closer ties to Russia, instructing his band to play the worldwide communist anthem during a visit from a Russian diplomat and announcing publicly that he adhered to the Communist ideology.<sup>6</sup> Khrushchev, in two letters to Kennedy, declared that Russia would defend Cuba from all future invasions but promised not to place missiles on the island.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, this assurance would not be sufficient, for Khrushchev did not intend to keep his promise.

On Tuesday, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1962, at 11:50a.m., Kennedy’s advisors in the CIA brought to his attention a series of “secret” missile sites on Cuba, bearing weapons shipped from the Soviet Union, which were in early stages of assembly.<sup>8</sup> Although Kennedy was enraged, he maintained a calm demeanor as the photo interpreter, Arthur Lundahl, explained that the missiles were medium-range ballistic weapons that, if launched, could destroy Washington, D.C. in thirteen minutes. However, the deadly warheads (tips of the nuclear weapons) were not visible in the photographs, indicating that the missiles would not be immediately ready to fire.<sup>9</sup> As the Russians were not yet aware that Kennedy had

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<sup>4</sup>Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 15-16.

<sup>5</sup>Victor Lasky, *J.F.K. The Man & The Myth: A Critical Portrait* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 2.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 149.

<sup>7</sup>Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1966), 15-16, 46.

<sup>8</sup>Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 3.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-5.

been made aware of their scheme, there was still time for the president to determine his next move.

Thus began the most dangerous fortnight in nuclear history. The Cuban Missile Crisis reached its peak with Fidel Castro “urging [Russia] to use nuclear weapons against their common enemy,” the United States, and “ended with the Kennedy brothers secretly offering to give up U.S. missiles in Turkey in exchange for a Soviet climb-down in Cuba,” according to Michael Dobbs.<sup>10</sup> Stern praises Kennedy’s “cautious and thoughtful leadership” as well as his understanding that “history is not a game. There is no script.”<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, President Kennedy tactfully used his gifts of both foresight and insight to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis by striking a deal with the Nikita Khrushchev in which Kennedy agreed to remove ineffective but threatening Jupiter missiles from Turkey, in exchange for Soviet removal of the missiles from Cuba and Khrushchev’s agreement to keep this bargain secret.<sup>12</sup>

President Kennedy’s resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis was a rare moment in which a leader was able to make the right decisions under pressure and eliminate the threat without resorting to a nuclear war. Had Kennedy responded differently, the result might have been disastrous for the entire world. He had “been set back at the Bay of Pigs. In 1962, he could not be set back or it could mean war.”<sup>13</sup> Still, he was able to provide a

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<sup>10</sup>Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>11</sup>Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 5, 9.

<sup>12</sup>Charles Kenney, *John F. Kennedy: The Presidential Portfolio* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 184-186.

<sup>13</sup>John F. Kennedy: *Years of Lightning Day of Drums*, 1966.

firm response to the Soviet Union, protect his country, appear as a strong and able leader, and end the Cuban Missile Crisis peacefully. His brilliance in handling this most dangerous task was occasioned by his ability to think independently, understand the risks from all sides and assert his final decision over the hawkish members of his cabinet.

First, John F. Kennedy's father, Joseph Kennedy, Sr. influenced the future president during his formative years, and his relationship with his son would contribute substantially to the latter's decisions in the face of stress and confrontation. Kennedy himself downplayed the role of his father in his development as a person; the public perception "that Jack was the creature of a strong-willed, multi-millionaire father" would never do, and thus "he was forever denying his father was an influence."<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding these considerations, Joe Kennedy's importance in his son's life was as crucial as any of the other figures John F. Kennedy admired. He not only oversaw and encouraged the development of his son's personality but also his political ambition. In 1957, Joe said of the future president, then a Senator, "I got Jack into politics...I was the one [who] told him...it was his responsibility to run for Congress. He didn't want to. He felt he didn't have the ability and he still feels that way. But I told him he had to."<sup>15</sup> It was this mindset that Kennedy, Sr. encouraged in John, one which caused him to exhibit determination for his whole life.

Joe Kennedy was a controversial figure who famously cared little for military service.

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<sup>14</sup> Lasky, *J.F.K. The Man & The Myth*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Dallek best surmises Joe Kennedy's views in that field: "The idea of sacrificing his life or that of any of his generation seemed [to Joe] absurd. He was too cynical about human nature and Europe's traditional strife to believe that anything particularly good came out of the fighting."<sup>16</sup> While many of his old Harvard classmates willingly enlisted during World War I, Joe Kennedy "saw nothing to be gained personally or nationally by enlisting," describing the war as "a senseless slaughter that would ruin victor and vanquished alike."<sup>17</sup> Although John F. Kennedy did not share his father's negative view of war in general, he nevertheless opposed senseless war that ruined both the victors and the losers, as reflected by his decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In fact, when the Crisis ended, Kennedy was known to advise his cabinet against "premature jubilation" and "gloating."<sup>18</sup> Joe's belief that war was a detriment to both the winner and the loser was reciprocated by his son in the belief that the prevention of war could be viewed as a victory for both parties.

For Joe Kennedy, family was "the only happiness that lasts." In the early stages of World War II, Joe Kennedy, serving as an ambassador to Britain, "was reviled in England for his defeatism and regarded as a coward when, during Luftwaffe bombings in 1940, he left London to spend his nights at a country estate."<sup>19</sup> While his son would find some fulfillment in military service as a young man, as president he would share his father's disinclination to sacrifice the lives of a generation of soldiers if it could be

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<sup>16</sup>Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy* (Boston, New York and London: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 21.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>18</sup>Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 207.

<sup>19</sup>Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), 172.



avoided through diplomacy. In accordance with his father's belief that war ruins both the winners and the losers, President Kennedy would later understand that the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis was a victory not only for his country but also the Soviets.

Alternatively, Joe Kennedy "was more often than not brilliantly insightful about domestic affairs, particularly the country's economic prospects."<sup>20</sup> His "misjudgment" of "external developments" resulted from his understanding of "world problems not on moral or political grounds but rather on how he felt they might inhibit his entrepreneurial ventures and, worse, cut short his life or, later, that of his sons."<sup>21</sup> To that extent, nothing was more important to Joe Kennedy than his own success and that of his sons.

