

John F. Kennedy, USIA, and World Public Opinion

The first thought that went through Donald Wilson's mind when John F. Kennedy telephoned him around 7:00 A.M., 11 July 1963, was that he should not have sent the president that thirteen-page memorandum on the U.S. Information Agency's first world public opinion poll. The day before, Wilson, the USIA's acting director, told associate director, Burnett Anderson, to cut the memo down to a more respectable size. Anderson tried, and then Wilson tried; but, by definition, a report titled "First Effort to Measure 'World Opinion'" had to cover a great deal of material.¹

Under Kennedy, USIA had embarked on a systematic effort to measure world sentiment "about the U.S. and major international issues." From Caracas to Bangkok, the USIA had secretly contracted local pollsters to ask people a series of questions concerning their perceptions of the United States and its power. The survey pointed to an unsettling trend. Despite a "generally good disposition towards the U.S." in all countries, "many places" held "the disturbing belief" that America "trails the Soviet Union in military power, both nuclear and conventional."² Past USIA opinion polls had shown that Western Europe perceived the Soviets as militarily stronger than the Americans. Yet this new survey revealed that regard for American power was even lower in parts of the developing world than it was in France.³

Indeed, the president had called Wilson to complain about the length of the memo. It was far too brief, said JFK. Wilson's thirteen pages contained a summary of the polling data, but Kennedy wanted everything – the raw data and the questions that the surveyors had asked.⁴ Wilson immediately telephoned Anderson, and the bureaucracy jumped to life. Recent declassifications

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1. Donald M. Wilson, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 1997. Burnett Anderson, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 1997. D. Wilson to the president, "First Effort to Measure 'World Opinion,'" 10 July 1963, President's Office File (POF), box 91, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

2. Wilson, "World Opinion."

3. Ibid.

4. Anderson interview, 28 August 1997.

at the Kennedy Library document that the requested information arrived in the White House at 3:48 P.M. the same afternoon.⁵

As this anecdote suggests, Kennedy was concerned with world public opinion.⁶ This essay examines the influence of USIA international public opinion polling on Kennedy's foreign policy. Far from providing a comprehensive account of USIA operations, it explores how the importance Kennedy placed on world public opinion led him to expand USIA's international opinion polling and to use the information provided by USIA to inform his foreign policy decisions. By quantifying American international prestige, USIA opinion polling showed Kennedy that America's image had sunk to an all-time low during his first year in office.⁷ Throughout his administration, the polls periodically confirmed that the world believed the Soviet Union was militarily more powerful than the United States – even after Kennedy had publicly announced there was no missile gap. Although recent scholarship demonstrates that the “West had achieved a decisive advantage over the Communist bloc by the early 1960s,” USIA opinion polls remind us that, at the time, that was not how the world perceived the situation.⁸

Although Kennedy's use of the USIA has not received much attention from scholars, many have noted that, for John F. Kennedy, image was (almost) everything.⁹ If contemporary accounts celebrated the image of Kennedy's vigor,

5. Wilson to the president, 11 [July] 1963, POE, box 91, USIA incorrectly dated this memo 11 *June* 1963; but it refers to the information on the first world opinion survey “requested earlier today” and is stamped by the White House as received on 11 July 1963 – one day after the 10 July memo on the world opinion poll. According to Anderson, USIA also sent a team to the White House on 11 July 1963 to brief the president.

6. In this essay I use the terms “world opinion” and “world public opinion” interchangeably to mean some concept expressing the aggregate sum of human sentiment in the non-Communist world. This definition of world opinion and world public opinion seems closest to the meaning imparted to these terms by the USIA. Ninkovich also conflates the terms in Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power: A History of the Domino Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1994), 56, 58, 256.

7. Thomas C. Sorensen, *The Word War: The Story of American Propaganda* (New York, 1968), 141.

8. On new scholarship see Peter Kindsvatter's report on remarks by John Lewis Gaddis, “Exploring the ‘New’ Cold War History and Missed Opportunities for Conflict Resolution,” *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter* 26, no. 4 (1996): 15.

9. As Thomas G. Paterson has noted, “First-rate historical studies of the United States Information Agency are wanting” (“Defining and Doing: A Primer,” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson [New York, 1991], 49.) This problem is particularly acute for the Kennedy administration, though an important start has been made by Frank Ninkovich in “U.S. Information Policy and Cultural Diplomacy,” *Foreign Policy Association Headline Series* 308 (Fall 1996). For a history of USIA up to 1961 see Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York, 1997). Hixson explores how the monitoring and attempted transformation of public opinion in Eastern Europe was an important element of policy in the Truman-Eisenhower years. USIA employees have written most of the works on the USIA's role in foreign policy. The best of these for the Kennedy period is Sorensen, *The Word War*. Thomas Sorensen, USIA deputy director (policy and plans) during the Kennedy administration, was the brother of Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's special counsel. See also Wilson P. Dizard, *The Strategy of Truth: The Story of the U.S. Information Service* (Washington, 1961); and John W. Henderson, *The United States Information Agency* (New York, 1969). In broader terms, Akira Iriye's *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, 1997) has contrasted

later studies have found the gap between style and substance to be the key to understanding his presidency.¹⁰ Critics charge that not only did Kennedy's image as an athletic family man mask illness and adultery, the "toughness" and action orientation of his administration covered up poor policymaking.¹¹ In addressing the question of what went wrong in the 1960s, they found that "Camelot had been a con game perpetrated on the American people."¹² Some have gone further and argued that Kennedy's aggressive posturing in international affairs manufactured crises to improve his domestic image.¹³ Even scholars who believe that Kennedy's foreign policy was a sincere expression of his anticommunism have considered his "toughness" extreme and debilitating.¹⁴

Kennedy was open about the importance he placed on improving the nation's international image—especially when it came to the battle for hearts and minds in the developing world. He feared that Communist success in Vietnam would not just be militarily disadvantageous to America but "would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the communists."¹⁵ One historian has written about how Kennedy's foreign policy should be understood in the context of "a neo-Wilsonian reliance on world opinion as the key to containment."¹⁶ Because of the importance Kennedy placed on America's image, even "symbolic conflicts" like Vietnam could not be lost.¹⁷ American weakness anywhere in the world, on any issue, might be the factor that tipped world opinion toward a belief that communism was ultimately going to be the more durable system.¹⁸

While world opinion may have been a palpable force in the mind of a president who was swept up in the domino theory, others—contemporary heads of state or those with a historian's hindsight—might consider world opinion to

traditional conceptions of power and interest with the international importance of cultural and ideological beliefs.

