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General Maxwell D. Taylor's Rhetorical Sensitivity in "Excom"
Deliberations During the Cuban Missile Crisis: Exemplar or
Aberration Derived From His High School Debate Experience?
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Perspective
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- 1 General Maxwell D. Taylor's Rhetorical Sensitivity in
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Debate Experience?
RONALD H. CARPENTER
- 15 Debating About Debate: A Symbolic Convergence Theory
Meta-Analysis of Educational Reform Movements in
Intercollegiate Competitive Debate
C. THOMAS PRESTON, JR.
- 27 Remembering, Forgetting, and Memorializing Forensics'
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This journal reflects the values of its supporting organization, *Pi Kappa Delta*, which is committed to promoting *the art of persuasion, beautiful and just*. The journal seeks to promote serious scholarly discussion of issues connected to making competitive debate and individual events a powerful tool for teaching students the skills necessary for becoming articulate citizens. The journal seeks essays reflecting perspectives from all current debate and individual events forms, including, but not limited to: NDT, CEDA, NEDA, NPDA, Lincoln-Douglas debate, as well as NIET, NFA, and nontraditional individual events.

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Editor's Note: This article is included using the author's original stylebook, Chicago Manual of Style. Although the proscribed format for submissions to this journal is the APA Stylebook, this article was accepted as written since to change the format of citations would change some of the richness of the scholarship. Dr. Carpenter's end-notes offer greater clarity and insight into the rhetorical situation, and to change that format would have done a disservice to the readers as well as the author.
Nina-Jo Moore, Editor

General Maxwell D. Taylor's Rhetorical Sensitivity in "Excom" Deliberations During the Cuban Missile Crisis: Exemplar or Aberration Derived From His High School Debate Experience?

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Abstract: As the basis for his distinguished military career, General Maxwell Taylor identified his experience debating in high school before attending West Point Academy. Successful debaters have "rhetorical sensitivity" in that they amass pertinent evidence, listen carefully to opponents' statements, and adapt accordingly to issues as they arise in successive sentences. During the Cuban Missile crisis, argument and advocacy in "Excom" deliberations were pivotal when the United States stood "on the brink" of potential nuclear conflict. General Taylor's rhetorical role therein merits examination as it reveals problems when martial commanders advocate armed conflict – or its avoidance – to Presidential commanders-in-chief.

I.

During World War II, General Maxwell D. Taylor parachuted into France on D-Day commanding 101st Airborne Division troops and later led them during the critical Battle of the Bulge. He subsequently was Superintendent of West Point, U.S. Commander in Berlin, Eighth Army Commander in Korea, and Army Chief of Staff under President Dwight Eisenhower. In 1959, after retiring from the Army, Taylor published *The Uncertain Trumpet*, which denounced the prevailing defense posture of "massive retaliation" by nuclear weaponry and advocated instead conventional forces for "flexible

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response." His argument impressed President John Kennedy. As Robert Kennedy attested, "we reoriented our whole strategic thinking. We had been affected tremendously by his book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*. ... I'd read the book too. And I really liked him."¹ Accordingly, Taylor became a civilian White House advisor but then was recalled to active duty as President John Kennedy's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

For his distinguished military career, Taylor's "Preface" for *The Uncertain Trumpet* acknowledged the relevance of his debating in high school:

I was asked recently what in my past experience had been most helpful to me as Chief of Staff. Was it attendance at the Command and Staff College and the Army War College? Was it service alongside General Marshall at the time of Pearl Harbor? Was it command of the 101st Airborne Division in Europe in World War II or the Eighth Army in Korea? I never hesitated in replying, "My most valuable preparation was membership in the Northeast High School Society of Debate in my preWest Point days in Kansas City."²

Taylor's debating was, by his own admission, "encouraged" by his father, who was a lawyer and believed forensics participation "augured well for success in a legal career."³

Yes, competitive debate long has been deemed apt preparation for practicing law—and other professions requiring advocacy with evidence about issues at hand, careful listening, and sound decisions about what to include or omit in successive statements. Forensics thereby nurtures what Roderick Hart and Don Burks call "rhetorical sensitivity" whereby communicators "*undergo the strain of adaptation*" to choose from "all possible verbal strategies *before* giving utterance to an idea."⁴ Debating well entails discerning which of opponents' preceding comments merit virtually instantaneous adaptation—whether rebuttal, affirmation, or silence. Moreover, exemplary debaters can argue either side of an issue, but if they were to do so *during* a debate, the switch might be less an exemplar of forensics prowess and more an aberration. After President George W. Bush initiated the controversial war against Iraq, martial commanders' communication prowess to persuade—or dissuade—warrants explication of Taylor's advocacy about a possible earlier armed endeavor—with dire consequences.

II.

