The Operational Code of John F. Kennedy During the Cuban Missile Crisis: A Comparison of Public and Private Rhetoric

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This study examines the manner in which the Cuban missile crisis affected the belief system of President John F. Kennedy. The analysis uses data derived from primary source materials that have become available only in the last 2 years, in addition to well-known public statements by the president. The Verbs in Context System (VICS) was used to generate insights into how Kennedy's operational code differed across sources and changed during the period of the crisis. The results provide evidence of Kennedy's initial private belligerence and provisional support for the "Gettysburg thesis" while calling into question some other potential interpretations of the effects of the crisis on the president's beliefs.

KEY WORDS: John F. Kennedy, Cuban missile crisis, operational code, content analysis, ExCom transcripts

The Cuban missile crisis is generally thought to have brought the world closer to nuclear destruction than any event before or since. As a result, it occupies a unique place in the history of American foreign policy and superpower relations in the Cold War era. Scholars from three generations and virtually all social science disciplines have examined the crisis from innumerable angles. As the temporal restrictions on document classification have expired and as the archives of the former Soviet Union are opened and explored, the emergence of new information from domestic and foreign sources has continued to fuel academic interest in the events of the autumn of 1962.

In this study I examine the manner in which those events affected the belief system of the most prominent figure in the crisis from the American perspective—President John F. Kennedy. The analysis is based on evidence derived from primary source materials that have become available only in the last 2 years—transcripts...
of private meetings that took place between 16 and 29 October—plus well-known public statements made by the president. I use the Verbs in Context System (VICS) to generate insights into how Kennedy’s operational code (see Schafer’s introductory essay in this symposium for a discussion of VICS; see also Walker, Schafer, & Young, 1998) differed across sources and changed during the period of the crisis.

I note four patterns that recur in the qualitative historical literature and, after defining them in terms of belief change, conduct an analysis aimed at exploring the veracity of the observations. One pattern is the long-standing assertion that the Cuban missile crisis was the “Gettysburg of the Cold War”—a point in time when the confronting parties faced fully the potential horrors they had unleashed by their actions and, after some sober reflection, took a step backward from the edge of the precipice of war (Sorensen, 1965). A second, contradictory, pattern is the seemingly overconfident convictions displayed later in U.S. foreign policy regarding the utility of coercive diplomacy (George, Hall, & Simons, 1971). A third pattern concerns the belief change that Kennedy may have exhibited as the crisis unfolded. Sorensen (1965) and White (1992) both noted that throughout the earliest stages of the crisis, Kennedy was angered by the Soviet actions. However, Schlesinger (1965) indicated that, although Kennedy was initially furious at Soviet Premier Khrushchev and Ambassador Dobrynin, his demeanor changed almost immediately to that of a sober and calculating tactician. This raises the question of when Kennedy’s initial belligerence abated.

A fourth pattern is one that has only recently been identified by comparison with these others. It is the disparity between the public and private aspects of Kennedy’s handling of the crisis. A newly accepted view of the crisis, generated from recently available data, holds that Kennedy negotiated in a quid pro quo manner (or would have been willing to negotiate) the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba in exchange for the removal of U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey (Blight & Welch, 1989). Although the Cuban missile crisis has long been understood as consisting of an American ultimatum and a Soviet withdrawal (Abel, 1966), this newer perspective raises questions concerning the difference between the public and private conduct of crisis management and, potentially, the attendant beliefs involved. This difference merits a deeper investigation.

Patterns and Expectations

Immediately after the crisis, observers characterized it as a textbook case of the appropriate use of force (Abel, 1966; Schlesinger, 1965; Sorensen, 1965). The United States, it was understood, held a preponderance of conventional forces in the area of dispute. The Soviets were presented with an ultimatum of either withdrawing their missiles or preparing to fight a nuclear war. Having expressed their belief that the United States was “too liberal to fight,” the Soviets were surprised and backed down when confronted with an American resolve to use force (Sorensen, 1965, p. 669). Qualitative examinations of the public rhetoric support
the interpretation that Kennedy made a stand, the opponents faced each other “eyeball to eyeball,” to quote Dean Rusk, “and the other fellow just blinked” (White, 1997, p. 120).

