How the Sinking of PT-109 Shaped JFK’s Leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis

Camelot was a fleeting moment in the nation’s memory. Upon the swearing in of the 35th President, a sense of hope and vitality rang from coast to coast. JFK dared his fellow Americans to envision a future of limitless capacities, forging new frontiers in the exploration of space and equal rights of Americans. However, Kennedy’s presidency did not come without its challenges. Only one year into his term he was faced with a conflict that brought the world closer to nuclear war than it had ever been before – the Cuban Missile Crisis. Though no previous President had been faced with a crisis of this magnitude, President Kennedy skillfully led the country out of one of the darkest times in its history. Kennedy’s artistry in leadership, however, was not simply fate or a mere fluke. Rather, it could be traced back prior to his debut in politics. During his naval service in World War II, Kennedy’s role in saving his crew after the sinking of their boat, PT-109, was pivotal in cultivating his leadership style. The lessons and skills Kennedy had gained during this episode proved his greatest asset in handling the Cuban Missile Crisis.

PT-109 Incident

Swept away in the wartime wave of patriotism, Kennedy enlisted in the United States Navy in 1941, shortly after graduating from Harvard University. Kennedy was originally placed in the intelligence department due to his physical ailments but voluntarily sought transfer to active combat where he felt he could make a larger impact. In June of 1943, Kennedy was assigned duty in the South Pacific where he commanded PT-109, a small torpedo boat. Two months into his journey on August 2nd at 2:32 am, a Japanese destroyer (triple the size of PT-109) spotted the boat and rammed through it, cutting it in half (“The Truth about JFK”). The boat went up in flames and Kennedy and his men were left adrift in the shark infested waters. Kennedy spent nearly three hours in the dark trying to locate all of his men and managed to find ten out of twelve of them, with two dying upon impact. Other nearby American ships saw the explosion, and reported the incident to Naval Command Officer Thomas Warfield, with whom Kennedy had a tense relationship. However, Warfield chose against a mission to rescue the crew of PT-109. Meanwhile, the crew clung onto a sinking fragment of the ship’s bow as they planned their next step. Kennedy held a vote with his men on whether to continue to fight or surrender to the Japanese stating, "There's nothing in the book about a situation like this. A lot of you men have families and some of you have children. What do you want to do? I have nothing to lose" (“John Fitzgerald Kennedy”). The crew voted to continue the fight and made the decision to swim to Plum Pudding Island. A surviving naval engineer, Patrick McMahon, had been badly injured in the fire and was unable to move. In spite of his debilitating back condition, Kennedy placed McMahon’s life vest strap between his teeth and voluntarily pulled McMahon as he swam for 5 hours to land. Though Kennedy and his crew reached the island, there was no food or water to be found. Additionally, Japanese soldiers were stationed on the island. Many of Kennedy’s men believed they were destined to die here, even though they had finally reached land. Their injuries were worsening, and Kennedy was violently ill after swallowing large amounts of seawater while pulling McMahon. Still, Kennedy went back into the water to search for an island which possibly had food.
Kennedy found Cross Island, an island rich in coconuts, and swam there with his men, once again towing McMahon. While there, the crew luckily found 50 gallons of water left by the Japanese, but that would not be able to sustain the men for long. The crew was convinced no one was going to rescue them on this desolate island and that this was a mere “death trap”. Kennedy, determined to lift the spirits of his men, remembered his father’s adage: “Things don’t just happen; they are made to happen.” Taking action, Kennedy went out to sea at night with a battle lantern hoping to spot American patrol boats and signal for help. One night a strong current pulled Kennedy far from the island, convincing him he was never to see land or his men again. Luckily, by morning the waves had carried him back to Cross Island, and he was surprised to see his men on the island with two Natives. Though the Natives were sympathetic to the American cause, they did not speak English. Kennedy could not have them relay a message in a traditional fashion, so borrowed the Natives’ knife and carved a rescue message into the coconut. The Natives delivered the message to nearby American troops, while the crew of PT-109 waited.

Finally on August 8th, six days after the collision of PT-109, the crew was rescued. Even after this catastrophe, Kennedy kept his good-humored nature – the same attitude that helped his men persevere. When the rescue crew told Kennedy that they had food for him, Kennedy answered back, “No, thanks. I just had a coconut!” (Roos).

