



Thirteen Days: A Political Reading

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Abstract

Thirteen Days is a historical political thriller, reflecting John F. Kennedy's leadership characteristics and the decision-making process during the Cuban Missile Crisis, close to reality. The study explains the connection between fictional and real and the decision-making process through the similarities and differences between film scenes and real images. In this sense, it examines John F. Kennedy's decision-making process and leadership structure using both international relations theories and film review methods. The film has been created with a historical perspective, the character traits, crisis and resolution processes of the American president and his small group members, as well as the actors in the Soviet bloc. In addition, evaluating the attitudes and approaches of the Kennedy government and Kennedy's leadership structure are clearly reflected to the audience in the film. This study contributes to the understanding of international relations by explaining Small Thinking Decision and Rational Actor Model theories with the cooperation of the field of international relations and cinema. The sum up, to compare of film scenes and real elements is also important in terms of editing the parts that appear as black-boxes during the crisis and interpreting them close to reality.

Keywords: R.A.M; Kennedy Administration; Thirteen Days; Historical Political Thriller



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Introduction

The Cuban Missile Crisis is one of the important conflicts that brought the world's two great powers and the whole world to the brink of war after the Second World War. There are feature films on both sides of this crisis, which resulted in both diplomatic and rational approaches and negotiations through the UN. The film *Thirteen Days* is important because of how the decision-making mechanism works and reflects the processes in international relations. In this sense, it is important to specify the historical process from the beginning to the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in terms of revealing the subject of the film and the reason for choosing the film in this study¹. In this context, the first beginning of the Cuban missile crisis began on October 15, 1962, when the American U-2 spy planes discovered and secretly photographed the missile launchers in Cuba. President Kennedy did not want this information to leak at the first stage and they met with his advisors and discussed how to act in the face of the problem. *Thirteen Days*, translated into Turkish as "The President's Men", is about the meetings held with consultations and the critical 13 days in the Cuban crisis. The events and developments in the thirteen days are listed below in chronological order.

Day 1: The first beginning of the Cuban missile crisis, the discovery and covert photography of missile launchers by American U-2 spy planes on October 15, 1962,

Day 2: The onset of the Cuban crisis on October 16 and the archiving of the photographs of the missiles detected by the U-2 planes, on the same day President Kennedy convened the executive committee in the capital and evaluated the precautionary options that America could take.

Day 3: Detection of the first segment of SS-5 IRBM missiles in Cuba on 17 October,

Day 4: Meeting of President Kennedy with the Soviet Foreign Minister on October 18, 1962; President Kennedy states in Cuba that they cannot tolerate Soviet missiles. The Soviet Foreign Minister denied the existence of these weapons.

Day 5: Discussion with President Kennedy, Secretary of Defense McNamara, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on October 19, 1962, about what military options might be.

Day 6: On October 20, 1962, President Kennedy arrives in the capital to discuss the discovery of additional Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Day 7: October 21, 1962, President Kennedy blockades Cuba,

Day 8: On October 22, 1962, President Kennedy addressed the people of the United States and announced the naval blockade plan to Cuba. On the same day, the US military alert level was raised to DEFCON 3. Cuban leader Castro mobilized all the forces of Cuba.

Day 9: On October 23, 1962, OAS (Organization of American States) declared that it supported the decision to quarantine Cuba. At the same time, it was seen in the reconnaissance photographs that the Soviet Missiles were ready to launch. The discussion of diplomatic efforts at the UN and the vote by the US organization took place today when McNamara and Kennedy discussed their confrontation options and strategies.

Day 10: On Wednesday, October 24, 1962, intense moves were discussed for the USA. Although the Soviet ships were approaching the quarantine line, a radio message came from Moscow to hold their position. On the US side, on the one hand, civil defense options are being evaluated, on the other hand, planning is being made against the Soviet intervention in Berlin. President Kennedy concluded that if the invasion occurred within the next ten days, the missile base crews in Cuba would fire at least some of the missiles at US targets. He receives a detailed briefing on the new reconnaissance photos from Cuba and discussed the need to disperse the planes at the Florida base in the event of an attack by Cuban-based MIGs. Meanwhile, McNamara pointed out that the ships approaching the quarantine zone were monitored by a Soviet submarine and the dangers of this situation.