10. Early works that helped perpetuate the official Kennedy image include T. H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York, 1961); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965); and Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965). Those that explore the gap between the Kennedy image and reality include Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York, 1961); Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (Garden City, NY, 1973); Herbert S. Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1983); and Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1991).

11. Parmet, *JFK*, 63.

12. Burton I. Kaufman, "JFK as World Leader," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Winter 1993): 449.

13. Richard J. Walton, *Cold War and Counter Revolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (Baltimore, 1972), 54–59. For an analysis and rebuttal of this charge in relation to the Cuban missile crisis see Thomas G. Paterson and William J. Brophy, "October Missiles and November Elections: The Cuban Missile Crisis and American Politics, 1962," *Journal of American History* 73, no. 1 (1986): 87–119.

14. Paterson wrote that "Arrogance, ignorance, and impatience combined with familiar exag-gerations of the Communist threat to deny Kennedy his objectives." Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest For Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963* (New York, 1989), 23.

15. JFK, 9 September 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1963* (Washington, 1964), 349.

16. Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power*, 192.

17. *Ibid.*, 302.

18. *Ibid.*, 272.

be an intangible, mendacious, or silly idea. General Charles de Gaulle told Kennedy's first ambassador to France that "the Anglo-Saxon world [is] deeply interested in world opinion," and asked with unconcealed disdain, "What is world public opinion?" De Gaulle suspected the concept was a smokescreen for the furthering of U.S. interests.¹⁹ Americans also questioned Kennedy's interest in world opinion. During one policy meeting, John J. McCloy, the administration's adviser on disarmament, "exploded: 'World opinion? I don't believe in world opinion. The only thing that matters is power. What we have to do now is to show that we are a powerful nation and not spend our time trailing after the phantom of world opinion.'"²⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the president's able defender, conceded that "the term 'world opinion' was unquestionably glib and the people who invoked it often exaggerated its significance." Yet, Schlesinger also wrote that, like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, Kennedy understood that the ability to move opinion was an element of power.²¹

Because of its elusive, phantomlike nature, discussing presidential conceptions of world opinion will always be problematic. In the case of Kennedy, however, such an evaluation is aided by a relatively unique set of records.²² Kennedy's President's Office File contains classified multinational public opinion surveys sent by USIA to the Oval Office. These demonstrate that, while in the White House, Kennedy had what he considered to be a tangible, confidential, and systematic measure of world public opinion.

To understand how Kennedy came to use USIA and its public opinion polling, it may be useful to discuss the origins of both America's official information agencies and the concept of public opinion polling. While world public opinion polling is a post-World War II phenomenon, the American opinion polling industry had begun to grow rapidly by the 1920s.²³ Polling is frequently associated with politics and the prediction of future election outcomes, but it was the growth of mass media advertising that launched the opinion polling industry.²⁴ Advertisers increasingly turned to pollsters to determine whether advertising campaigns were reaching their target audiences

19. Ibid., 256.

20. John J. McCloy in Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 481. Thomas Sorensen noted that many U.S. diplomats concurred with McCloy. He quoted one who told him, "To hell with public opinion and public opinion polls. I'm here to deal with the government, not with the public." Sorensen, *Word War*, 78.

21. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 482.

22. Although USIA began multinational opinion polling during the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy expanded USIA polling and began "world opinion polling." President Johnson discontinued the multinational opinion polling of USIA in 1966. Sorensen, *Word War*, 77.

23. Elmo C. Wilson, "World-Wide Development of Opinion Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1957): 174.

24. Archibald M. Crossley, "Early Days of Public Opinion Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1957): 159.

and influencing consumption preferences. From the beginning, opinion polling was never clearly separated from market research.²⁵

In the 1930s public opinion polling began to be used increasingly in the political sphere. In 1936 George Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion launched its first national cross-section presidential poll.²⁶ During World War II, polls carried out in liberated and occupied territories provided feedback to guide propaganda services in radio, press, and film.²⁷ Polling also began to be used as a source of intelligence information outside of propaganda operations. The Office of War Information published a monthly index of German morale with information gathered from freshly captured soldiers.²⁸ Soon after the war, the Morale Division of the Strategic Bombing Survey used opinion polling to investigate the psychological impact of bombing campaigns.²⁹

American postwar international polling operations expanded the wartime apparatus developed in occupied nations, but polls were still primarily used to monitor the effectiveness of various propaganda campaigns.³⁰ Responsibility for international polling was passed down from the abolished Office of War Information to an office in the State Department that underwent several name changes. In 1952 President Truman created the United States International Information Administration (USIIA), which was the USIA's direct predecessor. Despite the bureaucratic vicissitudes, by the early 1950s U.S. international pollsters had developed a standard operating procedure, which remained in place through the Kennedy administration: USIIA contracted its opinion polling operations to local pollsters who used native interviewers; to help prevent unintended biases from corrupting the data, USIIA instructed interviewers to conceal that the information was collected for the U.S. government.³¹

Further expansion of U.S. propaganda efforts became a political issue during the presidential campaign of 1952. Eisenhower announced his determination to make the U.S. information program an effective instrument of national policy.³² Soon after his election, Eisenhower appointed the President's Committee on Foreign Information Activities (known as the Jackson committee for its chairman, William H. Jackson) to make recommendations about how to best use propaganda. When Eisenhower created the USIA as an agency independent of

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 162–63.

27. Stuart Carter Dodd, "A Barometer of International Security," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1945): 195.

28. Ibid.

29. Wilson, "Development of Opinion," 176.

30. On 31 August 1945 Harry Truman abolished the Office of War Information. On 1 January 1946, the Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs was created as part of the Department of State.

31. Leo Bogart, "Measuring the Effectiveness of an Overseas Information Campaign," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1958): 479; Helen Crossley, former USIA pollster, in an interview with the author, 6 June 1996; D. Wilson to the president, "The Impact of the Presidential Visit to Mexico," 9 November 1962, POF, box 91.

