

The American Century Theater Presents

# The Titans

by Robert McElwaine

## AUDIENCE GUIDE



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*Edited by Jack Marshall*

## **About The American Century Theater**

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American plays of the Twentieth Century... what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to lose our mooring to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all citizens, of all ages and all points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These study guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.



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## *The Titans:* **The Play, the Playwright, and the Journey**

By Jack Marshall (Director, *The Titans*)

Robert McElwaine, then director of John F. Kennedy Center productions, wasn't certain why Kennedy Center president Roger Stevens had brought him to meet with former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1991, but the meeting certainly was fascinating. The discussion centered on the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, in which McNamara had played a pivotal role as the world came within a hiccup and an eyelash of a nuclear war. As they left the meeting, Stevens turned to his friend and said, "Think you can write a play about that?"

McElwaine was eager to accept the challenge. A veteran Hollywood screenwriter who occasionally acted as Stevens' in-house playwright, the story had everything---suspense, vivid characters, and unexpected twists and turns. It seemed remarkable that such a story had never been dramatized on stage: at that time there had been only the 1973 made-for-TV movie "The Missiles of October" (starring William Devane as JFK, Martin Sheen as Bobby Kennedy, and Howard Da Silva as Khrushchev).

McElwaine set out to acquire every bit of information he could find on the Crisis, particularly what went on "behind closed doors." Fortunately, the Nineties brought a new wave of useful material, notably transcripts of conversations captured by the same White House taping system, installed by Kennedy, that trapped Richard Nixon, and newly declassified documents. There was also new material on the Russian side of the confrontation that "The Missiles of October" had not had the opportunity to consult, such as Nikita Khrushchev's taped remembrances, smuggled out of Russia and published in 1990. The playwright also set out to interview every major participant and member of EXCOMM (the secret committee assembled to advise President Kennedy and develop response options once the Soviet missiles had been discovered). McNamara, Dean Rusk, George Ball and others gave him many hours of their time, and in most cases, candid reflections.

McElwaine digested the resulting notes, hundreds of pages of them, into an abstract. He was now convinced that the story could and should be told with minimal embellishment or fictionalizing. The real words of the participants were well-documented and in some cases recorded on tape, and the plot

needed no enhancement. But there were still hurdles to clear. Even with the White House taping system, the content of many of the meetings between President Kennedy and his chief advisor, his brother Robert, were unknown. RFK's account of the Crisis, "Thirteen Days," filled in many gaps but was also clearly a work of hagiography, designed to show his martyred brother (and himself) in the best possible light. The details of Khrushchev's deliberations were even more in doubt. This would not be a documentary. The playwright, guided by his research and careful extrapolation and analysis, would have to make a lot of tough calls. And they would have to be made without bias, predispositions or political agendas. McElwaine decided to follow where the facts took him.

Where they took him was to an increased appreciation of the humanity and complexity of Nikita Khrushchev, and the realization that he, as much as President Kennedy, had made critical and courageous decisions that averted catastrophe. It was this feature of the play, one suspects, that led to the unexplained decision of the Kennedy family, permanent members of the Kennedy Center Board of Directors, to kill Stevens' scheduled premiere of *The Titans* in the Eisenhower Theatre. "They felt that a production would not be good for the family," was all Stevens would say to McElwaine. A few years later, another World Premiere scheduled by Stevens in a California playhouse fell through when the theater ran into financial difficulties.

McElwaine continued to work on his play. The original version was thorough, lively, and had a prohibitively large and cast, Stevens told him. Somehow the story would have to be told without the contentious EXCOMM meetings, as well as other scenes. Such characters as McNamara, LeMay, Rusk, Malinovsky, Stevenson and Jackie Kennedy had to go in the interest of logistics and economy. McElwaine's solution was to frame the story of the Cuban Missile Crisis as a duel of conflicting goals and the pursuit of mutual respect and trust between two men: John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev. Each was given a trusted confidant and advisor---RKF for Kennedy, USSR Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko for Khrushchev---who in some cases would serve as stand-ins for other key figures. This was the four character play that Stevens intended to produce at the Kennedy Center. It was also the script that received a series of staged readings at the Bethesda Writers Center and the Kennedy Center Page-to-Stage Festival a few years ago, though many cuts, additions and refinements were made along the way.

The American Century Theater had achieved unprecedented success with another Bob McElwaine work, the musical *Danny and Sylvia*. Launched as an installment of the company's "Reflections" Series, which produces new plays about important American figures, events and movements, this musical tribute to Danny Kaye and Sylvia Fine (both long-time friends and clients of McElwaine during his previous career as a Hollywood publicist) earned two Helen Hayes nominations and a series of sold-out productions that took it to New York and London. The company invited McElwaine to become its Resident Playwright in 2006, and the first order of business was to give *The Titans* its long-delayed premiere in the same "Reflections" series that had served *Danny and Sylvia* so well.

It is a somewhat different play than the original. Recent revelations about the pressures placed on Kennedy by the hawks in the military, as well as the emerging evidence that Robert Kennedy's intense meeting with Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Dobrynin on October 27 was a turning point in the crisis, persuaded McElwaine to add several scenes and four new characters, some returning from his original version. He also added representations of the two most famous public moments in the Cuban Missile Crisis: President Kennedy's address to the nation, when he revealed the existence of the missiles and announced the Cuban blockade, and U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson's televised confrontation with the Soviet Ambassador, as he showed the spy plane photographs of Cuban missile sites to the United Nations and the world.



**1962: Excerpt from CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES: A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY** By Jane Franklin

*[The roots of the Cuban Missile Crisis go back before President Kennedy was elected, as The Titans shows. But 1962 was the pivotal year. Well after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Kennedy Administration and the CIA were still plotting to overthrow the government of Fidel Castro, leading to increased tensions in the triangular relations between the U.S., Cuba, and the U.S.S.R. No stage play could examine the baroque complications that can be seen in this partial chronology of 1962, including the crucial thirteen days in October.]*

**1962**

**January 18:** In a top-secret report (partially declassified 1989) addressed to President Kennedy and officials involved with Operation Mongoose, General Edward Lansdale describes plans to overthrow the Cuban Government: "The failure of the U.S.-sponsored operation in April 1961 so shook the faith of Cuban patriots in U.S. competence and intentions in supporting a revolt against Castro that a new effort to generate a revolt...must have active support from key Latin American countries....The preparation phase must result in a political action organization being in key localities inside Cuba, with...its own voice for psychological operations, and its own action arm (small guerrilla bands, sabotage squads, etc.)....The climactic moment of revolt will come from an angry reaction of the people to a government action (sparked by an incident), or from a fracturing of the leadership cadre within the regime, or both. (A major goal of the Project must be to bring this about.) The popular movement will capitalize on this climactic moment by initiating an open revolt....The United States, if possible in concert with other Western Hemisphere nations, will then give open support....Such support will include military force, as necessary." Lansdale lists various political, military and economic policies that are subsequently implemented by the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce.

