

THE MISSILES OF OCTOBER

By Michael Ventura

Oct. 9, 2009

My ninth grade English teacher was a cocky fellow whose name my memory has shed, except to recall his salesmanlike demeanor and the disappointing shallowness of his assignments. For instance, he asked us to write a one-page essay on “spring.” The 14-year-old version of me already thought he was a writer. To prove it, I’d listen to this teacher’s instructions carefully in order to get around them with some show of legality. He said “spring” but didn’t specifically say the season of spring. I therefore wrote about the little spring in my ballpoint pen, the spring in my step and the spring that’s like – but not exactly like -- a creek.

The poor guy deserved credit (which I firmly withheld) for his wry tolerance of my sallies. He lost his cool only once. Didn’t get angry, but was seriously disturbed.

It was late in the school year, 1960. His assignment was the “flag.” This was the era when the United States and the Soviet Union busily scared the hell out of each other with hundreds – yes, hundreds – of aboveground nuclear bomb tests, while educators scared kids with duck-and-cover drills. Bells rang as teachers yelled, “Duck and cover!” We’d dive under our desks, hunch in a ball, protect our heads, and wait to die. We’d seen newsreels of the bomb tests. We knew the futility this exercise. What scared me most was that grown-ups entrusted with preparing me for adulthood were liars or stupid or both. Why else enact this farce?

The Russians had their own version: Cover yourself with a white sheet and move very slowly. Their kids joked darkly, “Move slowly, very slowly, toward the cemetery.”

So my masterpiece, on a lined sheet of loose-leaf, proclaimed with the stern passion of age 14 that if Russians were insane and immoral enough to launch a nuclear attack, it would be equally immoral and insane for Americans to retaliate. History would praise us for millennia if, rather than destroy civilization for flag and country, we sacrificed ourselves to save the remainder of humanity.

Can’t remember my grade, but I still see my teacher’s expression when he called my name and I stepped to his desk to retrieve my paper: severe worry.

What I wrote at 14 I still believe -- especially after what happened just days before my 17th birthday, in October, 1962.

We call it the “Cuban Missile Crisis.” Russians call it the “Caribbean Crisis.” Cubans, the “October Crisis.” Briefly:

The Soviet Union, led by Nikita Khrushchev, secretly placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. The U.S., led by John F. Kennedy, found out. The U.S. demanded these missiles be removed. The Soviets first denied there were missiles in Cuba, then refused to remove them. Kennedy ordered a naval blockade around Cuba (technically, an act of war). He prepared a full-scale invasion, knowing the outcome would be all-out nuclear war. The U.S. military thought they could win such a war. Kennedy and Khrushchev, each fighting intense factions that were pushing for war in their governments, desperately tried to pull back from the brink – while, at the same time, both Ks were determined to nuke rather than back down. In the course of one week, nuclear war almost broke out three times (that we now know about). A compromise was reached at the very last minute – just before the hour Kennedy had chosen for an all-out invasion of Cuba. The Soviets agreed

to remove all missiles and permit U.N. inspection of the sites, in exchange for a promise (bitterly resented by America's military) that the U.S. would never invade Cuba or aid anyone else's invasion of Cuba.

I was a Brooklyn street kid who, by that time, lived in Waterville, Maine, while my family was scattered in and around New York City, a prime target. Me, I'm thinking, "Cuba?! It's the end of the fucking world because of something going on in Cuba?! Something happening in Cuba is threatening to kill my family?!" When you're 16 going on 17, it's all about you.

Be that as it may, it was a first lesson in globalization: No place is so unimportant that it can't hurt you.

As the crisis worsened and nuclear war seemed inevitable, I was back at my ninth-grade essay: World annihilation for the pride of a few high officials in two governments was insane, and insanely immoral. If the commonly accepted terms by which society operates can lead to such a moment, then "society" and "madness" must be synonymous.

No one who'd throw down for nuclear war was on my side or on the side of any common person. More importantly, our leaders were not on the side of our species. And what kind of a world is that?

What I was feeling, none too coherently, was expressed in a book read three years later: psychiatrist R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*: "A little girl of 17 in a mental hospital told me she was terrified because the Atom Bomb was inside her. ... The statesmen... who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous, and far more estranged from 'reality' than many of the people on whom the label 'psychotic' is affixed."

Yet these leaders were not madmen. Rather, they were men under the spell of the power they wielded, genuinely wanting to avoid war and just as genuinely willing to annihilate humanity rather than lose political face.

You may see this up close, insofar as that's possible, in two films: the superb 1974 TV docudrama *The Missiles of October* and the gruesomely sentimental 2000 feature *Thirteen Days* (which does have some good bits).

Thirteen Days focuses only on the Kennedys, presenting them relentlessly as the good guys. Its depiction of the crisis is thrown badly off-balance by its focus on Kevin Costner as the supposedly oh-so-good-guy Kenny O'Donnell, who functioned (without title) as John F. Kennedy's chief of staff.

The Missiles of October honestly presents both sides, giving us Khrushchev's reasons and dilemmas as well as Kennedy's. Remarkably unsentimental, it keeps to the record as that was known in 1974. William Devane's John F. Kennedy is by far the best screen portrayal of the man, indicating the volcanic psyche that fueled the charisma of this charming, intellectual, Irish gentleman-brawler. Martin Sheen's Bobby Kennedy is equally complex. Together these actors convey the secret codes between close brothers. And Howard DaSilva's Khrushchev is almost as good. Impressively, *The Missiles of October* doesn't shy away from how terribly frightened these men were by what they'd set in motion, and how small they felt in the face of this historical moment – and how, nevertheless, they were willing to kill us all, if necessary, to prove their points.

In both films we see America's military leaders continually taking matters into their own hands to provoke the war they wanted, even to the point of mobilizing to DEFCON

2 without a presidential order – DEFCON 2 being a hairbreadth from DEFCON 1, which is maximum readiness for nuclear war.

Both films detail how Khrushchev and Kennedy prevailed partly by dumb luck -- which is not to undervalue their efforts, nor the brilliant contributions of Bobby Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson (the only man at the table who didn't think it a good idea, under any circumstances, for politicians and generals to end humanity). And both films show that the most important meetings of the crisis were engaged by forgotten men: America's John Scali and Russia's Aleksandr Fomin, head to head in a late-night café in Washington, D.C. History doesn't get any weirder.

What the crisis meant for me was that, shortly after its resolution, I got to turn 17 – with the uneasy lesson that my life was not in my own hands.

No one, high or low, has that luxury.

Then all we dangerous creatures, connected intimately though worlds apart, tried to go on as though there exists, in actuality, something called “normal.”

For those interested, Wikipedia presents a fair summary of this crisis.

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