However, more recent revelations have indicated that, privately, Kennedy had been willing to negotiate a more cooperative settlement including a withdrawal of Jupiter missiles in Turkey (Blight & Welch, 1989). In a letter sent on 28 October 1962 and never officially received by the Kennedy administration (but released from Russian archives in 1992), Khrushchev intimated that his concessions “took into account” the American agreement to resolve the Jupiter missile problem (Sorensen, 1965, p. 56). Robert Kennedy’s secret meeting with Dobrynin to discuss this arrangement has also come to be part of the historical record. Early public histories, including Robert Kennedy’s (1969) own memoirs, described a very different set of events (which must certainly be consistent with theories of impression management).

These newer qualitative analyses predict a disparity between Kennedy’s public utterances and private rhetoric. In the case of the missile crisis, it would appear from the historical accounts that the nature of the U.S.-Soviet relationship was much more cooperative than one would expect from an examination of the public record. We should expect this difference in public and private rhetoric to manifest itself in the VICS indices in the following ways: Kennedy’s private view of the political universe (P-1) should be more cooperative than his public one (hypothesis 1). He should also be more optimistic about the realization of political goals (P-2) in private than in public (hypothesis 2). If the Americans and Soviets were secretly negotiating a compromise, we should also expect (hypothesis 3) Kennedy’s private strategy (I-1) to be more cooperative than its public counterpart, and (hypothesis 4) the same should be true of his tactics (I-2).

A second pattern suggested by some analysts stands in partial contrast to the simpler public-private dichotomy outlined above. Initially, these scholars hold, Kennedy was privately belligerent—a condition sparked largely by anger at what he perceived to be Soviet attempts to deceive him—and his focus at the outset was on the air strike option, because of his concern over the near-operational status of the missiles (Schlesinger, 1965; Sorensen, 1965). But his initial hostility gave way, at some point during the course of the crisis, to a more flexible position (White, 1992, 1997). Contrary to his initial leanings, he opted for the least provocative response and then, despite his earlier rejection of the position forwarded first by U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, moved toward a negotiated resolution (May & Zelikow, 1997; White, 1997). This pattern should manifest itself most clearly in a shift in Kennedy’s operational code over time. That is, his view of the political universe (P-1) should be initially hostile (hypothesis 5), his initial optimism (P-2) should be low (hypothesis 6), and we should also expect (hypothesis 7) his strategic (I-1) and (hypothesis 8) tactical propensities (I-2) to be initially conflictual. According to Schlesinger (1965), Kennedy’s shift away from an angry response toward a reasoned strategy occurred rapidly. Each of these four VICS indices
should almost immediately become more cooperative (hypotheses 9 to 12) and continue to do so as the crisis progresses (hypotheses 13 to 16).

A third pattern is the Gettysburg thesis. Had leaders both in the United States and the Soviet Union come to recognize that they had moved dangerously close to the brink of global destruction? Kennedy’s response to this question seems most clearly articulated 8 months later, during his American University speech. In the speech he called for a reexamination of attitudes toward the Soviet Union and argued that we should no longer feel “gripped by forces beyond our control” (Kennedy, 1964, p. 460). Had Kennedy’s beliefs started to shift in this direction in October? Did he arrive at a new attitude toward the Soviets then? Had he felt the situation spiraling out of control during the crisis, and had this realization changed his beliefs?

Much of what we might hypothesize from the Gettysburg thesis is consistent with the pattern detailed above (more cooperatively valenced self and other attributions, and a cooperative shift in strategy and tactics). In addition to these beliefs, three others are of particular note: the predictability of the political universe (P-3), control over historical development (P-4), and the role of chance (P-5). We should expect lower scores later in the crisis on the predictability (hypothesis 17) and control (hypothesis 18) indices, and a higher score on the role-of-chance indicator than at the outset of the crisis (hypothesis 19).

