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THE

KENNEDY TAPES

INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE DURING THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning when he first saw photographs of Soviet missiles in Cuba, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was 4 months and 18 days past his forty-fifth birthday. During the 13 days of crisis that followed, he would ask advice from some men older than he and from a few who were younger. (From no women, so far as we know.) All had been molded by World War II and the Cold War. "Munich," "Pearl Harbor," "the iron curtain," "containment," "the Berlin blockade," "Korea," "McCarthyism," "Suez-Hungary," "Sputnik," and other such shorthand references to recent history called up shared memories and shared beliefs. A reader for whom those terms have only faint associations may misunderstand some of the dialogue recorded here. This introductory chapter aims at providing such a reader a sense of the framework of experience within which Kennedy and his advisers interpreted the crisis.

"Munich" captured a world of meaning, especially for Kennedy. His father had played a role in the drama. He himself had published a book analyzing it. "Munich," of course, referred not to a single event but to a series of events and to their supposed lesson or lessons. The Munich conference of 1938 capped efforts by Britain to appease Nazi Germany, arguably making up for too-harsh peace treaties imposed after World War I. Czechoslovakia had been created by those treaties. At Munich, Britain compelled Czechoslovakia to cede to Germany borderlands populated by German speakers. When the Nazi dictator, Adolf Hitler, subsequently seized non-German Czechoslovakia and invaded Poland, Britain changed policy. World War II commenced. "Munich" and "appeasement" became synonyms for failure to stand firm in the face of aggression.

Kennedy's father, Joseph Patrick Kennedy, a famous stock speculator and one of the few millionaires openly to back Franklin Roosevelt, was Roosevelt's

ambassador to Britain at the time of the Munich conference.[1] Both in cables to the State Department and in public speeches and interviews, Joe Kennedy backed Britain's appeasement of Germany. He continued to do so. Well into World War II, he argued that Britain had been right to conciliate Hitler and that the best interests of the world would be served by a compromise peace. Joe Kennedy also spoke out against any action by his own government that might embroil the United States in the war. He thus marked himself as both an appeaser and an isolationist. (In his 1992 novel, *Fatherland,* Robert Harris imagines the world as it might have been had Britain actually come to terms with Hitler. One plot line concerns a visit to Europe in the 1960s by President Kennedy. But the President is Joe Kennedy, not John.)

John Kennedy was twenty-one and a third-year undergraduate at Harvard at the time of the Munich conference.[2] During the actual period of the conference, he seemed to agree with his father. The coming of war gave him second thoughts. Previously a desultory student, preoccupied with games and girls, he turned in his final college year to writing a long honors thesis, with the laborious title "Appeasement at Munich (the Inevitable Result of the Slowness of Conversion of the British Democracy to Change from a Disarmament Policy to a Rearmament Policy)." Family friends helped him polish the manuscript and publish it under the improved title *Why England Slept.* Appearing in 1940, only weeks after the fall of France, it became a surprise best-seller. It did not entirely contradict his father's line. Indeed, Joe Kennedy read and approved the final draft. But the book struck a different stance. Declaring "appeasement" a weak policy forced upon British governments by British public opinion, it called on America to arm so as not to have to follow a similar policy if challenged by totalitarianism.

All his life, Kennedy would carry the burden of being Joe Kennedy's son. Robert Lovett, Truman's Secretary of Defense and one of the elder statesmen whom Kennedy would consult during the missile crisis, voted against Kennedy in 1960 because Joe Kennedy was his father.[3] George Ball, who would be Under Secretary of State and a regular member of Kennedy's missile crisis circle, writes in his memoirs that he joined the Kennedy administration only after assuaging doubts similar to Lovett's: "I had long despised the elder Kennedy, who represented everything I disliked and mistrusted. He had been a buccaneer on Wall Street, an opportunist in politics, and a debilitating influence when our civilization was fighting for its life; now we were once more engaged against an enemy with the same face of tyranny. Before I could wholeheartedly support the new President, I had to satisfy myself that he was free of his father's views and influence. Just after the election I had carefully analyzed his writings and

speeches—and had found reassurance that the father's noxious views had not infected the son."[4] So, for Kennedy, "Munich" and "appeasement" connoted not only past events and their supposed lessons but also his own need continually to prove that his views were not his father's.

