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Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*. New York: Knopf, 2008. Pp. xvi, 426. ISBN 978-1-4000-4358-3.

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In 1947, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* created “The Doomsday Clock” and, ever since, it has been a fixture on that journal’s cover. The clock represented the *Bulletin’s* judgment as to how close mankind was to self-annihilation; the closer to midnight it ticked, the nearer the world to nuclear holocaust. The *Bulletin* initially set the clock’s time at seven minutes to midnight and, over the past sixty years, it has fluctuated between two minutes to midnight (1953-60) and seventeen minutes to midnight (1991-95). Due, however, to the periodic nature of the *Bulletin’s* publication, the Doomsday clock could not respond to brief but terrifying moments such as the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹ Michael Dobbs’s *One Minute to Midnight* takes its title from the Doomsday Clock, implying that, for a two-week period in October 1962, the world was but sixty seconds from the outbreak of nuclear war. After reading this fascinating yet terrifying book, it is clear that Dobbs is far too conservative—*Five Seconds to Midnight* might have been a more appropriate title.

Dobbs, a foreign affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*, has produced a marvelous historical narrative. His research employs material that has become available only in the last twenty years, among which are President Kennedy’s tapes of Oval Office and Cabinet Room discussions, documents from the former Soviet Union, and memoirs of and interviews with high- and low-ranking participants on both sides. Much of the story Dobbs tells is familiar, but instead of dwelling on many of the missile crisis’s better-known events, he focuses on the numerous events that point to the lack of control both sides had over events and how, in several instances, relatively low-ranking officers could have initiated nuclear war. Some of these incidents would seem comical were they not so serious. For example, Dobbs tells the story of Soviet saboteurs at a radar station on the grounds of the Duluth, Minnesota, airport. This facility was a crucial link in the radar net that guarded the northern approaches into the United States. According to Dobbs, the United States assumed that a Soviet nuclear attack would be preceded by *Spetsnaz* (Special Forces) commando raids that would attempt to take out that warning network. Moreover, the Duluth airport was one of many to which USAF fighters had been dispersed as a means of preventing their destruction in a Soviet first strike.² During the missile crisis, a guard at the Duluth facility spotted a figure climbing its surrounding fence. The guard fired a shot, an act that set off the airport’s klaxon. Duluth’s alarm set off others throughout the upper Midwest and in Canada, and though the fighter pilots in Duluth sat tight waiting for word of what to do, others did

¹ “Doomsday Clock,” *Wikipedia* (22 Sep 2008) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0828.htm>.

² Not coincidentally, this dispersal also meant that the USAF had lost positive control over many of its aircraft and their nuclear weapons.

not. At Volk Field, Wisconsin, another dispersal base, F102s with nuclear-tipped air-to-air missiles were scrambled and about to take off when a jeep, coming down the runway, stopped the scramble (Volk, like many of the dispersal fields, had inadequate communications facilities) because Duluth had reported that the *Spetsnaz* commando, it turned out, had been a bear (132-4).

At Galena Air Force Base in Alaska, F102s' conventional air-to-air missiles were replaced with nuclear-tipped missiles. Pilots of these aircraft, once airborne, could fire the missiles without presidential approval or two-man control. Several Galena F102s went into the air on 27 October 1962, as part of a search for a missing U-2, which had flown to the North Pole on an air-sampling mission and, unbeknownst either to its pilot or to the Air Force, had strayed into Soviet airspace on its way home. The Soviets, of course, had scrambled aircraft for the purpose of shooting down the U-2 at the same time Galena's F102s were sent out to search for it. Given the day's events (it was the same day as the downing of Major Rudolph Anderson's U-2 over Cuba), it is remarkable that the missing U-2 returned without incident (254-69).

The Soviets had similar problems. Though nuclear weapons were not involved, the decision to fire at Major Anderson's U-2 was emblematic of the problem. Saturday 27 October was the most crucial day of the Cuban missile crisis. In previous days, Khrushchev had sent conflicting signals regarding his terms for ending the crisis, and the Kennedy administration was deeply divided over how to respond. Administration hardliners believed that the Soviets either had misled the Americans or had shifted their position to a more aggressive stance, either of which, the hardliners believed, meant war could hardly be avoided. Those hoping for conciliation, on the other hand, were bemused and trying to find a way to end the crisis short of conflict. Dobbs makes it clear that, at this critical juncture, both Kennedy and Khrushchev were looking for a way out. But in Cuba, Soviet officers acting without Moscow's knowledge decided to bring down Major Anderson's U-2 (236-8). This action added credence to the Washington hardliners' position at precisely the moment that Khrushchev was looking for a way to end the crisis (292-3).