General Taylor was credible with Kennedy not only because of his book but also because of the April 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco. During the preceding Eisenhower administration, the CIA armed and trained Cuban exiles to land on their home island and overthrow Fidel Castro's communist regime. Commanding the Atlantic Fleet in 1960, Admiral Robert Dennison "first got an inkling" of "a CIA thing" code-

named "Operation Bumpy Road." Believing "it should have been called Quagmire," he concluded that Eisenhower "realized that it was very risky and probably would be an unsuccessful operation ... but it was passed over to Kennedy and, of course, he believed that it had been well thought through and everybody approved it."⁵

Carried out after Kennedy's inauguration, the landing failed catastrophically. In Theodore Sorensen's dispassionate view, the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the operational plan "only limited, piecemeal study In as much as it was the responsibility of another agency and did not depend directly on their forces, they were not as close or critical in their examination as they might have otherwise been." More cynical, President Kennedy blamed the JCS: "They always give you their bullshit about their instant reaction and their split-second timing, but it never works out." Bemoaning "generals and admirals with tiers of service ribbons advertising" their experience, he added "those sons of bitches with all the fruit salad just sat there nodding, saying it would work"; and Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay was least credible among them. White House staffers knew the president "has a kind of fit if you mention LeMay," once saying, "I don't want that man near me again" (LeMay nevertheless was retained because he is "like Babe Ruth. Personally he's a bum, but he's got talent and the people love him"). Kennedy also lamented, "How could I have been so stupid as to let them go ahead."⁶

"Much upset" about that military misadventure, Kennedy appointed the retired Taylor to head an investigating committee. Also in that group, Robert Kennedy remembered working "closely ... every day for three or four months," during which "Taylor made such a big difference. He had some sense. He could see the whole perspective." After "sessions from about nine o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the afternoon," the president's brother "was really impressed with him—his intellectual ability, his judgment, his ideas. He was, with Bob McNamara, the most effective person that I had met. ... I was terrifically taken with him. So the President brought him on as his military advisor."⁷ Deeming Taylor an "intellectual," President Kennedy boasted that his "chief military advisor spoke French and German and Spanish"; and "if you asked Taylor about a problem in the Middle East, he wanted to know how Xerxes had handled it."⁸ As Chief of Naval Operation at that time (and thus a JCS member), Admiral George Anderson attributed Taylor's "quick rapport with Kennedy" not only to *The Uncertain Trumpet* and the Bay of Pigs inquiry but also to "his personal views, which were very forcefully and articulately presented, because General Taylor is a very bright and articulate individual, both orally and in writing."⁹ That communication prowess—likely nurtured by high school debate—became significant during what arguably were among the most pivotal martial deliberations in American history.

II.

American reconnaissance aircraft had photographed missile launch facilities being constructed in Cuba by Russian technicians. Once operational there, Soviet nuclear missiles—en route by cargo ship for placement in Cuba—could quickly strike virtually the entire continental United States; the threat had to be eliminated. Although the final decision was his alone, President Kennedy considered recommendations from two groups deliberating independently of each other. An *ad hoc* executive committee, "Excom," included (among others) Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon, McGeorge Bundy, Theodore Sorensen, Kenneth O'Donnell, and one military person wearing civilian clothing: General Taylor.¹⁰ Another group, the Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff chaired by Taylor in uniform, planned armed response if Kennedy so decided. As Admiral Anderson recalled, the Pentagon "went immediately to general quarters [shipboard combat readiness]," and the JCS met "regularly" to amass and assess intelligence data and then recommend options.¹¹

Excom epitomizes "crisis management" that Graham Allison deems an "obscure and terribly risky" process:

If a President and his associates have to try to manage a nuclear crisis, the informal machinery, free-wheeling discussions, and devil's advocacy exemplified by the Excom have many advantages. But the mix of personality, expertise, influence, and temperament that allows such a group to clarify alternatives even while it pulls and hauls for separate preferences should be better understood before we start down the path to nuclear confrontation again.

Moreover, although "personality" can yield "*reticence*" as "hesitant silence" or "partially intended soft-spokenness," the process also suffers from "pace and noise level" resulting in "*misperception*" and "*miscommunication*."¹² Equally important, if not more so, Presidents are in positions of "*dependency*" because their decisions about combat reflects *what* is communicated to them and *how* martial commanders do so.¹³

In a *macroscopic* view, diplomatic correspondence as well as "back channel" contacts between Americans and Soviets led to an agreement that if Russia withdrew missiles headed to Cuba, the United States would withdraw Jupiter missiles from Turkey and pledge not to unseat Castro militarily.¹⁴ Nevertheless, when debating dire armed attack, commanders' words mandate *microscopic* analysis of *spontaneous* sentence by sentence behavior when "terribly risky" personality, misperception, and miscommunication characterize deliberations. For this study, organizational communication research suggests examining what is "*exceptional*—either qualitatively or quantitatively—in producing ... desired effects."¹⁵ In October 1962, "gatekeeping" is

exceptional because *one* person relayed information between *two* deliberating groups. As JCS Chairman, General Taylor attended Excom meetings of civilians *and* chaired Pentagon meetings of the service heads—Admiral Anderson, General LeMay, Army Chief of Staff General Earle Wheeler, and Marine Corps Commandant General David Shoup, all of whom would implement martial response—if ordered by President Kennedy.

