

An Exchange on the Missile Crisis

To the Editors:

As one who on occasion has been an admirer of Ronald Steel's writings, I was dismayed and saddened to read his review of Robert F. Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*. It is ill-informed; there are gross inaccuracies; and several quotations are so wrenched out of context that the result is simply the opposite of truth. And his overall judgments and conclusions are sometimes not only questionable as scholarship, but naive and simple-minded.

On the questions of quotations out of context, consider the following. Steel writes: "What happened was nothing less than a failure of intelligence, 'a failure,' in Hilsman's words, 'not of rationalization, but of imagination—a failure to probe and speculate, to ask perceptive questions of the data, rather than of explaining away the obvious.'"

But turn to my book, to the conclusions of my chapter, "The Intelligence Post-Mortem: Who Erred?", where one would expect to see my final judgment, and what do you find? "Given the inherent difficulties of espionage and the special circumstances... it is probably something to be proud of that the missiles were discovered as early as they were. In sum, Cuba in 1962, it seems to me, must be marked down as a victory for American intelligence—and a victory of a very high order."

Now that is just exactly the opposite of what Steel says my views are. Where did he find the quote he cites? He found it in an earlier part of the chapter, in a discussion not of American intelligence in the Cuban crisis, but of a small sub-unit of CIA involved in shipping intelligence, and the "failure" I speak of was the failure of this tiny sub-unit to report to higher authority that two of the ships bringing arms to Cuba had exceptionally large hatches and were riding high in the water, indicating space-consuming cargo. The sub-unit had not reported these facts—which were suggestive, but not decisive—because these ships, one of which had been built in Japan, were designed for the lumbering trade; and since the Soviets were short on ships, the shipping specialists thought it only natural that they should be using these, and so saw no significance in the reports. The part of the quote Steel left out was the crucial part: "The fact that the shipping specialists did not call these facts to the special attention of their intelligence superiors was clearly a failure. But it was a failure not of rationalization..." and so on.

Again, Steel quotes my description of a memo, written the next day, about Gromyko's meeting with the President, which argued that the Soviets would assume from what was said in the meeting, and in earlier meetings with Dobrynin, that Kennedy knew about the missiles. Steel then says: "Yet if the Russians assumed

not plotting a surprise attack." The truth is that the conclusion was a major point of the memo, and the President's plans and actions were based on the judgment that the Soviets were *not* planning a surprise attack. To quote again from my book (page 201), "The Soviets did not put missiles in Cuba with the intent of using them in a military sense any more than the United States put Minutemen ICBM's in Montana with the intent of using them."

And there are many more, either misquotations or straight inaccuracies. It was not "shortly after assuming office" that Kennedy learned there was no missile gap, but in late summer, 1961, following an intelligence breakthrough. And it was not from U-2 flights and Penkovsky that we learned, as Steel asserts. U-2 flights were never made over the Soviet Union after May 1, 1960. And a moment of reflection on what Penkovsky's job was would reveal how unlikely it is that he would have known. Since Kennedy did not know there was no missile gap until late summer—although he may have begun to suspect it—he could not have decided after the Vienna meeting, as Steel would have it, to let the Soviets know by way of Roswell Gilpatric's speech. Gilpatric gave his speech in October, and the facts are that the decision to make the speech was made in the days immediately preceding it.

Another quotation from Steel: "Meanwhile reports kept flowing in from agents inside Cuba that missiles much longer than SAM's were being delivered..." There were in fact only two such reports, as is fully described in my book, which hardly justifies the suggestive phrase, "flowing."

Still another quotation from Steel: "There were available [for diplomacy] not only the Soviet ambassador and the famous 'hot line' direct to the Kremlin, recently installed with such fanfare..." Yet the truth is that the "hot line" was installed *after* the crisis, and partly as a result of it.

There are many more pieces of misinformation or inaccuracies, but one more will suffice. Steel says McCone "immediately ordered the entire island photographed." In fact, however, McCone had no such power. The decision could be made only by the President on the recommendation of a high level committee. McCone attended a meeting of such a committee at which there was discussion of the fact that a rhomboid-shaped area in Western Cuba had not been photographed for a month. The SAM's were most nearly operational in this part of Cuba, and the discussion centered on the risk to the U-2 of making a surveillance flight, and the possible consequences if it were shot down. Nevertheless, the full group decided to recommend to the President that a U-2 be flown, providing great care be taken in planning the exact route it was to fly.

In addition to distorting the meaning of quotations, Steel also uses the technique of the grave question, implying that the

they are readily available. "But why were photographs not made earlier?" Steel asks. I have a long analysis of that question in my book and reach some conclusions that Steel should have found interesting. For example (page 186): "It could reasonably be argued that the U-2 flight of October 14 found the missiles at just about the earliest possible date..." I do believe that it could be reasonably so argued, but my own conclusion is that they could have been discovered at least two weeks earlier, but probably not much more. "Given the vagaries of the weather, (page 190) it would have been a fantastic stroke of luck if convincing photographs could have been obtained before September 21..." The decision to fly the U-2 was made on October 4, and the subsequent delay was at the operational level. Time was consumed in planning because of the SAM's; there was postponement because of weather; and there was a disgraceful squabble between the Air Force and CIA as to who should fly the plane—all of which is fully documented in my book. The point is simply that Steel's misuse of quotes, his inaccuracies, and his rhetorical questions leave the reader with an impression of mystery and possible conspiracy—yet the facts and the answers to Steel's questions are all laid out in a book he has read—or at least quotes from.

It is against this background of misquotation, inaccuracy, and suggestive rhetoric that Steel's major conclusions must be judged.

One of these conclusions is that the Kennedy administration was caught "flat-footed" in the Cuban missile crisis, and that the reason was that the administration "could never figure out why the Russians might find it advantageous to put missiles in Cuba." Yet the evidence on both counts is in the exactly opposite direction. As described above, a study of the data indicates that if the decision to fly the U-2 that discovered the missiles had been made two weeks earlier, it might have discovered nothing at all. This is not being caught "flat-footed." And there is other evidence. In my book, for example, in discussing the failure of the shipping intelligence unit to report the fact that two of the ships had large hatches (mentioned above), I wrote (page 189): "All that these reports could do, no matter how seriously they were taken, would be to increase sensitivity in Washington to the possibility that the Soviets would put missiles in Cuba. But the people in Washington, as even the public statements of the time show, were already sensitive to the point of nervousness. President Kennedy made several public statements warning the Soviets. He instituted special security precautions concerning intelligence on offensive weapons. In every Congressional hearing that had even the remotest connection with Cuba. And