32. Henderson, *United States Information Agency*, 48.

the State Department in 1953, he followed the Jackson committee's recommendation that U.S. information programs should "harmonize" the personal and national interest of foreigners with the national objectives of the United States.³³ The Jackson committee believed that polling was a necessary part of this operation.³⁴ According to Thomas Sorensen, Kennedy's deputy director of USIA, an "important step" in the growth of USIA during the 1950s was the creation of the Office of Research, which oversaw international opinion polling.³⁵

Eisenhower's secretary of state helped to restrict USIA's contribution to policymaking during the 1950s.³⁶ Thomas Sorensen wrote that John Foster Dulles did not place much faith in public opinion, but the president would occasionally bring Dulles up short by producing a USIA international poll and saying, "But, Foster, you forgot the human side."³⁷ Despite increased international opinion polling during the Eisenhower administration, polls were still primarily used to provide feedback on the success of USIA's propaganda efforts. For Eisenhower, the focus of USIA's duties was the dissemination of information that helped align world opinion with official U.S. opinion. He directed the agency "to submit evidence to peoples of other nations by means of communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the United States are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace."³⁸ Under Kennedy, USIA continued to create propaganda. But, Kennedy also issued a mission statement that gave the agency a new role as the president's world opinion monitoring service. In that statement, Kennedy declared the USIA should "help achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives by (a) influencing public attitudes in other nations, and (b) advising the President, his representatives abroad, and the various departments and agencies on the implications of foreign opinion for present and contemplated U.S. policies, programs and official statements."³⁹ Thus, Kennedy publicly acknowledged that world opinion was a factor he considered in his foreign policy.

USIA became an issue in the 1960 presidential campaign, but this time it was the Republican candidate who was on the defensive. Under the Eisenhower administration, USIA systematically began to conduct "prestige" polls, which surveyed international perceptions of American power. During the campaign Eisenhower publicly downplayed the battle for prestige, claiming that the

33. Shawn J. Parry-Giles, "The Eisenhower Administration's Conceptualization of the USIA: The Development of Overt and Covert Propaganda Strategies," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1994): 266.

34. *Ibid.*, 266.

35. Sorensen, *Word War*, 83.

36. Hixson, *Parting*, 26; Sorensen, *Word War*, 82–83.

37. Sorensen, *Word War*, 83.

38. Dwight Eisenhower, "Directive – Approved by the President for the Guidance of the United States Information Agency, 28 Oct. 1953," *Public Papers of the Presidents*, 1953 (Washington, 1960), 728.

39. "Mission of U.S. Information Agency," 25 January, 1963, USIA Archives, Washington.

United States had a “vigorous, expanding economy’ and bright future.”⁴⁰ Kennedy expressed concern that the United States lagged behind in missile production and space exploration and, what was even worse, that everyone in the world knew it.⁴¹ In 1960, when a ten-country Gallup poll found the Soviet Union gaining in international prestige, Kennedy commented, “that is what hurts the United States. If they think we are on the decline and the Russians are on the rise, if they think that our brightest day is somewhere in the past and now the future belongs to the Soviets, then all those people who want to go with the winner turn against us and move in the direction of Moscow and Peking.”⁴²

When classified USIA prestige polls were leaked to the Kennedy campaign, they gave even more credence to Kennedy’s accusations. On 25 October 1960 the *New York Times* ran a front-page article, “U.S. Survey Finds Others Consider Soviets Mightiest,” along with a copy of the USIA public opinion poll that formed the basis of the charges. According to this poll, the world public considered the launch of Sputnik a challenge to the United States that had not been answered. While the United States was still perceived to have the strongest economy, the Soviet Union was thought to be closing the economic gap and to be ahead in military strength.⁴³ These polls contradicted Vice President Richard Nixon’s claims that “United States prestige is at ‘an all-time high’ and that of the Soviet Union at ‘an all time low.’”⁴⁴ Eisenhower was furious about the leak. He even ordered the director of USIA to issue a statement that U.S. prestige was at its high point, but the director refused.⁴⁵ Considering the attention the leaked USIA prestige poll received near the close of the campaign and the narrow margin of Kennedy’s presidential victory, Nixon’s failure to win the “prestige issue” can be counted among the “what ifs” that could have swung the election in favor of the Republican candidate.⁴⁶

With a different president, USIA prestige polls might have faded from the scene like so many other campaign issues; but the topic was kept alive at press conferences, where reporters asked Kennedy if he would fulfill a campaign promise to declassify USIA prestige polls.⁴⁷ True to his word, in 1963 the president approved a system where sensitive polls were declassified after two

40. Dwight Eisenhower in “U.S. Survey Finds Others Consider Soviets Mightiest,” *New York Times*, 25 October 1960.

41. Ibid.

42. JFK speech, Muskegon, Michigan, 5 September 1960, Pre-presidential Papers, box 910, Kennedy Library.

43. “Text of Confidential U.S. Survey on Prestige Rating Abroad,” *New York Times*, 25 October 1960.

44. Richard Nixon in William Jorden, “Campaign Issues – V: Debate on Status of Prestige Rouses Sharp Conflicts at Home and Abroad,” *New York Times*, 31 October 1960.

45. Sorensen, *Word War*, 115.

46. Leo P. Crespi of USIA, who wrote the report that was leaked to the *New York Times*, raised the question of its importance to the election outcome in “Some Reflections On A Near Half-Century of U.S. Government Survey Research Abroad” (unpublished paper provided to the author by Crespi).

47. JFK, 21 February 1963, *Public Papers*, 1963, 203.

years.⁴⁸ But it is likely that JFK would have maintained his interest in world opinion without the reminders from the press. From a political standpoint, increasing U.S. prestige was important to Kennedy because, in the future, he did not want the charges he used against Nixon to be deployed against his administration. Even before Kennedy took office, he engaged several task forces to study the USIA and offer suggestions about how the organization could more effectively boost America's prestige. All of these task forces recommended strengthening USIA during the Kennedy administration.⁴⁹

JFK would have been interested in international public opinion even had it not figured at all in domestic politics. According to Walt Rostow, Kennedy's deputy special assistant, this president had a long-standing interest in the force of public opinion and was a "voracious reader of polls, foreign and domestic."⁵⁰ Kennedy's senior thesis at Harvard, which in 1940 became the best-selling book *Why England Slept*, argued that a policy of appeasement had been forced upon British governments by British public opinion.⁵¹ Two decades before he became president, Kennedy had adopted the idea that an understanding of international public opinion could elucidate the decisions of foreign governments. During his political career, Kennedy would make a habit of describing the Cold War as a battle for world opinion. Speaking at the Democratic convention he said that the Cold War was "a race for mastery of the sky and the rain . . . the far side of space and the inside of men's minds."⁵² These ideas carried over into his administration. In 1961, during a special message to Congress, he called the Cold War a battle for "minds and souls as well as lives and territory."⁵³ McGeorge Bundy's notes from a 1961 White House meeting concluded that the United States needed to "change our image before the world so that it becomes plain that we and not the Soviet Union stand for the future."⁵⁴

Kennedy's interest in convincing world opinion – especially Third World opinion – about the long-term viability and attractiveness of capitalism was an important theme of his administration. As he prepared to assume responsibility for America's strategic defense, however, the importance of U.S. prestige took on another, more immediate dimension. In the late 1950s Western analysts recognized that Khrushchev was exploiting the perceived increase in Russian missile capability that resulted from the launch of Sputnik.⁵⁵ Thanks in part to

48. Sorensen, *Word War*, 77.

49. *Ibid.*, 121.