This sense of ambition began when, in place of the military, he took a position at a bank and later at Bethlehem Steel's Fore River Company, a Massachusetts-based shipbuilding plant. This "assuaged his conscience about avoiding military serve," Dallek states, but "[more] important, the experience, business contacts and, most of all the chance to demonstrate his effectiveness in managing a multimillion-dollar enterprise were invaluable in opening the way to bigger opportunities."<sup>22</sup> Like President Kennedy, Joe Kennedy was known for being a hard worker with "inventiveness for efficiency and effectiveness" which "he brought to every task."<sup>23</sup> Additionally, John F. Kennedy's keen intellect and charismatic personality likely had its origins in Joe Kennedy. The father's business acumen led to an article published by the *New York Herald Tribune* describing

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<sup>20</sup>Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 21.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

Kennedy as, “The person who now monopolizes conversation in the studios and on locations [who] is not an actor, but one of the executives of this important new industry. His name is Joseph P. Kennedy.”<sup>24</sup> This personality would resurface years later when the entire world would know and love the charisma his son inherited.

Additionally, Joe Kennedy indirectly encouraged his children to think independently. John F. Kennedy’s famous propensity for making independent decisions and defending his viewpoints in the face of adversity no doubt originated in Joe Kennedy’s willingness to respect and engender independent ideas in his sons. Lasky relates an interview between Kennedy and Drew Pearson in which Pearson questioned whether Kennedy was influenced by his father’s political views. Kennedy replied, “‘Father wants me to be President all right...But as far as influencing me, I think my voting record in the Senate speaks for itself. He and I have disagreed on foreign policy and domestic issues for many years, but always very amicably.’”<sup>25</sup> On at least two other occasions, when questioned by Robert Hartmann and Henry Brandon respectively, Kennedy insisted that his father didn’t try to force Kennedy to conform to his opinion but rather to develop his own. Brandon asked the pointed question of whether seeing Kennedy become President was more important to his father than having his son agree with his ideas and views. “‘No,’” replied Kennedy, “‘[He] feels...that they should determine their own lives and make their own decisions. His responsibility is not to impose his political views on his children. It makes

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<sup>24</sup>David Nasaw, *The Patriarch: The Remarkable Life and Turbulent Times of Joseph P. Kennedy* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 128.

<sup>25</sup>Lasky, *J.F.K.: The Man and The Myth*, 223.

a much more successful and lasting relationship, I think, when a parent does not.”<sup>26</sup> His father thus gave Kennedy the gift of independent thinking in addition to ambition, both of which would serve him well during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

When encouraging John F. Kennedy to apply himself as his elder brother Joe did, his father would say, “I don’t want to give the impression that I’m a nagger, for goodness knows I think that is the worst thing any parent can be...I definitely know [that] you can go a long way. After all, I would be lacking even as a friend if I did not urge you to take advantage of the qualities you have...I am always urging you to do the best you can.”<sup>27</sup> Kennedy’s father’s influence on his son was thus to “get all you can out of what God has given you,” but did not extend to forcing his son to conform to his own beliefs.<sup>28</sup> He understood that the best way to help his son to succeed was to encourage him to succeed and let him develop his own viewpoint. As John F. Kennedy later said, “My father wanted me to see both sides of the street.”<sup>29</sup>

Joe Kennedy, Jr. himself, John F. Kennedy’s older brother, was crucial to President Kennedy’s political success and his reasoning during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Lasky writes that Joe, Jr. was “driving, domineering [and] hot-tempered” and “the pace set by Joe was too difficult for Jack to follow.”<sup>30</sup> Joe, Jr. was for many years the only Kennedy brother permitted to speak with his father at mealtimes; Joseph Kennedy, Sr. saw in his

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<sup>26</sup>Lasky, *J.F.K.: The Man & The Myth*, 223-224.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 67, 73.

eldest son future political success.<sup>31</sup> John F. Kennedy's relationship with his brother was a complex one. On one hand, Joe, Jr. inspired competition and a role model. The future president would describe his brother in writing, "I don't think I can ever remember seeing him sit back in a chair and relax...Even when still, there was always a sense of motion forcibly restrained...his intense enthusiasm for everything he did and his exceptional stamina."<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the future president would often strain himself by competing with his brother to impress his father and, as he grew older, "he wanted to break away from the shadow of his brother" against whom, in the words of his dean at Harvard University, "Jack was bound to play second fiddle."<sup>33</sup> Kennedy admired his brother's boundless energy and ability to apply himself, which he sought to emulate. Since this proved difficult, Kennedy learned from an early age to struggle and use his abilities to the utmost.

Joe Kennedy, Jr. provided John F. Kennedy with one of his deepest, most personal memories from World War II, which eventually served as a connection to the lost soldiers and sailors of war and strengthened Kennedy's resolve to avoid needless tragedy. By August of 1944, Joe, Jr. had served enough time in the armed forces to return home but instead "volunteered for a mission so dangerous that some members of his ground crew pleaded with him not to go," according to Ted Kennedy.<sup>34</sup> Joe, Jr. and an assistant were to pilot an "experimental drone" deployed to bomb Germany. Once the drone was steered on its proper course, they were to eject themselves over the English Channel and

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<sup>31</sup>Lasky, *J.F.K.: The Man & The Myth*, 67.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 71-73.

<sup>34</sup>Ted Kennedy, *True Compass: A Memoir* (New York and Boston, Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2009), 85.

allow it to destroy its target. Due to a possible technical error, the drone exploded before Joe, Jr. and his copilots were due to eject themselves.<sup>35</sup>

Upon hearing the news of his brother's death, John F. Kennedy suggested that his family go sailing, which "steered" his family "from nearly unendurable grief across the healing waters on the long, hard course toward renewal and hope."<sup>36</sup> Three weeks later, Kennedy's sister Kathleen's husband of four months, Billy Cavendish, would be shot in Belgium.<sup>37</sup> Although Joe, Jr. would be posthumously awarded the Navy Cross by the United States Navy, neither Joe Kennedy, Sr. nor John F. Kennedy would forget that his brother's life was lost due to war. As president, John F. Kennedy understood that young men like his brother and brother-in-law would die and that even a glorious death would not return them to their families.