**January 28:** Cuban authorities arrest a group of saboteurs for plotting to paralyze urban transportation by putting motors out of commission with chemicals and magnetic mines.

**February 3:** The Kennedy Administration announces a total embargo of trade with Cuba to take effect February 7. Since the prohibition of exports (see October 19, 1960), the embargo has become extraterritorial with regulations barring re-export to Cuba of any commodities or technical data that originate in the United States. Congress has passed legislation prohibiting U.S. aid for any country that "furnishes assistance" to the Cuban Government.

**February 19:** Cuba asks for an immediate meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss U.S. aggression. Just as Cuban officials quickly learned about "secret" plans that became the Bay of Pigs invasion, they know that U.S. officials are planning another invasion.

**February 20:** General Lansdale presents to the SGA a 26-page, top-secret timetable for implementation of the overthrow of the Cuban Government (partially declassified 1989). CIA agents or "pathfinders" will be infiltrated to

carry out sabotage and organization, including radio broadcasts. Jacqueline Kennedy "would be especially effective in visiting children refugees" in Florida with USIA coverage. The OAS, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the United Nations will be used for international support. Guerrilla operations will begin in August and September with defections of high officials "to tell the inside story" and "evoke world sympathy with the freedom fighters." Finally in the first two weeks of October: "Open revolt and overthrow of the Communist regime."

**March 14:** General Maxwell Taylor, SGA chair, issues detailed "Guidelines for Operation Mongoose" (partially declassified 1989). The document states: "a. In undertaking to cause the overthrow of the target government, the U.S. will make maximum use of indigenous resources, internal and external, but recognizes that final success will require decisive U.S. military intervention. b. Such indigenous resources as are developed will be used to prepare for and justify this intervention, and thereafter to facilitate and support it."

**March 22:** At a luncheon meeting, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover tells President Kennedy that the FBI knows about the connection between Judith Campbell, one of the President's mistresses, and crime bosses John Roselli and Sam Giancana. He warns the President of potential damage if word got out. The affair ends at once and the President no longer uses this particular courier for messages to Giancana.

**May 7:** CIA officials inform Attorney General Robert Kennedy that the CIA has been involved with crime boss Sam Giancana in plots to assassinate Prime Minister Castro. But as testimony by CIA officials reveals to the Senate Intelligence Committee years later, the CIA officials tell the Attorney General that the plots have been halted when in fact they continue.

**Late July:** In response to the U.S. invasion plans, Soviet arms shipments to Cuba greatly increase.

**August 20:** In a memo to President Kennedy, General Maxwell Taylor says that since the SGA sees no likelihood of overthrowing the Cuban Government by internal means without direct U.S. military intervention, the SGA favors a more aggressive program for Operation Mongoose. Richard Helms, CIA director in 1962, testifies to the Senate Intelligence Committee June 13, 1975: "I believe it was the policy at the time to get rid of Castro and if killing him was one of the things that was to be done in this connection, that was within what was expected."



**August 30:** At a press conference, President Kennedy says the Monroe Doctrine means today what it meant to Presidents James Monroe and John Quincy Adams, that is, that the United States opposes all foreign intervention in the Western Hemisphere, specifically what is happening in Cuba.

**August 31:** Senator Kenneth B. Keating (R-New York) warns on the Senate floor that the Soviet Union may be constructing a missile base in Cuba.

**September 4:** White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger releases a statement of policy about Cuba from President Kennedy. It includes an expression of concern about recent Soviet arms shipments to Cuba, a report that information received within the previous four days shows that the Soviet Union has provided Cuba with "a number of anti-aircraft defense missiles," and an assurance that there is no evidence of offensive ground-to-ground missiles or other significant offensive weapons.

**September 11:** The Soviet Union warns that a U.S. attack on Cuba or on Soviet ships carrying supplies to Cuba would mean war.

**September 13:** Knowing that Operation Mongoose calls for an October invasion of Cuba, President Kennedy nonetheless tells a press conference that Prime Minister Castro's "charges of an imminent American invasion" are a "frantic effort to bolster his regime."

**September 18:** Cuban Armed Forces denounce the increase of U.S. violations of Cuban air space.

**September 26:** The U.S. Congress passes a joint resolution giving the president the right to intervene militarily in Cuba if the United States is threatened.

**September 27:** Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay receives a proposed plan for aerial bombardment of Cuba that would precede landing U.S. troops by air and water. The proposal is approved with a plan to complete preparations for such an attack by October 20.

**October 2:** Again tightening the embargo, the U.S. Government announces new regulations, including: U.S. ports are closed to any country that allows any of its ships to transport arms to Cuba; a ship that docks in any country belonging to the socialist bloc will not be allowed to dock at any U.S. port during that voyage; U.S. aid will be unavailable to any country that allows planes or ships under its registry to transport certain materials to Cuba; ship-owners involved in trade with Cuba will not be allowed to transport U.S.

shipments of foreign aid supplies. No U.S. ships are allowed to be used in any trade with Cuba.

**October 6:** Admiral Robert L. Dennison, chief of Atlantic Forces, receives a memo from Defense Secretary McNamara telling the Joint Chiefs of Staff to start putting into effect OPLAN 314 and OPLAN 316, two contingency plans for invasion of Cuba.

**October 14:** A U-2 flies over western Cuba, the first Strategic Air Command (SAC) mission since authority for U-2 surveillance flights was transferred from the CIA to the Air Force on October 12.

**October 15:** Analyzing U-2 photographs taken a day earlier, the CIA informs National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy that the Soviet Union is constructing sites for intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba.

**October 15:** A group of Cuban exiles led by Eugenio Rolando Martínez receives instructions in Florida from CIA agents for planting explosives at the Matahambre copper mines in Pinar del Río. Cuban authorities discover and thwart the plan on October 25.

**October 16-22:** President Kennedy and his closest advisers deliberate on what to do about Cuban sites for nuclear weapons that could be used against the United States. On October 16, Attorney General Robert Kennedy discusses the idea of using the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo in some way that would justify an invasion: "We should also think of, uh, whether there is some other way we can get involved in this through, uh, Guantánamo Bay, or something, or whether there's some ship that, you know, sink the Maine again or something." Tapes of at least part of these discussions are made public at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston in 1983.