Day 11: On October 25, 1962, Adlai Stevenson, the US ambassador to the UN, confronted the Soviets at the UN, but they refused to respond. On the same day, DEFCON 2 was started, and the movement of ships towards the quarantine line and possible US interventions were reviewed.

Day 12: On October 26, 1962, Khrushchev's letter, containing the information that the Soviet missiles would be removed from Cuba, reached the United States if President Kennedy gave a guarantee that the United States would not openly invade Cuba. On the other hand, it was reported by the CIA that the activities at the missile site continued and accelerated. That same day, Robert Kennedy and the Soviet ambassador Dobrynin met in secret and agreed by phone with the president that the withdrawal of US missiles from Turkey could be negotiated as part of a comprehensive agreement. On the same day, Khrushchev receives a telegram from Castro calling for a nuclear first strike against the United States should it invade Cuba.

Day 13: On 27 October 1962, two U-2 spy planes were shot down. While one of them was flying over Russia, the other was shot down in Cuba. A second letter EX-COMM received from Khrushchev; In addition to his promise to the public that he will not invade Cuba, it includes that the USA will remove its missiles from Türkiye.

Day 14: The Cuban crisis ended on October 28, 1962. That day, Khrushchev announced on the Moscow radio that the Soviet missiles in Cuba had been dismantled and that they had given up their insistence on removing the US missiles from Türkiye.

Day 15: On October 29, 1962, President Kennedy allowed US ships to stay in the quarantine line and continue low-level flights. The complete end of the crisis is on 21 November 1962. More than

a month after the onset of the crisis, after several weeks of tense negotiations with Khrushchev at the UN, the Soviet IL-28 agreed to withdraw the nuclear Soviet bombers from Cuba, and in response, President Kennedy ended the quarantine (Cartelon, 1998).

Considering the above historical perspective, in this study, US President John F. Kennedy and Small Group thinking Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis are discussed. The operation of the decision making process after Kennedy's news of the crisis constitutes the main subject of this article and a comparison is made between the scene images taken from the film and the archive photographs.

Erişen (2012), draws attention to the importance of analysing individuals' attitudes, judgments, and decision-making behaviours in order to understand, the foreign policy in the International Relations literature. Emphasizing the importance of discovering how individuals think about their personality traits, Erişen, expresses the connection between the experience, prejudice, motivation, and beliefs of the leader, who acts as a decision maker, with the decision processes. At the same time, he states that the perception of the leader as alone is not sufficient in the decision-making process and underlines the effect of the group members in the decision-making mechanism in the context of the finalization of the decisions. Discussions and results in group thinking reveal the character traits of leaders and decision-makers, and group thought makes a judgment based on the leader's character traits. In this context, there are different approaches in

the International Relations literature depending on the fact that leaders are not alone and the structure of groupthink and decision-making processes.

In the international relations literature, there are three different structures for organizing consultant systems: formalist, competitive and collaborative approaches. The first approach has a hierarchical structure and individuals in the group cannot challenge. They accepted the decision and obeyed. In the competitive approach, it can be said that there is a kind of cooperation between the president and his advisers, and conflicts are possible.

Rational Actor Model (RAM) consist of rational policies, and it cover the black-box. This model refers to decision makers and states as black boxes. In this sense, it is based on the argument that every state's decision-making process is rational. Leaders and decision makers are the main theme.

When leaders make decisions, they base their decisions on real findings, which put the country's interests first. This theory based on leaders' characteristic behaviour and attitude, realist theory depend on framework decision making process (Shahryarifar,2016). Therefore, the model allows for detailed foreign policy analysis at all levels. The decision-making process in RAM is evaluated in four stages. These; Objectives and Objectives, Determining the alternatives, evaluating the results of the alternatives and finally choosing the most effective decision to be implemented.

(Allison, 1999).

In addition, in the film review, it is seen that the Kennedy administration has a collegial approach. The second approach, the Collegial approach; it does not contain a hierarchical order, it is prone to teamwork, each individual in the group shares responsibility, produces alternatives and is open to new ideas and is oriented towards sound / reasonable decision-making. This way of working depends on how effectively the leader will lead. Although this system has the feature of performing well, it also has the feature of performing risky. In this sense, the management ability and personal characteristics of the leader are also important for the good performance of this approach.