Another member of the missile crisis circle in whose words one can hear echoes of the 1930s is Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Eight years older than Kennedy, Rusk had grown up in circumstances that Kennedy could scarcely imagine. The son of a poor Georgia farmer, he could remember running through the cold night to reach an outdoor privy and wearing underwear stitched from flour sacks. But he had managed to go to Davidson College in North Carolina. From there he had gone on to a Rhodes Scholarship. Studying at Oxford from 1931 to 1934 and spending several months in Germany, he had seen at firsthand not only Hitler's dictatorship but an event highlighted in *Why England Slept*—an Oxford Union debate of February 1933 that resulted in a 275-to-153 vote in favor of the resolution "This House will in no circumstances fight for King and Country." Rusk remembered ruefully how he himself, back in the United States teaching at a women's college in northern California, had argued for giving Hitler some leeway. His subsequent conversion was so complete that tears could come to his eyes when he pleaded with students not to be seduced by appeasement and isolationism.[5]

"Pearl Harbor" was another historical reference point for Kennedy and his advisers. Practically all Americans had been shocked to learn on December 7, 1941, that Japanese planes had bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor and sunk or severely damaged the warships anchored there. Most could recall ever afterward exactly where they had been when they heard this news. Kennedy and a friend with whom he shared an apartment in the District of Columbia had just finished a pickup game of touch football on the grounds near the Washington Monument. They heard the first bulletins on their car radio while driving home.[6]

On Kennedy himself, the Pearl Harbor attack had no immediate effect. During the previous year, as the nation moved further and further away from isolationism, the armed forces had expanded. Concealing chronic ailments that should have exempted him, Kennedy had wangled a commission in the naval reserve. As one team of biographers comments, "Thus, a young man who could certainly not have qualified for the Sea Scouts on [the basis of] his physical condition, entered the U.S. Navy."[7] He was serving as an ensign in the Office of Naval Intelligence when the Pearl Harbor attack occurred. Rusk, having been in ROTC and remained in the reserve, had been called to active duty in 1940. He was a captain in the Army, also in Washington, serving in Army intelligence.

And in the same building with Kennedy was Adlai E. Stevenson, who would be Kennedy's ambassador to the United Nations in October 1962. Eight years older than Rusk and seventeen years older than Kennedy, Stevenson was a prominent Chicago lawyer serving as a civilian assistant to the Secretary of the Navy. In Chicago, he had been a conspicuous critic of the positions espoused by Joe Kennedy. Ironically, he would be the person in Kennedy's missile crisis circle regarded as most nearly an advocate of "appeasement."

President Roosevelt's address to Congress on Pearl Harbor had breathed moral outrage. He declared December 7, 1941, "a date which will live in infamy," remembered for an "unprovoked and dastardly attack." The two members of Kennedy's missile crisis circle whose references to Pearl Harbor would echo some of Roosevelt's indignation were two not then in uniform or in government service—George Ball and Kennedy's younger brother Robert Francis (or Bobby), who would be his Attorney General. Ball, approximately the same age as Rusk, was a wealthy Chicago lawyer, friendly with Stevenson. He had worked in the Treasury Department during the early New Deal but then returned to private practice. Though he had been, if anything, more critical than Stevenson of the isolationism identified with Joe Kennedy, he had stayed away from Washington, and he would continue to do so until the spring of 1942. Robert Kennedy, at the time of Pearl Harbor, was barely sixteen years old and a third-year student at a Rhode Island preparatory school, struggling for passing grades.[9]

In the debates recorded on Kennedy's tapes, Pearl Harbor has a presence as pervasive as Munich. Recollections of Pearl Harbor had helped to make worst-case worry about surprise attack a guiding theme for postwar U.S. military planning and procurement. Absent Pearl Harbor, the whole debate about the Soviet missiles in Cuba might have been different, for supposed lessons from the Pearl Harbor attack shaped the intelligence collection apparatus that informed Kennedy of the missiles and kept him and his advisers abreast of day-to-day developments. Most important of all, Pearl Harbor served as a conclusive example of the proposition that a secretive government might pursue its ambitions, or relieve its frustrations, by adopting courses of action that objectively seemed irrational or even suicidal. This proposition haunts discussion of Soviet motives and possible Soviet reactions during the missile crisis.