**October 22:** Dependents and non-essential personnel are evacuated from Guantánamo Naval Base. President Kennedy masses U.S. forces in Florida and puts them on alert around the world. At 7 p.m. Washington time, President Kennedy speaks on national television and the world learns that it is on the brink of nuclear war. The President announces that there are nuclear missile sites in Cuba and that he has ordered a naval blockade of the island to prevent deliveries of offensive weapons. He demands immediate dismantling of missile sites and withdrawal of any and all missiles. Eighty minutes before Kennedy's speech, Cuba declares a combat alarm (a higher stage in Cuba than a combat

alert) and concentrates anti-aircraft batteries and artillery along the Havana waterfront.

*[In a speech on January 1, 1984, Fidel Castro says that in 1962 "42 medium-range missiles were deployed in Cuba." In 1989 at a conference about the Missile Crisis in Moscow, Soviet officials reveal that at the time of the blockade there were 20 nuclear warheads in Cuba with 20 others on a ship that turned back because of the blockade. No missile to launch the warheads was yet operable. In addition, as a Russian general states at the 1992 conference in Havana, there were 43,000 Soviet soldiers on the island.]*

**October 23:** The Soviet Union rejects U.S. demands on the grounds that acceptance would violate Cuba's right to self-determination. The OAS meets and most members agree to prepare an invasion if U.S. demands are not met. In a speech to the Cuban people, Prime Minister Castro reaffirms Cuba's right to strengthen defenses with any weapons it chooses. He does not acknowledge the presence of nuclear missiles. He says all of Cuba's weapons are defensive and Cuba will not allow any type of inspection.

On the evening of October 22 the president publicly announced that Cuba would be subject to a U.S. naval blockade. The next evening, shortly after the signing of the blockade order, the president met with his advisers.

At the end of this meeting the president and his brother are left alone for a private discussion. The recording is of very poor quality, but the conversation is notable for its intimacy and candor. The president, after telling Robert about a dinner date, discusses the blockade order:

**JFK:** It looks really mean, doesn't it? But on the other hand there wasn't any choice. If he's going to get this mean on this one, in our part of the world [unclear], no choice. I don't think there was a choice

**RFK:** Well, there isn't any choice. I mean, you would have been, you would have been impeached.

**JFK:** Well, I think I would have been impeached. [Unclear exchange] If there had been a move to impeach, I would have been under [unclear], on the grounds that I said they wouldn't do it, and . . .

**RFK:** [Unclear] something else. They'd think up some other step that wasn't necessary. You'd be . . . But now, the fact is, you couldn't have done any less.

Shortly thereafter, the president asks his brother about Georgi Bolshakov, a Soviet defense attaché who had until recently been an important channel for passing messages to Moscow:

**RFK:** We had lunch today.

**JFK:** What did he say?

**RFK:** He said they are going to go through [the quarantine]...He said this is, this is a defensive base for the Russians. It's got nothing to do with the Cubans.

**JFK:** Why are . . . They're lying [unclear] that. Khrushchev's horseshit about the election. Anyway, the sickening thing that's so very bad is what this revealed about . . . This horror about embarrassing me in the election. Who said [unclear]?

**RFK:** Well, you know, he [Bolshakov] probably heard it.

**October 23:** The U.S. Government begins low-altitude surveillance flights over Cuba in addition to U-2 high-altitude flights.

**October 24:** The U.S. naval blockade around the island of Cuba takes effect.

**October 26:** The Soviet Union sends a message to UN Secretary General U Thant that it has ordered its merchant ships not to enter the zone of the U.S. naval blockade.

**October 26:** Reasoning that any U.S. attack on Cuba would involve an attack on the Soviet troops and therefore lead to thermonuclear war, Prime Minister Castro writes to Premier Khrushchev (these letters are published by Granma in 1990) that if the United States invades Cuba, the Soviet Union "should not allow the circumstances" in which the United States would be the first to use nuclear weapons. Khrushchev receives this letter October 27.

**October 26-27:** The White House receives two letters from Premier Khrushchev, offering to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba and to pledge that the Soviet Union will not interfere in the internal affairs of Turkey if the United States ends the naval blockade, pledges not to invade Cuba, and removes its nuclear missiles from Turkey.

**October 27:** Because U.S. overflights pose the threat of a surprise attack, the Cuban military command has ordered antiaircraft batteries to fire on planes that violate Cuban airspace, and this information is passed on to the Soviet military. Around noon, a U-2 spy plane is shot down over Cuba, killing the pilot. Although at first there are differing accounts of precisely who downed the U-2, in the 1980s officials from both Cuba and the Soviet Union report that a Soviet officer gave the command. Cuban leaders later point out that "had we had the proper weaponry," Cuba would have shot down the plane "without hesitation." (Cuba later identifies the Soviet commander as Lieutenant General G.A. Voronkov, to whom Cuba awarded the Ernesto Che Guevara Order, first degree, after the Missile Crisis ended.)

On Saturday evening, October 27, with the Soviet freighter *Groznny* rapidly approaching the blockade, the president sent off a letter to Moscow accepting the terms of the October 26 letter, the removal of the missiles in Cuba in exchange for a U.S. non-invasion pledge. At the same time, the president instructed his brother to privately assure Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that the Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be removed but that this pledge could not be made publicly.

**October 27:** President Kennedy sends a letter to Premier Khrushchev with a proposal that the Soviet Union immediately withdraw its missiles from Cuba while the United States ends the naval blockade and pledges not to invade Cuba. This agreement will be made public. Meanwhile, Attorney General Robert Kennedy meets with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin and agrees privately that once the crisis is resolved, the United States will withdraw its Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

**October 28:** After days at the nuclear brink, the worst of the Missile Crisis ends when Moscow Radio broadcasts Premier Khrushchev's letter to President Kennedy accepting the October 27 proposal. Concerning U.S. aggression against Cuba, Khrushchev's letter says, "I regard with respect and trust the statement you made in your message of 27 October 1962 that there would be no attack, no invasion of Cuba, and not only on the part of the United States, but also on the part of other nations of the Western Hemisphere, as you said in your same message. Then the motives which induced us to render assistance of such a kind to Cuba disappear." Without consultation with Cuba, the Soviet Union begins dismantling the missile sites and withdrawing its missiles. At this point Prime Minister Castro asserts Cuba's position with a demand that the U.S. Government end five practices: the embargo, subversive activities inside

Cuba, armed attacks against Cuba, violation of Cuban air and naval space, and occupation of Cuban territory at Guantánamo.

