

Emily Shedal

History 290

Professor Caroline Boswell

April 30th, 2018

Kennedy and Fake News During the Cuban Missile Crisis

When the Cuban Missile Crisis started in October of 1962, President Kennedy was almost two years into his presidency. The crisis would prove to be a pivotal point in his presidency which is still being discussed. Along with the Cuban Missile Crisis in October, Kennedy was also dealing with the situation in Berlin, Germany and this weighed heavily on his mind throughout the crisis. Soviet leader, Khrushchev wanted to take West Berlin and told President Kennedy that he was going to make a move once the congressional elections were over in the United States. Kennedy thought the stunt in Cuba might be a preview of what was to come in Berlin.¹ With a communist threat facing the United States, Kennedy enjoyed the support of the public who rallied behind him and he also enjoyed a period of muted criticism from the press however, this would change after the crisis was over. During the crisis, President Kennedy was able to coerce the press into delaying the output of certain stories, which allowed him to use them as a weapon against the USSR, by saying that it was in the interest of national security that they do not publish certain information. After the crisis was over, Kennedy Administration critics charged that they had intentionally withheld vital information from the public during the crisis.²

Kennedy did step up his press policies during the Cuban Missile Crisis and these policies only added to press-government antagonisms that had been building since the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy's predecessor. A 1953 directive, Executive order 10501, created under the Eisenhower Administration increased government secrecy with its keeping of the classification system.

¹ Ernest R May, "John F Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis" last modified November 18, 2013. http://bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_cuban_missile_01.shtml.

² David Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (The Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2012), 7-9.

These antagonisms between the press and the government go back even before Kennedy's predecessor, Eisenhower, to the Truman Administration, which was characterized by an increase in government secrecy. Kennedy had vowed to have a more open government than his predecessors and he also made an attempt to have warmer relationships with reporters.³ Creating closer relationships with these members of the press could have been Kennedy's attempt at getting them not to ask questions about an increase in government secrecy. Some of President Kennedy and his wife's closest friends were reporters, most notably Ben Bradlee, who would go on to write a book about his conversations with Kennedy.⁴ Kennedy's relationship with the press would change when he became president. Reporters who were close friends with Kennedy now became critics of him. His administration had become more involved with controlling the press in the months leading up to the crisis. The Kennedy Administration had been known to, before the crisis, sue newspapers, such as the Saturday Evening Post, which published inaccurate information and deny reporters, who had written critical articles about the president, access to senior officials.⁵ During the crisis, however, they would try a new friendlier approach to the press, that being voluntary censorship.

The government created a plan for censoring the information that was given to the American people by the various news outlets. Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's Press Secretary, published a book on his time in Kennedy's Administration titled *With Kennedy*. He states in his book that, "there is no question that the entire information policy of the government was rigidly and directly planned".⁶ The policy planning for control of the stories published by the press and the crisis's narrative produced by them was in the hands of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), of which

³ David R Davies, "An Industry in Transition: Major Trends in American Daily Newspapers, 1945-1965," (PhD diss., University of Alabama, 1997).

⁴ Coleman, 65.

⁵ Ibid, 66.

⁶ Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (Doubleday & Company, INC, 1966): 287.

Kennedy was a member, as Salinger goes on to say.⁷ One attempt of controlling the news was through the twelve-point guideline document, which was distributed to the press during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This document created by Kennedy and the ExComm provided a basis for the press to follow while publishing a story on the crisis. These twelve points gave the press information on what might be of value to the enemy and therefore, they should not publish stories about.

Salinger said that after meeting with the press to reveal the plan, he could feel the anger and dislike in the room from the press members. They did not approve of the idea of government censorship, even though it was voluntary for them to participate in.⁸ They were not forced by Kennedy or his administration to create fake news but encouraged to delay the output of certain stories, which might interest America's enemies. Also, as was pointed out by the former press secretary under the Eisenhower Administration and ABC network vice president, James Hagerty, the television and radio networks were a "loose confederation".⁹ Which meant that the decisions on whether to agree to the twelve-points or not was station to station or channel to channel based. Some might agree to the terms, while some might not. So, it would be very hard for Kennedy to receive full cooperation from all members of the White House press corps. He was throwing a Hail Mary, hoping to receive some cooperation from a press core which he had not been on good terms with. He did receive some cooperation from news outlets, such as *The New York Times*. As one journalist, Walker Stone put it, "I am in favor of going along with Kennedy until we have some clear evidence he has 'gone soft' on either Castro or Khrushchev."¹⁰

⁷ Salinger, 287.

⁸ Ibid, 288.

⁹ Ibid, 289.

¹⁰ Walker Stone Papers, U.S. Mss 120AF, Box 15, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Archives and Area Research Center.