Though Kennedy and his advisers carried away from World War II itself memories that influenced their thinking in October 1962, the memories were not counterparts to Munich or Pearl Harbor. They were individual, not col-

lective. Kennedy, continuing to hide his ailments, was assigned combat duty as skipper of a twelve-man patrol torpedo boat in the southwest Pacific. When the boat was rammed by a Japanese destroyer, Kennedy managed to save most of his crew. He towed one man ashore by keeping his teeth clenched on the man's lifejacket strings. Graphically recounted in a *New Yorker* article by John Hersey (and later in a book by Robert Donovan), the story of PT 109 made young Kennedy famous once again. The experience may also, however, have contributed to the caution he would exercise during the missile crisis. He wrote to his father at the time: "When I read that we will fight the Japs for years if necessary and will sacrifice hundreds of thousands if we must—I always like to check from where he is talking—it's seldom out here. People get so used to talking about billions of dollars and millions of soldiers that thousands of dead sounds like drops in the bucket. But if those thousands want to live as much as the ten I saw—they should measure their words with great, great care."[10]

Invalided out after his return from the Pacific, Kennedy did a brief stint as a newspaperman. He covered the San Francisco conference of April 1945, from which came the final Charter of the United Nations organization. Adlai Stevenson, who was there as a senior adviser to the U.S. delegation, had responsibility for press relations. "It was all a little ridiculous," Stevenson remarked later, "me interpreting developments play by play in a secret room at the Fairmont Hotel, whose number was known to not less than 50–75 U.S. correspondents."[11] Kennedy, one of the fifty to seventy-five, wrote for his newspaper, in the vein of his earlier, private letter:

> The average GI on the street . . . doesn't seem to have a very clear-cut conception of what this meeting is about. But one bemedaled marine sergeant gave the general reaction when he said: "I don't know much about what's going on—but if they just fix it so that we don't have to fight any more—they can count me in."
>
> Me, too, sarge.[12]

The Pacific War that had commenced at Pearl Harbor ended with Japan's surrender in August 1945. Two other men who would be around Kennedy during the missile crisis had also seen service in that war. Curtis LeMay, who would be Chief of Staff of the Air Force in October 1962, and Kennedy's most hawkish adviser, had been transferred from the European theater to take over the 20th Air Force, based on Guam. Slightly older than Rusk, he had joined the Army Air Corps in 1928, leaving Ohio State University without a degree. The mission of LeMay's command was strategic bombing of the Japanese home

islands. After analyzing the command's operations, LeMay ordered a complete change in tactics. The B-29s had been flying at high altitude in order to be safe from antiaircraft fire. LeMay calculated that at much lower altitudes there might be somewhat greater loss of aircraft, but that this disadvantage would be more than offset by increases in bomb loads and in bombing accuracy. Experience seemed to prove him right. In a low-level attack on Tokyo in March 1945, his 325-plane force lost only 14 aircraft and hit a much higher-than-usual percentage of its targets.

An admiring observer of LeMay's management of the 20th Air Force was Army Air Forces Lt. Colonel Robert S. McNamara, who would later be Kennedy's Secretary of Defense and LeMay's civilian boss. McNamara was less than a year older than Kennedy. He, too, came of Irish immigrants, but his forebears had taken the Panama route to California. Although his parents were never as poor as Rusk's, and he grew up in a city rather than on a farm, he remembered money's being scarce in his family. While attending the University of California at Berkeley, he had had to live at home in Oakland, and he and a classmate would drive to school, hoarding gas by coasting downhill whenever possible.[13] He majored in economics, had a superb record, and graduated at twenty-one but, to his lasting vexation, failed to win a Rhodes Scholarship. He went on instead to the Harvard Business School. During the period of the Munich conference and *Why England Slept,* McNamara was studying management just across the Charles River from Kennedy. After graduation, he was one of a group kept on at the Business School to teach the new subject of financial control. Early in 1942, the Air Forces appropriated the entire group and gave McNamara a commission. He served in Europe until late in 1944, urging on commanders exactly the type of benefit-versus-cost calculation that he saw exemplified by LeMay.

McNamara and LeMay were not to see eye to eye during the missile crisis. Indeed, they may not have seen eye to eye in 1945, when LeMay was clearly gratified not only by the cost-effectiveness of his operations but by their consequences. Of the March 1945 raid, LeMay boasted later: "We burned up nearly sixteen square miles of Tokyo," then quoted the official report from the time: "There were more casualties than in any other military action in the history of the world."[14] LeMay had also had command responsibility for the special bomber group that attacked Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and his attitude toward the first atomic bombs was dismissive. He rejected the notion that they were somehow special, morally or otherwise. "The assumption seems to be," he wrote, "that it is much more wicked to kill people with a nuclear bomb, than to kill people by busting their heads with rocks."[15] At least in later years,

McNamara would come to argue vehemently that nuclear weapons were special and ought never to be used.

