# Press Freedom and Armageddon

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Before President Kennedy spoke to the nation on October 22, 1962 about missile bases in Cuba, the crisis was shrouded from the press by a deliberate veil of secrecy. President Kennedy adamantly insisted on a news blackout while his administration worked to defuse a possible nuclear confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Press freedoms were also curtailed after the story broke. Did a perceived need for concealment cross the line into "press management," as has been charged? Was JFK ultimately correct to institute such a policy?

Shortly before 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday, October 16, President Kennedy received the first photographic evidence that the Soviet Union was constructing missile bases in Cuba. In various states of readiness, the bases would soon be capable of launching medium-range nuclear warheads at the United States. Later that morning, Kennedy met with Press Secretary Pierre Salinger. "I expect a lot of traffic through here this weekend," Kennedy told Salinger, "If the press tries to read something significant into it, you're to deny that anything special is going on." He did not elaborate.

With midterm elections fast approaching, the press secretary accompanied JFK that weekend on a campaign swing to bolster the Democratic majority in congress. As he relates in his memoir With Kennedy, when the presidential entourage reached Chicago on Friday, October 19, Salinger learned that the *Sun-Times* would soon report that the United States was set to invade Cuba. Ken O'Donnell, White House Appointments Secretary and one of Kennedy's top advisors, told Salinger to deny the report. O'Donnell also notified Salinger that "the president may have to develop a cold somewhere along the line tomorrow," precipitating a return to Washington, and advised him to stay away from reporters in the interim. The next morning, Saturday, October 20, the straight-faced president informed Salinger that he had indeed developed a cold. "Wait a minute," Kennedy called as Salinger departed. "Let's be sure we're all saying the same thing." JFK scribbled a set of phony symptoms onto a scrap of paper and handed it to his press secretary. ("There, tell them that.") Salinger then delivered his "medical bulletin" to a skeptical White House press corps. Salinger also sent his staff home to lull the press into believing it was just another Saturday.

Journalists, however, were not convinced. The number of senior administration officials seen coming and going from the White House at odd hours, similar activity at the departments of State and Defense, and news that Vice President Johnson was cutting short a political trip and returning to Washington (suffering, it was reported, from a cold) pointed to an atmosphere of crisis.

Throughout Saturday, the press secretary was bombarded with phone calls from reporters frantic with curiosity and determined to uncover what was *really* going on. To each request for comment, Salinger – still very much in the dark at this point – responded, alternately, "No comment" or "I don't know." According to Salinger's diary, at 2:35 an AP newsman sought comment on large troop movements from California to Florida. "Must be part of the Vieques exercise," speculated Salinger. (The Marines had been scheduled to practice amphibious landings on Vieques island.) At 4:00 p.m., the Pentagon told Salinger the maneuvers had been canceled, but to keep reporters guessing, an announcement would be delayed as long as possible. When Kennedy called for an update on press activities that evening, Salinger said columnist Walter Lippman had told a *Washington Post* editor that the U.S. and the Soviets were gearing up for war. Salinger also warned that continued secrecy was impossible and reminded Kennedy he was still ignorant of the facts. JFK promised a briefing in the morning.

The next day, Sunday, October 21, the president met with cabinet members to prepare the administration's response to media inquiries once the story broke. If pressed on whether an invasion of Cuba was imminent, Kennedy instructed officials to ask that this line of questioning be dropped, "in the interest of national security." In his book President Kennedy: Profile in Power, Richard Reeves quotes a note that General Chester Clifton, one of JFK's military aids, left for the president after the meeting was adjourned. "Is there a plan to brief and brainwash key press within 12 hours or so? *New York Times?* Lippman? (*Washington Post* columnist) Marquis Childs?

(Columnist Joseph) Alsop? Key bureau chiefs?" In an attempt to confuse reporters, Kennedy ordered administration officials with no connection to Latin American policy (one was the State Department's German desk officer) to roll up to the White House in conspicuously large limousines. Finally, after days of surreptitiously calibrating the U.S. response to the Cuban missile threat, Kennedy and his advisors decided the president should address the nation the following evening, Monday, October 22. Yet JFK was determined to keep a lid on the story in the hours leading up to his speech. He personally telephoned three of the most influential press figures in the country – *Washington Post* president Phil Graham, Orville Dryfoos, publisher of the *New York Times*, and Henry Luce of *Time* magazine – to secure their silence. All agreed.