**October 29:** The U.S. Government rejects all of Cuba's demands, stressing that removal of the missiles and verification have to precede any negotiations. The U.S. Government continues to press for removal of IL-28 bombers from Cuba.

**December 12:** Premier Khrushchev sends a letter to President Kennedy in which he asks the United States to honor its agreement not to invade Cuba as the Soviet Union has honored its promise to withdraw missiles. During December, a Soviet military brigade arrives in Cuba to train Cuban forces and help defend the island against invasion (see September 9, 1992).



## ***The Titans: Key Figures in the Cuban Missile Crisis,*** **October 15-28, 1962** By Jack Marshall

### **The Adversaries**

**President John Fitzgerald Kennedy**--- A junior senator from Massachusetts and the son of rogue Boston millionaire Joseph P. Kennedy, he was propelled into power by a razor-thin margin over Vice-President Richard Nixon in the election of 1960, in part because of his performance in the first set of presidential debates. Kennedy was a navy war hero, a PT boat captain who rescued his men in an incident that became a movie, “PT 109.” While still a U.S. Senator, he wrote (well, was given the author’s credit for) a best-selling book, *Profiles in Courage*, that won him a Pulitzer Prize.

Jack Kennedy (or JFK, as the press dubbed him) was an inspiring figure and speaker whose legacy includes the Peace Corps, the space program, and the

Viet Nam War. His style, charisma, and glamorous wife Jacqueline launched a legend, a cult, and a Broadway musical, *Camelot*. Kennedy’s promising but unfulfilled presidency was cut short by an assassin’s bullets after less than three years, in Dallas, on November 22, 1963. True, a growing volume of unflattering evidence has revealed him as a serial and reckless adulterer, as well as a sometimes cynical participant in deceiving the public about such important

matters as his shaky health and trivial matters like his reading prowess (the press eagerly publicized the fanciful tales of Kennedy digesting whole books in minutes). But JFK's undeniable combination of grace, humor, idealism and martyrdom, together with his success in extricating himself and his nation from deadly crisis he helped to create, allows him to remain one of the most popular and well-regarded of all U.S. Presidents in the public mind.

**Premier Nikita Khrushchev**--- Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev was born in 1894 to an illiterate peasant family in a village near Russia's border with the Ukraine. In 1917, after the Russian Revolution had ousted the Czar, Khrushchev joined the Bolshevik forces of the Red Army in the Russian civil war, serving as a political commissar. After the First World War, Khrushchev supported the Stalin forces in the power struggles against Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Bukharin. In the 1930s, Khrushchev was promoted from one political position to the next, until he finally became second in command in the Moscow Communist Party. During this period, Stalin began a series of bloody purges to consolidate his power and Khrushchev was a full participant, willingly taking part in the extermination of the Ukrainian intelligentsia.

By the time Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Khrushchev had been sent to head the Communist Party in the Ukraine, which put him near the front lines. He saw the devastation of war first-hand as the Germans routed the Red Army, then again as the Soviets turned back the Nazi advance. Khrushchev was called back to Moscow after the war, where he was one of Stalin's top advisers. When Stalin died in 1953, Khrushchev outmaneuvered or outlived several competitors for the government's leadership, and soon became the dominant figure.

From the outset, Khrushchev set out to make the Soviet system more effective by curbing Stalin's worst excesses. In an historic speech to the 20th Party Congress in 1956, he attacked Stalin for his crimes -- acknowledging what many people believed, but which no Soviet leader had ever dared mention. Naturally, Khrushchev chose not to mention his own complicity in those crimes.

His advocacy of reforms sparked a groundswell of independence movements among Soviet satellite nations in Eastern Europe. But Khrushchev would not tolerate dissent, and sent tanks and troops into Budapest, Hungary in 1956 to crush an outbreak of free thought. To the West, Khrushchev became the image of a threatening Soviet Union, made vivid by his famous threat to the advocates of capitalism and democracy, "We will bury you!" and his infamous (and calculated) tantrum at the U.N., furiously banging his shoe on the table.

Alternating between playing clown and villain, Khrushchev's years in power were marked by a series of risky gambits and examples of diplomatic brinksmanship, including the U-2 affair, the building of the Berlin Wall, and, of course, the Cuban Missile crisis. Yet he became the first Soviet leader to advocate "peaceful coexistence" with the West, and to seriously negotiate with the United States to reduce Cold War tensions. By 1964, Khrushchev's reforms and adventures, as well as his resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis and his role in provoking it, had created more enemies in the Party than his allies could keep at bay. Hard-liners led by Leonid Brezhnev ousted Khrushchev and sent him into retirement in a dacha in rural Russia, where he died in 1971. His son, Sergei, now lives and teaches in the United States.

## **The Americans**

**Robert Kennedy**---JFK's younger brother, confidant, advisor, and Attorney General (in an audacious display of nepotism now forbidden by law), Robert (or Bobby, or RFK) was known as his brother's sometimes ruthless hatchet man, placed in charge, for example, of the administration's efforts to overthrow Castro after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. A key figure in the Cuban Missile Crisis as his brother's most trusted advisor, Robert wrote the first eye-witness account of the incident in his book Thirteen Days, and, not surprisingly, took some liberties to burnish the Kennedy reputation. Later he was elected U.S. Senator from New York, and, like his brother, was assassinated, in 1968.

**U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson**---Twice the Democratic nominee for president, twice a loser, Stevenson was hailed by his supporters as the articulate and brilliant guru of modern Democratic liberalism, and derided by his detractors as a dithering, effete "egghead" so obsessed with seeing all sides that he was incapable of a coherent position or assertive action. He had challenged Kennedy for the presidential nomination in 1960, but his support had dwindled. Stevenson reportedly felt snubbed and unappreciated by Kennedy, but the latter's decision to bury him in the low-profile position of Ambassador to the U.N. ended up redeeming Stevenson's image. His dramatic performance at the U.N. during the crisis, confronting Soviet Ambassador Zorin, was a highlight of his career that impressed his most committed opponents, and was perhaps the most memorable public moment of the entire event.

**General Curtis LeMay**--- LeMay had been the preeminent air combat leader of World War II, developing the bombardment tactics that devastated Nazi Germany, and later led the air war against Japan, including the dropping of the atom bomb. After the war, he organized the famous Berlin Air Lift.



Appointed as the Strategic Air Command's commander in 1948, he built it up to the point where he was dubbed the "Father of the Strategic Air Command." LeMay's toughness was the stuff of myth: it was said that he approached a plane engine with his ever-present cigar stuck firmly between his lips. When a guard asked him to put it out because it might blow up the aircraft, LeMay reportedly replied, "*It wouldn't dare!*" In 1961, he became Air Force Chief of Staff, and reinforced his reputation as the Cold War's fiercest warrior. During the crisis, he led the EXCOMM voices urging Kennedy to attack the Soviet missile bases, and was captured on JFK's White House taping system deriding the President as weak and fearful.