Unfortunately, not just officers at conventional SAM sites in Cuba had the authority to engage American targets. Dobbs tells of Soviet cruise missiles carrying tactical nuclear warheads deployed throughout Cuba. The Soviets intended to use these missiles against an American invasion of the island; one battery was deployed near enough to use against the naval base at Guantanamo Bay. In all cases, the local commander had authority to use missiles when and where they saw fit (126-7, 205-6).

Dobbs also recounts the travails of four Soviet diesel-electric submarines sent into the Atlantic to protect merchant ships heading to Cuba. These had nuclear-tipped torpedoes that the subs' captains could employ without Moscow's approval. The U.S. Navy hunted aggressively for Soviet submarines and found two, one of which was the B-59. Circling destroyers dropped hand grenades into the water as a signal for the sub to surface, the United States having communicated to the Soviets the meaning of this action. The problem was that the Soviets never sent this message to their submarines. Conditions on the B-59 were horrific—temperatures exceeded 110 degrees and the atmosphere contained a dangerously high proportion of carbon dioxide. The sub's captain, believing himself under attack, briefly considered using his nuclear torpedo but his officers talked him out of it. He in-

stead surfaced, to be greeted by, among other things, American aircraft dropping illumination flares of 50 million candlepower. The captain again believed himself to be under attack (301-3, 317-8, 327-8). Under such circumstances it was miraculous that nuclear war was somehow avoided.

Dobbs bursts many of the myths that have arisen over the decades regarding the missile crisis. For example, he shows that Soviet ships bound for Cuba had turned around nearly twenty-four hours before the establishment of the quarantine line, not at the last minute as was reported at the time and “confirmed” in books by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. The “eyeball to eyeball” imagery, according to Dobbs, “served the political interests of the Kennedy brothers, emphasizing their courage and coolness at a decisive moment in history,” but it presented a fundamentally false story (87-9). Dobbs also quashes the myth that the president responded angrily to the decision by General Thomas Power, the commander of the Strategic Air Command, to move SAC to DEFCON 2. In fact, he had acted on orders from the president (94-6). And Dobbs shows conclusively, contrary to a long-believed and much-cherished story, that the contact between ABC correspondent John Scali and a KGB agent in the Soviet embassy had little if any positive impact on the course of the missile crisis (166-8, 289-90).

Dobbs portrays both nations’ intelligence services as borderline incompetent in the run-up to as well as during the crisis. Soviet intelligence had little information about and even less insight into the Kennedy administration’s inner workings. For example, they believed that Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon was a member of the faction urging conciliation and that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was a member of the hard-line faction. In fact, just the opposite was the case (116-7).

The CIA’s intelligence regarding the situation in Cuba was just as flawed. The agency’s failure to detect Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba was but one example. Prior to the crisis, the CIA had judged Soviet deployment of nuclear weapons to Cuba “far too risky to undertake.” Because of this assumption (“CIA analysts found evidence to support whatever hypothesis was most fashionable at the time”), the agency dismissed numerous on-the-ground reports of nuclear weapons. Additionally, the CIA had expected Soviet nuclear weapons storage sites to follow the template of those in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In Cuba, however, due both to the secretive and haphazard nature of the weapons’ deployment and the limitations of operating in a Third World nation, the Soviets stored their weapons wherever they could, often in circumstances that caused the on-site officials to fear for the weapons’ security. Ironically, the reverse was the case: because the CIA was looking for a familiar template, most of the storage facilities went undetected (79-80, 123-4, 174-5).

By his impressive scholarship and gripping narrative, Dobbs tells an important cautionary tale. He reminds us throughout that despite their ardent desires and best efforts to end the crisis, both Kennedy and Khrushchev struggled and nearly failed to maintain control of the situation. This is a message that we as a nation and our new president ought soberly to consider after eight years of Bush-Cheney hubris in foreign affairs.