Using the above approaches, in this study, it has been tried to be explained through the sample of *Thirteen Days*, which tells the Cuban crisis based on the Rational Actor Model (RAM) used by the Kennedy Government. The film was chosen as a sample because it is a historical political reality film that describes the decision-making process of the US administration during the Cuba Missile Crisis. In addition, the contribution of the film to the group decision-making analysis with the *Thirteen Days* film analysis method and its connection with reality, the fictional structure of the film is examined by comparing the actual photographs and the frames taken from the film.

Evaluation

The film shows how the US small-group decision making process during the Cuban crisis worked and how sensitive decisions were brainstormed within the group. As seen in the film, the target in the solution of the Cuban crisis; resolution of the crisis without causing nuclear war and ensuring the border security of the United States without losing prestige from this event. In this context, to determine the alternatives, consisting of sixteen people; Civilian group consisting of the President of the United States, the Secretary of Justice and the President's special assistant and political adviser, the vice president, the Secretary of Defence, the Secretary of State, the United Nations (UN) representative, the Director of the CIA, the Advisor to the National Security Agency, the Press Secretary, and the Chief of Staff, There is a military team consisting of the Air Force Commander, the Naval Forces Commander and the Land Forces Commander.

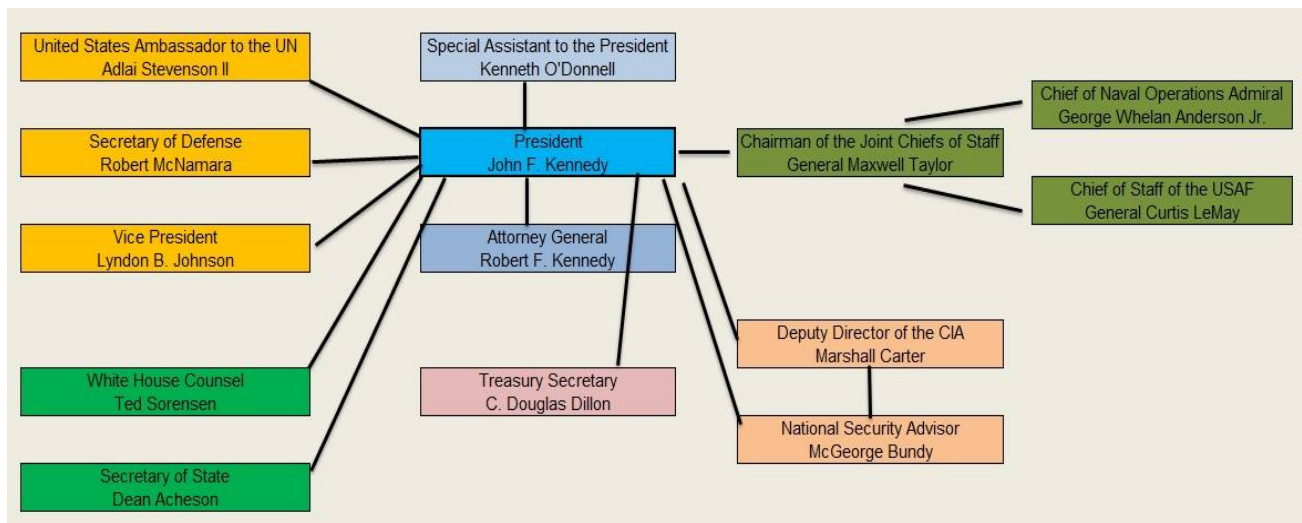


Figure 1 Kennedy Administration Small Groupthink Decision

One of the characteristics of the collegial structure is that they have equal mutual responsibility in generating ideas and strong discussions during brainstorming. Therefore, it is important that the leader is strong and that the final decisions are made by the leader. Confirming the accuracy of the information obtained in the decision-making process and making realistic interpretations that leave no room for doubt in the analysis of the information are important in the decision-making process in foreign policy, especially in times of crisis. In the Cuban Crisis, the information brought to President Kennedy by the NPIC of the National Security Agency created the perception that the missiles placed in Cuba threatened the United States. In order to get information about this situation, new photo shoots were made.