John F. Kennedy's position as the son of one of the richest and most ambitious men in America granted him a sense of independence that at first proved difficult for him to apply. Although it would later prove useful to the President, John F. Kennedy, the student, found himself on occasion to be at odds with his environment. As a student, he refused to be subjected to "sharply delineated bounds" and "rebelled against school...authority."<sup>38</sup> As a youth, his precocity caused displeasure among his superiors. In 1935, he graduated from Choate sixty-fourth of one hundred twelve students, never wanted to attend Harvard University and his rise to the presidency was so unanticipated

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<sup>35</sup>Ted Kennedy, *True Compass*, 86.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>38</sup> Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 37-38.

by his former classmates that in 1961 they posted a sign at his former dorm room titled, “Be Kind to Your Roommate,” while the dorm’s head described Kennedy as “‘reasonably inconspicuous.’”<sup>39</sup> He matured “slowly” and his famous sense of drive and ambition “was then channeled into unrealized attempts at campus prominence,” such as a failed attempt for a seat on the Student Council.<sup>40</sup> During his freshman and sophomore years in college, John F. Kennedy “took the ‘gentleman’s C’ in most subjects, and a C average was just enough to keep him out of trouble with the Dean’s office.”<sup>41</sup> During these years, “he...refused to fit in,” and was regarded as a bright young man who seemed unable to properly apply himself.<sup>42</sup> He was thus regarded as immature and misguided. As the son of a rich and powerful man, the stigma of being over-privileged as well caused him to venture from his father’s shadow. Ultimately, however, Kennedy’s competitive and ambitious spirit would allow him to harness his independent nature and drive to become one of the most respected presidents in our country’s history.

More importantly, as the son of an ambassador, John F. Kennedy had opportunities to witness the diplomacy and negotiations that were involved with foreign policy. On one hand, Kennedy opposed appeasement because it was clear that Adolf Hitler was reaping an advantage from Neville Chamberlain’s government. One of Kennedy’s idols was Sir Winston Churchill, who inspired his nation to unite against the Nazi threat. Kennedy admired Churchill for being a decisive but intelligent leader, whose speeches contained “powerful oratory that would later inspire the nation in the darkest hours of the war”

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<sup>39</sup>Lasky, *J.F.K. The Man & The Myth*, 72, 73.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>42</sup>Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 38.

which “left an indelible impression on [Kennedy].”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, his ambassador father gave him opportunities to practice “hands-on diplomacy” as a young man.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Kennedy gained “a developing impulse to question prevailing wisdom,” and in October of 1939 he published a column denouncing what he saw as a hasty willingness to engage in war with Germany on the part of the Allies, opting instead for “a quick, negotiated end to the fighting through the good offices of President Roosevelt.”<sup>45</sup> While shunning appeasement or inaction, Kennedy believed that leaders should have a pragmatic approach to warfare and try to exhaust other options, such as the diplomacy of President Roosevelt, before they deemed war inevitable. It was at this early age that he came to the conclusion that presidents had an “obligation” to utilize every possible strategy to negotiate peace before turning to war. This notion would follow him for the rest of his short but successful life, and one day he would take his own advice in lieu of other people’s, thereby bringing a “quick, negotiated end” to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Nevertheless, Kennedy never advocated for caving in to the demands of enemy nations, nor did he believe leaders should lose track of the seriousness of any given confrontation. He had a keen interest in foreign policy as a young man; his senior thesis at Harvard University, entitled “Why England Slept,” criticized the appeasement of Adolf Hitler and the failure of the British to respond firmly to the dictator’s demands. Kennedy wrote, “What does this mean for our future? The outcome of the present war [World War II] will throw more light on the subject but what can be learned from a study of the events

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<sup>43</sup>Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 58.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 59-60.

preceding it?”<sup>46</sup> Additionally, he saw the importance of not “patting [oneself] on the back for past performance,” noting “that the preparation for modern warfare is totally different from that of previous wars.”<sup>47</sup> In reviewing history, Kennedy came to the understanding that action should be taken in the event of any threat. Unlike the appeasers during the 1930s, Kennedy promised that “if Cuba should possess a capacity to carry out offensive actions against the United States...the United States would act.”<sup>48</sup> With characteristic tact, he added, “But the United States will not take any action that the situation does not require and will take whatever action the situation does require along the grounds which I indicated in my opening statement.”<sup>49</sup>

In 1957, several years before his presidential run, Kennedy would publish a collection of volumes, titled *Profiles in Courage*, in which he admired statesmen who, in his opinion, demonstrated great courage. They ranged from well-known John Quincy Adams to lesser-known Robert A. Taft. The overriding attributes of this collection of statesmen was their ability to make unpopular decisions which agreed with their own consciences. For Kennedy, “one’s need to maintain his own respect for himself was more important to him than his popularity with others...a reputation for integrity and courage was stronger than his desire to maintain his office.”<sup>50</sup> Kennedy’s idea of a successful and good leader

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<sup>46</sup>Papers of John F. Kennedy, Personal Papers, Manuscripts: “Appeasement at Munich.” Final thesis: Harvard copy, 145.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>48</sup>John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, “John F. Kennedy: ‘378 – The President’s News Conference,’ September 13, 1962,” in *The American Presidency Project*, University of California – Santa Barbara.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2006), 218.



was one who placed higher esteem on “his conscience, his personal standard of ethics, his integrity or morality [and] his faith that his course was the best one, and would ultimately be vindicated,” which needed to be stronger than “the pressures of public disapproval [and] his fear of public reprisal.”<sup>51</sup> Kennedy himself understood that as president, he would implement certain policies and make certain choices that would not be accepted by everyone. With his experiences in the Navy and his overall aptitude for foreign policy, President Kennedy felt that he was better qualified to determine the reaction to Soviet placement of missiles on Cuba. Although many members of his cabinet did not approve, he was able to courageously stand by his principles. Some of these principles Kennedy had concerning compromise can be traced to the figures he admired in *Profiles in Courage*. Daniel Webster, a famous Senator and Secretary of State, and Sam Houston, a politician from Texas, both spoke in favor of compromise during our country’s history.