50. Walt Rostow, letter to the author, 7 August 1997.

51. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 2.

52. JFK, "The New Frontier: Acceptance Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Democratic National Convention, July 15, 1960," Pre-presidential Papers, box 910.

53. JFK, 25 May 1961, *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1961* (Washington, 1962), 397.

54. Bundy, 13 February 1961, POE, box 125a.

55. Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 192.

the new image of Soviet power, the Kremlin was emboldened to try for concessions in Berlin that might split the Atlantic alliance.⁵⁶ U.S. strategic experts concluded that a reversal of images was required. Before taking office, Kennedy read a report from the Rand Corporation called "Political Implications of Posture Choices." The paper recommended that the United States should enhance perceptions of its military power to win maximum political gains both domestically and internationally.⁵⁷

A good example of the broader concern for perceived power was a 1961 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article by Leo Crespi, then serving as the head of the Survey Research Division of USIA and director of USIA's public opinion polling. Crespi's article highlighted the blurred distinction between actual power and perceived power that would haunt the Kennedy administration. According to Crespi, "the *image* of United States foreign policy has become no less important than the objective political, military, and economic realities."⁵⁸ Crespi believed that the primary objective of U.S. military policy was deterrence, and "deterrence is first and foremost a psychological rather than a military matter; and the extent to which our military posture deters is in a fundamental sense a matter of the *image* of our military might."⁵⁹ In his inaugural address, Kennedy emphasized the importance of Soviet perceptions of U.S. power when he said that "We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed."⁶⁰ By extension, firmness would also translate into greater respect among the allies and uncommitted nations.

The international climate of the early 1960s, as well as Kennedy's own interest in world public opinion, created a policy environment where USIA gained influence in the executive branch.⁶¹ According to Donald Wilson, Kennedy "was a man who perhaps better than any other president in our history, understood how foreign opinion worked, what molded it, what shaped it and how to shape it. And therefore he was interested in USIA and interested in getting the maximum out of USIA."⁶² The new USIA director, Edward R. Murrow, quickly gained the president's respect. According to Thomas Sorensen, "as the months passed Kennedy's appreciation of both Murrow and USIA grew."⁶³ Although the USIA would never directly assume a primary role in

56. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, 1988), 359.

57. Parmet, *JFK*, 73.

58. Crespi, "Some Observations on the Concept of Image," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1961): 116.

59. *Ibid.*

60. JFK in Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York, 1993), 38.

61. D. Wilson, Oral History, Kennedy Library; Sorensen, *Word War*, 134.

62. D. Wilson, Oral History.

63. Sorensen, *Word War*, 128. See also Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 612; and Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 580.

policymaking, after the summer of 1961 USIA was present at all major policy meetings.⁶⁴

USIA submitted weekly reports to the president, but there was a special telephone on Murrow's desk, which he called "the blowtorch." It "rang increasingly often with presidential queries about items in USIA's reports or some other matter."⁶⁵ Frequently, Kennedy's calls to Murrow were prompted by USIA international opinion polls. According to one agency staff member, "Kennedy was particularly interested in Agency surveys of foreign opinion and often asked for full texts of the studies, or information on what people in Country X were thinking about problem Y."⁶⁶ Because Kennedy used "the blowtorch" to request USIA opinion surveys, the paper trail that connects Kennedy directly to USIA opinion surveys is not as large as it would be had he communicated with USIA via memorandum.⁶⁷

In addition to weekly reports from USIA, the scores of opinion surveys in the President's Office File indicated that USIA was frequently sending information on international opinion to the White House. It is impossible to say how many of the reports addressed to the president were specifically solicited by Kennedy.⁶⁸ But cover letters attached to some of the opinion surveys in the President's Office File mention in passing that they were initiated at the president's request.⁶⁹ The documents that specifically refer to a presidential inquiry are probably not a reliable indication of the USIA international polls to which Kennedy paid the closest attention. Presumably, Murrow and his acting director were well aware of Kennedy's interest in certain topics and sent the majority of these surveys along without specific urging.⁷⁰ Still, the surveys that document the president's requests do provide some indication of the broad scope of international opinions that Kennedy wanted USIA to collect. Far from being focused on the opinions of the European allies, these poll results dealt with Communist propaganda activities in Mexico, foreign reaction to American racial strife, Castro's influence on Latin America, foreign reaction to the Telstar satellite, and, as mentioned above, world opinion surveys.⁷¹ Other USIA surveys

64. D. Wilson, Oral History.

65. Sorensen, *Word War*, 128.

66. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

67. Thomas Sorensen to the president, "Latin American Book Programs," 16 April 1962, POF, box 91, refers to the president requesting USIA information by telephone.

68. There are occasional references to the president reading USIA reports in administration documents. See, for example, General Clifton to McGeorge Bundy, 8 November 1961, National Security File, box 22, Kennedy Library.

69. See, for example, D. Wilson to the president, 6 July 1961, D. Wilson to the president, 20 October 1961, Sorensen, "Latin American Book Programs," Edward R. Murrow to the president, "Requested Summary of Foreign Reaction to Telstar," 31 July 1962, D. Wilson to Evelyn Lincoln, 11 October 1962; and D. Wilson to the president, 11 [July] 1963, all in POF, box 91.

70. "I thought you might be interested in our latest June surveys," Murrow to the president, 8 August 1962, POF, box 91. See also Murrow to the president, 13 August 1962, and Murrow to the president, 16 August 1962, both in POF, box 91.

