



One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964: The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis

By Aleksandr Fursenko, Timothy Naftali

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Based on classified Soviet archives, including the files of Nikita Khrushchev and the KGB, "One Hell of a Gamble" offers a riveting play-by-play history of the Cuban missile crisis from American and Soviet perspectives simultaneously.

No other book offers this inside look at the strategies of the Soviet leadership. John F. Kennedy did not live to write his memoirs; Fidel Castro will not reveal what he knows; and the records of the Soviet Union have long been sealed from public view: Of the most frightening episode of the Cold War--the Cuban Missile Crisis--we have had an incomplete picture. When did Castro embrace the Soviet Union? What proposals were put before the Kremlin through Kennedy's back-channel diplomacy? How close did we come to nuclear war? These questions have now been answered for the first time. This important and controversial book draws the missing half of the story from secret Soviet archives revealed exclusively by the authors, including the files of Nikita Khrushchev and his leadership circle. Contained in these remarkable documents are the details of over forty secret meetings between Robert Kennedy and his Soviet contact, records of Castro's first solicitation of Soviet favor, and the plans, suspicions, and strategies of Khrushchev. This unique research opportunity has allowed the authors to tell the complete, fascinating, and terrifying story of the most dangerous days of the last half-century.

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Editorial Review

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The Berlin Wall has been rubble for a decade and the memories of the cold war are growing dim. And yet no one is ever likely to forget the Cuban Missile crisis of October 1962, when the world stood on the brink of full-scale nuclear war as the Soviet Union and America locked horns off the coast of Florida. The Soviet navy set sail for Cuba loaded with nuclear warheads for their newly constructed missile bases, precipitating the crisis. After 10 days of high tension, the Soviet Union backed down and the warheads were sent back home. War was averted, but up until now, no one has ever been too certain just how close the world came to catastrophe. Kennedy was assassinated long before he could write his memoirs, Castro's lips are sealed, and the Soviet archives were a closed book.

Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali have taken advantage of recent unrestricted access to Soviet records and performed painstaking detective work to fill the gaps in the historical record. Some of the tension of the narrative is lost, because we know the outcome; even so, they give penetrating insights as they reconstruct the drama step by step. We learn that the Kremlin did seriously consider launching a nuclear attack on the U.S.: the appropriate orders were discussed and Khrushchev spent the night of October 22 in his office so he could be on hand to cable his authorization. Some of the most interesting facts to emerge, however, are those concerning John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert. JFK had always previously been portrayed as something of a parochial gung-ho type, but this, it emerges, was merely a public persona designed to appease the Pentagon hawks. At the same time JFK was talking about a Cuban invasion, he and his brother were engaging in a more secret policy of appeasement through the Soviet ambassador. Fortunately for all of us, diplomacy won the day. In recent years, JFK has been somewhat discredited as a leader for his unpleasant sexual carryings-on and corruption. It may just be that this view is as incomplete as his portrayal as the saintly "King of Camelot". If so, *One Hell of a Gamble* could be the first stage in his partial rehabilitation. --John Crace, *Amazon.co.uk*

From Library Journal

Those of a certain age will remember the fateful days in the fall of 1962 when the world stood on the brink of nuclear catastrophe. Since that time, scholars have struggled to discern how the United States and the Soviet Union could have come so close to disaster. Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* (1971) set the standard for these queries, but his work has now been vastly improved upon by the investigations of Fursenko (history, Russian Academy of Sciences) and Naftali (history, Yale). Taking advantage of the opening of heretofore closed Soviet archives, the authors have produced a breathtaking view of the inner workings of the Soviet Politburo and its efforts to come to grips with a potentially disastrous international incident. Seldom have scholars plumbed the depths of Soviet-American relations as deeply or as effectively. The resulting tale proves once again that truth can indeed be stranger than fiction. This important work belongs in all libraries. Highly recommended.

--Edward Goedeken, *Iowa State Univ. Lib., Ames*

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From [Booklist](#)

In recent years, revelations have dribbled out about what actually occurred to ignite and resolve the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Adding some disclosures of their own, historians Fursenko and Naftali narrate the exact facts concerning the look into the nuclear abyss. They write chronologically, starting with wariness about Fidel Castro--red or not? Both Americans and Russians wondered. Communications between Havana

and Moscow have not before been told in quite this much detail and convey the difficulties the Russians had with their mercurial ally. As for John Kennedy, his once-praised handling of the crisis no longer shines under historical scrutiny. The big secret the authors unearthed is a report Khrushchev's son-in-law made of his meeting with JFK in early 1962, which the Soviets took as a definite JFK intention to invade Cuba. They later sent the missiles, which seemed to solve their several strategic problems at once. Although complex, this is a benchmark of information against which all future studies of the crisis may be measured. *Gilbert Taylor*

Users Review

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