Kennedy admired Daniel Webster for speaking in favor of the Compromise of 1850, which was opposed by pro-slavery Democrats in the South. Although he aspired to be President, Webster “preferred to risk his career and his reputation rather than risk the Union.”<sup>52</sup> He argued against secession of slave states and identified primarily as an American – rather than aligning himself with the popular interests of the North and South.<sup>53</sup> Kennedy especially respected Webster for his willingness to stand for his ideals, despite adversity. Kennedy wrote that Webster “neither could have intended his speech as an improvement of his political popularity nor permitted his ambitions to weaken his plea

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<sup>51</sup>John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, 218-219.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 66-67.

for the Union,” and concluded his assessment by asserting that, even at the point of death, Webster proclaimed his loyalty to his country and his indifference to the drop in his popularity, for his convictions were more important.<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, Kennedy admired the courage of Senator Sam Houston of Texas. He was a southern Democrat who nonetheless spoke in favor of the Compromise of 1850, which limited the power of the southern, slave-holding states, and spoke against leaving the Union. Like Webster, Houston claimed, “‘I know neither North nor South; I know only the Union.’”<sup>55</sup> He described his vote in favor of compromise, rather than serving the interests of a single faction in the United States, as “‘the most unpopular vote I ever gave [but] the wisest and most patriotic.’”<sup>56</sup> In addition to the courage of Webster and Houston, Kennedy admired their ability to favor compromise above popularity. In his introduction, Kennedy wrote, “We should not be too hasty in condemning all compromise as bad morals. For politics and legislation are not matters for inflexible principles or unattainable ideals.”<sup>57</sup> Kennedy believed that compromise provided a leader with “a sense of all things possible,” and served to check the interests of extremist factions and narrow-minded politics.<sup>58</sup> Compromise was underrated and at times tended to be the best possible course of action, though it was often scorned by the masses. As President, Kennedy would remain courageous and reach a compromise with the Soviets at the disapproval of some members of his cabinet. He sought to emulate the leaders he

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<sup>54</sup>John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, 74.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-5.

felt served the best, most patriotic interests of their country, even if they did not always receive praise from others.

As a diplomat's son, Kennedy learned to favor negotiation, but his characteristic opposition to engaging in a full-scale war with the Soviets during the Cuban Missile Crisis was the result of several negative experiences during his service in the United States Navy. Not only did he understand the consequences of failing to take action but also the consequences of an impulsive and hasty action. Stern writes of a Kennedy "cleverer and better informed than his generals and the hawks in his Cabinet and to have the nerve to face them down."<sup>59</sup> This "heroism...came out of Kennedy's personal past," manifesting in a "special contempt for the senior brass supposedly in control of the war."<sup>60</sup> Kennedy viewed these officers as responsible for the deaths of several of his close acquaintances and mistrusted their ability to remain contentious regarding their decisions because they did not understand from experience the suffering of junior soldiers, while Kennedy had a closer connection due to his junior rank in the Navy. For one, his elder brother Joe, an officer in the military who was killed in an accidental detonation of explosives, possibly due to a design defect that was not properly addressed by the Navy's board of review.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, John F. Kennedy's friend Andrew Kirksey, whom he poignantly called "the boy in my boat," was killed in the famous PT-109 boat commanded by Kennedy.<sup>62</sup> Kennedy had always looked at history to learn what

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<sup>59</sup>Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 24.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>61</sup>Edward J. Renehan, Jr., *The Kennedys at War: 1937-1945* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 303-304.

<sup>62</sup>Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 28.

could result from a poor decision but his personal history added reality to the consequences of inaction or misguided action. He was unwilling to give ground to Castro and Khrushchev but he knew his soldiers as people who depended on his leadership.

These experiences gave Kennedy a lifelong desire to avoid armed conflict if diplomacy could avert it, and strengthened his idealistic viewpoint that leaders are obligated to avoid such conflict if possible. In the decade before the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy watched the American and Russian stockpiling of nuclear weapons with unique apprehension. While he was “as passionately anti-communist as any of his advisors,” he recognized the dangers of any form of warfare, especially one which involved nuclear weapons.<sup>63</sup> Witnessing firsthand the horrors of war allowed Kennedy to understand the human cost of hawkish foreign policy. Although he was firm in his anti-communist ideals, he was equally firm in his resolve not to enter a potentially disastrous conflict if it could be avoided.

As President, he displayed the aforementioned ideals not only to his adversaries, but to his cabinet and military advisors as well. This was manifested in his distribution of an emerging bestseller among his assistants. In 1962, the same year as the Cuban Missile Crisis, a historian named Barbara Tuchman published a historical bestseller titled *The Guns of August*, which posited the view that “mistakes, misunderstandings, and miscommunications can unleash an unpredictable chain of events, causing governments

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<sup>63</sup>Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 28.

to go to war with little understanding of the consequences.”<sup>64</sup> In *The Guns of August*, the “unpredictable chain of events” led to World War I. Kennedy, seeing a parallel between the misunderstandings which Tuchman claimed were responsible for World War I and the potential for misunderstandings to lead to World War III, was piqued by the book. He was reportedly “so impressed” with it that he “often quoted from it, and insisted his aides [and military officers] read it,” then had the Secretary of the Army distribute it to “every U.S. military base in the world.”<sup>65</sup>

One passage that struck John F. Kennedy involved two German soldiers asking themselves why World War I started and why their lives were to be put at risk on account of political disagreements at the international level; they were unable to find an answer to this question.<sup>66</sup> As a soldier, Kennedy likely pondered this question while on his PT-109 patrol boat, or whilst reading *They Were Expendable*. Tuchman’s book perhaps reminded Kennedy of these days as a young officer pondering the inevitability of World War II, which resulted in the deaths of his brother and friends and his own narrow escape. The importance of *The Guns of August* with regard to Kennedy’s decisions is difficult to determine, as it was published just before the Cuban Missile Crisis and would certainly have attracted the President’s attention. However, it seems safe to assume that Kennedy’s past sense of history did not conflict with the views presented in the book. In any case, he found the book useful and brought the Cuban Missile Crisis to an end partly through seeking to avoid the “miscommunications” condemned by Tuchman.

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<sup>64</sup>Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 226.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 226.

<sup>66</sup>Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 505.