71. See note 69 above.



President John F. Kennedy and USIA Director Edward R. Murrow. CREDIT: Courtesy of USIA.

in the office File also provided reactions to Kennedy's speeches and state visits.⁷² The expansion of USIA as an intelligence-gathering organization also included joint studies with the CIA.⁷³ On at least one occasion, Kennedy publicly cited USIA polls as proof that Castro had been discredited in Latin America.⁷⁴

Despite the variety of subjects covered by USIA polling, the polls sent to the president had an overarching and worrisome theme: Kennedy's efforts to boost U.S. prestige did not alter the international perception that U.S. power lagged behind that of the Soviets. By August 1961 USIA reported to Kennedy that his administration had improved America's international reputation in some respects. Since the last major survey of Western European opinion after the Paris summit conference of mid-1960, "confidence in U.S. leadership in foreign policy, in credibility, and in dedication to peace" had increased. These 1961 polls also revealed, however, "a continuing erosion of West European confidence in

72. See, for example, USIA, "Reactions to President Kennedy's Address on Latin America," 22 March 1961, POF, box 91; and D. Wilson, "The Impact of the Presidential Visit to Mexico," and USIA, "Western European Reaction to President Kennedy's Trip," 8 July 1963, both in POF, box 91.

73. D. Wilson to the president, 20 October 1961, POF, box 91.

74. JFK, 7 February 1963, *Public Papers, 1963*, 153.



Jacqueline Kennedy in India, 1962. USIA publicized the trip and monitored international reaction to the first lady. CREDIT: Courtesy of John F. Kennedy Library.

U.S. military power and America's future pre-eminence as a world power."⁷⁵ Despite Kennedy's success in creating a more positive image of U.S. ideals,

⁷⁵ USIA, "The Current State of Confidence in the U.S. Among the West European Public," August 1961, POF, box 91.

USIA polls indicated that he had not stemmed the downward trend in the seemingly all-important perceptions of America's military and nuclear force.

USIA's first "world opinion" poll illustrates the kinds of prestige problems Kennedy faced throughout his administration. USIA found that in every country and city surveyed, the United States led the Soviet Union by a wide margin in overall net favorable opinion.⁷⁶ The Soviet Union was, on the whole, perceived negatively in all areas except Delhi and Tehran. Yet the U.S. lead in world opinion was the result of positive views of America in "softer" subject areas. Many people saw the "basic interests" of their nation to be much more closely aligned with the United States than with the Soviet Union.⁷⁷ World opinion, as expressed in the study, also believed that the United States tended to be true to its word.⁷⁸ Yet the Soviet Union still had a clear lead in perceptions of its space program and a moderate lead in the perceived strength of its nuclear arsenal.⁷⁹ On the question of whether the United States, Soviet Union, or China would be the strongest nation if they competed for the next twenty-five years, opinion was mixed.⁸⁰

USIA told the president that this world opinion poll had its limitations. The agency recognized that "existing survey organizations are inadequate to provide genuine world-wide evaluations."⁸¹ As with other USIA opinion polls, problems of translation and data collection may have hindered an accurate assessment of public opinion. Yet, the survey impressed the president enough that he quickly called USIA for more information.

By 1963 perceptions of America's military and nuclear power had improved only slightly since the day Kennedy took office. A 1963 USIA survey of Western European opinion reported that Western European perceptions of America's comparative military strength had increased from the all-time low of 1961.⁸² The Soviet Union, however, still led the United States in perceived power in Britain and France.⁸³ Furthermore, as Kennedy expanded opinion polling into developing nations that had never before been surveyed, assessments of American power could be surprisingly disturbing. For example, the results of the first polling efforts in Tehran, included in the first world opinion survey, were "considerably more favorable to the Soviet Union than anticipated."⁸⁴

If Kennedy's expansion of USIA polling, his requests for opinion surveys, and the frequent correspondence between the White House and USIA officials support the contention that this president was concerned with world opinion,

76. Wilson, "World Opinion."

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. USIA, "Trends in Western European Estimates of U.S. and Soviet Strength," July 1963, POF, box 91.

83. *Ibid.* According to USIA surveys on a range of topics, German opinion was usually more favorable to America than British or French.

84. Wilson, "World Opinion."

one might still ask how Kennedy used USIA international opinion polling in his foreign policy. There is no simple answer to this question. When the author put this question to some of Kennedy's surviving staff members, the response was mixed. All were wary of any suggestion that Kennedy let world public opinion dictate his policies.⁸⁵ Yet, Walt Rostow remembered that Kennedy's understanding of Latin American public opinion led him to make changes to the Alliance for Progress.⁸⁶

It would seem safe to assume that, for political and national security reasons, USIA opinion polls increased Kennedy's desire to improve world assessments of U.S. power. If he feared that the people of developing nations considered the Soviet Union and China the wave of the future, USIA opinion polls told him that many of them did believe it. If he feared that he must not tempt the Soviet Union with military or nuclear weakness, USIA opinion polls indicated that U.S. power was in doubt. If Kennedy wondered about whether a U.S. failure in one theater had repercussions elsewhere, then USIA confirmed these concerns as well. The USIA surveys showed that even Kennedy's domestic policy could be the subject of unfavorable comment as far away as Africa and South Asia.⁸⁷

At the same time that USIA opinion polls helped confirm JFK's worst fears, they were also a tool to address opinion problems. Referring to the 1960 presidential election, Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's special counsel, wrote: "More than any previous candidate in history, Kennedy sought help from the science of opinion polling – not because he felt he must slavishly adhere to the whims of public opinion but because he sought modern tools of instruction about new and unfamiliar battlegrounds."⁸⁸ This domestic use of opinion polls would aptly characterize how Kennedy used world opinion surveys. Kennedy used USIA polls to help him devise methods of engaging Communist forces and ideas. None of the USIA opinion polls in the Kennedy Office File surveyed world opinion proactively – that is, they did not ask people "What should America do?" USIA surveys were reactive, asking opinions about how existing policies were perceived, or how the United States ranked relative to the Soviet Union and China.

As part of the strategy for bolstering the credibility of America's military and nuclear threat, the Kennedy administration quickly began to wage tactical battles with world opinion. For example, USIA surveys showed a linkage between world opinion's assessment of space-launch capability and the American nuclear deterrent.⁸⁹ Kennedy stepped up America's space program, and

85. Schlesinger to the author, 10 July 1997; Theodore Sorensen to the author, 21 August 1997; Rostow to the author, 22 July 1997.

86. Rostow to the author, 22 July 1997. In a 1964 interview about Kennedy, Rostow asked, "Will historians be able to reconstruct the whole picture of what went into his remarkable computer of a mind? Everyone that worked with him has hold of a portion of the truth. No one, I believe, saw all the elements that shaped his thought and action." Rostow, Oral History, Kennedy Library.

87. USIA, "Civil Rights Alabama 5/17/63–10/10/63," POF, box 91.

88. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 106.

89. *New York Times*, 29 October 1960.

