

JFK Betrayed

In the final weeks of his presidency, JFK was isolated. He could not trust his own State Department, CIA, military advisors, or even the Secret Service. That is the backdrop for the crime of the century in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

During and following the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK and Nikita Khrushchev established a working relationship based on mutual trust, respect, and optimism. But their frank communication had to be conducted in the form of secret letters. The leaders were forced to be so secretive that JFK had to bypass his own administration to avoid sabotage and betrayal by the men and women ostensibly working for him.

For example, the very last letter sent from NK to JFK was handed by Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Valerian Zorin to US ambassador Foy Kohler in Moscow. Kohler did not share JFK's passion for peace. When he wired the State Department, he dismissed the letter as containing "nothing new of substance". Really? In the letter, NK suggested that the two leaders build on the recently signed nuclear test-ban treaty and tackle new projects together in their common goal of world peace. He suggested, among other things: a non-aggression pact between NATO and Warsaw Pact nations; creation of nuclear-free zones in selected parts of the world; barring further access to nuclear weapons; prohibiting the launch of objects bearing nuclear weapons into orbit; and developing methods of preventing surprise attack. The ultimate goal of such measures, NK stated, was complete disarmament and the elimination of the threat of nuclear war.

That would certainly have warranted a warm, prompt reply from JFK, but he never got the letter. His State Department decided, in their infinite wisdom, that it just wasn't worthy of JFK's response. McGeorge Bundy took it upon himself to approve a very short draft reply, and he instructed his minions to send it out right away. But that never happened. They later blamed it on a clerical error. On December 4, 1963, Bundy and others decided, oh well, too late to send any sort of reply to NK now, with President Kennedy being dead and all.

This is the hostile work environment in which JFK found himself. He was not in control of his own administration. He and his brother were a very small island in a bureaucratic sea of determined opposition and, at times, open contempt.

It isn't hard to imagine how frustrated, disappointed, and betrayed Khrushchev felt as weeks went by with no reply from JFK. Fortunately, John was clever enough to establish back-channel communications that allowed him to assure NK that he did indeed want to proceed with disarmament negotiations. On the American side, it was Pierre Salinger who served as the conduit for these super-secret communications. For the Soviets, it was a KGB agent. We know about it through Soviet archives made available to Americans when the Soviet Union fell. Very few Americans today are aware that JFK was forced to rely more on the KGB than on his own State Department to conduct his foreign policy.