Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Power of Morality and Moral Perception

BY HILARY THERIEN
Establishing Civil Religion: Kennedy’s Inaugural Speech

- “Unwillingness to witness or permit... the undoing of human rights.”
- “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, [and] oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.”
- This endeavor of the nation to work towards “a more fruitful life for mankind” through collective cooperation and sacrifice would not only “light the country and those who serve it... [but also] the glow from that fire [could] truly light the world.”
- “no promise from God that... [their] greatness will endure... [The nation has] been allowed by Him to seek greatness with the sweat of [their] hands and the strength of [their] spirit.”
- “here on earth God's work must truly be our own,”
The President Who Happened to be a Catholic-and its Implications

- "concerned not to let it appear his faith was determining his policies"
- Under great scrutiny as the first Catholic president
- This caused Jack to have a hyper-vigilance for religion, his own and others
- Emphasized the importance of the separation of church and state

- "no Catholic prelate would tell the president... how to act, and no protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote."
Discovery of Offensive Weapons: Behind Closed Doors

- The first eight days, Executive Committee meets and debates
- Decision not to immediately tell Congress
- Soviets had consciously deceived them and built up armaments in hopes to bargain for Berlin and/or disgrace the US on a global stage
- Jack understands them to an extent due to Jupiter Missiles
A Call to Castro?

The note:

- States that "obviously" the weapon bases were for nuclear intention, and are "clearly" offensive in nature.
- connects the grave issues the US and Western Hemisphere faces with the grave issues Cuba faces with Soviet militarism

- Moral plea versus religious plea
- No reference to God or Catholicism
- Moral pragmatism
Who Are We, If Not Our Ideals?

- surprise air strike, an invasion, or a blockade?

- Pearl Harbor analogy against surprise attack helped sway the group toward seeking peaceful solutions before escalating to armed conflict.

- Dillon stated the US had "fought World War Two for ideals and we should not change now."
Kennedy Reveals the Looming Crisis

- Unifying and uplifting civil religion

- Points out malpractices and deception of USSR

- quarantine as “most consistent with our character and courage as a nation and our commitments around the world. The cost of freedom is always high—and Americans have always paid it. And one path we will never choose... [is the] path of surrender and submission.”
Kennedy Reveals the Looming Crisis Cont.

Cuba:
- mutual "aspiration for liberty and justice for all"
- free: from foreign domination, to choose own leaders, to own their own land, to speak and write and worship without fear and degradation

- "greatest danger of all would be to do nothing"
- "goal is not victory of might but vindication of right"
NYT Letters to the Editor

- Some angry, some terrified
- "speech to the nation has deserved and received bipartisan approval of a united country."
- nation's precedent of having military bases across the world in times of peace, whereas this was never a strategy for the USSR, therefore aggressive
- the government's actions should be "applauded [because] for the first time in many years... [the US] enunciated a clear warning to the Soviet Union of... [the nation's] intentions rather than our capability."
Irreligiosity of the USSR did not mean that JFK did not incorporate morality, and Soviet perception of US officials’ morality when dealing with them

- Russian diplomat Dobrynin completely misunderstood US military zeal.
- RFK meets with Dobrynin privately, lies that JFK is unaware

- Dobrynin reported back to USSR that the “Kennedy brothers were personally affronted” and determined to confront soviet ships
The contemplation of a moral call to Castro shows the role morality played according to Kennedy.

The moral debates of a surprise attack were incredibly potent in Ex Comm.

When Kennedy revealed the crisis to the public, he was able to formulate his civil religion in an empowering and unifying way, thus ensuring majority support from the country.

If it weren't for his ability to perceive Soviet perception and use it to the advantage of the US by sending his brother, the situation could have been greatly exacerbated instead of rectified.

Kennedy's construction, implementation, and perception of morality proved imperative in ensuring American victory in the Crisis.