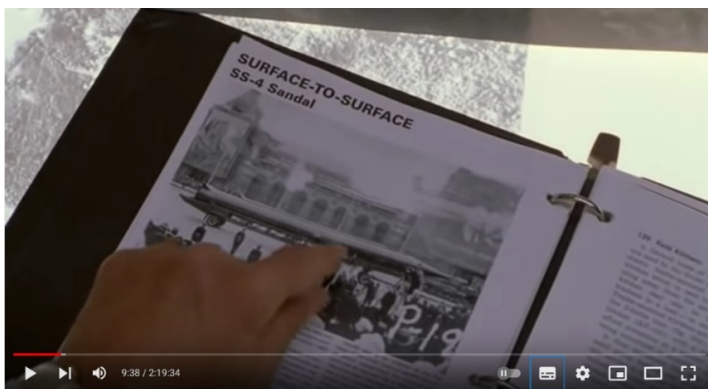


Figure 2 Frame from the Film

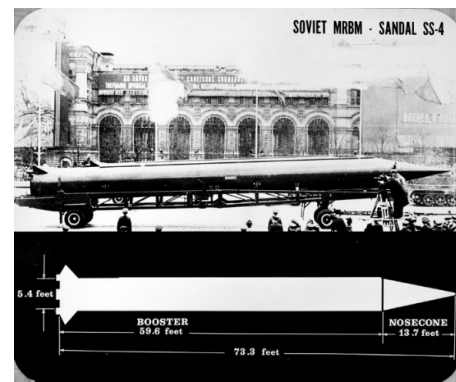


Figure 3 Real missile photograph

The missile photograph in the film is shown to President Kennedy from the catalogue in historical reality. In the real photograph, the image of the missile in the Kremlin square for the first time in 1962, that is, in the official parade in celebration of the October revolution that took place a year ago, is archived in the briefing file submitted to the president by the CIA (Briefing Board #10,

1962). In the film, President Kennedy met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union on the third day of the crisis to learn the purpose of placing the missiles after the photographs presented. The connection of the film with reality is also seen in this interview. Both in the film and on the date in question, although the questions open to interpretation were asked by Kennedy to the ambassador, no satisfactory answers were received. Thereupon, the decision-makers of the USA gathered in a black-box group to solve the problem and to produce an alternative. Although the meeting moment is shown exactly in these frames in reality and in the film, the images after the difference of opinion were reflected in the film with Roger Donaldson's fictionality and made a difference. Below are the actual photos and film frames of the first meeting. When the camera angle of the film is examined, it draws attention that the camera shoots busts in order to dramatize and emphasize the difference of opinion by emphasizing the facial expressions. However, in the film, the military-civilian divide and the defence minister who agrees with the soldiers, McNamara, are sitting on the same side and standing on both sides as separate groups after the conflict is reflected on the screen. The photograph taken from the actual meeting, on the other hand, was shot with the pose of soldiers and civilians sitting on separate wing. Below is the photograph and film frame with these details:



Figure 4 Meeting scene in the film



Figure 5 Actual meeting

While producing solution alternatives according to RAM, it is important that realistic and suggested solutions are applicable. In order to protect national interests while producing alternative solutions, personal perceptions and preferences of decision-makers come to the fore. In this sense, the solution proposals that emerged at the first meeting in the Cuban crisis; Destruction of missiles, Air Defence, Invasion are ideas. These ideas are mainly those of the vice-president, who, with his military wing, had previously participated in World War II. In this context, when the black-box of the USA is examined, it is seen that some of the civilians and the military wing and the other civilian group are in disagreement. At the first meeting, the military group demanding an immediate military intervention with the claim that the USA would be seen as weak, and the civilian group seeking a solution without war, including President Kennedy, were formed. Therefore, a final decision could not be reached at the first meeting. This disagreement can be considered a failure of group work, as there are suggestions made without calculating the results,

and the pro-war accuses the President of weakness. In this sense, although the film fictionally reflects this scene with the frame below, there is no such photographic frame in the historical process due to the black-box structure that is the feature of the groupthink decision model mentioned earlier.