USIA followed with an extensive information campaign. In 1961, based on feedback from polls and press reports, the USIA boasted that “two young men soared into space early this year. . . . One was a Russian, one an American. The Russian was the first one up, but the American’s achievement was more widely heard and even more widely believed.”⁹⁰ The USIA continued to systematically track world opinion of the space race. For example, Murrow wrote the president in August 1962 with a USIA survey of “U.S. vs. Soviet Space Standing in Western Europe.” It showed that although the United States “had some distance to go” before it caught up to the Soviet Union, at least favorable opinion had increased since 1961.⁹¹

Another instance of how Kennedy used USIA opinion polling to boost U.S. prestige was the attention paid to the impact of his 13 March 1961 Alliance for Progress speech. USIA closely monitored the reception this speech received around the world. The agency reported that the speech had been well crafted, because “every segment of Latin American society seemingly found some aspect of the president’s proposal held out hope for its particular aspirations.”⁹² Follow-up studies would continue to monitor how the Alliance for Progress program was being perceived by Latin Americans of different nationalities and socioeconomic status.⁹³ The continual feedback helped U.S. officials better match their rhetoric to the aspirations of the target audience. When the president became sensitive to the Soviet Union’s efforts to show the dissonance between America’s human rights claims and the nation’s internal racial prejudices, USIA monitored world opinion to better understand how severely racial strife was damaging U.S. prestige. USIA polling was then used to refine American efforts to combat unfortunate or incorrect perceptions of the situation.⁹⁴

Throughout his abbreviated administration, Kennedy would continue to use USIA as an integral part of his efforts to boost U.S. prestige. Indeed, after the Bay of Pigs, the battle for world opinion took on a more urgent tone. According to Rostow, the Bay of Pigs fiasco reverberated throughout American policy. In a top-secret memo to the president, Rostow wrote that Kennedy’s strategy in the first few months had been to “bind up the northern half of the Free World more closely and begin to link it constructively to the south.” Efforts like the space program and the Alliance for Progress were examples of this attempt to improve American international prestige. Yet the Bay of Pigs “damaged the grand alliance in all its dimensions.” What happened in Cuba was acutely important to the European allies because “our prestige appears somewhat to

90. USIA, *16th Report to Congress, January 1–June 30, 1961* (Washington, 1961), 7.

91. Murrow to the president, “U.S. vs. USSR Space Standing in Western Europe,” 13 August 1962, POE, box 91.

92. USIA, “Reactions to President Kennedy’s Address on Latin America.”

93. USIA, “The Economic and Political Climate of Opinion in Latin America and Attitudes toward the Alliance for Progress,” June, 1963, POE, box 91.

94. USIA, “Civil Rights Alabama 5/17/63–10/10/63”; USIA, “Media Comment on the Mississippi Crisis,” October 1962, POE, box 91; Murrow to JFK, 2 October 1961, POE, box 91.

be damaged and our prestige is important to each of them in his own situation.”⁹⁵ Rostow believed that after the Bay of Pigs the United States was on the defensive, merely trying to maintain its prestige against the growing appeal of communism. On 28 April 1961 Rostow wrote the president that “we must now, I believe, face the fact that we are in the midst of one of the great crises of the postwar years. It is a worldwide crisis” taking place “at a period of up-swing in Soviet military and space capabilities; and it is colored by an image of American strength and determination fading relative to the Communist thrust.”⁹⁶ USIA international polls only helped confirm Rostow’s perception of the situation. In this more defensive climate, it appears that President Kennedy, concerned with the impact of perceived Soviet gains in the arms race, was willing to sacrifice some of America’s “soft” prestige in return for gains in the harder currency of military prestige.

Two examples of this kind of manipulation of world opinion are Kennedy’s handling of the atomic testing issue and his use of defoliants in Vietnam. In both cases, Kennedy chose to act against world opinion on one level and to influence it on another. On 30 August 1961 Kennedy found out that the Soviets had announced an end to the moratorium on nuclear testing. Kennedy’s advisers offered a number of possible responses to this from a “fireside chat” detailing America’s nuclear superiority to a nuclear strike of the Soviet test site.⁹⁷ Murrow urged the president not to take immediate or drastic action because he would be “throw[ing] away this opportunity to consolidate our leadership of the non-Communist world and isolate the Communist bloc.”⁹⁸ The day after the Soviet announcement, Murrow forwarded a USIA research report to the president that indicated press from around the world was denouncing the Soviet decision.⁹⁹ Two days after the Soviet announcement Murrow wrote Kennedy, “We are now getting some comment from uncommitted areas which, after criticizing the Soviet decision, suggests that the United States will probably announce a resumption of testing soon and that too will be a very bad thing. Time continues to work for us.”¹⁰⁰

Kennedy learned of Soviet atmospheric testing on 1 September and waited only four days to announce that the United States would resume underground testing. USIA then tried to create a distinction between the U.S. and Soviet testing by emphasizing the greater health dangers of atmospheric testing.¹⁰¹ The president publicly appealed to the Soviets not to test a fifty-megaton bomb, and the administration distributed information to UN delegations about the potential

95. Rostow to the president, “The Problem We Face,” 21 April 1961, NSF, box 299–304.

96. Ibid.

97. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 619.

98. Ibid.; U.S. Department of State, *The Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963* (Washington, 1995), 7: 149–50.

99. Murrow to the president, 31 August 1961, POF, box 91.

100. Murrow to the president, 1 September 1961, POF, box 91.

101. USIA, *18th Report to Congress, January 1–June 30, 1962* (Washington, 1962), 29–30. See also Murrow to the president, 11 September 1961, POF, box 91; and Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 620.

fallout effects from the Soviet explosion.¹⁰² Later, Murrow wrote the president that he found it “remarkable” that the United States had been successful in convincing world opinion that there was no important military purpose to the Soviet test program.¹⁰³ For Murrow this underlined “the importance of immediate public reaction [by the United States] to Russian moves.” Murrow went on to quote Joseph Goebbels as having said that, “He who speaks the first word convinces much of the world.”¹⁰⁴

Kennedy was willing to put off underground testing for a few days to focus negative reaction on the Soviets, and he delayed a decision on resuming atmospheric testing for months. Ultimately, however, he was willing to take action in opposition to world public opinion if it helped foster the belief that the United States was a more powerful nation than the Soviet Union. Military and scientific advisers helped convince Kennedy that some atmospheric tests would be necessary to advancing the U.S. nuclear program. A panel of scientists concluded that if the United States did not resume atmospheric testing, there was a chance the Soviets might make a breakthrough that would put them ahead in the arms race. The Defense Department argued that even if tests were not essential to America’s deterrent, they “could help provide that extra margin for limiting damage should deterrence ever fail.”¹⁰⁵

