**’Thirteen Days’ Doesn’t Add Up**

**by Michael Nelson, Political Science Professor, Rhodes College**

The film Thirteen Days, a Hollywood account of the Cuban Missile Crisis, purports to take audiences “behind the scenes” at the White House during the tense and critical period when nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union seemed not only possible but likely. Feature films, television shows, and novels that fictionalize the past invariably include dramatic embellishments and fictitious encounters, and they have a powerful impact on how students understand history. Michael Nelson, professor of political science at Rhodes College, analyzes Thirteen Days and other fictional treatments of the presidency (notably the television series The West Wing) and explores strategies for teaching students about the complexities of power and politics beyond the movie theater. (Posted February 2001)

One of the most jarring things I discovered when I taught my first undergraduate course on the American presidency in the fall of 1979 was that my students were 3 years old during the Cuban missile crisis. I was 13. They didn’t remember a thing about those storied 13 days in October 1962. I remembered everything, including what it was like to go to school in the morning in fear that I would not come home that afternoon. Students today barely recall the cold war (they were around 10 when the Berlin Wall fell), and the Cuban missile crisis may as well have happened in 1066.

So after reading one stellar review after another in the national media, I took my current class on the presidency to see Thirteen Days, the new $80-million blockbuster starring Kevin Costner, on the weekend it opened. It turned out to be a disappointing movie, except for actor Bruce Greenwood’s wonderfully nuanced portrayal of John F. Kennedy as — at least for the duration of the crisis — a thoughtful, anguished, morally serious president who remained cool under pressure. Despite its flaws, however, I’m still glad I took my students to see it.

The inclination in most college social-science courses is to show movies sparingly, if at all, and to show only classics. (I’m not sure what those would be in a course on the presidency: As critic Terrence Rafferty has noted, “It’s difficult to name a profession that has inspired fewer great movies. Maybe urology.”) But the impressions of a historical or political subject that students bring with them into a course are often derived from the popular entertainment of their day. Going as a class to see a movie that most of my students would have gone to see anyway created an opportunity to help them sort out the historical wheat from the Hollywood chaff. For that reason, I still kick myself for not having taken them to see JFK, Oliver Stone’s cinematically powerful but historically awful movie about the Kennedy assassination.

Thirteen Days unfolds from the perspective of Kenneth O’Donnell, who is played by Costner. In real life, O’Donnell was a political consigliere to the Kennedy brothers. Robert F. Kennedy, a friend and classmate of O’Donnell’s at Harvard, had first brought him into his brother John’s campaign organization when John ran for the Senate in 1952. No one has ever argued that O’Donnell, who served as White House appointments secretary and political adviser after Kennedy became president in 1961, played an important role in the missile crisis. To the contrary, a host of historians, political scientists, journalists, and Kennedy aides — including Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Graham Allison, Marvin Kalb, and Theodore Sorensen — have said that O’Donnell (as Schlesinger put it) “had nothing to do with the Cuban missile crisis.”

Ernest R. May, coeditor of The Kennedy Tapes (the book on which the movie is based), said in The American Prospect that the apparent rationale for making O’Donnell the main character in Thirteen Days was that he could serve as an“inside Everyman, evaluating the crisis almost as an ordinary citizen would.”

Ironically, the Everyman device works best when O’Donnell goes outside among all the other Everyfolk, walking the streets of Washington and joining a long line of people entering a Catholic church with a handwritten signboard out front advertising “Confessions 24 hrs/Pray for Peace.” When the O’Donnell character is inside the White House, he is at center stage, not watching from a corner. To a one, my students left the theater convinced that O’Donnell had been a more important figure in the crisis than Attorney General Robert Kennedy or any other member of Ex Comm, the ad hoc group of current and former executivebranch officials that President Kennedy created to respond to the Soviet Union’s covert installation of offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba.

In one entirely fictitious scene, O’Donnell phones the Navy pilot who is about to fly a low-altitude surveillance mission over Cuba and tells him to lie to his superior officers if Cuban or Russian soldiers try to shoot him down. O’Donnell would rather conceal evidence than allow it to be used by advocates of a military strike. In another scene, O’Donnell calls Adlai Stevenson to stiffen the U.N. ambassador’s spine before Stevenson presses the American case against the Soviet Union in the Security Council. Stevenson’s spine needed — and received — no such stiffening from O’Donnell or anyone else on that occasion.