William White's fictional but realistic bestseller *They Were Expendable* had arguably the greatest impact on Kennedy as a young serviceman. In the Navy, his motto onboard PT-109 was, "They Were Expendable."<sup>67</sup> No other author captivated the position of low-ranking personnel who struggle to serve their country, while coming to grips with their wartime sufferings. Written in 1942, *They Were Expendable* is told from the perspective of a patrol boat crew who suffer the misfortune of being "expendable." That is to say, their lives perceived as of little worth by senior soldiers and politicians who have little, if any, frontline experience and whose agendas do not illuminate to them the reality of war.

*They Were Expendable* introduces the concept of expendability with an analogy from one of the young naval officers. He calls to the author's mind a sergeant machine-gunner who is ordered to hold a position indefinitely. In such a situation, the serviceman claims, "You know you're expendable. In a war, anything can be expendable...usually men. They are expending you and the machine gun to get time. They don't expect to see either one again."<sup>68</sup> In the military, a few moments or "a precious quarter of an hour" are worth the life of a man.<sup>69</sup> As in *The Guns of August*, the soldiers are left to ponder the greater context of their misfortune. They find themselves questioning why they were sent to fight in the first place and why they don't receive adequate supplies and aid. In the words of the officer, "Because we little guys [expendables] never get to see the broad picture of the war, [we] never find out the reasons back of the moves or failures to move. We only see

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<sup>67</sup><http://erwin.bernhardt.net.nz/oceania/solomonsww2ptboat109.html>

<sup>68</sup>William White, *They Were Expendable: An American Torpedo Boat Squadron in the U.S. Retreat From the Philippines* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1942), 3.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

our part [and] can only hope help didn't come in time for some sensible reason.”<sup>70</sup> Here, Kennedy could relate to other young servicemen who really fought in World War II, whose concerns were unheard by hawkish officers who did not join them in the frontlines and thus did not understand what it meant to be expendable. *They Were Expendable* was able to convey the greater meaning of war to people who did not experience combat and, although it was fictional, the plotline of White's story became the reality for John F. Kennedy and his comrades. Therefore, Kennedy was a president who understood from experience what it meant to be expendable; he served as captain of a patrol, in company of common sailors.

In *They Were Expendable*, a measure of direct criticism was aimed at senior officers, such as General MacArthur. The decision to promote MacArthur to Commander-in-Chief of forces in the Pacific, resulting in MacArthur being ordered to leave his position, meant that the remaining forces were left to fend for themselves. To the servicemen, “our last hope of seeing America and escaping a Japanese prison – was gone forever. Now the MTB's were like the rest here...the expendables who fight on without hope to the end.”<sup>71</sup> Just as Kennedy criticized MacArthur for his absence on the frontlines, White critiqued the Filipino politicians for “not appropriating money for the army – they'd set MacArthur up with a big salary and a penthouse, and then hardly given him a dime to train and equip an army – it was all window-dressing.”<sup>72</sup> John F. Kennedy therefore mistrusted judgment

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<sup>70</sup>White, *They Were Expendable*, 187.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 54-55.

of senior officers during the Cuban Missile Crisis. When they advocated bombing Cuba and potentially starting a nuclear war, Kennedy felt that he better understood what it was like to be “expendable,” and didn’t want the people who would have fought in a nuclear war with the Soviets to become as such.

Additionally, John F. Kennedy was influenced by *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Franz Werfel’s tale of Armenian life during the Turkish genocide during World War I. A central point Werfel makes is that evil must be resisted. According to his biographer Walter Donovan, Kennedy read it enthusiastically.<sup>73</sup> The novel speaks of the evolution of differences that threaten the world; the transition of “the old sporadic fanaticism of religious hatred” that “had been skillfully perverted into the cold, steady fanaticism of national hate.”<sup>74</sup> As in Kennedy’s time, the World War I era was polarized between two opposing sides, with conflicting ideas, that threatened to erupt into violence.

Werfel’s arguments are useful against the philosophy of appeasement but also against losing faith in one’s ability to overcome adversity. In a notable part of Werfel’s novel, one character dismisses the importance of addressing the genocide with the words, “[Please] realize that, in this Armenian destiny, certain historical forces, too vast for our control, may be working themselves out.” The other character replies, “Every man and every nation at one time or other becomes the weak. That’s why nobody should tolerate persecution, let alone extermination, as a precedent.”<sup>75</sup> After the Cuban Missile Crisis,

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<sup>73</sup>Walter Donovan, *PT-109: John F. Kennedy in World War II* (New York: Crest Publishers, 1964), 25.

<sup>74</sup>Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (New York: Carl and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1934), 25.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 535.



Kennedy would say in a speech, “Too many of us think [peace] is impossible. Too many think it unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed, that we are gripped by forces we cannot control.”<sup>76</sup>

Kennedy agreed with this concept in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, with the key emphasis being placed on the phrase “we cannot control.” Kennedy continued to refute that notion, saying, “We need not accept that view. Our problems are man-made – therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings.”<sup>77</sup> He attributed “reason and spirit” to the human ability to conquer “seemingly unsolvable” obstacles.<sup>78</sup> Kennedy “solved” the Cuban Missile Crisis in part because he fervently believed that he was *able* to do so. The idea that humans must step aside and allow atrocities or war to occur when it could be prevented, simply based on the fact that they believe that historical forces are “beyond human control” did not resonate with Kennedy. As president, he understood that it was both his right and his duty to take control of the situation and resolve it to the best of his ability. Therefore, writings and occurrences during the World War I era implemented the idea that problems need not be repeated on account of past mindsets that they must repeat and allowed him to demonstrate that he indeed learned from history.