Murrow was unequivocal about the effect that U.S. atmospheric testing would have on world opinion. He counseled the president that “world-wide protests now directed against Soviet nuclear tests would be turned on the United States if we resumed nuclear testing in the atmosphere. . . . In terms of world opinion, the best course of action would be to avoid the resumption of atmospheric tests.”¹⁰⁶ USIA research indicated that Soviet testing had “set Communism back in Latin America.”¹⁰⁷ In Africa USIA believed “there is little appreciation of American defense needs and resumption would be generally viewed as intensifying the arms race.”¹⁰⁸

While Murrow counseled against resuming testing, USIA stations around the world offered two conflicting suggestions for countering the negative reaction if the United States did resume testing. Some believed that the best strategy would be to do the atmospheric testing before the Soviets finished because “this would avoid making the U.S. the sole target of the already sensitive and irritated state of world opinion.”¹⁰⁹ Other posts believed that the longer the United States delayed, the more time USIA would have to explain the decision.

102. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 620.

103. Murrow to the president, “Reactions to Nuclear Tests,” undated [last memo in folder 7/61–12/61], POF, box 91.

104. *Ibid.*

105. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 622.

106. Murrow, “Reactions to Nuclear Tests.”

107. *Ibid.*

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.*

Kennedy waited until the end of February before moving toward a final decision to resume atmospheric testing on 25 April.¹¹⁰ According to a USIA report, the agency had worked “through all its media of communication, during the months preceding resumed U.S. tests, to prepare overseas opinion for this eventuality. A continuous flow of information materials was sent to all posts abroad to provide a background for understanding.”¹¹¹ On 3 August Murrow offered evidence of the success of USIA information efforts. According to Murrow, polling of West European opinion (usually the most favorable to U.S. actions) indicated that “the reasons for our resumption of nuclear testing in the atmosphere were widely understood and approved.”¹¹² Despite this summary, the results of the survey did not indicate a resounding endorsement of U.S. actions.¹¹³ While the USIA took the edge off unfavorable opinion, many people abroad remained outraged by the U.S. decision.

Although Murrow had warned Kennedy that world reaction would be unfavorable if he resumed atmospheric nuclear testing, the president did not view world opinion as a moral force compelling his actions. USIA polling had helped Kennedy manage world opinion. In the end, it showed him that he had not lost an unacceptable amount of the nation’s “soft” prestige while he attempted to boost perceptions of U.S. military power. To be sure, the delay of testing and the use of the USIA indicates that Kennedy was interested in convincing the world that the United States had a greater sense of “morality” than the Soviet Union, but it was more important that there be no doubt at home or abroad about the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent. The resumption of testing was an appeal to world opinion on another level. In making the decision, Kennedy told his staff that Khrushchev “has had a succession of apparent victories – space, Cuba, the thirteenth of August [the Berlin Wall].”¹¹⁴ Resuming testing was one way for Kennedy to counter Khrushchev’s attempts to “give out the feeling that he has us on the run.”¹¹⁵

Another example of Kennedy’s willingness to act contrary to world public opinion in pursuit of positive assessments of America power can be seen in his position on defoliant spraying. By late 1961 Kennedy was receiving pressure from the U.S. Army, which wanted to spray defoliants in Vietnam. Murrow provided an assessment of the world opinion fallout that could be expected from defoliant use and how USIA would seek to counter it. Murrow wrote the president that “we can expect a major propaganda attack by the communist bloc in the event that defoliant operations are undertaken in Viet-Nam.” Murrow believed that

110. *FRUS, 1961-1963* 7:337–39.

111. USIA, *18th Report to Congress*, 29.

112. Murrow to the president, 3 August 1962, POF, box 91.

113. While a minority indicated that the resumption was “not justified,” a significant portion of opinion had “no opinion,” and there was not a clear majority that believed U.S. resumption was “justified.” USIA, “West European Opinion on Nuclear Inspection and U.S. Resumption of Nuclear Tests,” 3 August 1962, POF, box 91.

114. JFK in Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 483.

115. *Ibid.*

the United States “should be able to cope with propaganda repercussions arising from defoliation of guerrilla hide-out areas, border areas and roadsides.” Yet, he said, “chemical attacks on crops would, in my opinion, put us in an altogether different position with respect to world opinion, especially in the newly developing countries where food has been a perennial problem.” Briefed of the U.S. plan to “escape blame for these actions by having them carried out by Vietnamese planes and pilots,” Murrow told the president that this “would make little difference in our world-opinion problem.”¹¹⁶

In the event that the president did decide to carry out defoliant operations, the USIA intended to “take every step possible to get the technical facts of non-toxicity-to-humans across before we are put in a defensive position.”¹¹⁷ Mindful of world opinion, Kennedy put off crop destruction operations for a year and then began limited operations that were each approved by Washington.¹¹⁸ North Vietnam exploited America’s use of defoliants and provoked international outrage aimed at the United States.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, by 1962 Kennedy was willing to damage America’s international image with defoliants in an attempt to impress upon world opinion that America had the means and the determination to counter Communist aggression in Vietnam. Once again, he traded a measured amount of “soft” prestige for perceptions of military power.

The cases of atmospheric testing and defoliant spraying highlight some of the nuances of Kennedy’s concern for America’s international image and his use of public opinion polling. The warnings from Murrow, which drew particular reference to the opinions of developing nations, indicate the scope and depth of JFK’s concern for how his actions would be perceived around the globe. Yet the president’s concern for world opinion was driven primarily by his desire to maintain perceptions of the balance of power the United States had achieved with the Soviet Union. When he was concerned with increasing the “net favorable opinion” of U.S. power vis-à-vis the Communists, Kennedy ignored Murrow’s warnings about the effect that his actions were about to have on world opinion. Kennedy put power above public opinion, or, rather, considered public opinion to be in the service of power.

The decisions to resume nuclear testing and use defoliants in Vietnam were examples of the specific ways the USIA and its opinion surveys helped formulate Kennedy policy. More generally, unsatisfactorily low international opinions of American military power make the symbolic importance of resisting communism in areas like Vietnam easier to understand. As Kennedy told his staff in November 1961, U.S. actions in Vietnam would be “examined on both sides of the Iron Curtain . . . as a measure of the administration’s intentions and

116. Murrow to the president, 27 November 1961, POF, box 91.

117. Ibid.

118. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978), 257–58.