**Robert McNamara**---a successful business executive tapped to be Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, McNamara strongly supported the president's decision to quarantine Cuba to prevent Soviet ships from bringing in more offensive weapons, and was one of his most influential advisors during the crisis. After Kennedy's death, McNamara became embroiled with the war in Viet Nam under President Johnson, and his central role in that tragic conflict has overshadowed his many important accomplishments. McNamara's reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis expressed to playwright Bob McElwaine were a vital resource in creating *The Titans*.

**Dean Rusk**---JFK's Secretary of State, and a member of EXCOMM., Rusk is credited with the most famous quote to come out of the event: "We are eyeball to eyeball and I think the other fella just blinked." Recent revelations in Michael Dobbs' excellent new book *One Minute to Midnight* have cast doubt on the circumstances surrounding the quote.

**C. Douglas Dillon**---A Republican who had served as "Ambassador Extraordinaire" to France during the Eisenhower Administration, Dillon was Kennedy's Treasury Secretary, himself treasured by JFK for his keen mind, broad perspective, and extensive experience. All of this earned him a place on EXCOMM.

**Pierre Salinger**---Kennedy's portly press secretary, later U.S. Senator from California. His job was to keep news about the crisis from leaking to the press prematurely.

**Theodore Sorensen**---Sorensen was Kennedy's crack speechwriter, as well as the one assigned to draft any correspondence deemed sensitive and requiring careful wording. His memoir, published in 2008, contains one of the most recent accounts of the crisis.

**George Ball**---A career diplomat, a member of EXCOMM and a source for *The Titans*, Ball was Under-Secretary of State in 1962. Later he would become our U.N. Ambassador.

**John McCone**---McCone was a diplomat and business man tapped by JFK to run the CIA, and another member of EXCOMM. He resigned his position under President Johnson, leaving a famous memo in which he predicted the civil unrest that would arise from Johnson's Viet Nam policies.

**McGeorge Bundy**---A reputed genius who helped plan the Allied invasion of Europe during W.W. II, Bundy was Kennedy's National Security Advisor, and played a major role in the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Later Bundy was a prime architect of the escalation of the Viet Nam War.

**General Maxwell Taylor**--- Taylor, who had a distinguished record in W.W. II, was undeniably the Kennedys' favorite general. JFK appointed Taylor to head a task force to investigate the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, trusting his intelligence, fairness and integrity. Taylor was especially close to Robert Kennedy, and developed a friendship which continued until Kennedy's assassination in 1968. After Taylor's *post mortem* on the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy installed him in the newly-created post of "Military Representative to the President," essentially allowing Kennedy to maneuver around the Joint Chiefs. Shortly before the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK elevated Taylor to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a position he held until 1964.

## The Soviets

**Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko** was a skilled negotiator, a shrewd politician, a master diplomat, and a key figure in Soviet foreign policy for nearly forty years. He spent a great deal of time in the U.S early in his career: he was chief of the U.S. Division of Foreign Affairs, counselor to the Soviet Embassy, and in 1943 was appointed a Soviet Ambassador to the United States.

Gromyko became the primary Soviet diplomat and expert in foreign affairs, participating in the Allied conferences at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam, and headed the Soviet delegation to the Dumbarton Oaks Conference that laid the groundwork for the United Nations. He was the U.S.S.R.'s first permanent

representative to the U.N. Security Council. After Stalin's death, Gromyko became a full member of the Central Committee and was appointed Soviet foreign minister in 1957, a position he held under Khrushchev and his successors Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was a close advisor to Khrushchev. He also helped negotiate arms limitations treaties, specifically the ABM Treaty, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, SALT I and II, and the INF and START agreements.

**Marshal Rodion Malinovsky** was a renowned Soviet military commander in World War II who played a key role in the Battle of Stalingrad. After Stalin's death in 1953, Malinovsky's close friend Nikita Khrushchev promoted Malinovsky to Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Ground Forces and First Deputy to Minister of Defense Marshal Georgy Zhukov. Malinovsky also became a full member of the Communist Party Central Committee. When Khrushchev began to distrust the popular war hero Zhukov and suspected him of political aspirations, he purged him and gave his post as minister to Malinovsky. But despite his personal loyalty to the Premier, Malinovsky maintained a forceful and independent view regarding military affairs and national defense. Though Khrushchev and others in the Soviet military establishment were convinced that future wars would be won by a superior nuclear missile capability, and advocated investment in warheads combined with a reduction in conventional forces, Malinovsky regarded nuclear missiles as most useful as a deterrent, not as the primary weaponry of future wars. He championed a broad-based military and a standing army proficient in modern military technology, capable of capturing and controlling territory. Malinovsky built a powerful Soviet army by achieving parity with the United States in nuclear weapons and modernizing the huge conventional force.

The Cuban missile crisis caused Malinovsky to ally with the political opponents of his friend, Khrushchev. He publicly demanded that the military to be given a greater say in formulating Soviet strategic policy, and worked behind the scenes

to encourage a coup within the Party, which ultimately removed Khrushchev from power in October of 1964. The new Party leadership endorsed Malinovsky's concept of an autonomous and professional military establishment, and his vision of an armed forces balanced between nuclear and conventional weaponry.

**Anatoly Dobrynin** joined the Soviet diplomatic corps in 1946. His first job in the U.S. was at the UN; he then served as head of the American Department

of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Shortly after Kennedy's election he became Soviet ambassador to the United States, where he remained until 1986. Even before the Missile Crisis began, Attorney General Robert Kennedy had opened a confidential "back-channel" of communication with Dobrynin, so Premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy could communicate secretly and through trusted aides. During the crisis, Robert Kennedy met with Dobrynin three times. After each meeting, Dobrynin cabled a report to Khrushchev, telling his superior of new developments and giving his expert assessment of them. Dobrynin was famous for his calm demeanor, and Khrushchev knew his analysis was always rational, well-considered and without bias. The Soviet leadership recognized Dobrynin's worth after Khrushchev's removal, and he was made a full member of the Politburo in 1971. Dobrynin retired from the Central Committee at the end of 1988, but continued as an adviser.