Reading material that left an indelible impact on young Kennedy included *Pilgrim's*

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<sup>76</sup>John F. Kennedy, “Commencement Address at American University, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963,” in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

*Way*, alternatively titled *Memory-Hold-The-Door*, an autobiographical set of memoirs by John Buchan, later known as Baron Tweedsmuir. Tweedsmuir reminisced about his early life, experiences during World War I, and provides ample advice and critiques of political and social life in the British Empire. The Kennedy Library lists *Pilgrim's Way* as among Kennedy's personal favorites, while Senator Ted Kennedy dedicated some remarks to the memoir during the Kennedy Library and Museum's Rededication Ceremony of 1993. In reference to President Kennedy's famous commencement address at American University in 1963, Senator Kennedy said, "For Jack, 'commencement is what America is all about. The words he loved and lived by were from his favorite book, 'Pilgrim's Way' by John Buchan.'" <sup>79</sup> John F. Kennedy's favorite quote by Buchan epitomized his philosophy of political service: "'Public life is regarded as the crown of a career, and to young persons, it is the worthiest ambition. Politics is still the greatest and most honorable adventure.'" <sup>80</sup> Tragically, his brother Robert F. Kennedy would himself be assassinated shortly after paraphrasing this quote to "a gaggle of newsmen." <sup>81</sup>

Just as John F. Kennedy was encouraged to think independently by his father, so too did Buchan encourage analytical, futuristic thinking. "The tragedy of man," he wrote, "is that he has developed an intelligence eager to uncover mysteries, but not strong enough to penetrate them...[we] pose questions which we are sometimes capable of asking but rarely able to answer." <sup>82</sup> John F. Kennedy sought to increase his knowledge in an effort

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<sup>79</sup>Kennedy Library.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 40.

<sup>82</sup>John Buchan, *Pilgrim's Way: An Essay in Recollection* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1940), 296.

to provide these answers; he was able to seek and find solutions to both the everyday challenges of the United States and one of historical proportions. Had Kennedy been the embodiment of this “tragedy,” the result could have been tragic for humanity as well.

One figure Buchan admired was Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, in part because he “revered the fortitude of human nature, the courage with which men stumbled up the steep ascent of life. It was the business of a leader, he thought, not so much to put quality into his following as to elicit it.”<sup>83</sup> Balfour possessed the unique ability to see the values of both old and new systems, to retain the best of both worlds and act as a leader who inspires and elicits quality from his followers. Like Kennedy himself, Buchan believed that humanity had both the ability and the responsibility to create a better, freer world. “It was our freedom,” he wrote, “our steady nerves which convinced me that we could build up the world anew and embody in it the best of the old.”<sup>84</sup> Buchan, with a quote eerily similar to Kennedy’s own in his commencement address, stated, “No experience can be too strange and no task too formidable if a man can link it up with what he knows and loves.”<sup>85</sup> Kennedy not only encouraged others to overcome their challenges in his address, but also lived by this adage himself.

Interestingly, Buchan’s relevance in Kennedy’s life was not only as an admired author – Kennedy and Buchan shared several key experiences and arrived at similar conclusions as a result of these experiences. Just as Kennedy’s family acquired great wealth and had the opportunity to travel and learn, so too did Buchan experience a period of wealth

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<sup>83</sup>Buchan, *Pilgrim’s Way*, 158.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 167.

shortly before World War I. Like the Kennedys, he enjoyed travelling, reading and yachting.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, Buchan was acquainted with Kennedy's father during the latter's ambassadorial visit to Britain in 1938. He encouraged the British government to treat Kennedy with respect, seeing in him "a man of great ability and independent character," if "rather different from the ordinary ambassadorial type [and] clearly out of the diplomatic mould."<sup>87</sup> Finally, John Buchan's conclusions in the aftermath of World War I resonate with John F. Kennedy's during World War II.

In *Pilgrim's Way*, John Buchan dedicates a portion of his memoirs to the generation of young men lost during World War I. He lost friends, classmates, his wife's cousin, and his youngest brother to the war. This chapter, which suggests themes present in White's *They Were Expendable*, resonated most strongly with Kennedy's experiences in the Navy during World War II: "Losses, which a few years before would have seemed cataclysmal, became a matter of course."<sup>88</sup> As a result, Buchan criticized the perception of war as glorious and inevitable. "There was no uplift of the spirit, such as is traditionally associated with battle," he wrote, "I acquired a bitter detestation of war, less for its horrors than for its boredom and futility, and...its *panache* [glorification.]"<sup>89</sup> To Buchan, "To speak of glory seemed a horrid impiety."<sup>90</sup> To a young soldier during World War II, his own services would seem a repetition of diplomatic shortcomings during a previous generation, a mistake Kennedy himself would not want to repeat as President.

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<sup>86</sup>Buchan, *Pilgrim's Way*, 138.

<sup>87</sup>J. William Galbraith, *John Buchan: Model Governor General*, online.

<sup>88</sup>Buchan, *Pilgrim's Way*, 165.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, 165-166.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 166.

Richard D. Mahoney writes that Kennedy “jotted down” quotations from *Pilgrim’s Way* in a notepad he kept with him during World War II, as a tribute to the lives lost as a result of war.<sup>91</sup> Geraldine Hawkins, quoting biographer Geoffrey Perret, writes that Kennedy was especially touched at the death of Buchan’s thirty-five-year-old friend, Raymond Asquith. The untimely death of such a courageous and brilliant soldier was the “passage that made the deepest impression on Kennedy,” who throughout his life would “urge anyone he wants to understand him to read *Pilgrim’s Way*, for the light that he begins moving towards shines out from that book.”<sup>92</sup> Kennedy was especially touched at Buchan’s descriptions of young and courageous men forced to sacrifice themselves because war could not be averted. Therefore, he associated himself with the courageous and young who ran the risk of losing their lives for a cause. Kennedy, while willing to serve his country, did not want his sacrifice to be for no reason.

The writings of Tuchman, White and Buchan, coupled with his own experience in the Navy, left a profound impression on him during his political life. Kennedy would seek to end the Cuban Missile Crisis diplomatically not because he was afraid or because he was not set in his principles, but because he did not want to unnecessarily sacrifice another generation of Americans in what would have been a catastrophic nuclear war. He did not want future generations questioning whether he could have done anything to prevent a nuclear war. In accordance with Buchan’s advice, Kennedy conducted foreign policy

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<sup>91</sup>Richard D. Mahoney, “Sons and Brothers: The Days of Jack and Bobby Kennedy” (Arcade Publishing, 1999), article.

<sup>92</sup>Geraldine Hawkins, “JFK Remains a Pop Culture Icon Because He Personified the ‘60s” (Mass News, 2003), article.

with the beliefs that he could overcome any challenge with sufficient determination and that he had the responsibility as a leader to attempt to do so.

