To the Editors:

Bruce Allyn, James Blight, and David Welch should be congratulated for a splendid review of some of the most important findings from their joint research on the Cuban missile crisis, including the conferences they helped organize in Hawk's Cay, Cambridge, and Moscow. They have performed an invaluable service for both historians and political scientists.

Nevertheless, the research methodology that Allyn, Blight, and Welch (henceforth AB&W) have used is not without its drawbacks. Although their work has given us a much better understanding of the American side of the Cuban missile crisis, I am not sure we yet have a better understanding of the Soviet side. Indeed, our "knowledge" of certain aspects of the Soviet role may, if anything, be more confused than before.

The reservations I express below, though applied to the AB&W article, are intended as general notes of caution.

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1. "Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," International Security, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Winter 1989/90), pp. 136–172. (Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.) This article stands well on its own, but is best read in conjunction with two earlier products of the Cuban missile crisis project: James G. Blight, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., and David A. Welch, "The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Fall 1987), pp. 170–188; and James G. Blight and David A. Welch, On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989). On the Brink contains, among other things, abridged transcripts of the Hawk's Cay and Cambridge conferences, with detailed annotation by the authors. The unabridged transcripts of the two conferences (which are reconstructed from notes, since the meetings were not tape-recorded) are available as Working Papers from Harvard's Center for Science and International Affairs (CSIA). The transcript of the Moscow Conference (which was taped) will be available later this year from University Press of America as CSIA Occasional Paper No. 9.
Limits of Oral History

The AB&W article relies heavily on "oral history," that is, the recollections of officials in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba who either participated in the Cuban missile crisis or knew the participants. The authors briefly allude to the "weaknesses" and "inherent limitations" of oral history; but these problems do not deter AB&W from concluding that recent contributions of Soviet officials "have greatly improved the understanding of the causes, conduct, and implications of the Cuban missile crisis (pp. 171, 172)."

Can the limits of oral history really be overcome so easily? In the case of the Cuban missile crisis, the failings and selectivity of memory are especially acute because the events transpired nearly 30 years ago and almost all of those who played any part in the crisis (and are still alive) are now elderly. There are bound to be honest divergences in the way aging men recall events of nearly three decades ago.

Along with inevitable failings of memory, there is the more nettlesome issue of ulterior motives. AB&W point out that "current interests and objectives color recollections of historical events." Thus, many officials will "recall" events (p. 171) in a way that puts the best gloss on their own role or that supports causes they have come to promote. On the American side, this is perhaps best evident with Robert McNamara, who, having become an antinuclear crusader in recent years, now strenuously denies that U.S. strategic nuclear superiority in 1962 had even the slightest effect on the outcome of the crisis.

On the Soviet side, the question of ulterior motives is far more intractable. Blight and Welch "were told by the Soviets at the Cambridge meeting that Gorbachev is intensely interested in the Cuban missile crisis."

More recently, Bruce Allyn acknowledged that one of the main reasons Soviet officials were willing to participate is that "scrutiny of the Cuban missile crisis fits in with the theme of 'inadvertent war' that is a central part of Gorbachev's 'new political thinking'." This desire to emphasize the dangers of inadvertent war is fine; but it immediately raises the question of whether the Soviet participants were unduly motivated to portray the Cuban missile crisis as an extremely dangerous event—perhaps more dangerous than it actually was. By fostering an impression that the two sides actually were "on the brink" of nuclear war in 1962, the Soviet attendees may have hoped that the conferences would lend a sense of urgency to Gorbachev's proposal for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Archival Access and Critical Oral History

These weaknesses of oral history—both the lapses of memory and the attempts to slant things or mislead—can be compensated for if adequate documentary evidence

is available. On the American side, that is certainly possible. An enormous amount of declassified material is already available to cross-check the recollections of former officials, and more will be released over the next several years.\(^5\) Such documents can enrich, and be enriched by, oral history. In combination, the American documents and recollections of American officials provide keen insights into the Kennedy administration’s handling of the Cuban missile crisis. This is the essence of what Blight and Welch term “\textit{critical} oral history.”\(^6\)

On the Soviet side, however, the ability to cross-check and verify the recollections of former officials is impossible. As the AB&W article acknowledges, “Western students of the [Cuban missile] crisis have not seen a single Soviet or Cuban document against which to check the recollections of Soviet and Cuban participants and scholars.” Nor are we likely to get access to such documents anytime soon, for, as AB&W also note, “Cuba and the Soviet Union have no history of declassifying diplomatic documents for historical uses, and no procedures for doing so (p. 171).” Even a top-level Soviet military historian such as General Dmitrii Volkogonov, the head of the Defense Ministry’s Institute of Military History, has often complained about being denied access to archives.\(^7\) The problem is so pervasive, according to Volkogonov, that it is even hindering the preparation of a new official history of the Soviet Union’s role in World War II:

Our institute, which deals with the military problems of history, possesses quite large possibilities, although I must say straight away that, as before, many archives are closed. In particular, in the party archives, and even in the military archives, which it might seem should belong to us, there are still stocks to which they do not give us access.\(^8\)

If the most trusted and highest-ranking Soviet army officers cannot gain access to the documents they want about the distant events of the Second World War, what hope is there for Westerners to get archival materials concerning a much more recent episode like the Cuban missile crisis?

General Volkogonov’s statement is especially important because it implies that well-stocked Soviet archives do exist and that the problem is simply getting access to them. Indeed, at the Moscow conference, Volkogonov read aloud from documents that he claimed had come from the archives. It is a shame that Western scholars have not been allowed to examine such materials in this age of “glasnost.”

Furthermore, even if, as AB&W allege (p. 171), the Soviet archives on the 1962 crisis are “sparse” (something I find hard to believe), that would create the severest problems of all for practitioners of critical oral history. It would mean that we will


\(^{6}\) See Blight and Welch, \textit{On the Brink}, pp. 5–6.

\(^{7}\) Interview in “Triumf tirana, tragediya naroda,” \textit{Moskovskie novosti}, No. 7 (February 12, 1989), pp. 8–9.

never be able to cross-check and corroborate most of the “insights” that the Soviet attendees offered about Soviet motives and behavior. It also would raise troubling questions about precisely how the Soviet attendees could have learned what they claim to know, if they could not learn it from archives.

But assuming that the requisite documents are available, we will have to wait until Western scholars are granted full access to them—including the opportunity to test their authenticity—before we can truly accept (or reject) major Soviet “disclosures” about historical events like the Cuban missile crisis. In short, the notion of “critical oral history” may work well when assessing the American side of the Cuban missile crisis, but thus far it has been irrelevant when we come to the Soviet side. The main thing we have gotten from the Soviet Union up to now is uncritical oral history.

Limits of the Knowledge of Soviet Participants

A final problem concerns the qualifications of Soviet participants in oral history projects like the recent Moscow conference. Most Western journalists who covered the conference suggested that it brought together, for the first time, the top officials on both sides of the Cuban missile crisis.9 But, in fact, none of the conferences brought together the highest-level participants from both sides. The three conferences featured nearly all of the key American statesmen, but on the Soviet side, no comparable representation was possible because all the key officials were long dead.

To be sure, the Soviet foreign minister at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, Andrei Gromyko, attended the Moscow conference, as did the former Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin. But it is unlikely that either man, especially Dobrynin, had much inside knowledge of Soviet decisions leading to the crisis.10 Moreover, even if Gromyko did have inside knowledge, he revealed none of it at the conference (which may not be surprising for an old, frail, and notoriously reticent man).

All the leading Soviet figures in the crisis—N.S. Khrushchev, M.A. Suslov, L.I. Brezhnev, A.I. Mikoyan, F.R. Kozlov, A.N. Kosygin, R.Ya. Malinovskii, and S.S. Biryuzov—died many years ago. A few peripheral members of the 1962 Presidium were still alive and healthy at the time of the Cambridge and Moscow conferences;

10. Gromyko in 1962 was not even a candidate member of the Presidium (as the Politburo was then known) and therefore ordinarily would have taken no part in the highest-level deliberations. Although Gromyko’s recollections of being consulted by Khrushchev are undoubtedly accurate (in some form), this by no means implies that the late foreign minister, whom Khrushchev often mocked, was a key figure in the Soviet handling of the crisis. The same applies a fortiori to Dobrynin, who was not even informed of the missile deployments until well after the United States had discovered them. Dobrynin subsequently became an important conduit for back-channel negotiations, but aside from that, his role was negligible.
but they did not attend either session. Also not present was Andrei Kirilenko, the only full member of Khrushchev's Presidium who is still alive.

Instead, the conference organizers were forced to rely primarily on surrogates like Khrushchev's son, Sergei, and Mikoyan's son, Sergo. Up to a point, the use of surrogates is valid (and in this case unavoidable), so long as proper care is taken. But surrogates, no matter how well-informed, are not the same as the principals. These were not, as the New York Times described them, "top-level officials" on the Soviet side who were finally brought together with their American counterparts.