Figure 6: Clashing of Ideas



Figure 7: Actual photograph

When the decision-making group of the USA met for the second time on the seventh day of the crisis, different alternatives emerged. In this meeting, it is seen that the military wing produced solutions in favour of harsh military interventions. One of these solutions is to carry out an air strike after the blockade of Cuba. However, the civilian wing wants to resort to diplomatic solutions before the military operation. In this case, Kennedy wanted the group to reach a unanimous decision. Thereupon, after the blockade idea was passed unanimously from the group, President Kennedy decided to use the term "quarantine" in order to prevent the American people and the world from misunderstanding the definition of the blockade. The journalists who took the photo in the scene where President Kennedy signed the quarantine order on the eighth day were

also reflected on the screen by director Roger Donaldson. At the same time, it is seen that the direction of the camera is positioned in accordance with the angle of the real photograph. Figure 5 shows the photo taken of President Kennedy signing on the eighth day and the signature scene in the film:



Figure 8 Signing the quarantine decision



Figure 9 Actual photograph

The letter of the quarantine decision signed by President Kennedy was shot using a close-up while signing in the film. The exact similarity of the signature shows the attention given to the details by the director, the historical consultants of the film, and the art directors Thomas T. Taylor and Ann Harris. The original decision signature, as a notebook, is shown in Figure 11, with the photographs in the JFK Library and Museum.

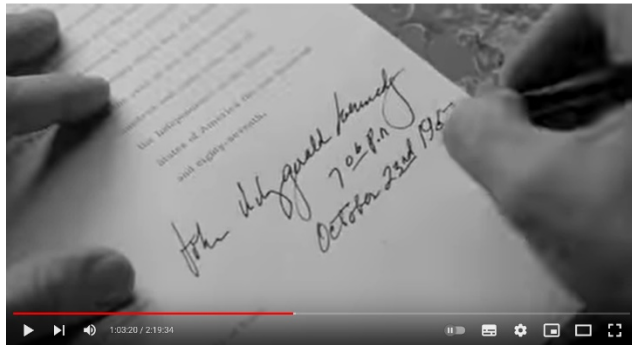


Figure 10 Signature in the film

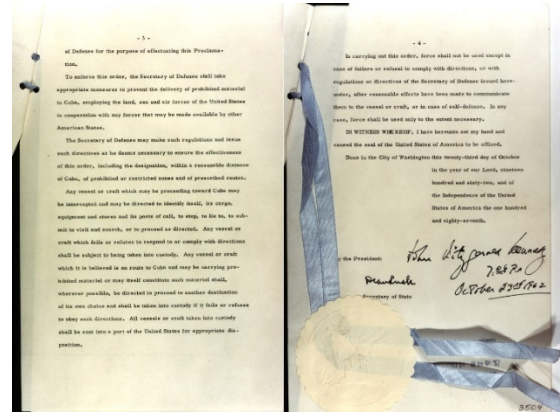


Figure 11 Actual signature

President Kennedy reviewed and calculated the results of all alternatives while the negotiations were going on. The President has tried to make a gain-loss analysis of the decisions to be taken. When analysed rationally during this study, it is seen that the USA is a "gain of loss". The most important reason for his disappearance is that the border security is under threat. The activation of missiles placed in Cuba will cause the US capital to be destroyed in five minutes. The secondary reason is the risk of the cold war turning into nuclear war. In this context, the conclusions President Kennedy made while evaluating the alternatives; He wanted to prevent the possibility that the risk of nuclear war would increase if all the missiles could not be destroyed by an air attack, that the same result would be reached if the invasion failed, and that the Soviet Union might enter Berlin and lead to the Third World War in case of an invasion after an air strike. It also risks repeating the Bay of Pigs failure if the invasion fails. In this case, the president will move away from the warless solution, which is his main goal, and America's prestige will not be preserved if the

invasion fails. If he had believed that military solutions would be successful and war would be the solution, as a result of Kennedy's conclusions, it would have been possible to decide on air operations and invasion. Here, Kennedy's idea that the best way to protect the national interests is to keep the peace made him not look forward to harsh military solutions.