Perhaps no author received more public praise from Kennedy than Basil Liddell Hart, a military theorist and historian. In 1960, both Kennedy and his opponent Richard Nixon were invited to review Hart's latest work, *Deterrent or Defense*. Nixon declined, while Kennedy wrote, "No expert on military affairs has better earned the right to respectful attention...For two generations has brought to the problem of war and peace a rare combination of professional competence and imaginative insight."<sup>93</sup> Kennedy held Hart's judgment in high esteem, for "his predictions and warnings have often proved correct."<sup>94</sup>

Hart is something of an anomaly; on one hand, he is praised by some, such as American historian Jay Luvaas, who called him "one of the most profound, original and influential military thinkers of modern history."<sup>95</sup> Hart, whose military thinking continued to evolve and develop in the preliminary stages of World War II, was also praised by Brian Bond, who admired his predictions of battles during the war and the "number of egregious defeats" suffered by Britain, notably in May of 1940, alongside the French, when fighting the German Wehrmacht.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, the most widely accepted portrayal of Hart's views regarding World War II is that he had a clairvoyant understanding of the actions the two sides would take and was able to accurately predict

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<sup>93</sup>John F. Kennedy, "Book Review by Senator John F. Kennedy of 'Deterrent or Defense' by B.H. Liddell Hart," the 'Saturday Review of Literature,' September 3, 1960. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25937>.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

the outcome. He “fully understood the danger represented by Nazi Germany, was an archfoe of appeasement,” and opposed it when Hitler demanded the Sudetenland territory of Czechoslovakia in 1938, a feeling which was ignored by “hidebound” British generals.<sup>97</sup> In 1981, the Congressional Military Reform Caucus’s principle spokesman said in part, “[The] British...ignored prophets like Liddell Hart. But Hart’s strategy was picked up by the Germans, who used it with devastating effect in 1940.”<sup>98</sup> This more common view of Hart presents him as a tragic figure who was able to (and did) give sound advice to policymakers during the build-up to World War II but was disregarded by most of his intended audience. This version of Hart also appears in some of Kennedy’s interpretations as well. For example, Hart’s advice against appeasement corresponded to Kennedy’s in his dissertation, *Why England Slept*, in which he quoted Hart several times.

Alternatively, Hart is criticized for lack of evidence to suggest that he opposed appeasement, with some postulating that there is evidence to the contrary. Some claim he “argued forcefully” for appeasement in 1938, that his “policy prescriptions” were more closely aligned with Neville Chamberlain, that his advice had no impact on German victories during battles, and that he was “almost completely wrong in his estimations of what the World War II battlefield would look like and what would happen when the German and Allied forces finally clashed.”<sup>99</sup> It is also important to consider that Hart’s advice, while considered sound by Kennedy, is largely restricted to military matters, and does not ascribe the same attention to diplomatic tactics that Kennedy provided in a

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<sup>97</sup>Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart*, 7.

<sup>98</sup>Statement of the Hon. G. William Whitehurst, Washington D.C., 14 December 1981, 30.

<sup>99</sup>Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart*, 8.

review of one of Hart's works.

Basil Hart's postulations had a key impact on young John F. Kennedy. In 1940, he quoted Hart in his thesis, *Why England Slept*, admiring Hart's view, "I do not criticize persons, but only a state of affairs. It is they, however, who will have to answer for deficiencies at the bar of history."<sup>100</sup> Kennedy went on to emphasize Hart's sense of preparedness and exhaustive strategies, criticizing the armies during World War II as "suicide clubs" due to their "grave deficiencies."<sup>101</sup> In one example, stated Kennedy, "Hart...pointed out that the number of guns to a division was not sufficient for a barrage of one Infantry battalion," and that the number of battalions under the Cardwell system was not sufficient to repel enemies.<sup>102</sup> From Hart, Kennedy honed his ability to question the system itself, an ability which would be further shaped during his time in the Navy, and when reading *They Were Expendable*. That Basil Hart's advice was not highly regarded by the afore-mentioned "hidebound" generals convinced Kennedy that senior military officers and policy-makers do not always make their decisions in the best interests of their men or even with regard to fighting a war efficiently.

More importantly, Kennedy praised Hart's *Deterrent or Defense*, in which Hart argued that, while nuclear weapons provide a useful *deterrent* to any attack by the Soviet Union against the West, they should not be considered an adequate *defense* against Soviet forces in general. Due to the destructive nature of such weapons, Hart said, they must be

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<sup>100</sup>John F. Kennedy, *Why England Slept*, 37.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.



kept “high up the sleeve” and used only in the event of a last resort.<sup>103</sup> In fact, the Soviet Union was more likely to favor a different method of attack because “the Western Powers’ capacity for nuclear retaliation should suffice to deter Russia from launching a large-scale invasion of free Europe.”<sup>104</sup> Nuclear weapons actually possessed a disadvantage that they could be used *only* as a last resort weapon, for “[There] are no degrees of importance in the matter of suicide.”<sup>105</sup> That is to say, should nuclear war erupt, both sides would lose because the Cold War policy of mutually assured destruction dictates that both sides would be destroyed. Therefore, it is not enough for the West to possess nuclear weapons; they should also develop conventional forces to use in small-scale conflicts, such as defending Europe.

Kennedy, in his review of *Deterrent or Defense*, agreed, “The notion that the free world can be protected simply by the threat of ‘massive retaliation’ is no longer tenable.”<sup>106</sup> Both Hart and Kennedy disagreed with Richard Nixon’s policy of relying on nuclear retaliation, with Kennedy agreeing with Hart’s “grand theme” that the United States “must be prepared to face down Communist aggression, short of nuclear war, by conventional forces.”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Kennedy concluded from reading *Deterrent or Defense* that “responsible leaders in the West will not and should not deal with limited aggression by unlimited weapons whose use could only be mutually suicidal,” and that

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<sup>103</sup>Hart, *Deterrent or Defense*, 54.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup>John F. Kennedy, “Review of *Deterrent or Defense*.”

