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Cognitive and Emotional Intelligence of President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

By Anthony Pantalone

President John F. Kennedy's cognitive and emotional intelligence during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 had incredibly profound effects on this event and the United States' national security. His position as president of the nation made him a central player in the crisis and his decision-making the deciding factor of any resulting fallout. Both his cognitive style and emotional intelligence directly shaped his response to news of missiles in Cuba. Kennedy's calculated response caused by this intelligence may be the sole reason tensions in the crisis never further escalated towards nuclear annihilation on a global scale.

Before exploring President Kennedy's behaviors and thoughts, one must better understand the concepts of cognitive style and emotional intelligence. These two specific terms—coined by Fred Greenstein—allow scholars to analyze and compare past American presidencies. Cognitive style is how a president is able to absorb, process, and then base decisions on the vast amounts of information constantly coming through the Oval Office. Emotional intelligence is the capability of the president to use emotions to help further the goals of an administration. This term essentially encompasses how the president handles personal emotions when forced to deal with the high demands of being the leader of the Free World.¹

These two characteristics of a president were apparent in Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Cognitive and emotional intelligence worked in tandem in analyzing the current security threat to the United States and how the president should craft a response. They helped

¹ Fred Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6.

mold all his decisions on the nation's next moves and the possible reactions from both the Soviet Union and Cuba.

The president's cognitive style throughout this crisis was impeccable and a testament to his mental prowess. Kennedy, while in office, often was able to attain a mastery over many official documents in small amounts of time. His mental capabilities had allowed him to be a quick reader which is a skill important for the head of a nation.² This general cognitive style would be especially noteworthy in the context of the missile crisis as information would have to be relayed to the president quickly. Various intelligence briefings and communications with foreign nations would have to be conducted while Kennedy would also need to focus on decisions about what to do next.

Kennedy's cognitive style would be a factor in the missile crisis even before he had knowledge of this national threat. The night of October 16th saw emergency meetings form based off new reconnaissance images of missiles laying out in an open field. While many within the Kennedy administration were informed of this matter, Presidential Special Assistant McGeorge Bundy failed to notify the president. He instead reasoned that the president would be receiving unconfirmed information of a threat to security he would not be able to act on in the moment. The briefing about Cuba was saved for the next morning, so that the president would be able to sleep soundly in the wake of this revelation and take in this information with his advisors near him.³

The early hours of this crisis saw many new briefings and new information being presented before the president and other officials within the Kennedy administration. News of

² Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 72.

³ Robert Earl Cecile, "Crisis Decision-Making in the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations: The Application of an Analytical Scheme" (PhD diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1965), 130-131

missile sites in Cuba was found to be shocking to those within the administration when the Central Intelligence Agency provided photographs of fields in which ballistic missiles were located. Experts testified before the group, and the president was left reeling with the photographic evidence before him. Robert F. Kennedy's account of the presentation shows his brother confused by the images despite trusting the word of intelligence experts. The president even later asserted the sites, based off the information from the CIA, only "looked like a football field to him."⁴ Despite this reaction to the information before him, JFK and the subsequent Executive Committee would go on to make significant decisions in the area of national security based on this briefing and these images.

President Kennedy's cognitive style throughout the rest of the crisis remained sharp and sound, a fact amplified by his reading abilities. While the president was in the midst of international tensions with Cuba and the Soviet Union, John F. Kennedy still found time for outside reading. He had been reading *The Guns of August*, a book by Barbara Tuchman on how growing tensions and faulty decision-making resulted in global conflict in World War I.⁵ This book would end up having a profound impact on the president's decision-making process during this crisis.

Another aspect of Kennedy's mental state, his emotional intelligence, also played an extremely important role in the president's course of action. While events unfolded over the course of thirteen days, the president's emotional intelligence appeared differently in public appearances compared to private meetings. A timeline of Kennedy's public and private remarks concerning the missiles between September to November sheds a greater light on the relationship

⁴ Robert F. Kennedy, "Subject Files: Kennedy, Robert F.: Cuban Missile Crisis Article, [Thirteen Days Draft]," 3.

⁵ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 72.

between the president's appearances in public and private.⁶ The president's public emotional intelligence throughout his presidency was steadfast and did not highlight any blatant mental weaknesses. Kennedy often instead used his emotions to further the goals of his White House.⁷ The Cuban Missile Crisis was no different for Kennedy, as his emotions played a major role in his interactions with the public. The president's initial specific remarks to Congress and his address to the nation convey this point immensely. After JFK presented the evidence of missiles and the Executive Committee's decision for quarantine to congressional leaders, it was met with some pushback. The president did not respond negatively to his doubters but instead listened intently as his mind on the matter was already made.⁸ The subsequent address to the country that day saw Kennedy draw a hard line against the actions of the Soviets, but, again, he kept his emotions in check.⁹

The president's remarks near the conclusion of the crisis even conveyed his strong emotional intelligence with the American public. The address on November 2nd of 1962 saw Kennedy inform the nation of ballistic missiles in Cuba being dismantled. Only facts about the ongoing situation were relayed, and JFK was sure to not declare victory arrogantly for the United States or outright blame Russia or Cuba for the crisis. Instead the president spoke to the nation

⁶ B. Gregory Marfleet, "The Operational Code of John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis: A Comparison of Public and Private Rhetoric," *Political Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (September 2000): 552.

⁷ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 73

⁸ "Cuban Crisis: A Step-by-Step Review: Cuban Crisis: A Step-by-Step Review of Events that Led to Naval Quarantine Soviet Build-up Started in July U.S. Reconnaissance Flight of Oct. 14 Provided Photo Evidence Second Week of Crisis as Situation Passed Climax Toward an Easing of Tension," *New York Times*, November 3, 1962, 7.