The “overconfidence thesis” stands in contrast to the Gettysburg thesis. Certainly there was great relief among the U.S. decision-makers as the crisis was resolved. Was this relief coupled with pride in making the right decision and confidence in their ability to manipulate their capabilities and influence their opponents? We have been told that some policymakers learned the utility of coercive diplomacy (George et al., 1971). They perceived that the escalation of pressure on adversaries worked in this instance and that, eventually, when met with the appropriate degree of threat or force, any adversary would back down—even a superpower. In the mind of at least one observer, the Cuban missile crisis “bequeathed to U.S. policymakers a faith in the strategy of escalation and perhaps a misplaced belief in their own infallibility” that possibly contributed to the deepening involvement in Vietnam several years later (White, 1997, p. 152). If Kennedy did become overconfident, we would expect hypotheses 17, 18, and 19 to be reversed. The predictability index should be higher at the end than at the outset of the crisis, as should the locus-of-control indicator, whereas the role-of-chance indicator should be lower.

**Sampling**

To test these hypotheses, I first divided the period of the crisis into phases based on the important turning points in Kennedy’s state of mind according to the secondary literature. For the purposes of this study, these turning points are (1) the evening of 18 October, when Kennedy appeared to settle on the blockade as a
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course of action; (2) the morning of 24 october, when the blockade was imple-
mented, nuclear war loomed, and the executive committee (excom)\(^1\) waited for
the soviet response; and (3) 28 october, when khrushchev’s broadcast signaled
the end of the crisis. these time points divide the timeline of the crisis into four
phases.\(^2\)

i define phase 1 as the “pre-decision” phase. it began in late august when
evidence of soviet conventional force buildups and rumors of missiles focused
kennedy’s attention on cuba and his suspicions on the soviets. during this phase,
up to the point of decision, it is my contention that kennedy’s beliefs would be in
a state of flux because of some uncertainty regarding soviet actions and motives.

by the evening of 18 october, the process of problem recognition was virtually
complete. the investigation into khrushchev’s motives had been extensive. the
excom deliberations had identified soviet designs on berlin as the likely well-
spring for their actions, and this belief was among those central to kennedy’s
decision not to take a more forceful or provocative action (may & zelikow, 1997).

phase 2, the “decision” phase of the crisis, was entered near midnight on the
evening of 18 october, as kennedy dictated into an oval office tape machine
the administration’s plans to implement the blockade in 2 days (may & zelikow,
1997). the blockade would not actually be announced until 22 october and
implemented the morning of 24 october. however, after this series of early
meetings, the focus of the excom discussion shifted. instead of being dominated
by a discussion of what actions ought to be taken, the participants began focusing

\(^1\) the core members of the excom were: vice president lyndon johnson, secretary of state dean rusk,
under secretary of state george ball, latin american assistant secretary edwin martin, deputy
under secretary alexis johnson, former soviet ambassador llewellyn thompson, secretary of
defense robert mcnamara, deputy secretary roswell gilpatric, assistant secretary paul nitze and
chairman of the joint chiefs of staff general maxwell taylor, cia director john mccone, attorney
general robert kennedy, treasury secretary douglas dillion, white house aides mcgeorge bundy
and theodore sorenson. occasional participants and visitors included: dean acheson, adlai stevenson,
robert lovett, charles bohlen, marshall carter, arthur lundahl, kenneth o’donnell, henry
fowler, roger hillman, edward mcdermott, sidney graybeal, general curtis lemay and other
military leaders, and several members of the u.s. senate and congress (sorenson, 1965, p. 674–675;

\(^2\) these phases parallel largely the phase designations made by guttieri, wallace, and suedfeld (1995)
with one exception, the end of the pre-crisis or pre-decision phase. these authors, using the same data,
focused on the role of stress in patterns of cognition and therefore placed emphasis on the discovery
of missiles as a stress-inducing development. for reasons discussed in this section, from a belief
systems perspective this date is not as important as the points at which the problem first becomes
salient and a decision is made (although the arrival of the missiles shortened the elapsed time between
these two points). earlier attempts to conduct content analyses of either the mc Bundy transcripts or
meeting memoranda, by purkitt (1992) and anderson (1987), have also focused on temporal changes
in excom meeting dynamics but have been severely limited by data availability. by focusing on 2
days of meetings at the beginning and end of the crisis (16 and 27 october), purkitt adopted an early-
versus late-crisis approach. anderson’s study, the earliest of these attempts, used memoranda gener-
ated by 3 days of meetings late in the crisis (25 to 27 october) and contained no early samples—a
limitation that anderson correctly predicted would be overcome in time.
on how to implement the various plans (White, 1997). In particular, contingent military preparations, diplomatic maneuvers in the Organization of American States, and likely Soviet responses occupied Kennedy and the discussants.

