

David R. Gibson. *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision During the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. 256pp.

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With *Talk at the Brink*, David Gibson has taken a different approach to one of more studied events of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis. Countless pages have been devoted to analysing and interpreting the back-and-forth diplomatic chess match between Kennedy and Khrushchev, with the possible fate of the world hanging in the balance, but Gibson's work is the first book to utilise the secret audio recordings of President Kennedy to explore these events from a sociological perspective. It is through these recordings that Gibson looks to prove his contention that the decisions made were not the result a "clash of factions...or a clear-sighted assessment of the risks," (xi) nor was it a product of a singularly-focused president forcing his will on his advisers. Instead, from a broad perspective, the decisions were the result of how talk is normally conducted within a group dynamic, only in this case against the backdrop of potential disaster. The book provides a fresh take on the American decision makers' perspective to the evolving crisis.

Gibson acknowledges previous examination and analysis of the crisis by Irving Janis, who argued that the decision-makers, ExComm, were able to avoid the dangers of "groupthink," when critical thinking caves to the pressure for consensus, (7) based in large part on Kennedy's desire to fix the decision-making process that led in part to the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion. He further points to the informal and egalitarian nature

of the ExComm meetings as evidence of their effectiveness. Gibson, however, points out that Janis' research relied heavily on accounts that reflect self-interest of each party. Gibson also cites the work of Paul Anderson, who unlike Janis, argues that the U.S. decision was not based on a comparison of all possible choices and scenarios, but rather a "succession of yes-no choices on binary options, with each choice shaping the options subsequently encountered." (8) In fact, Anderson dubbed the process "decision making by objection." Again, while acknowledging certain merits of this position, Gibson points to the concept that these conclusions are still based on a second hand accounting, and therefore left a gap in data and analysis that should be filled with primary sources.

Gibson has done a very commendable job balancing and melding the concepts of historical research from a sociological perspective, providing readers with a very detailed analysis of what Leopold von Ranke called "wie es eigentlich gewesen," (what actually happened.) At the core of the book is to use these recordings to show how "talk" throughout the crisis unfolded according to the rules and constraints of conversation, and how "talk," particularly in this crisis, was affected by uncertainty and the unseen but real presence of outside influences beyond the control of ExComm, that being the decisions and thought-processes of the Soviet Union. Discussions and decisions needed to be made based upon the perceptions of what individual responses from the Soviets might be to various potential scenarios, and much of this was based on what Gibson refers to as "foretalk." (24) In this instance, Gibson discusses that is rooted in the idea that future events can be imagined and perhaps influenced by present decisions, which seemed to be a driving force behind the decision-making process of ExComm.

Gibson further expands on the concept of foretalk by showing how consequences, causes, and implications all play individual parts in the decision-making process. He also shows that the individual personality traits of each participant reflect directly on the level of participation, and indeed the way with which that participation played out, as a part of a group dynamic. He focuses on the concepts of scope, foretalk, minds, and environment to reach the conclusion that talk is something that is fluid and evolves as environments and conditions evolve and must adapt to the uncertainty and ambiguity of decision-making.

In his conclusion, Gibson pointed to the reflection of President Kennedy in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis, where Kennedy opines that “the essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer-often, indeed, to the decider himself...there will always be the dark and tangled stretches of the decision-making process-mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved.” (159) Kennedy acknowledged that even he, as the “decider,” felt puzzled by the process that ExComm followed in reaching their ultimate decision points. Gibson follows and analyses each point, and strengthening his arguments that the participants, even if they recognised the potential pitfalls of various types of group decision-making and conversation, would still be subjected “vagaries and momentary demands of talk” (165), particularly in a group setting of men such as ExComm. It is through this lens that Gibson finds the striking correlation between the President and his trusted circle and the greater crisis.

As stated previously, Gibson has done an excellent job in providing a new perspective onto a highly analysed and oft-cited moment in American history. This work is perhaps not the ideal read for the casual history buff or student, but serious Cold War

or incident historians can gain a new understanding and insight into the Cuban missile crisis, and for that reason, it is an important work.