During the final year of World War II and the early postwar years, Kennedy and the men who would surround him during the missile crisis moved into the era of the Cold War.[16] The syndicated columnist Walter Lippmann popularized that term as early as 1946. Winston Churchill contributed another enduring one when he declared, also in 1946: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent."[17] Yet another new term—"containment"—came into wide use in 1947. George F. Kennan, a professional diplomat, later an eminent historian, gave "containment" currency through an article published in 1947 under the pseudonym "X" in the quarterly *Foreign Affairs.* He called for "a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies," particularly through "adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy."

Kennedy's attitudes evolved much as did those of most other Americans. When reporting on the San Francisco conference and its aftermath, he had expressed some wariness about the future. Explaining to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* why he could not complete a projected article in favor of arms limitation, Kennedy wrote: "The Russians . . . have demonstrated a suspicion and lack of faith in Britain and the United States which, while understandable in the light of recent history, nevertheless indicates that in the next few years it will be prudent to be strong."[18] These comments from the 1940s foreshadow the wary empathy with which he would approach the Soviet Union as President.

Kennedy ran successfully for Congress in 1946. There he supported President Truman's efforts to put containment into practice by giving aid to European countries threatened either by the Soviet Union or by domestic Communist parties. While his father spoke out publicly against wasting money or running risks on behalf of foreigners unable to solve their own problems, Kennedy made a well-publicized speech in the House, declaring that the United States had a duty not only "to prevent Europe and Asia from becoming dominated by one great military power" but to prevent "the suffering people of Europe and Asia from succumbing to the soporific ideology of Red totalitarianism."[19]

As the language of Kennedy's speech attests, Americans had come increasingly to see Soviet totalitarianism as a threat comparable to that of Nazi totalitarianism. One seeming lesson of the 1930s was that the United States

should not do what it had done then. The U.S. government should instead make clear that, in case of aggression in any way resembling Hitler's, the United States would be in the front line from the very first day.

In 1948 the Truman administration set an example. Berlin, the former German capital, lay well inside eastern Germany, occupied by the Soviets under wartime agreements. Berlin itself, however, had American, British, and French sectors too, creating a populous Western island within the Soviet zone. In June the Soviets suddenly imposed a blockade, stopping all rail and road traffic from the West into Berlin. After reflecting on alternatives, President Truman ordered a round-the-clock airlift to deliver food and supplies to the city. If the Soviets had interfered, the result could well have been war. The Soviets let the planes go through. After some months, they suspended the blockade. From then on, Berlin stood as a symbol of U.S. determination to put American lives on the line against forceful Soviet takeover of any part of Europe.

In 1949 the United States signed with Canada, Britain, and various West European states the North Atlantic Treaty. The Senate as well as the executive branch thus committed the United States to the principle that an attack on any European signatory would be treated by the United States as an attack on itself. At the time, the commitments to Berlin and to the North Atlantic Treaty were made easier by the American monopoly on nuclear weapons and by misplaced confidence that that monopoly would last.

Despite the vigor of his initial support for containment, Kennedy seemed a mere observer of these events. Others who would be around him in October 1962 were, however, deeply engaged. Robert Lovett was Under Secretary of State and a key adviser to Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall on the Berlin blockade. Rusk, who had become a colonel during the war and ended up on Marshall's Pentagon staff, had followed Marshall to the State Department and was Assistant Secretary for UN Affairs. LeMay, a three-star general in the newly independent Air Force, was commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe. He thus organized and ran the airlift, and did so with the same driving efficiency he had shown in the Pacific.

Time and again during the missile crisis debates, one person or another would make reference to the blockade and airlift. For some reason, everyone tended to misdate it, placing it in 1947–48 instead of 1948–49. But Kennedy and Rusk, in particular, would mention the blockade as the one example in the past of a direct Soviet challenge to the West. And Kennedy would cite the episode as one in which the United States had been free to use nuclear weapons and had chosen not to do so.[20]

After the Berlin blockade crisis, the Cold War intensified. In 1949 the Soviets

surprised the West by testing an atomic bomb. It became clear that Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, instead of giving priority to repairing war damage, was pouring resources into military modernization. In late June 1950 came the Korean War. Soviet-backed North Korea suddenly launched a major offensive against U.S.-backed South Korea. Interpreting this as a challenge to the principles of the UN Charter and possibly as a rehearsal for a similar offensive in divided Germany, Truman immediately sent in U.S. military forces. Before the year was out, North Korea had been defeated, but Communist China had intervened and pushed the battle line back to the preconflict boundary.