In the decision-making process, Kennedy and his team's (black-box) discussion in evaluating alternatives is one of the factors that enable group work to turn into profit. The decision taken by the President not only protects the prestige of the USA, but also reveals his personal characteristics.

Kennedy wants to produce the solution without nuclear war, which is his target while taking the decision, and therefore he has tried to see the gains and losses by calculating the results of all the alternative solution proposals presented to him. The gains and losses of alternative solution proposals are as follows:

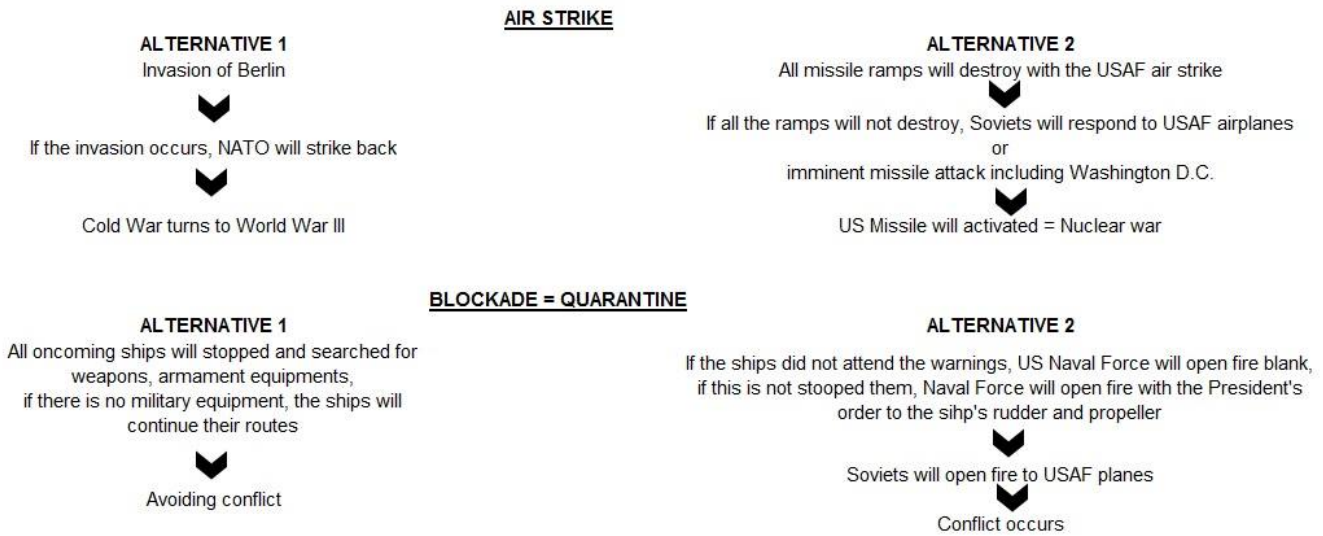


Figure 12 Implications of alternative solution proposals by President Kennedy

It is seen that both of the alternatives calculated in the quarantine application are realized respectively. Two of the original six Soviet ships stopped and turned back, one ship disappeared from radar and was found a day later when it was about to break through the blockade and was stopped by blank fire. In the film, it is seen that the missile chests on the Russian ship were shot in close-up to create impact in the film. The real photo is framed from a higher angle with the plane shot. Figure 13 and 14 includes film and real images.



Figure 13 The crates of missiles in Russian freight ship **Figure 14** Real Russian ship (right)

Thereupon, there was a second disagreement between US decision-making groups. The discussion of firing without the permission of the President created disagreements between the soldiers and civilian bureaucrats. At the same time, the Pentagon's nuclear test without Kennedy's knowledge increased the debate. Kennedy sharply expressed his concern that this move would be perceived as an attack by the Soviets. These events led to the emergence of the third decision-makers meeting. The developments have brought the search for new solutions to the agenda. The leader of the Soviet Union, Krushchev, sent a letter to President Kennedy to solve the problem diplomatically in order to prevent the tension from going to war. While the accuracy of the letter was a matter of debate, a second letter reached the US president. The letter from the USSR in the film scene is mentioned as a dialogue in the film. The actual letter is in figure 15, figure 16 and figure 17 with the signature of Krushchev from the JFK library and Museum.