And so, if none of the highest Soviet officials from 1962 could participate in the Moscow conference, what does that imply about the contributions of the Soviet scholars and officials who did participate? If AB&W are right in saying that the Soviet archives on the Cuban missile crisis are "sparse," then how would the Soviet attendees have been able to learn the details of Soviet decision-making that they claim to know? And even if, as I suspect, the archives are not "sparse," would these scholars and officials really have been given free access? General Volkogonov, by his own admission, has often been denied access to documents that he needs. Is it plausible that the other Soviet participants would have fared any better?

Until Western scholars get access to documents that will corroborate the claims of Soviet oral history participants, the best we can do is speculate, as we have in the past, about Soviet motives and actions in events like the Cuban missile crisis. I certainly would not recommend the abandonment of attempts to make use of "uncritical" oral history from the Soviet side, but I would be wary of deriving broad conclusions from "knowledge" that is unsubstantiated or, worse, untrue.

—Mark Kramer
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The Authors Reply:

Mark Kramer's cautionary remarks about the shortcomings of purely oral history are sensible and salutary. He is correct to note that the Soviets' continuing refusal to release official documents diminishes the confidence that can be placed in some of their claims. We apologize if our own caveats on these points were insufficiently clear, because we share his concerns.

We cannot be responsible for any misrepresentations made by the New York Times, but Kramer is in error if he believes that all of the Soviets who have cooperated in our project are uninformed, and his implication that they acted in bad faith is unwarranted. Men such as Gromyko, Dobrynin, and Alekseev were all in a position to speak to important issues from personal experience. Khrushchev and Mikoyan,

11. These include Kirill Mazurov, who died in December 1989; Vladimir Shcherbitskii, who died in February 1990; and Viktor Grishin, who is still alive.

1. Although Kramer correctly notes that Gromyko was not a member of the Presidium in 1962, by all accounts the foreign minister was present at Presidium meetings where the Cuban initiative was discussed.
whom Kramer dismisses as “surrogates,” base their testimonies in large part on their fathers’ unpublished notes and memoirs, and Mikoyan was privy to high-level decision making at the time. We were told that Volkogonov had been given special dispensation to examine the relevant records prior to the Moscow conference, and he read from what he claimed were documents from the Soviet archives at the conference itself.

It is possible, of course, that we have been the unwitting victims of an elaborate fraud, but we doubt it. Despite Kramer’s suggestion that the Moscow conference might have been orchestrated to serve Gorbachev’s current political agenda, “Essence of Revision” clearly demonstrates that the Soviets disagree among themselves on crucial matters of interpretation, including whether or not the world was “on the brink.” Few of the participants at the Moscow conference currently hold positions of political importance, and in our article we deliberately did not dwell on the views of those who do, for the very reasons that concern Kramer.

This does not mean that we have treated all accounts uncritically. We have taken Gromyko’s claims with a grain of salt, for example, because of his reputation for dissimulation. (He is known to have advised prospective Soviet diplomats, “It is better to commit a thousand sins of omission than one sin of commission.”) But we have come to know men like Alekseev, Dobrynin, Khrushchev, and Mikoyan personally. We do not maintain that their memories are infallible; but we are confident that they have treated our endeavors with due seriousness.

What disturbs us most about Kramer’s letter is the implication that we should refrain from drawing even tentative conclusions from recent Soviet testimony on the ground that it is all either “unsubstantiated” or “untrue.” This is know-nothingism. Scholars have never had access to Soviet documents, and only recently have Soviets begun to speak out. We should not fail to recall that for almost a decade after the Cuban missile crisis, virtually all serious scholarly interpretation of American decision-making was based on five books devoid of documentation. Our present state of knowledge with respect to Soviet decision-making is roughly analogous to this early stage of American historiography. The crucial question scholars must now ask is whether we should put greater faith in the old Sovietology—based on conjecture and intuition—or in the recollections, however imperfect, of those who were in a position to know something about the matter. Oral history, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, may not seem very impressive until you consider the alternatives.

Knowledge is never absolute; it is never anything more than the current best guess. We have tried to articulate that best guess while noting its inherent weaknesses. We

2. Gromyko’s article prompted by the Moscow conference is considerably more informative than his remarks at the conference itself. See Andrei A. Gromyko, “Karibskii krizis: o glasnosti teper’ i skryosti togda” (The Caribbean crisis: on openness now and secrecy then), Izvestia, April 15, 1989, p. 5.

do not believe that "Essence of Revision" is the final word on the subject; to the contrary, we sincerely hope it isn't. We look forward to the day when all relevant Soviet archives are open to Western scholars; but in the meantime we should not permit the opportunities presented by even limited glasnost to slip through our fingers.

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