The then commander of U.S. and UN forces, General Douglas MacArthur, declared that China's intervention created "a new war." He proposed various operations against China proper. When the Truman administration remained adamant against extending the war beyond the Korean peninsula, MacArthur appealed for support from Truman's political opponents in Congress and elsewhere. Truman relieved MacArthur of his command. MacArthur then came home, greeted by huge crowds in city after city and received with a standing ovation by a joint session of Congress. Protracted hearings followed, calling into question the wisdom of Truman's policy and stirring speculation about Truman's possible impeachment. Passions eventually died down, but only after a parade of other World War II military leaders joined in testifying that MacArthur's position was unsound. Meanwhile, the Soviets had initiated truce talks, and eventually all parties accepted an armistice, leaving the country divided very much as previously.

This long and decidedly unpopular war was another important landmark for men in Kennedy's missile crisis circle. Shortly before the 1950 North Korean offensive, Rusk voluntarily left his job as Deputy Under Secretary of State to assume the lower-ranking post of Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. The Communists' success in the Chinese civil war had stirred domestic furor; many in Congress and elsewhere alleged that the United States had "lost" China, possibly because of Communist subversives within the U.S. government. (One of the attackers was Congressman John Kennedy, who declared in 1949 that America's China policy had "reaped the whirlwind . . . What our young men had saved, our diplomats and our President have frittered away.")[21] The Far Eastern Bureau thus became the hottest spot in the State Department, if not in the executive branch, and hence a challenge to Rusk's strong sense of duty. Looking back, Rusk took pride in having fended off such charges and especially in having been one who counseled patience and restraint during the Korean War.

LeMay's retrospect on the Korean War was exactly the opposite of Rusk's.

After initiating the Berlin airlift, LeMay had returned to the United States to take over the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC). Technically a unified command directly under the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), it was, for practical purposes, an all Air Force command with the mission of preparing to destroy the Soviet homeland. LeMay made it one of the most efficient and dedicated organizations in military history. When the Korean War opened, LeMay urged that SAC attack North Korea "immediately with incendiaries and delete four or five of their largest towns."[22] He remained bitter ever afterward that his proposal was rejected. He also favored bombing China once the Chinese intervened, and he argued gruffly that they never would have intervened had they been presented with a credible threat that the result would be incendiary raids on their cities.

Maxwell Taylor, who would be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the missile crisis, also had a part in the Korean War.[23] About the same age as Adlai Stevenson, Taylor was a Missouri-born West Pointer. A linguist who had gone back to the Academy to teach French and Spanish and served a tour in Asia as a Japanese language officer, he had been on General Marshall's staff in Washington early in World War II, then been a distinguished paratroop commander in Europe. Analyzing the Korean War for the Army staff, he concluded that the war's military objectives had been poorly defined. Shortly before a final truce agreement was reached, Taylor assumed the principal U.S. military command in Korea. From this experience as a whole, he concluded that the U.S. government had made a mistake in treating diplomatic negotiations and military pressures as alternatives rather than as complementary courses of action, best pursued simultaneously. As to whether the United States had been right or wrong to keep the war so limited, he remained of two minds—not of Rusk's but also decidedly not of LeMay's. These lessons—and this past ambivalence—would influence his thinking when he sat with Kennedy in October 1962 and interpreted for him the advice of LeMay and the other chiefs of staff.

Apart from its particular lessons for individuals, the Korean War had lasting effects on American policymaking. Until World War II, the military establishment had had almost no voice in foreign policy decisions. After the war, Congress made provision for a National Security Council, intending it to ensure that Presidents would not totally ignore military considerations when making decisions about international relations. Besides the President, the principal members were the Secretary of State and the civilian Secretary of Defense. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was later designated as an adviser to, but not a member of, the NSC. Until the Korean War, the Secretary

of State remained the pivotal member of the NSC and the principal framer of foreign policy.