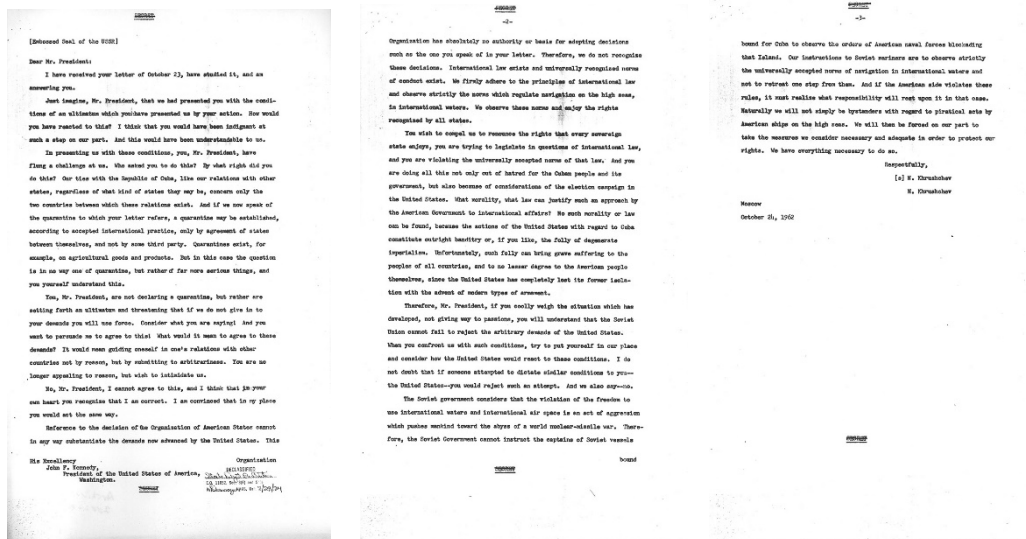


Figure 15 Khrushchev's letter **Figure 16** Khrushchev's letter **Figure 17** Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy

CIA analysts informed the President that the language of the two letters was not the same and stated that the second letter should be ignored. At the same time, the accusations of the Soviet Union representative at the UN continued. In this accusation, he especially emphasized that the Soviet Union was accused without showing any evidence and that the countries of the world restricted the freedom of movement in the seas by the USA with a blockade. In order to respond to this, the US decision makers gathered again and first took the decision of their representatives to respond to the accusations in the UN with evidence and harshly and conveyed it to its UN representative. In Figure 10, the meeting, in which the photographs of the missiles presented by the USA at the UN meeting, are shown, is given with a wide angle. In the real photograph, the

regions where the missiles were deployed at the beginning of the photographs were taken by zooming in at the briefing given to the UN by the assistant of the permanent representative of the USA to the UN. Although the angle of the film and the real photograph is the same, the difference between the far and close-up shots is remarkable.



Figure 18 Scene from the meeting in UN

Figure 19 Actual photographs (right)

While the UN meeting is projected on the television screen in the film, the photo of the UN meeting is seen in the real photo. It is remarkable that the film was shot by adhering to the documents and that the mimics and jesters of the actors are similar to real people. In Figure 11, the finger waving gesture of the Russian UN permanent secretary Valerian Zorin is successfully reflected by Oleg Vidov, who plays Zorin.



Figure 20 Zorin's speech in United Nations, film scene



Figure 21 Zorin himself

After the developments in the UN, diplomatic negotiations started again. At the decision meeting held before the meetings, it was unanimously decided to continue the answers given to the first letter, and to remove the short-range missiles in Turkey for six months as an additional item. When we look at the practice, it has been realized that the problem cannot be solved with the correspondence of the two leaders. Minister of Justice Robert Kennedy summoned the Soviet Union Ambassador Dobrynin to his office and conveyed the US President's solution proposals to him.

As stated in the first letter, he promised the ambassador that the United States would not invade Cuba in return for the removal of missiles from Cuba. However, the ambassador stated that this offer would not satisfy Khrushchev, and thereupon, Minister Kennedy stated that the short-

range missiles in Turkey would be removed after six months, provided that it was never reported to the press.