This second phase ended, and phase 3 began, on 24 October. As we have been told on numerous occasions, on this day the superpowers came closer to nuclear war than at any other time. As Soviet freighters steamed toward Cuba, joined by a contingent of submarines, and American naval vessels moved to intercept them, the ExCom waited for news. Robert Kennedy observed, “These few minutes were the time of gravest concern for the President. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? Was it our error?” (Kennedy, 1969, p. 69). As the president appeared to question his decision, “His face seemed drawn and his eyes pained, almost gray” (Kennedy, 1969, p. 70). As news arrived concerning the actions of the Soviet ships, tensions eased. Many felt as if they had dodged a bullet. Kennedy decided to match Khrushchev’s caution with his own (Schlesinger, 1965). In this “post-decision” phase, Kennedy and Khrushchev corresponded frequently and the basis for a settlement began to emerge. Khrushchev’s statement on 28 October, indicating that the missiles would be withdrawn, marks the onset of phase 4, the “resolution” phase. This phase ended on 20 November, when Kennedy’s press conference remarks indicated that Khrushchev had kept his promise.

The record of Kennedy’s public statements and the transcripts of the private ExCom meetings were examined for each of these periods to determine which utterances satisfied the 1,500-word minimum length required by the VICS sampling criteria. Each of the transcripts of the ExCom meetings was examined to generate an estimate of the quantity of the discussion that Kennedy alone generated. Virtually all of the transcribed meetings satisfied the 1,500-word minimum for Kennedy content. Those meetings where Kennedy’s participation amounted to less than 1,500 words, and the private recording that he made in the Oval Office on 18 October, were excluded from the sampling frame.3

In the private sphere, more than one utterance satisfied the length criteria in three of the four periods. In the public sphere, only the first period offered more than one utterance that could be coded. The 13 September press conference was

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3 Although the recorded monologue approaches the 1,500-word minimum for use of the VICS method, it was excluded because, unlike the other recordings, Kennedy was not in a group setting. The absence of advisors makes this recording qualitatively distinct. In the interest of maximizing comparability across phases and limiting the introduction of confounding factors into the analysis, the private recording was excluded. Public utterances were collected from the National Archives (Kennedy, 1962, 1963, 1964). The transcripts of the private ExCom meetings were drawn from May and Zelikow (1997). This book presents carefully transcribed accounts of the contents of all of the publicly released tapes that Kennedy made of the meetings surrounding this crisis (16 to 29 October). The efforts of the authors in getting these transcripts made—including hiring transcription services, audio specialists, and court recorders and bringing in outside experts, including historians and former staff members, to clarify details—far exceeds any comparable efforts to date. The May and Zelikow transcriptions must be considered the most complete data set available of Kennedy’s private utterances during the crisis.
chosen over Kennedy’s 4 September statement using random means. For the ExCom meetings, a decision was made to sample by day (rather than by meeting) in order to control for the possibility that the day’s earlier meetings were devoted to intelligence assessment and dissemination, whereas the later meetings were more focused on assessments and discussion. After a day was randomly selected, all of that day’s meetings were selected and treated as separate measures. Each utterance was content-analyzed using the VICS method. I coded all of the utterances, and a 20% sample of each of the utterances was randomly selected and coded by a second coder with equivalent training and experience with the method. The total percentage agreement score for all utterances is .88.

Figure 1 illustrates the documents selected for coding and the phase designations on a timeline. Note that the third (post-decision) phase is without any public utterances. Although two White House statements were issued during this time, no statements were actually communicated by Kennedy. Questions of authorship aside, even if these two White House statements were combined, they would not satisfy the minimum size criteria set by VICS. As a result, no public or private utterances were coded for that period, leaving only three periods for comparison.

