

History Reveals Presidential Close Calls!  
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As a historian, I can be pretty dispassionate about reading things that are past and gone. Knowing that President Woodrow Wilson had a stroke and that his wife Edith secretly kept him hidden from October 1919 to April 1920 is certainly alarming, but nothing disastrous seems to have happened. This could not happen today, I hope.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, a weekend when the actions of individuals both in the White House---the cool head of Bobby Kennedy who advised his brother President John Kennedy, whose bad health was not known to the public, overriding the not-cool heads of the US military advisers; the cool head of Russia\222s Khrushchev, the best among the USSR\222s rogues; the heroic actions of a Soviet nuclear submarine commander off the coast of Cuba who had no advice from anybody but his own conscience; all combined to save the world from what might have been a global nuclear catastrophe. Just reading about this gives me cold sweats.

But the latest historic revelations give me equally cold sweats. Two new books have just come out about President Richard Nixon, whom we thought we really knew pretty well by now. Well, no we didn\222t. Evan Thomas\221 book (Being Nixon) gives us a balanced picture of Nixon\222s entire life, his well-known flaws but his lesser known sympathetic side. He was a man who desperately wanted to be lovable, but just could not be. He did succeed in overcoming what for most politicians would have been total defeat, even after the disgrace of his leaving office before he would have been impeached---and even found guilty of crimes.

But the second book (One Man Against the World) is the one that has really frightened me after the fact. Tim Weiner, New York Times reporter, has had access to newly released Nixon tapes and other interviews, tapes inexplicably never destroyed. These tapes reflect what was going on during a very dangerous period during the Yom Kippur War, when Israel suffered a surprise attack by Egypt and came close to losing! In the Situation Room, the five-member military team, which included Alexander Haig and Henry Kissinger, learned that the Russians were sending nuclear warheads to the Egyptians. They tried to rouse the President, but he was, as he had been for some nights, drunk and unavailable.

Nixon was so distraught by the disintegration of his administration, the unraveling of all his actions and the impending doom of exposure, that he had become insomniac. Only alcohol enabled him to sleep. The country was facing a possible nuclear confrontation and unelected officials had to make decisions that, by sheer luck, turned out to save us from disaster. All praise to Kissinger and Haig. (And Israel was saved from an Egyptian win by Russian tanks in the Sinai with no air conditioning.)

Nixon had mused to Haig: "Maybe the country would be better off if I just left." What did he mean by that? Step down? Commit suicide? And then what? There was no possible Vice President at the time. Spiro Agnew was under indictment for bribery. House Speaker Carl Albert was a Democrat and was under a cloud too. Kissinger was not native-born. Not good.

Historians like to look at the broad sweep of movements, of great trends, of issues that play out, creating historic eras. Marxists see everything in terms of economics and class struggle. They see the ruling classes dominating and exploiting the working classes, aided and abetted by bureaucrats. The individual is not much of a factor here.

Others see geography as the major factor in determining much of the sweep of history: where countries are, what climate, natural resources they have, what sort of neighbors, all of these determining their history. These are the geopolitics that provide the luck (good or bad) of a country\222s history. I largely buy into this theory, but there is another great mystery that we cannot afford to ignore: the final mystery of individuals and their choices of good or evil, who can override all these other things.

674 words

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