Yet stiffening spines is one of O’Donnell’s main functions in Thirteen Days. You come away thinking that President Kennedy could never have made his televised speech to the nation and Robert Kennedy would have flubbed his presentation of the administration’s crisis-ending compromise to the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, if O’Donnell hadn’t pulled them aside for pep talks. Bizarrely, a scene that replicates the famous from-behind photograph of Kennedy leaning heavily on a table ends with O’Donnell handing him a drink.

Inflating O’Donnell’s importance in the missile crisis, however, is not the main problem with Thirteen Days. No one ever complains that Ishmael’s role in the story of Captain Ahab’s hunt for the white whale is inflated just because Ishmael is the narrator. From a historical perspective, the film’s main problems are that it inflates the role of White House political-staff members and portrays the military brass as cartoonish hawks.

I call the first phenomenon the West Wing syndrome, which is already widespread, especially among political-science students. Like Thirteen Days, the West Wing television series is not bereft of virtue, especially its seriousness of purpose about the dilemmas of governing. But the series is notorious for, among other things, attributing nearly all that’s good in government to the (mostly young and attractive) political advisers on the White House staff. West Wing’s vice president is a bad guy. Its members of Congress are cravenly self-interested. Most of its cabinet officers are parochial, peripheral, and second-rate.

Within the TV White House, staff members whose expertise is more in public policy than in politics — the national security adviser, domestic policy adviser, and chief economic adviser — are seldom, if ever, seen. When good things happen to America on The West Wing, it’s because President Josiah Bartlet and his political advisers have taken charge.

The West Wing syndrome is on full display in Thirteen Days. McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser, comes across as clownishly inept (he wasn’t — not even close). Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara is portrayed with little of his real-life intelligence and force of personality. And Congress is represented only by the sound of braying voices in a meeting room from which President Kennedy is indignantly stalking (that never happened). Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, whom May and his coeditor, Philip D. Zelikow, describe in The Kennedy Tapes as having skillfully chaired several Ex Comm meetings in the president’s absence, is neither seen nor heard during the crisis — his main presence in the movie is as the butt of a joke between the president and O’Donnell.

According to the film, the missile crisis turns on O’Donnell’s realization that the Joint Chiefs of Staff are conniving to box Kennedy into going to war, preferably nuclear war with the Soviets. (Bundy and McNamara, of course, don’t have a clue.) When the light bulb goes on over O’Donnell’s head, he pulls the president aside and says, “Look, I’m your political adviser. I’m giving you a political analysis. This is a set-up.” Josh and C. J. couldn’t have done a better job for President Bartlet.

In Thirteen Days, it’s the Joint Chiefs who wear the black hats, not Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader whose perceived problems with his own hard-liners are regarded sympathetically, almost therapeutically, by the Kennedys. It isn’t enough for the film’s auteurs to make the accurate point that the Joint Chiefs wanted to attack Cuba to remove the missiles. Instead, the generals and admirals must also seem wild-eyed (and in the case of the Air Force chief of staff, Curtis LeMay, wild-eyebrowed), profane (“get the bastards”), bombastic (“shoot the red dog”), and conspiratorial. We’re supposed to applaud when O’Donnell tells the pilot to lie to his superiors if he’s shot at. By the end of the movie, you half expect the generals to start talking, Dr. Strangelove style, about preserving the purity of our bodily fluids.

As my colleague Daniel Cullen mentioned to me, Thirteen Days is especially deserving of criticism on these large matters because it is so scrupulously accurate on the small ones. The thin ties and horn-rimmed glasses the actors wear, the tail-finned cars they drive, the physical gestures they make, even their rotary-dial phones and transistor radios are all dead-on perfect. Black-and-white establishing scenes and actual excerpts from Walter Cronkite’s live television reports on the crisis further contribute to the movie’s verisimilitude. This is the way it really was, the filmmakers implicitly promise with those fine points: Just look at McNamara’s slicked-back hair. It’s all the more distressing, then, when we discover that in several important respects this isn’t the way it was at all.

The film’s [web site](http://www.thirteen-days.com/) offers related primary documents, in addition to information on the making of the film.

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