Analysis and Discussion

Table I presents the results of seven separate two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs), one for each of the operational code indices for which hypotheses were generated. These analyses included the phase, the source of rhetoric (public or private), and the interaction of phase and source of rhetoric as sources of variance. Although the ANOVA results indicate the presence of significant differences between Kennedy’s public and private rhetoric and differences across phases, the F scores alone do not indicate the nature of this difference.

As the graphs in Figure 2 illustrate, these differences appear to be the opposite of what was hypothesized (hypotheses 1 to 4). The scores for strategy (I-1) and tactics (I-2) are consistently more negative in Kennedy’s private rhetoric throughout the crisis. The political universe (P-1) and optimism (P-2) indices, although roughly equivalent at the outset of the crisis, become substantially more positive in Kennedy’s public rhetoric as the crisis progresses. Moreover, because none of the interaction effects are significant, we can state with some confidence that the pattern of private and public difference that is indicated by these indices holds across phases. Contrary to hypotheses 1 to 4, Kennedy was on the whole more negative in his private rhetoric in all phases.

Why was Kennedy’s private rhetoric more conflictually valenced? One explanation could be the nature of discussions. Kennedy and his advisors were often involved in crafting contingency plans for worst-case scenarios. Their loss-prevention perspective often led to the consideration of some extreme options, such as invasion, nuclear retaliation, and even all-out war. There was little discussion regarding more positive, goal-oriented approaches to negotiated settlement. The
Figure 1. Sampling frame. The private statements are from transcripts of ExCom meetings (those selected for coding are underlined).
Table I. Comparison of VICS Indices for Elements of President Kennedy's Operational Code, by Phase, Source, and Interaction of Phase and Source, 12 September to 20 November 1962

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VICS index</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Phase x Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F(3, 1)</td>
<td>F(3, 1)</td>
<td>F(3, 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Philosophical questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-1. Nature of the political universe</td>
<td>8.74*</td>
<td>7.22*</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-2. Realization of political goals</td>
<td>6.30*</td>
<td>7.88*</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-3. Predictability of the political universe</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-4. Control over historical development</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>9.69*</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-5. Role of chance</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-1. Approach to goals (strategy)</td>
<td>15.04*</td>
<td>59.12***</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-2. Pursuit of goals (tactics)</td>
<td>11.41**</td>
<td>34.06***</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01; N = 9, one-tailed tests.

result of this pattern is a high frequency of negative self and other attributions. A second explanation relates to the issue of accountability. Kennedy could comfortably express the full range of his views in private. This included voicing his anger at Khrushchev and his uncertainty about Soviet motives. He could not articulate these beliefs in public, where he might be held accountable for them.

The second set of hypotheses relates to allegations of Kennedy's initial hostility and anger over Khrushchev’s actions and the time at which this hostility abated. The results of the analysis indicate that Kennedy did appear belligerent during the earliest phase of the crisis. This is consistent with the expectations generated from the qualitative literature and expressed in hypotheses 5 to 8. However, as shown in Figure 2, these VICS indices demonstrate relatively little change in Kennedy’s beliefs between the pre-decision and decision phases, regardless of source. Virtually all of the observed changes in Kennedy’s beliefs appear to have occurred after the crisis had entered the resolution phase. Kennedy indeed appeared initially belligerent, but this belligerence was only minimally diminished until the crisis was all but resolved. This observation, which contradicts hypotheses 9 to 12 but confirms hypotheses 13 to 16, leads naturally toward the examination of lessons drawn from the crisis and the final hypotheses that relate to the nature and trajectory of Kennedy’s beliefs at the close of events.