Conclusion

The Cuban Missile Crisis emerged shortly before the US Congress Elections. Considering the selection factor, it can be thought that President Kennedy was more sensitive in the decision-making process. In addition, Kennedy clearly evaluated the possible consequences of an undesirable outcome such as war for the whole world during the resolution of this crisis.

During this period, the difficulties experienced in the decision-making process and the perspectives and conflicts of the chairman and the group members in the discussion of ideas were also reflected in the film. From the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis and throughout the decision-making process, Kennedy is seen in the film, keeping the US interests at the forefront and looking for the most reasonable solution for the whole world. If the leader has pro-war thinking, it is possible to solve the situation in a threatening way as a result of informing the leader. The military approach within the group shows us that a pro-war leader has the perceptible knowledge to accept an air strike.

In terms of guiding the decision-making group, it shows that Kennedy strongly led the group he founded with the Collegial approach. The fact that he forces the group to take a decision unanimously is an indication that he reminds the group that they are as responsible as himself for

the decision taken during the decision-making process. The communication between the chairman and the group is direct and every member of the group expresses his ideas for a solution openly and uncensored.

If the group had a hierarchical structure, brainstorming would not have been so controversial and effective, and the chairman would have dictated his own decision. However, as reflected in the film, the non-hierarchical structure of the Kennedy administration allowed brainstorming.

It is seen that Kennedy is able to analyse the perception of the Soviet Union and other countries of the world correctly and that he has the ability to intervene strongly, when necessary, in managing the group, while being conveyed to the cinema. Kennedy's portrait of the leader, who gave sufficient time during the group's decision-making and questioned the decision of the group, was successfully reflected in the film. While making the final decision as a leader, it is seen that he decides by calculating the results of the proposed solutions realistically.

The fact that the group had two different perspectives in the decision-making process enabled the emergence of the most effective idea to solve the crisis. As far as we understand from the film, it is possible to put the solution proposals on a spectrum from harsh approaches to relatively moderate approaches. The blockade is a relatively moderate solution that can prevent war and is the easiest to explain at the UN. If the air operation had been chosen, it is possible that the US

might lose prestige in the face of the arguments that the Soviet Union could produce at the UN, and it might also result in results that are not in line with the US's interests. Beyond all this, the possibility that such a decision would lead to a new World War was reflected on the screen.

It should be said that the foreign policy makers in Kennedy's group and he displayed a rational foreign policy approach. Kennedy chose the solution with the least risk of loss in the decisions made within the group. Although its implementation involved various risks, it is important to use wordplay by considering how the method to be applied will be perceived by the outside world and by the Soviet administration, in terms of showing that it adopts a rational approach.

As a result, the Kennedy administration's efforts to evaluate information, minimize risk in policy making, act with a rational policy method in solving the Cuban Crisis, and act by thinking about perception ensured the prevention of nuclear war as well as protecting the country's interests.

Although the differences of opinion within the group are natural, the effective management of the leader in the decision-making process helped in joint decision-making and the film revealed the idea that the responsibility is shared within the group.

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FILMOGRAPHY:

Full Cast and Crew (Thirteen Days, 2000)

Directed by: Roger Donaldson

Written by: David Self

Based on: The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis

Cinematography: Andrezej Bartkowiak

Edited by: Conrad Buff

Starring:

Kevin Costner (Kenny O'Donnell)

Bruce Greenwood (John F. Kennedy)

Steven Culp (Robert F. Kennedy)

Dylan Baker (Robert McNamara)

Bill Smitrovich (Gen. Maxwell Taylor)

Ed Lauter (Gen. Marshall Carter)

Tim Kelleher (Ted Sorenson)

ENDNOTES:

¹ [Editor's Note] The study of politics in film by social scientists and the study of the political in film by humanities/film studies scholars produced an impressive amount of literature like Neve (2004), Franklin (2006), Giglio (2010), Valeriano (2013), Panagia (2013), Carter (2014), Christensen and Haas (2015) and Ryan and Kellner (1988), Scott (2000), Wood (2003) and Kellner (2009). This article explores previously uncharted territory and intersections of multiple approaches in analysing a very political film beyond the era it depicts, its reception at the time of its initial release and at the time of its analysis today.