During and after the Korean War, the military establishment gained a much stronger voice.[24] Dwight Eisenhower, who succeeded Truman, had the advantage of being himself a five-star general and a hero of World War II. He sought to reduce the influence of the uniformed military largely because of concern lest they use that influence to increase military spending. Despite his background and the force of his personality, he was only partially successful. Military leaders who criticized his policies found ready supporters on Capitol Hill and in the press. Kennedy was among them.

During the missile crisis, Kennedy would hold only one formal meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He and the others would usually rely on Taylor to report their views. But that did not make their views any less weighty. Kennedy and his civilian advisers recognized that it would be inadvisable—to say no more—to adopt a line of action that leaders in the uniformed military would unite in opposing. During the spring of 1962, Kennedy's light reading would include a novel by Fletcher Knebel and Charles Bailey, *Seven Days in May,* in which military leaders engineer a coup against a President who seems to them too pacifistic. Asked by a friend whether something of the sort could actually happen, Kennedy said he thought it could.[25] The fact that such a contingency did not seem totally unrealistic in 1962 was traceable in large part to the Korean War and the MacArthur affair.

The period of the Korean War had also been the high phase of "McCarthyism."[26] The label came from Joseph R. McCarthy, a loutish Senator from Wisconsin, who had taken to its outer limit the tactic of detecting domestic U.S. Communists and Communist sympathizers as the chief sources of trouble both in the United States and in the world. But McCarthy's success in capturing headlines and terrorizing individuals and agencies reflected widespread public anxiety fed by, among other things, proof that prominent officials of the Roosevelt administration had been secret Soviet agents. Alger Hiss, Rusk's immediate predecessor in managing UN affairs in the State Department, had gone to the penitentiary.

To assuage public anxiety, the executive branch, Congress, and officials in state and local governments and in private bodies such as colleges and churches established rules and procedures that did in fact resemble earlier efforts to find witches or to punish heretics. Many rules and procedures inhibiting if not barring free speech remained commonplace in 1962.

Kennedy's father was a strong and an unrepentant supporter of McCarthy.

Kennedy, who moved from the House to the Senate after the election of 1952, was on good terms with McCarthy. Robert Kennedy went to work on McCarthy's staff. After finishing Harvard during World War II, he had served briefly in the Navy as an enlisted man and had just graduated from the University of Virginia Law School. After a row with McCarthy's chief staffer, Roy Cohn, he quit. He later worked with Senators who were critical of McCarthy and Cohn and helped draft a report that led to formal Senate censure of McCarthy in 1954, a censure that effectively ended McCarthy's career.

John Kennedy did not vote for or against the McCarthy censure. He was in a hospital undergoing a series of life-threatening operations to arrest one of his disabilities—spinal degeneration that kept him in constant and increasing pain. He could, of course, have recorded a position by pairing with another Senator. He was the only Democrat not to do so. This fact, together with his brother's work for McCarthy, helped to keep alive suspicion of John Kennedy—like father, like son, like brother.

By October 1962 McCarthyism itself would seem far in the past. Memories of its virulence, however, persisted. So did public anxiety. A hit film of 1962, John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate,* starring Kennedy's friend Frank Sinatra, was based on the premise that Communists could manipulate American political processes through their own mind-controlled puppets. When Kennedy and his advisers talked at the White House about possible public reactions to one option or another, many of them had in the backs of their minds hysteria such as that which had risen during the first decade of the Cold War. This recollection would increase their sensitivity to opinions such as those of LeMay.

During the 1950s the careers of Kennedy and Stevenson had intersected again. After World War II, Stevenson had gone back to Illinois to practice law, oversee a small-town newspaper, and manage a farm in the village of Libertyville. (His friend George Ball observed: "He had the normal equipment of any good farmer of the area: a tennis court, a swimming pool, a horse or two, and a few sheep.")[27] In 1948 the Illinois Democratic machine enlisted Stevenson as its clean-government candidate for governor. Eloquent, obviously sincere, and running against a Republican tarred by scandal, he swept the state. Though Stevenson wanted to seek a second term as governor, Truman and others talked him into becoming the presidential nominee. Again, he was eloquent and obviously sincere. All the Kennedys supported him. He garnered many more votes than Truman had in 1948, but not enough to avoid being overrun by Eisenhower.