## Blockade or Quarantine? The Problem of International Law vs. Presidential Power

(Excerpted from "Executive power v. International law" by Robert J. Delahunty and John Yoo in *The Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* (Sept. 22, 2006)

*[Nobody with a passing awareness of current events can observe the action in The Titans in 2008 without being struck by the many parallel issues facing the nation and the President in 1962. How much can diplomacy accomplish? What are the dangers and benefits of talking directly to one's adversary? What is an "imminent" threat? Does the United States have a right to do what it forbids other nations from doing? And perhaps most perplexing of all: how binding is international law on the actions of the President and the United States, especially when national security is involved? When Nikita Khrushchev thundered that the U.S. had breached international law with its Cuban blockade at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was technically correct. This article (the full text can be downloaded at <http://papers.ssrn.com>) examines the always dicey problem Presidents must face when international law forbids action that is deemed necessary for the nation's security. And yes: co-author John Yoo is the same John Yoo who authored some of the controversial "torture memos" for the Bush Administration---Jack Marshall, Editor.]*

Presidents have long had an uneasy relationship with international law. If it is true that most states follow most international law most of the time, that

probably goes for Presidents, too. Whether Presidents follow international law out of a belief that they, and the United States, must comply with it, or whether they follow international law because much of it simply describes general regularities in state conduct, remains a debated question. Presidents, however, have stretched or violated international law at significant moments in American history where important national security and foreign policy goals were at stake. Recently, international law has served as a political rallying point against the anti-terrorism policies of the Bush administration regarding the use of force, detention, interrogation, and military trial.

... It appears that no federal court of appeals has ever held that customary international law limits presidential decisions. The only district court to reach such a conclusion was affirmed, but the court of appeals did not address the customary international law holding...

There is no compelling reason in the constitutional text, structure, or the history of its ratification to read the President's authority as chief executive and commander-in-chief as circumscribed by international law. There are some statements during the early Republic that suggest some Framers believed, after the Constitution's adoption, that federal law included international law, but it appears that the significance of this history has been over-interpreted. Practice, when more completely read, seems to stand for the opposite proposition: that the Constitution does not forbid Presidents from taking action under their constitutional powers that run counter to rules of international law. ..Whether the President should follow international law in the exercise of his constitutional authorities remains a policy question that is context specific.

Arguments that the President must obey international law, as a matter of domestic law, depend on the Supremacy Clause. The President's Article II obligation to "take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed" applies to international law only if Article VI recognizes international law as constituting federal law. The Supremacy Clause itself only mentions one species of international law: treaties. "This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States," Article VI declares, "shall be the supreme Law of the Land." Clearly, Article VI recognizes that treaties are federal law and therefore must be enforced by the President, subject to any powers he has to suspend or terminate treaties. But there are compelling textual reasons to conclude that the Supremacy Clause recognizes only treaties, and not unwritten forms of international law--such as customary international law--as federal law. Notice that after Article VI lists the

Constitution first as due supremacy effect, it does not say solely "Laws." Rather, it says "Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof." First, this suggests that it is the "Laws of the United States," and not other sources of law that are supreme. State law is not entitled to supremacy, nor is international law or common law, but only "Laws of the United States."

... Giving customary international law a limiting effect on presidential power would also create a strange deformation in the Constitution's allocation of the foreign affairs power. Under current practice, the Constitution is understood as granting the bulk of the foreign affairs power to the President. According to Supreme Court opinions, the President is the "sole organ" of the nation in its diplomatic relations, and he exercises broad powers to set foreign policy, to protect the national security, and to make or break international agreements. Critics of presidential power would preclude the President in these activities from violating international law. ..There is no indication that the Framers would have intended such a result. If anything, the basic theory of popular sovereignty underlying the Constitution rejects it. Under this theory, the government exercises power only because it serves as the agent of the people's will...

...Formally considering international law to be federal law could interfere with the separation of powers by preventing the President from conducting foreign relations effectively as the "sole organ" of the United States. A President may wish to violate international law in order to create a new rule of customary international law, as President Reagan did when he unilaterally extended American maritime boundaries. A President, acting on behalf of the United States, may disagree with the majority of other nations that a new rule of customary international law should come into being. Considering customary international law to be federal law would preclude the President from engaging in these courses of action, even though under the Constitution, as interpreted by the Supreme Court, he plays the leading diplomatic role on behalf of the United States...

Understanding the policy advantages that often attend compliance with international law, Presidents have usually enforced international law, including the laws of war... Nonetheless, the Executive has also, on occasion, unilaterally ordered or authorized actions that have placed the United States in breach of international law, including the law of war. Characteristically, Presidents have taken such actions on the basis of their constitutional authorities to safeguard national security, protect the lives of citizens, interpret and execute treaties, and manage the foreign affairs of the United States and the disposition of its Armed

Forces. The President's power to disregard international law is at its apogee when the survival of the nation is at stake: as former Secretary of State Dean Acheson said with regard to the legality of the United States' 1962 naval blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis, "law simply does not deal with such questions of ultimate power.... No law can destroy the state creating the law. The survival of states is not a matter of law."

But even when the stakes are lower, practice attests that the Executive is not constitutionally constrained to follow international law.

Although the historical record amply supports this contention, it is also not without ambiguity... Presidents are understandably reluctant to acknowledge publicly that they are violating international law. Little is gained by such an admission, and elite reaction, both at home and abroad, would surely be hostile. In those circumstances, Presidents or their advisers will instead cast about for arguments of greater or less plausibility in an effort to show that their actions satisfy international legal norms. Given the malleability of much international law, "a most pliant code [that] nations have always bent to their purposes," such arguments are not hard to find.

For example, in the period between the outbreak of the Second World War and the United States' entry into the War after Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt concluded that it was essential to the United States' security to provide Great Britain, either directly or through subterfuges, with sufficient material aid to enable it to avert an Axis victory in Europe. Yet as a neutral power rather than a belligerent, the United States was constrained in what it could lawfully do to assist Britain. Article 6 of the 1907 Convention Concerning the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War (Hague XIII) (to which the United States was a party) provided that "[t]he supply, in any manner, directly or indirectly, by a neutral Power to a belligerent Power, of war-ships, ammunition, or war material of any kind whatever, is forbidden." Yet in his address to Congress on September 21, 1939, in which he urged the amendment of the Neutrality Act of 1935, Roosevelt argued that "under the age-old doctrines of international law," the United States would be free to sell to belligerent nations "such goods and products of all kinds as the belligerent nations ... were able to buy from us or sell to us." Subsequently, Roosevelt decided in August, 1940 to sell several U.S. Navy destroyers to Great Britain directly, in exchange for certain air and naval bases in Britain's colonies. One legal scholar who has examined this transaction carefully has found that even the President's legal advisers believed that it violated both international law and domestic legislation implementing it....