In terms of lessons drawn, we are presented with two very different and contradictory possibilities: the Gettysburg and overconfidence theses. The generally cooperative trend in Kennedy’s main philosophical and instrumental beliefs

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4 Separate one-way ANOVA analyses comparing phases 1 and 2, first for private utterances only and then for all utterances combined, revealed no significant differences between the VICS scores. A similar analysis using only public utterances cannot be conducted because of the lack of degrees of freedom (N = 2).
Figure 2. Estimated marginal means, by phase and source of VICS indices, for Kennedy's main philosophical and instrumental beliefs.
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toward the end of the crisis would appear to confirm part of the pattern that would be associated with the Gettysburg thesis. However, the indices for predictability of the political universe (P-3), locus of control (P-4), and role of chance (P-5) were designated as the ones that would most clearly indicate which of these lessons Kennedy might have taken to heart.

As the graphs for these VICS scores indicate (Figure 3), the general trend appears to support the idea that the views that Kennedy expounded in his speech at American University were formed at the end of the crisis. The predictability of the political universe (P-3) declines as the crisis ends, as does the locus-of-control variable (P-4), indicating that Kennedy felt less in control of the U.S.-Soviet relationship after the crisis. The role-of-chance indicator (P-5) predictably trends higher as the crisis progresses (peaking in mid-crisis). These results are consistent with hypotheses 17, 18, and 19, respectively. Although none of these differences across phases is statistically significant, I believe—given the coincident direction of the trends—that we can exclude the possibility that Kennedy was overconfident and interpret the results as provisional confirmation of the Gettysburg thesis.

Conclusions

The results from the VICS analysis of the nature of Kennedy’s belief change during the Cuban missile crisis and at its conclusion confirm Kennedy’s private hostility at the outset of the crisis. They also suggest, contrary to some accounts, that there was not a great change in Kennedy’s approach to the crisis in the early stages. Little difference was detected between the pre-decision and decision phases in Kennedy’s private rhetoric. Although he may have chosen the blockade path, Kennedy appeared willing to continue to consider other more confrontational options well into the crisis. The results also suggest that Kennedy’s beliefs at the end of the crisis were on a trajectory consistent with, and perhaps leading to, the sentiments expressed in the American University speech. This provides provisional support for the Gettysburg thesis and some disconfirming evidence regarding the overconfidence thesis. It also raises some interesting counterfactual questions regarding the course of U.S. foreign policy had Kennedy continued in office (Fearon, 1991; Tetlock & Belkin, 1996).

The study also provides some insights into the public/private rhetoric debate. The absence of significant interaction terms in the ANOVA analysis and the patterns of parallel lines that appear in the graphical plots, particularly the instrumental measures (I-1 and I-2), suggest that although there may be differences between the actual values of the indices generated using the different types of

5 This echoes Anderson’s (1987) findings that the ExCom was still engaged in “decision”-oriented behaviors (task descriptions and the consideration of alternatives) well into the post-decision phase and was not solely focused on the consequences of past actions.
Figure 3. Estimated marginal means, by phase and source of VICS indices, for predictability, control, and role of chance in Kennedy's beliefs.
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rhetoric, the general trends they define may be similar. This suggests that changes in the VICS scores, rather than the values of the scores themselves, should be the focus of future analyses. It also suggests that even though private and public statements both can serve as the basis for an examination of belief change using the VICS method, the context-sensitive nature of the indices means that special attention must be paid to the nature of the rhetoric and its source when comparing across individuals or over time.

The analysis also generates some questions for future research. The first concerns the post-decision phase. Although no utterances were coded in this phase because of the lack of public statements, the histories of the crisis suggest that this phase was the most volatile in terms of tactical changes, interaction with the opponents, and possible learning. Kennedy had decided on the utility of a diplomatic approach around 24 October, but it was not until later that a trade of missiles was approved. The intervening series of letters exchanged between Kennedy and Khrushchev may provide an alternative basis for comparison between types of rhetoric.

Another area that merits further investigation is the role that the president’s interaction with his advisors played in shaping his beliefs. A considerable portion of the secondary literature on the crisis concerns itself with the nature of group deliberations and the crisis outcome. How different were the beliefs expressed by the hawks from those articulated by the doves? How did Kennedy’s beliefs reflect the advice he was getting? Did his statements affect the pattern of beliefs expressed by others? As May and Zelikow (1997) noted, this set of transcripts constitutes the most complete data set available on how an elite group of policymakers arrived at a set of important decisions. There is a need for further systematic analysis of these data.

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