Four years later, Stevenson was again the candidate against Eisenhower. Before the Democratic convention, Kennedy decided to seek the vice-presidential nomination. He had in the meantime again achieved celebrity through a book. Titled *Profiles in Courage*, it sketched biographies of Senators, from the early republic on, who had risked their careers for unpopular principles. Kennedy's work on it had kept him occupied while recuperating from back surgery. It not only became a best-seller; it won a Pulitzer Prize. Given his failure to vote on the McCarthy censure, his book title provoked from the Democratic left a rebuke that he needed less profile and more courage. (Eleanor Roosevelt was usually the person credited.)

For the vice-presidential nomination, Kennedy's chief opponent was Senator Estes Kefauver, who had unsuccessfully opposed Stevenson in the presidential primaries. Stevenson disappointed Kennedy by deciding to support neither candidate but to let the delegates make their own choice, and Kefauver won. Robert Kennedy joined Stevenson's campaign train and suffered even greater disappointment by watching the candidate in action. "Stevenson just did not seem to be able to make any kind of decision," he commented later.[28]

At some point after Stevenson's second defeat, Kennedy decided that he would try himself to be the Democratic presidential nominee in 1960. This effort would preoccupy him and his brother from then until the 1960 election.

In the course of seeking the presidency, Kennedy confronted three clusters of issues that would become central concerns for him after being elected and that would bear critically on his management of the missile crisis. Their catchwords were "the strategic balance," "European security," and "the Third World."

"Strategic balance" referred to the relationship between the U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals.[29] The years between Hiroshima and Kennedy's swearing-in as President saw dizzying advances in nuclear weapons and related military technologies. Having cracked the secret of making bombs based on the power of nuclear fission, scientists and engineers in both the West and the Soviet Union turned successfully to exploiting the vastly greater potential energy of nuclear fusion. The blast of an atomic bomb, a fission weapon, had been calculated in kilotons, each kiloton equivalent to 1,000 tons of TNT. The blast of a hydrogen bomb, a fusion weapon, was calculated in megatons, each equivalent to 1,000 kilotons, or a million tons of TNT.

Before long, both Soviet and Western weapons laboratories became able to mass-produce both fission and fusion weapons and to increase explosive power while reducing both size and weight. The bombs used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been huge, hand-crafted devices, so delicate and so difficult to

engineer that it had been hard to imagine their ever existing in large numbers. The Hiroshima bomb had been 10 feet long, weighed almost 5 tons, and, to be loaded in an airplane and armed to explode, required a crew of experts, working several days. By the time of the missile crisis, bombs twenty times more powerful were 3 feet long, shaped like ordinary TNT bombs, and easily slapped onto the wing of a ground-based or carrier-based fighter-bomber.[30]

During the 1950s both camps increased the range, speed, and accuracy with which they could deliver nuclear weapons. In 1957 Soviet Sputnik rockets put objects in space orbit, demonstrating an apparent capability for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), which would be in flight only about thirty minutes and against which there was no known defense.

The Sputnik flights sparked panicky debate in the United States about an impending "missile gap." Democrats, with Kennedy one of the leaders, charged that Eisenhower administration penny-pinching had allowed the Soviets to gain a lead that not only compromised containment but also possibly jeopardized national survival.

To appease critics, the Eisenhower administration stepped up work on high-thrust rockets and large-capacity reentry vehicles. It was for the same purpose and also to placate allies that the administration arranged to place intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) abroad—Thors in Britain, Jupiters in Italy and Turkey. By the time of the 1960 presidential election, the Eisenhower administration had moved far along in development of several models of ICBM, with a solid-fueled Minuteman the most promising. It was also well along on Polaris, a missile of intermediate range but classified as an SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) rather than an IRBM.

As of 1960 the actual nuclear arsenal of the United States was enormous. That of the Soviet Union, according to calculations by the U.S. intelligence community, was smaller but also huge. With competition spurred by the Sputniks, the arsenals grew almost by the day. When Eisenhower yielded the presidency to Kennedy, the United States would have around 18,000 nuclear weapons. The most powerful were 10-megaton bombs carried by intercontinental bombers (B-52s). The least powerful were tactical weapons that could be fired from 8-inch guns or even from jeep-mounted mortars. The gross yield of all these weapons probably equaled one million times that of the bomb that had obliterated Hiroshima, dry roasted most of its 85,000 people, and irradiated tens of thousands more. Though U.S. intelligence analysts doubted that the total Soviet arsenal yet matched America's, they had no question that the Soviets, too, possessed what critics already decried as "overkill." To generals