## The Cuban "Quarantine"

Faced with the alarming disclosure that Soviet missiles were being introduced into Communist Cuba, President John Kennedy's Administration grappled with the question of how to respond. Although the Cold War had already lasted for well over a decade, the United States was not in a state of war with either the Soviet Union or Cuba. Moreover, although the introduction of the Soviet missiles to a location within close range of the United States' major East Coast cities undoubtedly constituted a grave threat to the nation's security, it could not in itself have reasonably been considered an "armed attack" within the meaning of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter--a condition that was widely understood to be necessary before the right to take lawful armed countermeasures in self-defense was triggered. Although President Kennedy spoke of the United States action as one of self-defense, his State Department, in presenting the case to the Security Council, the OAS, and the public, sought to justify the American use of force in Cuba primarily under the Rio Treaty and the action of the Organization of American States pursuant to that Treaty. But this argument is untenable.... The only possible legal basis for the action taken by the United States in the Cuban missile crisis was therefore its 'inherent' right of self-defense, reaffirmed by Article 51 of the Charter."

Hence, a unilateral American naval blockade of Cuba, even though defensively intended, could well be regarded as an unlawful act of aggression, in violation of Article 2(4) of the Charter. The Kennedy Administration was greatly concerned with international law--or to be more accurate, with likely perceptions of that law--when considering whether to institute a naval blockade. To minimize legal objections, it decided to characterize the action as a "quarantine" rather than as a "blockade," and it limited the action in the first instance to interdicting the flow of offensive military equipment into Cuba. Further, instead of obtaining United Nations Security Council authorization for its action (which the Soviet veto obviously made impossible), the Kennedy Administration sought authorization for the use of force from the Organization of American States. While these maneuvers succeeded in altering international perceptions of the American action, they hardly silenced objections made on grounds of international law.

Again, the arguable ambiguity in international law does nothing to cloud the President's constitutional authority to act as Kennedy did. That President Kennedy had the constitutional authority to order the "quarantine" of Cuba is,



we think, incontestable, whatever the legality of that action under international law...



## Dramatizing History: Issues and Controversies.

### I. One for the Books: When it is acceptable to rewrite history?

By **Kirk Ellis**, screenwriter and co-producer of the HBO miniseries "John Adams" (Excerpted from **The New Republic**, May 07, 2008)

...In writing the HBO miniseries *John Adams*, my intent was not to portray the "external facts" of the American Revolution (as Thomas Jefferson phrased it in one of his late-life letters to Adams). Rather, it was to depict an internal history, an epic of thoughts and ideas refracted through the singular prism of one man who helped shape those events. I have always tried to be scrupulous in my approach to the historical record, whether the subject be John Adams or some of my previous subjects, like Judy Garland, Anne Frank or, yes, even the Three Stooges. A dramatist's "truth," however, often involves departing from the letter of that record in order to personify the spirit of the people and the times more fully.

The "truth" I sought to illuminate in the miniseries was emotional and intellectual rather than literal. With every historical project I've done, the next-day bloggers often make the assumption that filmmakers alter "facts" either out of ignorance or negligence. In fact, a good deal of soul-searching goes into every deviation from the record; nothing is arbitrary. Some changes are made deliberately from the outset, with an eye to the overall structure of the piece; others arise as a result of production exigencies. But all aim to further the broader goal of making "history" accessible in dramatic form.

A writer always seeks economy in storytelling. Of course I knew that there were two Boston Massacre trials, not one. But the audience would not have thanked us for devoting the whole of the first episode to an examination of courtroom procedure, with two separate verdicts rendered. The key dramatic points are Adams's decision to defend Captain Preston and his soldiers, and his success at exonerating them on the charge of murder. Both points are "factual." Has there been some manipulation involved in the dramatization? Absolutely. But the outcome of the proceedings has not been altered.

Similarly, while it is "history" that Adams made not one, but two trips to France between 1778 and 1780 (and the second trip, involving a perilous winter crossing of the Pyrenees, is arguably even more dramatic than the first), the miniseries depicts only his initial crossing in 1778 on the frigate *Boston*. As with the compression of the two Boston Massacre trials, showing both crossings would have unnecessarily elongated the dramatic story, and the crossing on the *Boston*, with its chase-on-the-high-seas action, stands in for the dangers Adams encountered on both voyages. That first crossing was the only time in which Adams directly participated in the war--firing as a common marine at the pursuing armed British merchantmen--and thus seemed the natural choice.

Other changes are necessitated by structure. John and Abigail are our only conduits through which to witness the principal action, and their story takes precedence over any other. [The Adams children] are left out of the Paris and London scenes in order to emphasize the emotional renewal of the Adams marriage and the burgeoning friendship with Jefferson, the mercurial course of which provides the emotional and thematic underpinning of the latter episodes.

Are mistakes sometimes made? Sure. In Part 5, Adams is shown breaking a Senate tie over ratification of the Jay Treaty. That never happened: The treaty passed with a two-thirds majority, as required by the Constitution. Adams did cast more tie-breaking votes than any other vice-president, and always on the side of the administration. But in retrospect, the scene now seems too much of a stretch, the one example of "manufactured drama" in the miniseries; we should have reconsidered its inclusion.

... I have repeatedly read reviews to the effect that "every word of dialogue is taken directly from the Adams letters." Nothing could be further from the truth. Some of the signature speeches in the show--notably Adams's oration for independence--are largely invented. While the letters provided a guide to thought and vocabulary, nothing could have been drier than a direct recitation. Rather, the effort was to get beneath the text of the letter to their intellectual and emotional core and render those thoughts in the majestic language of the period. An example: Frustrated by Adams's long silence in Europe, Abigail writes that she fears he "has exchanged hearts with some frozen Laplander" and worries of a cooling of his affections--a wonderful phrase that once had a place in the script itself. That, along with so many other epistolary moments, is absent from the finished film. But that letter underpins the lovely scene in Part 3 where young Nabby finds her mother obsessively scrubbing windows in the

middle of the night, resulting in Abigail unburdening herself to her daughter and finding some solace...

...The miniseries is by no means lacking in incident or spectacle, but it doesn't dwell on those events that pass for action in today's frenetic society. Yes, it demands an audience pay attention--but that's not the same thing as being "slow." We never thought it necessary to condescend or talk down to our audience. The program's deliberate pace reflects that of the period it depicts, a time when people were more contemplative, more attuned to responsibility and the consequences of their actions, and not afraid of patience and perseverance, of eloquence and erudition.