After the crisis passed, criticism over the administration's handling of the press grew. Just a day after Khruschev agreed to withdraw the missiles from Cuba (Sunday, October 28), Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester told the *Washington Star* that "in the kind of world we live in, the generation of news by the government becomes one weapon in a strained situation. The results, in my opinion, justify the means." Charges that Kennedy and his men had manipulated the press prior to the October 22 address swiftly followed suit. The House Subcommittee on Freedom of Information released a lengthy memo alleging a pattern of "deliberate" lying to the media. The report stated that on October 19, a Pentagon spokesman denied "emergency measures" had been taken relative to Cuba and singled out Salinger's "The president has a cold" prevarication of the 20th. In With Kennedy, Salinger defends these and other instances of press dodging on the grounds that full disclosure to the American media would mean, essentially, full disclosure to the Soviet's as well. The very point of such elaborate and painstaking secrecy, argues Salinger, was to afford Kennedy precious time in formulating U.S. policy before the missile bases became operational. "If there was one key element in President Kennedy's successful policy at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis," writes Salinger, "it would seem to me it was the fact that we caught the Russians and the Cubans by surprise on the night of October 22, that they had not been forewarned about the blockade (sic), and that they therefore were faced with urgent considerations of what to do in the face of this powerful U.S. move."

Salinger also points out, rightly, that although Kennedy didn't have a cold on October 20, at that time the press secretary knew nothing of the missile crisis. Indeed, Kennedy carefully avoided briefing his press secretary through its early stages. Salinger wasn't apprised of the whole truth, he writes, until Sunday, October 21 – the day before ordinary Americans heard about it,

Salinger admits that after Kennedy finally spoke, "there is no question that the entire information policy of the government was rigidly and directly planned." Between October 22 and 28, news information about the crisis was coordinated by the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. Arthur Sylvester handled military news emanating from the Pentagon, while Robert Manning disseminated diplomatic news from the State Department's Public Affairs Bureau. All information that might conceivably aid the Soviets was "cut off at the source in the Defense Department." On October 23, while the crisis was still unfolding, Salinger met with representatives from the television networks, radio, newspaper and wire services. He distributed a White House draft of "twelve points of information valuable to the enemy" which sought voluntary censorship from news organizations. Salinger also stated that the Defense Department would shortly issue compulsory censorship guidelines. (In addition, Salinger had instructed Sylvester to establish an office at the Pentagon to "consult" with media organizations before publication of stories affecting the national interest.)

The press was not pleased with such strictures. Nor was it pleased to learn the U.S. had allowed a Soviet tanker, the *Bucharest,* to pass through its naval blockade of Cuba from James E. Van Zandt, an obscure Pennsylvania congressman. Reporters were "disgusted," recalls Salinger, that the White House failed to release such important information. More heated complaints arose when Ambassador to Britain David Bruce released "classified" photographs of the Cuban missile bases to British newspapers, leaving the American press flat-footed. In the wake of numerous leaks from State and Defense, Kennedy commanded that all officials report, in writing, what questions were asked during press interviews, and how they were answered. Journalists correctly saw this as de facto censorship, as thereafter government sources were unlikely to divulge information of much value.

Months after the crisis faded from the headlines, the Kennedy administration continued to receive strong censure for its "generation of news" from media organs like the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the American Newspaper Publishers Association. A *Washington Star* editorial labeled future information emitting from the White House "suspect." Yet in his first post-crisis news conference, held on November 20, Kennedy stood by his conduct toward the press:

> "We did not want to indicate to the Soviet Union or to Cuba, or anyone else who might be our adversaries, the extent of our information until we had determined what our policy would be and until we had consulted with our allies...
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> "I have no apologies for that. I don't think that there's any doubt it would have been a great mistake and possibly a disaster if this news had dribbled out when we were unsure of the extent of the Soviet buildup in Cuba, and when we were unsure of our response...
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> "I can assure you that our only interest has been to try ... not to have (information) coming out of the Pentagon which is highly sensitive, particularly in the intelligence areas... I can assure you that in my own not-too-distant experience, (such information) has been extremely inimical to the interest of the United States."

Considering what was at stake during the Cuban Missile Crisis, I am inclined to agree with Kennedy's assessment. The possibility that the superpowers might blunder or overreact their way into mutual annihilation made secrecy – and censorship – a necessary evil. One may decry this strategy in times of peace, or conventional war. Yet even Kennedy's press critics would agree that whatever words describe the missile crisis, "conventional" is not one of them. In an age of instant news, a single dispatch could have telegraphed U.S. intentions and altered the balance of power. No one knows might have happened after that. As citizens we're often cynical about the prevarications and stonewalling of our elected (and unelected) officials. Were I alive in October 1962, however, I'd be grateful Kennedy caught his cold.