The sinking of PT-109 was a transformative moment in the life of John F. Kennedy. Fighting on the ground opened Kennedy’s eyes to a world beyond the comforts of high-society New England. He entered the war as the privileged son of one of the wealthiest men in America. However, through leading the fight between life and death of his crew, Kennedy learned that in order to gain respect as a leader he had to do so through his actions, not only though his last name. These lessons in leadership would prove an invaluable asset in Kennedy’s handling of the largest crisis of his Presidency – the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Cuban Missile Crisis Overview
On October 14, 1962, an American U2 spy plane flying over Cuba spotted the construction of Soviet-supplied nuclear missiles on the island. These missiles proved a grave danger to the United States because they could target most of the country, with Cuba being only 90 miles away from Florida. America and the Soviet Union, the world’s two superpower nations, seemed on the brink of a nuclear war. President Kennedy and his group of advisors (called the ExComm) held several meetings regarding the handling of this situation. Many of his advisors were either a proponent of direct war with Cuba (and inevitably the USSR) or a proponent of diplomacy. After weighing the benefits and consequences of each path, President Kennedy felt that there ought to be a third option. He proposed the idea of a naval blockade around Cuba, where American officers would inspect every ship coming into Cuba to ensure that the Soviets could not send additional military supply. This solution was implemented and ultimately ended the 13-day deadlock between the United States and the USSR. Furthermore, through a secret negotiation the Soviet Union agreed to remove any nuclear missiles from Cuba. In return, United States removed their nuclear missiles from Turkey, a member of NATO.
Applying Lessons Learned from PT-109 to the Cuban Missile Crisis:

The Cost of War

Many of President Kennedy’s advisors pressured him to go to war with Cuba, with the famed General Curtis LeMay even telling the President he had no other choice. The United States had nuclear superiority to the USSR and an American victory was plausible, as the General said, but President Kennedy knew the catastrophic collateral damage nuclear warfare could cause. He could not bear the thought of losing so many American soldiers in a war that could possibly be prevented. To Kennedy, the loss of life was personal. Kennedy felt tremendous guilt for the death of two of his PT-109 crewmen during the collision, even going as far to say the rescue story of PT-109 was not one of “success” because two men were lost. According to First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, the President often cried when he learned of large incidents of death under his administration. Because of this, President Kennedy seemed willing to expend all possible solutions before succumbing to war in order to protect the lives of people.

Another key catalyst in President Kennedy’s decision against war was his communication with Nikita Khrushchev, Premier of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev was shocked that Kennedy was planning action against the nuclear proliferation, as Khrushchev believed he was simply balancing the nuclear missiles the US had in Turkey with Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev sent Kennedy a letter painting a picture of his own experiences fighting for the USSR during World War II. In painstaking detail, he showed the utter destruction war could cause. The Soviet Union had lost over 20 million soldiers during the war, a scale of tragedy that had never been seen before in the history of war. In his letter, Khrushchev further stated the number dead as a result of a nuclear war would make the casualties of World War II look minuscule by comparison. This letter, which provided a glimpse into the experience of another soldier during the same war, strongly resonated with Kennedy. He realized Khrushchev shared his same beliefs on the threat of war. After reading that letter, President Kennedy thought to himself, “He thinks just the way I do” (Bron, Whyte). The military and even civilian sacrifices to be made as a result of nuclear warfare was a leading cause of President Kennedy’s aversion to war with Cuba.

A secondary cause in President Kennedy’s decision against war was his skepticism of military generals, especially after his experiences with Naval Command Officer Thomas Warfield during World War II. Warfield would demand his men undertake high-risk operations and “crush” the enemy at all costs, while he stayed as far away from the fighting as possible. Warfield withheld information from soldiers about grim obstacles they could face and their chance of survival, seeing as it could discourage men from fighting (“Future U.S. Presidents Join WWII”). A key difference between Warfield and Kennedy was that Warfield viewed human lives as replaceable, while Kennedy did not. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy was adamantly that there not be powerful generals forcing young men to fight in risky conditions fully knowing, and still not caring, that they would not return alive. President Kennedy’s empathy for lost lives and memories of Warfield’s poor commanding led him to refuse the option of war.
Listening to Others

Despite his position of authority as commander of PT-109, Kennedy held a vote with his crew to determine their fate after the ship had been destroyed. Kennedy realized his role as leader did not mean that he acted according to his own preferences, but rather represented the will of his own men. His leadership in heading the Executive branch similarly depended on feedback from others. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, he sought a great amount of input from his advisors before making a decision. Instead of taking charge and only entertaining his own ideas during his ExComm meetings, President Kennedy carefully listened to each of his advisors, even if he disagreed with their stance. In fact, during ExComm meetings President Kennedy could rarely be heard speaking, with the exception of clarifying questions and short phrases (“Off the Record Meeting on Cuba”). President Kennedy appreciated the various perspectives he could gain through talking to others, and this ultimately helped him strategize the details of the Naval Blockade. Kennedy demonstrated that true public servants listen to others, rather than speak.