⁹ "Cuban Crisis," 7.

about a slow easing of tensions in order to, in turn, ease the anxieties of Americans across the country.¹⁰

The private emotional intelligence of the president showed a different man leading the nation at times during this crisis. The stakes of these events concerning Cuba were extraordinarily high, causing levels of stress over possible armed conflict to also be very high. When met with the initial news of the threats of ballistic missiles in San Cristobal, Cuba, the president immediately believed that “action would have to be taken” if reports of these missiles were accurate.¹¹ A call to action would have likely caused military conflict and possibly nuclear annihilation if the president maintained this thought. Instead, he chose not to act on impulses and carefully consider the next steps.

President Kennedy took care to not make impulsive decisions or act on emotion throughout the crisis—a crucial example of his emotional intelligence at play. Impulse would only result in unparalleled global catastrophe. Kennedy’s thinking process during the first days of the crisis was complex as he continued to weigh options presented before him by the Executive Committee. Repercussions of all actions of the United States would need to be considered before action would be taken. It was imperative for Kennedy that America would not hurt or violate any current alliances in taking action, while also not causing a nuclear response from Cuba or the Soviet Union.¹² Six options for a course of action were put before the

¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, Radio and Television Remarks on the Dismantling of Soviet Missile Bases in Cuba, recorded on November 2, 1962.

¹¹ Cecile, “Crisis Decision-Making,” 131-132

¹² Ernest R. May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 93.

president, and each was analyzed at length in order to find the potential shockwaves and response for each action.¹³

A nuclear holocaust within this period was a horrifying potential reality, one that he was not willing to take. In Robert F. Kennedy's official memoir of the crisis, he states that "[t]he possibility of the destruction of mankind was always in his [brother's] mind" during these thirteen days in October 1962.¹⁴ Nuclear war would only result in the deaths of millions across the globe if the United States' actions were not perceived correctly. If Kennedy did not either keep this fact in mind or refuse himself the right to act on emotions, nuclear holocaust and horrific tragedies would have befallen the world.

Kennedy's view of a potential conflict was only intensified by his cognitive abilities and the reading of *The Guns of August*. Kennedy had explicitly told his brother in confidence about his feelings on the crisis and his involvement: "I am not going to follow a course which will allow anyone to write a comparable book about this time, *The Missiles of October*."¹⁵ The importance of peace was prevalent for Kennedy in all deliberations concerning the removal of Cuban ballistic missiles. His actions were in the interest of peace while also being in the interest of the nation. Many members of the Kennedy administration believed the president's concerns for peace in his careful decisions, detached from impulsive emotion, were "a textbook case of an appropriate use of force" in retrospect.¹⁶

The president was not entirely perfect in terms of emotional intelligence over the course of these thirteen days. A specific period within the crisis saw the nation draw nearer and nearer

¹³ Cecile, "Crisis Decision-Making," 133-135.

¹⁴ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton, 1969), 127.

¹⁵ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 127.

¹⁶ Marfleet, "The Operational Code," 546

towards what seemed to be an inevitable war with Russia or Cuba. Major feelings of self-doubt within John F. Kennedy arose upon hearing the news of a submarine accompanying Soviet tankers. Robert Kennedy recounts the emotions in his brother's body language and the loss of color in his face. He even describes this weakness in an intimate moment he has with JFK in which they quietly stared at one another upon hearing this news. RFK recalls how it no longer looked like the president was there and it felt like John Kennedy only appeared like the man he knew as his brother in this moment of weakness.¹⁷

Another brief moment between the two brothers saw an intimate discussion about self-doubts in issuing a quarantine. Robert and John Kennedy only had a few seconds with one another in which they spoke about the gravity of their actions. JFK saw his actions as mean against Russia but still believed he had no other choice. The president "would have been impeached" if no action was taken.¹⁸ Later, another event got the best of the executive's emotions when the British philosopher Bertrand Russell chastised the United States for its quarantine against ships to Cuba. The president even wrote back to Russell stating that Russia should be looked towards for blame in this situation.¹⁹ While the president was careful not to upset tensions in his decision-making, the effects of the crisis did seem to hinder his emotional intelligence in some respects.

The pairing of emotional intelligence with cognitive style is incredibly relevant in the Cuban Missile Crisis as the president's actions show an intersection of these two presidential characteristics. Both cognitive and emotional intelligence are much more important than ever for a president when handling a national crisis or threat. The president must be able to take in large

¹⁷ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 69-70.

¹⁸ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 67.

¹⁹ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 74.

amounts of rapid information while carefully analyzing that information. This analysis must then allow them to come to a decision on a course of action that is unaffected by personal emotions. In the case of John F. Kennedy in this crisis, his decisions on Cuba were formed and shaped with new information over the course of days in order for his actions to not be impulsive. Kennedy had even also been gestating on the issue of Cuba for some time before the immediate threat of ballistic missiles arose. His policies in the crisis were somewhat based on previous thoughts over this period.²⁰

Cognitive style and emotional intelligence are two major characteristics of the modern American presidency. The Cuban Missile Crisis, a major event of the 1960s in which the world teetered on nuclear destruction, displayed President Kennedy's response to this national threat. The United States' actions in aiming to solve this issue and stop the installation of missiles is entirely based in the president's emotional intelligence. Between the sharp-witted cognitive style of this president and the dichotomy between public and private emotional intelligence, these mental capabilities were a major factor within this historical event.

²⁰ McGeorge Bundy, Memorandum to Theodore Sorenson, March 8, 1963.

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