119. George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York, 1979), 88.

determination.” If he chose to negotiate in Vietnam, the United States might “in fact be judged weaker than in Laos.”¹²⁰ Because a Communist “victory” in space, Vietnam, or anywhere else would affect already unfavorable perceptions of U.S. strength, Kennedy did not know where the “non-essential areas” were.¹²¹

If one of the disastrous consequences of Kennedy’s preoccupation with world opinion was his escalation of America’s commitment in Vietnam,¹²² it may have also contributed to what has been called his “finest hours.”¹²³ The Cuban missile crisis is, perhaps, the best example of the multiple effects a concern about international opinion had on Kennedy foreign policy. The crisis highlighted the way JFK juggled concerns for world perceptions of America’s military power, credibility, and relationship to nonaligned nations.

The administration’s initial reaction to the discovery of ballistic missiles in Cuba was to remove them with a surprise attack. Then George Ball raised the question of how world opinion would react to such a move. He claimed an attack “like Pearl Harbor” would put the European allies and Latin America in a “funk.”¹²⁴ Those who continued to believe in the need for an air strike also urged the president to consider international public opinion. According to General Taylor, speaking for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “our strength in Berlin, our strength in anyplace in the world, is the credibility of our response under certain conditions. And if we don’t respond here in Cuba we think the credibility is sacrificed.”¹²⁵

Late in the evening on 18 October, Kennedy, dictating a soliloquy into his tape recorder, framed his whole dilemma in terms of the effect his response would have on America’s image. JFK did not want the United States to be seen as the aggressor. Kennedy said, “When I saw Robert Lovett later . . . he was not convinced that any action was desirable. He felt that [a strike against the missile sites], the first strike, would be very destructive to our alliances. The Soviets would inevitably bring about a reprisal; that we would be blamed for it.”¹²⁶ Yet he realized his advisers had a point when they counseled that “for us to fail to respond would throw into question our willingness to respond over Berlin, [and] divide our allies and our country.”¹²⁷ Kennedy had to walk a fine line between devastating the nation’s “soft” prestige with a strike and creating negative assessments of its power and credibility through inaction. These concerns helped lead him toward a middle course where the United States would not immediately launch an attack but reserved that option if the blockade failed.

On 27 October Kennedy reviewed Khrushchev’s offer to trade the missiles in Cuba for the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. His advisers believed that if the

120. JFK in *ibid.*, 83.

121. Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power*, 272.

122. Herring, *Longest War*, 82; Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power*, 267–75.

123. May and Zelikow, *Kennedy Tapes*, 691, referring to the day of 27 October 1962.

124. Ball in *ibid.*, 147.

125. Taylor in *ibid.*, 177.

126. JFK in *ibid.*, 172.

127. JFK in *ibid.*, 172.

United States removed the Jupiters, allies would perceive America to be uncommitted to their defense. Bundy told the president that “if we sounded as if we wanted to make this trade, to our NATO people and to all the people who are tied to us by alliance, we are in real trouble . . . that is the universal assessment of everyone in the government that’s connected with these alliance problems.”¹²⁸ Yet maintaining credibility with NATO was not Kennedy’s only objective. Kennedy demonstrated a broader conception of world opinion than his advisers did. The president’s gut reaction was that he would have to take the trade, because “to any man at the United Nations or any other rational man, it will look like a fair trade.”¹²⁹ The president did not limit his perception of world opinion to that of the allied nations or a few heads of state.

At the crucial hour Kennedy turned out to be “the only one in the room who [was] determined not to go to war over obsolete missiles in Turkey.”¹³⁰ A three-way exchange between George Ball, the president, and McGeorge Bundy provided some indication that the president’s conception of world opinion was broader than that of the men who would go on protecting American credibility by escalating the Vietnam War:

Ball: . . . If we talked to the Turks [about removing the Jupiter missiles], I mean, this would be an extremely unsettling business.

Kennedy: Well, *this* is unsettling *now*, George, because he’s got us in a pretty good spot here. Because most people would argue this as not an unreasonable proposal. I’ll just tell you that. In fact, in many ways –

Bundy: But what *most* people, Mr. President?¹³¹

Although it is impossible to know what Kennedy meant by “most people,” his interest in USIA international public opinion polling might have helped broaden his definitions and inform his decisions. At least one scholar has argued that had Kennedy lived, his concern for maintaining world opinion would have made pulling out of Vietnam unlikely.¹³² Yet Kennedy’s actions in the Cuban missile crisis seem to indicate that, while concerns about world opinion were always on his mind, he could conceive of it broadly enough to look beyond the notion that U.S. credibility depended solely on the perceptions of European allies.

Interestingly, Lyndon Johnson would end the USIA’s world public opinion polling in 1966. Sensitive USIA opinion polls were declassified after a two-year interval. Some members of USIA believed multinational opinion polling was terminated because world opinion’s condemnation of American involvement in Vietnam would have been made public when Johnson was presumably going

128. Bundy in *ibid.*, 529.

129. JFK in *ibid.*, 498.

130. *Ibid.*, 692.

131. *Ibid.*, 499.

132. Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power*, 267–75.

to be running for reelection.¹³³ Despite Kennedy's concern for the credibility of America's military power, perhaps on the Vietnam issue, as with the missile trade, his understanding of "most people" – informed by USIA opinion polling – might have helped guide his decisions. Confronted with trusted polling data that showed world condemnation of efforts to escalate the Vietnam War, Kennedy might have been encouraged to pull out.¹³⁴

In his presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy expressed concern for U.S. prestige and used USIA international opinion polling to gauge America's image abroad. Throughout his administration, he requested the results of USIA polls and changed the agency's mission statement to reflect the impact its polling operations had on his policies. Perhaps because of his knowledge of USIA polling, Kennedy's understanding of world opinion seemed more nuanced than that of his advisers. Regard for international prestige can be linked to specific Kennedy initiatives such as the space program, Alliance for Progress, nuclear testing, and defoliant usage. More generally, the USIA polls repeatedly reminded the president that many people believed the Soviet Union was militarily more powerful than the United States. This knowledge increased JFK's fear that underdeveloped nations perceived communism as the wave of the future and offered confirmation of his administration's sense of crisis.

133. Sorensen, *Word War*, 77.

134. By the summer of 1963, USIA was reporting to Kennedy that involvement in Vietnam was hurting America's international prestige. See Murrow to the president, "Foreign Reaction to Diem Repression and U.S. Foreign Policy," 28 August 1963, POF, box 91.