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*

this should also be the policy of “responsible military leaders.”<sup>108</sup> This would account for his decision not to readily bomb Soviet missile sites on Cuba and provoke a nuclear war. On the contrary, Kennedy advocated for “a strengthening of the free world’s defense and new, purposeful efforts to bring the weapons of mass destruction [and their use] under effective international control.”<sup>109</sup> Still, he was unwavering in his desire to provide a strong message that he would never be “blackmailed” or “forced” to allow Communism to spread into the free world.<sup>110</sup>

Kennedy would speak highly of his career as a young officer in the Navy, saying, “I can imagine a no more rewarding career,” calling it “worthwhile” and providing “pride and satisfaction.”<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, his experiences in the Navy would finalize his idea that senior military officials and policymakers did not always act in the best interests of their soldiers. In a letter to his sister Kathleen, he would write, ““The glamor of PTs just isn’t [there] excepting to the outsider.””<sup>112</sup> Kennedy was critical of the efficiency, citing their “inadequate” guns, torpedoes, engines, radios, lack of proper armor and propensity to become “floating infernos when hit.”<sup>113</sup> It transpired that “the failure lay...with the tactics followed by all PT boat captains and circumstances beyond Kennedy’s control.”<sup>114</sup> Kennedy became a war hero due to his misfortune of commanding “the only PT boat ever rammed in the entire war,” which resulted in two of his mates being killed and Kennedy

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<sup>108</sup>John F. Kennedy, “Review of Deterrent or Defense.”

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup>Public Papers of Kennedy, 321.

<sup>112</sup>Lasky, *J.F.K.: The Man & The Myth*, 94.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.

being forced to relay a message in a coconut shell demanding rescue.<sup>115</sup> Kennedy would refuse to be hailed as a hero, instead bestowing the title upon his deceased comrades. He would recall this incident for the rest of his life, keeping memorabilia from the PT-109 episode in the Oval Office during his tenure as president.<sup>116</sup> This would have a dramatic effect on the way he interacted with military officials during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Kennedy made certain never to allow the perceived experience of military officers to overrule his brand of logic. He considered his own wartime experiences to be deeper than those of even his closest military aides. He had found himself involved in the war and forced to face the gruesome aspects of combat, but he did not feel that his superior officers understood from experience how their decisions affected their inferiors. His refusal to adhere to his hawkish generals as President is reflected in his writings as a young soldier. He felt that senior officers “give the impression of their brains being in their tails.”<sup>117</sup> This resulted, he claimed, in “the super-human ability of the [military] to screw up everything they touch.”<sup>118</sup> He “reserved his harshest criticism” for the highest-ranked officers whom he saw as sending men to their deaths while they remained unwilling to risk their own lives.<sup>119</sup> One example is his contempt for General Douglas “Dugout Doug” MacArthur, pointing out that the nickname was derived from MacArthur’s “refusal to send in army troops to relieve the marines...and to emerge from

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<sup>115</sup>Lasky, *J.F.K.: The Man & The Myth*, 95-98.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 631.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>118</sup>Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 94.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

his ‘dugout in Australia.’”<sup>120</sup>

Kennedy learned to question the knowledge and experience of generals who actually had little experience regarding the dangers of warfare because they were usually cloistered away from the fighting. When given the chance to avoid a nuclear war with the exchange of the removal of missiles from Turkey, and an American promise not to invade Cuba, for the removal of missiles from Cuba, he responded to opposition, “[In] two or three days we may have a military strike which would bring perhaps the seizure of Berlin or a strike on Turkey. We should take [this deal.]”<sup>121</sup> He used his own judgment over objections from his generals because he felt he had a better understanding of what was at risk. He felt that their decisions might result in miscommunications or the inept response he had always criticized.

Finally, John F. Kennedy was shaped by his understanding that negotiating with an enemy involved showing respect, something influenced by the military theorist Basil Hart. Hart’s words provided one of the strongest influences on Kennedy’s foreign policy during his presidential career. “Keep strong,” was Hart’s advice; “keep cool. Have unlimited patience. Never corner an opponent, and always assist him to save his face.”<sup>122</sup>

Kennedy referred to these concepts of patience and aiding an opponent in saving face during the negotiations, especially when he agreed with Walter Lippmann’s advice: agree to remove “obsolete” missiles from American bases in Turkey in exchange for Russia’s

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<sup>120</sup>Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 93.

<sup>121</sup>Stern, *The Day the World Stood Still*, 166.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

cooperation in removing missiles from Cuba.<sup>123</sup> Additionally, Kennedy “appreciated how difficult it must have been for Khrushchev to back down,” as the removal of missiles from Turkey was kept secret for several decades to avoid public outcry. Kennedy showed his appreciation by advising his cabinet against “premature jubilation” and “gloating.”<sup>124</sup> Kennedy understood that in order to maintain the peace he would need to respect his adversary and their need to “save face” in the eyes of their own people. Furthermore, in accordance with his father’s belief that war was devastating to both winners and losers, John F. Kennedy was not arrogant in his relief that the Cuban Missile Crisis was averted; for the victory was twofold – both the United States and the Soviet Union “won” the war.

John F. Kennedy’s experiences as a diplomat’s son and as a junior officer during the World War II era ingrained in him the desire to favor good judgment over potentially disastrous warfare. From his father he learned to have and defend his own opinions and had the chance to see the strengths and weaknesses involved with different forms of foreign policies, and began to question the infallibility of superior officers. From the military he saw firsthand the repercussions of decisions on the part of superior officers or politicians who never served in the frontlines, and came to believe that he as President had the obligation to exhaust all possible courses for peace before finally turning to aggression. From the military he also came to the conclusion that a decorated officer does not always understand the effects of his decisions on countless soldiers in the frontlines. This caused Kennedy to always question the judgment of his advisors urging him to bomb Cuba. Each of these factors contributed to his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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<sup>123</sup>Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1966), 160.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, 207.

Most important of all, Kennedy was himself. He had a profound knowledge of history and an incredible ability to weigh in on his options, as well as a feeling of obligation to do what was best. He would not stand aside and allow Cuba a chance to launch a nuclear attack on his country, nor would he begin an armed conflict if he had the chance to avoid it, understanding the weight of his choices. Kennedy was influenced by each of the factors discussed but his sense of history shaped his perception of these experiences and caused him to examine policies he had witnessed during his lifetime in the context of history. He was able to predict potential errors during the Cuban Missile Crisis because he had studied foreign policy and failures thereof. This made him the man who led his country from the brink of nuclear conflict with Russia to a peaceful settlement that benefited everyone. Kennedy's presidency was eventful for the decisions he made during a two-week period, but these decisions were the result of a lifetime of experience.

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