

Thirteen Days

A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

By Robert F. Kennedy.

With Introductions by Robert S. McNamara and Harold Macmillan.
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By DAVID SCHOENBRUN

Early in the morning of Saturday, Oct. 27, 1962, Attorney-General Robert Kennedy received a memorandum from J. Edgar Hoover informing him that Soviet personnel were preparing to destroy all sensitive documents in their New York headquarters. This was a classic sign of final preparations for war. Robert Kennedy went promptly to the White House, with "a sense of foreboding."

The sense was heightened by the events of that morning, when the world stood still for one long moment on the brink of nuclear destruction. A letter had arrived overnight from Chairman Khrushchev, proposing that the Russians withdraw their missiles from Cuba, but only on condition that the Americans withdraw theirs from Turkey; Russia would then pledge not to invade Turkey, America giving the same pledge on Cuba. This letter came only a few hours after a first letter offering to withdraw the missiles from Cuba in exchange only for a no-invasion pledge, without demanding our withdrawing anything from Turkey.

This sudden change confused President Kennedy's top advisers, meeting with him in the Cabinet Room that morning in a session of the "Ex Comm," the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. No one knew why Khrushchev had sent two consecutive letters strikingly different in tone and content. No one had any answers. The President himself was furious, for he had several times in the past year given orders to Dean Rusk to remove the missiles from Turkey. Now they were the object of Soviet blackmail because Rusk had failed to carry out those orders and had neglected to inform him of this.

As the grim, angry meeting proceeded, Robert McNamara deepened the gloom by reporting that the Russians were intensifying their efforts to assemble their missile sites and their IL-28 nuclear bombers in Cuba. Nerves stretched and some snapped when an urgent Air Force message arrived announcing that America's most famous and skillful U-2 pilot, Major Rudolph Anderson Jr., had just been shot down and killed over Cuba by a SAM missile.

Almost everyone at the meeting instantly called upon the President to order an air attack to destroy the SAM sites. The surprising dissenters, opposing the strike, were Robert McNamara and Robert Kennedy, the supposedly "tough" men of the Cabinet. The President dismissed the proposal. "It isn't the first step that concerns me, but both sides escalating to the fourth and fifth step—and we don't go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so." He ordered, instead, an urgent and complete review of the implications of all possible courses of action. Then he sobered and chastened every man at the table by ordering that every American missile with an atomic warhead be defused, so that he, personally and alone, would take responsibility for ordering them to be used. His brother Robert Kennedy recalls that the President reminded all present that he "was deciding for the U. S., the Soviet Union, Turkey, NATO, and really for all mankind."

That dramatic scene is described by the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy in this book on the Cuban missile crisis, the "Thirteen Days" from our discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba on Tuesday, Oct. 16, 1962, to Khrushchev's agreeing to their withdrawal on Sunday, Oct. 28. The vignette of that fateful Saturday is told simply, almost starkly, in seven swift pages, the drama building and breaking without benefit of any special prose effects. The main story is well known, but as a principal figure in resolving the crisis Robert Kennedy brings to it extraordinary authority, with his own insights, perspectives and very important revelations of the decision. (Continued on Page 30)

Mr. Schoenbrun was the C.B.S. News chief correspondent and C.B.S. Washington Bureau chief during the thirteen-day crisis, making process at the highest level, on the brink of nuclear holocaust. Robert Kennedy shows us what happens to the most competent and trusted men under stress. Above all, perhaps his most valuable contribution is the way he recounts the events of what superficially seems to have been exclusively a military crisis, while constantly posing moral and philosophical problems.

For instance, he questions the right of a large nation to attack a very small one, and the right of leaders to make decisions that would end the lives of men, women and children who never had a voice in those decisions. He exposes the totally changed nature of power-relationships in the thermonuclear age, so that the specifics of his report relate to much larger questions that one hopes will be, indeed must be, debated and examined intensely by all world leaders if the world is to survive.

"Thirteen Days" will certainly be read, and one prays reread and reread, by President Nixon and his chief advisers. One hopes, too, that Kosygin and Brezhnev, Wilson, de Gaulle, Mao and their successors, all with the personal power to end human history, will read this definitive text on atomic confrontation. It should