"Facts are stubborn things," noted Adams (quoting Jonathan Swift) in his Boston Massacre summation. But well-told history is also drama. David McCullough, upon whose masterful book the miniseries is based, understands this; it's what has made his books best-sellers--and eminently adaptable....The process of screenwriters, academics, and popular historians, I think, is much the same. We make our choices from the historical record to tell the story that best suits our purposes. The line between "history" and "drama" is a fine one, indeed. It is in the intersection between those two different, but not always mutually exclusive, realms that our *John Adams* miniseries exists. Hopefully, our viewers will utilize it as another tool to construct their own vision of our founding past.

## II. The Ethics of "United 93"

By Jack Marshall (Excerpted from The Ethics Scoreboard, May 1, 2006)

Once again questions are being raised about a high-profile film's ethics in setting out to dramatize a historic event. The film in question this time is "United 93," the recreation of how the heroic passengers on the third hijacked plane on September 11, 2001 foiled the terrorists' plans to use the craft in a suicide bombing of the White House or the U.S. Capitol. But it seems that the objections being raised now are based on emotion and ignorance, not ethics. There is not anything intrinsically unethical about "United 93."

The weakest complaints have maintained that it is somehow wrong for filmmakers to imagine and dramatize details of historical events that exceed what is known to be true. This postulates standards that would have wiped out, to name just a small percentage of works relying on such inventions and speculations, every movie, TV drama or piece of literature about the Trojan

War, the Titanic (or any other shipwreck), the Alamo, Custer's Last Stand, the Tudor monarchs of England, the French Revolution, the Bounty mutiny, the Lincoln Assassination, the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, and the Roman Empire. The objection would also deep-six biographical works about Spartacus, Joan of Arc, Julius Caesar, Queen Elizabeth I, Genghis Kahn, Henry the Eighth, Thomas More, and Alexander the Great. It is nonsense. Any dramatic account of a historical event involves story-telling, and good story-telling requires filling in blanks. It also requires a point of view, and the shaping of events and personalities to make the story both compelling and meaningful. Can this be done maliciously, recklessly, deceptively or hurtfully? Certainly...and misuse of the technique *is* wrong. But to insist that it is improper for the dramatization of an event to include any unverifiable details would make history useless for dramatic exposition, robbing our culture of both great literature and popular portrayals of history. True, Americans would be exposed to less speculative history, but they would be exposed to hardly any history at all...and what little they experienced would be soporific...

### **III. The Ethics of Changing History**

**By Jack Marshall** (Excerpted from The Ethics Scoreboard, Oct.10, 2006)

"When the legend becomes truth, print the legend."

This cynical endorsement of our culture's preference for soothing fantasy over harsh historical truth was the intentionally disturbing message of John Ford's film, "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance." But rejecting Ford's grizzled old

newspaper editor's warped ethic does not justify the equally objectionable modern practice of using spurious logic to substitute one dubious historical account for another. Even more ethically suspect is the common practice of replacing an accepted, well-supported version of an historical event with a "new improved" version that exists less because of its accuracy than because of its advocates' biases.

When Disney released the latest Hollywood version of the heroic story of the Alamo, it claimed that it was "historically accurate," unlike John Wayne's mythic telling of the tale in his 1960 version. "Historically accurate" apparently meant showing Davy Crockett (a decidedly un-Duke-like Billy Bob Thornton) surviving the final slaughter, surrendering to the Mexican army and being executed by Mexican General Santa Anna, rather than fighting to the death like Wayne's Crockett and those before him, including, according to many

historians, the real one. The surrender story arises from a letter from one of Santa Anna's commanders, stating that Crockett was among a group of Texans who were captured alive. The letter contradicts the testimony of Susannah Dickinson, who was in the Alamo during the battle and who claimed to have seen Crockett's body with the rest.

There is only one reason to favor the account of a Mexican general who didn't know what Crockett looked like (any captured Texan could have claimed to be Davy Crockett), over that of Capt. Almeron Dickinson's widow, who knew Crockett but didn't see him die. It satisfies those who enjoy undermining American heroes. No one who knew Crockett in life witnessed his death, so the actual circumstances of his demise will always be unknown. A genuine American hero, Davy deserves the benefit of the doubt, but an unholy alliance of biased historians and hypocritical film-makers (Disney's "historically accurate" film still included Jim Bowie's completely fictional death-bed combat with Mexican soldiers, a wonderful myth that is 100% at odds with the truth) is well on its way to establishing Crockett's supposed surrender as fact.

A similar scenario occurred regarding the sinking of the *Titanic*. James Cameron's Academy Award-sweeping film showed the doomed ocean liner spectacularly splitting in half before going down, unlike several earlier versions including the scrupulously researched British film, "A Night to Remember," based on Walter Lord's book. Why? Well, when the wreckage of the ship was discovered in 1991, there were two distinct halves on the ocean floor. Computer specialists produced models showing that the ship must have broken apart as it sunk, and a Discovery Channel documentary suggested that science and technology, once again, had allowed historians to see into the past. The *Titanic* broke apart *above the surface* with a loud explosion. Hail technology!

There is one problem with this, however. Hundreds of people witnessed the sinking of the *Titanic*, and many of them delivered extensive testimony about what occurred on that tragic night at the official inquest. Some were even on board the ship when it supposedly split in half. Oddly, *all* of them seem to have missed seeing a sight approximately as big and horrifying as the fiery explosion of the *Hindenburg*, though all reported that they heard a very loud noise as the ship went down. Somehow, everybody missed the super-liner splitting in the air...everybody, that is, except some of the aged survivors of the disaster still living in 1991, who were interviewed regarding the new version of events and who conceded that the huge ship *might* have broken apart on the surface. It is important to remember that the youngest of these survivors was 84 and just

five-years old in 1912, while the oldest survivor, who was a teenager at the time of the sinking, was well into her 90s.

Common sense dictates that contemporary accounts from the crew and adult survivors are far more reliable sources than the accounts of 80 and 90 year-olds trying to recall what they witnessed as children eight decades earlier. Yet in order to validate the high-tech investigations into one of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's most studied events, Cameron's film's version of the sinking has superseded well-supported fact. Ask anyone who saw the movie: the *Titanic* cracked down the middle. Who cares what the people who were there saw? (Subsequent improvements on the computer model have indicated that the Discovery Channel was wrong: the Titanic split below the surface.)

... Ignoring the truth to "print the legend" is wrong, but before we discard an established historical account, it is only right to hold the proposed new version to a higher standard of reliability. Too often the primary virtue of a revised historical account isn't that it is proven or well-supported, but that it serves someone's agenda. When that is the real motivation, Ford's old newspaper editor is right.

"Print the legend."





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