During the crisis, Kennedy and Excom were inundated with information from varied sources. This “complex communication environment” held “an immense number of fragments or bits of information” to be organized quickly into a “coherent picture”; and as Samuel Becker observes, people “exposed to information which they believe is important” will “generally turn to additional sources to verify or supplement what they got from the original source.”¹⁶ Those verifiers are “opinion leaders” because of being perceived as “characteristically more competent,” with “access to wider sources of pertinent information”; and although early studies anticipated their “producing change,” opinion leaders’ typical “influence” was “reinforcement.”¹⁷

Admittedly, the President did not attend several Excom meetings “to keep the discussions from being inhibited.” As his brother Robert observed, “personalities change when the President is present, and frequently even strong men make recommendations on the basis of what they believe the President wishes to hear.”¹⁸ Or as another Excom participant described Robert Kennedy’s excluding himself from some meetings, “this had a healthy effect in stimulating real discussion. It inhibited the striking of attitudes”; for “we all knew little brother was watching ... keeping a list of where everyone stood.”¹⁹ Thus, even if absent from Excom meetings, the President could know what Taylor said. In transcripts of Excom meetings, Taylor’s words—sentence by sentence—reveal rhetorical sensitivity.²⁰ After all, Taylor’s “warm relationship” with Kennedy was a “personality” factor worth perpetuating for presidential “dependency” upon him. As H.R. McMaster concludes, the general knew how much “Kennedy preferred to conduct business with individuals who shared his outlook,” and the President believed Taylor controlled the Pentagon Joint Chiefs, whom he deemed “more an impediment than an asset.”²¹

JCS members then knew their rightful role, however, and General Shoup expressed it: although “willing and ready with the forces available to them to do anything the President decided,” the JCS did “not make the decision” but rather were unified to “point out their understanding of the problem, try to relate it to all the political factors that they’re aware of, and make a recommendation.”²² Nevertheless, for urgent decisions entailing “dependency” upon what is communicated to presidents, gatekeeping favoring “personality” may be an aberration of rhetorical sensitivity nurtured by debate. Only candid, informed estimates should be advocated to presidential commanders-in-chief.

Accordingly, Admiral Anderson described how the JCS had problems with their Chairman, stemming partly from Taylor's gatekeeping:

From the Joint Chiefs' point of view, some of the sensitive negotiations, exchanges of information between President Kennedy and the White House and the Soviet Union were not filtering down to the Chiefs. That was so tightly held—maybe they gave it to Taylor and he didn't pass it on down. Maybe he was told not to pass it on down. But there was an inadequacy, in my opinion, in that flow of information to the Chiefs.

That gatekeeping was compounded by Taylor's hearing impairment.

I think we lacked in some measure a flow of information on the deliberations at the special group, from the White House down, partially because Maxwell Taylor had a hearing impediment. LeMay also had a hearing impediment. As a matter of fact, down in the Joint Chiefs, I'd sit on one side of the table and LeMay and Taylor on the other side and they'd be having two separate conversations, one on one side and one on the other—not interfering because they were talking, deaf ears to each other. When General LeMay went up to the White House, he put in a hearing aid, which Maxwell Taylor would never do, I guess through some quirk of vanity or something. LeMay never missed anything but I'm quite certain that Taylor did miss or chose not to pass on or didn't have time to pass on some of the things that took place.²³

McNamara also knew that Taylor “suffered partial deafness and had trouble conversing.”²⁴ For urgent deliberations inviting “misperception” and “miscommunication,” accurate listening is imperative when debating about similar sounding “mobile” versus “movable” missiles.

III.

When Excom deliberations began at 6:30 pm on 16 October, Secretary of Defense McNamara summarized Pentagon planning for air strikes followed by invasion rather than a limited attack that “would leave too great a capability in Cuba undestroyed.” After explaining how “an open approach politically to the problem” was “likely to lead to no satisfactory result,” he also argued “a blockade against offensive weapons entering Cuba” had “major defects.” He then outlined Pentagon planning for “a substantial air attack ... as Max [Taylor] suggested—possibly 700 to 1,000 sorties per day for 5 days” [a sortie is one mission by one airplane]. McNamara then explained how “an invasion following the air attack, means the assembly of tens of thousand, between 90 and over 150,000 men.” After McNamara's invitation “to comment on this,” Taylor concurred about “our” judgment at the Pentagon:

You're never sure of having, absolutely, getting everything down there. We intend to do a great deal of damage because we can