For those that did comply with the twelve-point system, Kennedy was grateful. A letter, sent on White House stationary dated October 25, 1962, to New York Times President Orvil Dryfoos obtained from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign website shows President Kennedy's gratitude to the news outlets who did observe the twelve-point guidelines. Kennedy said, "An important service to the national interest was performed by your agreement to withhold information that was available to you on Sunday afternoon."¹¹

It seemed to some people that the president had the power to control what information was given out by news outlets because to them news outlets were part of the president's arsenal. The Assistant Secretary of Defense, Arthur Sylvester said that the U.S. government had the "right to lie" which is part of the president's "arsenal of weaponry".¹² He went on to implicate that the various news outlets were part of the fight.¹³ He therefore justified the president's right to ask these news outlets to deliberately withhold certain stories to make their enemy, the USSR, think that the United States was doing nothing, while the U.S. government was really conspiring what to do next.

Kennedy's censorship of the press only obtained some success in delaying stories. When U.S. government pictures of the missiles in Cuba were published in a British newspaper, journalists along with Salinger and Kennedy were outraged. The press was upset that they were unable to publish such pictures, because they were considered classified in the United States. Salinger said that, "why there was every any argument over the release of the pictures, I shall never know."¹⁴ It seems that even Kennedy's Press Secretary did not know why such information was delayed release to the press. Kennedy's withholdings from the press seemed to go farther than even his press secretary was aware of.

¹¹ James B. Reston Papers 1935-1995, October 25, 1962, Series 26/20/120, Box 103, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

¹² Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie* (Penguin Group, 2004), 135.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Salinger, 294.

Lack of communication continued during the crisis, when people at the departments of Defense and State began to release information that was being delayed release to the press. This lack of communication between the White House and other government departments angered Salinger. "How can we expect the press to cooperate with us, when people at Defense and State put out information we are asking the press not to publish?"¹⁵ Kennedy need to keep a closer eye on all government employees, while the crisis was going on in order for the press to continue with the voluntary information withholdings. A new policy was executed that required all staffers at the departments to write a memorandum to the secretary of that department telling them what they had told the press. It did not block the press from talking to employees at these departments. The secretary of each department had the right to know what officials in that department were doing with government information, however, implementing the policy during the crisis made it look suspicious to the press and the public. The policy should have been implemented months or even years sooner to avoid casting suspicion on Kennedy.¹⁶

Spying on American journalists was another tactic that Kennedy tried for plugging the intelligence leaks. This had started months before the Cuban Missile Crisis because leaks were happening during the Berlin situation.¹⁷ It seemed that the spying on journalists was not accomplishing its goals of plugging the leaks because they continued well into, during, and after the crisis. Kennedy also played an instrumental role in the creation of Project Mockingbird, which stemmed from the government official leaks during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Project Mockingbird was the name given to the project in which the director of the CIA and employees of the telephone company, wiretapped two journalists in 1963. The two journalists that were tapped had worked together on articles before and

¹⁵ Salinger, 294.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Coleman, 63.

had sometimes included classified materials in their articles, which is why they were tapped. The director of the central intelligence agency agreed to shield the president from the project, if it should become public knowledge or the press caught wind of it. Kennedy did think that the creation of it was necessary in order for the ceasing of leaks of classified information to the press, so incidents such as leaks during the Cuban Missile Crisis did not continue.¹⁸

Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester made the situation with the press even worse because of an interview given on October 29, 1962. Sylvester said that the “generation of news . . . becomes one weapon in a strained situation.”¹⁹ Sylvester was implying that the news outlets became a weapon during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The press then twisted “generation of news” to Kennedy’s “management of the news”; quickly making themselves appear as the victim in a situation they too played a part in.²⁰ The news outlets left out any part about their involvement in the censorship and Kennedy’s reasons for asking them to take part in it, which could have lessened the blow to Kennedy’s reputation. They distorted the truth so bad that they made it seem to the American public as though managing the news was something that Kennedy had dreamt up by himself. However, as it has been noted above presidents had been managing the news since the Truman Administration.

New York Times reporter James Reston originally defended Kennedy’s censorship of the press saying that “it becomes patriotic to mislead the enemy by evasion, distortion, and outright falsehood.”²¹ Reston continued to defend Kennedy’s censorship of the press even after Sylvester’s interview. He said that “as long as the officials merely didn’t tell the whole truth, very few of us complained. But as soon as Sylvester told the truth, the editors fell on him like a fumble.”²² It should be noted that James Reston

¹⁸ Coleman, 75-77.

¹⁹ Salinger, 295.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ James Reston, “Washington: Kennedy’s New Diplomacy in Cuba”, *The New York Times*, October 26, 1962.