Ingenuity in Problem Solving

Even in seemingly hopeless circumstances, Kennedy harnessed his creativity to put forward innovative solutions. When the crew of PT-109 was trying to get a message through Natives who did not speak English, Kennedy focused his energy on finding an unconventional means of communication using the resources around him. Hugging the Natives to convey his peaceful intentions, Kennedy gestured permission for their knife, picked up a coconut on the ground, and in it began carving a message intended for the American troops. The concise and efficacious message read in part, “NATIVE KNOWS POS’IT...HE CAN PILOT...11 ALIVE...NEED SMALL BOAT - KENNEDY” (Eschner). Luckily for Kennedy, the Native men were coast watchers for the Allied Forces and were able to successfully deliver the message back to the American troops. Kennedy’s spontaneous thinking, as well as his willingness to pioneer new methods led to the rescue of the crew.

Nineteen years later, the coconut that saved the lives of Kennedy and his men laid upon the desk of the Oval Office as a reminder of his creative problem-solving. Presented with a tough decision to make during the Crisis, Kennedy assessed his options to de-escalate nuclear proliferation in Cuba. However, he questioned the effectiveness of more “traditional” methods of handling foreign conflicts, such as war or diplomacy. He demonstrated strong disinclination to war, but also felt that pure diplomacy lacked the ability to settle such a time-sensitive threat. President Kennedy was aware that a good decision could not come out of this unfavorable ultimatum, so he was determined to make room for one more option. Kennedy proposed the novel idea of a “quarantine” of Cuba. The “quarantine” was in essence a Naval Blockade, but Kennedy made one key adjustment to ensure that it would not be interpreted as an act of war: Kennedy instructed American naval officers that inspections of incoming ships should be peaceful, even if the foreign ships did not initially cooperate. This distinction between a non-violent “Quarantine” and a naval blockade prevented the conflict from further escalating. The new idea that Kennedy proposed, as well as the innovative adjustments he made, resolved the Cuban Missile Crisis.
Keeping Morale High

Even during the most trying times, Kennedy inspired his crewmen and fellow countrymen to persevere. While stranded on Cross Island with unfavorable odds of survival, Kennedy, bloodied and battered, still found the strength within himself to expend every last effort on getting rescued. Kennedy’s actions - such as venturing into turbulent tides at night to flag down American ships - reasserted his crew’s raison d’etre. They felt that if Kennedy still believed in rescue, perhaps they should not lose hope either. Kennedy’s resolute spirit inspired the crew to see the possibility of hope in any situation, rather than succumbing to a circumstance.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy informed the nation of the dilemma through a televised address. Though these 13 days were the most frightening period in many Americans’ lives, Kennedy displayed a collected demeanor to put the American people at ease. As a leader Kennedy knew that fear often reduced society to chaos, but so long as Americans were unified and composed the country could overcome this obstacle. By sharing with the public his plan to end the deadlock, he instilled hope in Americans that the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis was near.

Conclusion

Though Kennedy may have dismissed his heroism during the sinking of PT-109 as “involuntary”, it proved to be an influential moment that revealed his unique leadership qualities. Kennedy himself even acknowledged, “I firmly believe, that as much as I was shaped by anything, so I was shaped by the hand of fate moving in World War II” (Fleming). Kennedy’s struggle for survival in the Pacific was inspiring in many ways, but even more profound is what he was able to make of that experience. Using the lessons he learned from rescuing his PT-109 crewmates, President Kennedy narrowly avoided nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His empathy for soldiers, humility in taking feedback from others, creative strategizing, and ability to uplift Americans remain a lasting part of Kennedy’s legacy as a leader. President Kennedy is remembered as a figure that led Americans to achieve goals for the greater good than one’s self and to see the potential for hope in every situation. As President Kennedy eloquently stated, “Every area of trouble gives out a ray of hope; and the one unchangeable certainty is that nothing is certain or unchangeable.”
Works Cited