²² Alterman, 137.

had worked with Kennedy before the crisis to withhold and alter stories before publication.²³ In 1971, however, he did not withhold an article about what is known today as the Pentagon Papers. He felt that these papers were history and did no longer pose a national security threat. Therefore, it could be argued that he agreed that the government had the right to control what is published to some extent, but it could also be said that he understood the implications of what might happen if certain stories were published that might pertain to matters of national security.²⁴

Even though it wasn't public knowledge until 1989, journalists were leaking the information they had about Kennedy's attempt of censorship of the news outlets.²⁵ In a March 1963 essay titled "Mr. Kennedy's Management of the News", *New York Times* Pulitzer prize winning reporter, Arthur Krock confirmed to the public that a news management policy existed and that it has been enforced by the Kennedy Administration more confidently than any previous administration.²⁶ Not even five months after the crisis had ended, press members like Krock were beginning to turn on Kennedy, even though some of them, like *New York Times* President Orvil Dryfoos, had been willing participants in Kennedy's news management.

Some scholars argue that news outlets have exaggerated the Cuban Missile Crisis. Historian Eric Alterman argues in his book *When Presidents Lie* that news outlets have romanticized the Cuban Missile Crisis. Making the crisis "a heroic tale in which the cool-headed president played the dashing, romantic lead."²⁷ The Cuban Missile Crisis is one of the great triumphs of Kennedy's presidency, and is considered a win for America. The news outlets, however, did anything but romanticize Kennedy's role in the crisis. They do give him credit for saving America from a potential nuclear war, but they surely let the world

²³ R.W. Apple Jr., "James Reston, a Giant of Journalism, Dies at 86", *The New York Times*, December 7, 1995.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Alterman, 133.

²⁶ Arthur Krock, "Mr. Kennedy's Management of the News", *Fortune Magazine* (March 1963).

²⁷ Alterman, 90.

know that he committed many supposed sins when it came to them during the crisis. Such as the supposed censorship he imposed on them. The whole story may be somewhat romanticized but instead of Kennedy as the hero, America as a whole plays the hero versus the communists of Cuba and the USSR.

Kennedy's relationship with the press, which started out friendly soured during his presidency. Kennedy's treatment of reporters during and after the crisis led to detest between the two. Over time the news outlets have twisted the truth about Kennedy's suppression of the press during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Angered by the fact that individuals from the government began to leak information to the public that was being kept from them, they have made Kennedy appear to be a bully who forced them into going along with his lies, while they were in fact willing participants in the deception of the American people. They have tried to turn the blame away from themselves and onto a dead president, so that they do not lose the trust of the American people. Kennedy did give them reasons for suspicion and distrust (i.e. wiretapping) but they made the choice to go along with the delaying of certain stories. Most of them likely went along with the twelve points in hopes that they could receive favors from the White House in return, while others like Reston understood that national security should come first over a story.

Even with the press trying to spin their involvement in the Cuban Missile Crisis, it is considered a high during Kennedy's short-lived presidency. Keeping America out of a potential nuclear war with communists, while juggling the situation in Berlin involved every weapon in Kennedy's arsenal, including the White House press corps. Even though they may not like to admit their part in the crisis by delaying the release of some stories Kennedy was able to keep information that might be of interest out of the hands of the Soviets. Even though his success with the press didn't last long, their cooperation with him in the delaying of certain stories during the crisis no doubt played a vital role in America's successful defusing of the situation in Cuba.

Bibliography:

Alterman, Eric. "Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis." In *When Presidents Lie*, (Penguin Group, 2004): 90, 133, 135, 137.

Apple, R.W. Jr. "James Reston, a Giant of Journalism, Dies at 86". *The New York Times*. December 7, 1995.

Coleman, David. *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (The Miller Center for Public Affairs, 2012): 7-9, 63, 65-66, 75-77.

Davies, David R. "An Industry in Transition: Major Trends in American Daily Newspapers, 1945-1965," (PhD diss., University of Alabama, 1997).

Krock, Arthur. "Mr. Kennedy's Management of the News". *Fortune Magazine* (March 1963).

May, Ernest R. "John F Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis" last modified November 18, 2013. http://bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_cuban_missile_01.shtml.

Reston, James. "Washington: Kennedy's New Diplomacy in Cuba." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Oct 26, 29.

Reston, James B Papers, 1935-1995. October 25, 1962. Series 26/20/120. Box 103. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Salinger, Pierre. *With Kennedy* (Doubleday & Company, INC, 1966): 287-289, 294-295.

Stone, Walker Papers. U.S. Mss 120AF. Box 15. University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Archives and Area Research Center.

White House Letter. October 25, 1962. Series 26/20/120. Box 103. Reston, James B. Papers, 1935-1995. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.