

Transcript of Harald Malmgren (1935-2025) speaking at Kilkenomics festival (Ireland), November 5, 2018, regarding purported role in deliberations during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and regarding his purported then-recent briefings of Generals Mattis, Kelly, Dunford, etc.

Based on the 8-minute video on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izIHcHTOnU8>

David McWilliams (economist and co-founder of the Kilkenomics Festival)

(00:09): You were actually in the room with JFK. Tell me exactly at the peak of the crisis what was happening.

Harald Malmgren (00:17): Yes, I was there. And it was scary. No one in the world knew how close we were. I think at the key point, we were thinking, we have four hours to decide everything, and otherwise everything goes off.

David McWilliams (00:34): And you were what, 25, 26?

Harald Malmgren (00:36): No, I think I was at the ripe age of 28. [Malmgren was actually age 27 during the Cuban Missile Crisis.]

David McWilliams (00:39): Okay.

Harald Malmgren (00:40): But I was the go-between between McNamara and JFK and McGeorge Bundy, who was the NSC director. And it was a time when Jack Kennedy brought to Washington a lot of young, fresh minds, most of them economists. I was in that crowd. And our job wasn't to tell people with experience what to do, but ask a lot of questions, get people to think outside the box. And I was there conveying questions like, okay, if we go, what do we hit? I mean, if we hit Moscow and it only goes on a few hours and we want to stop, who do we talk to?

David McWilliams (01:27): At the end?

Harald Malmgren (01:28): At the end, yeah. And a bunch of generals, including the Strategic Air Command chief over in the Pentagon [identified later by Malmgren as General Curtis LeMay, who was actually USAF Chief of Staff at the time] said, "Well, of course we have to go and not worry about that. We've got to kill those

guys in Moscow. They created all this trouble.” And I said, but yeah, but are we ready to go over there and govern Russia? And everybody said, no, no, we're not planning on that. I said, well then if you want to stop, who do you talk to? Why don't we just agree that hitting Moscow is the last thing we want to do? And then one of the generals said, “That's the best damn question that anybody's ever raised.” He said, “And let's leak that to the Russians. And so they won't hit Washington either, and we're all safe.” [general laughter]

David McWilliams (02:14): I'd love to see the profound self-interest [inaudible].

Harald Malmgren (02:17): Well, and then we also had this problem of -- everything had been pre-planned. We had a government that was ready to roll at the next level, and they were all supposed to go to a place called Mount Weather, which is actually right near where I live now, in the countryside. Mount Weather is a cavernous place in the mountains. And all these people were supposed to go, and all of a sudden the request came in, can I take my wife and kids? And of course, the order came out. No, no. They said, well, in that case, I think I'll stay in Washington, find somebody else. So what happened? The only people who went were the janitors and cooks and the people ready to take care of people. Nobody showed up. So...

David McWilliams (03:02): That's interesting. When at that moment, people said, you know what?

Harald Malmgren (03:05): They chose family.

David McWilliams (03:06): Yeah, screw America, I'm going to stay at home.

Harald Malmgren (03:07): But they chose family.

David McWilliams (03:09): That is interesting.

Harald Malmgren (03:09): That's why this four-hours moment was really revealing of how people behave when they're looking over the cliff.

David McWilliams (03:19): Yeah, absolutely.

Harald Malmgren (03:20): So, then we went through the routines of, okay, well if we do this, if we do that, and then we put a cordon of ships around Cuba so that the last freighters coming in with missiles would either have to break through our

cordon-- And that was the moment at which the Russians decided on their side, "we better not do that because they'll blow up our ships and then we're really at war." And it became clear they didn't want war either.

David McWilliams (03:48): Yeah, nobody wanted it.

Harald Malmgren (03:49): Nobody really wanted this,

David McWilliams (03:50): Except for possibly Fidel.

Harald Malmgren (03:52): Yeah, except, yeah, sure. For him, this would've been a win-win. He gets the Russians out of his way and he gets the Americans out of his way, and he can prosper on his own, or he thought he could anyway. So this was devilishly complex, but when you get down to the bare bones of it, it was simple. The choices were, do we really want to do this or not? So fortunately, there was one go-between is not in the history books. And Anatoly Dobrynin, the ambassador in Washington. Now, who is he? He was there from '62 to '86, but in '62 he was in position. He was also a member of the Central Committee in Moscow, a unique person who was actually at the head of the Russian government. And he was trusted and he was brilliant. And so he actually-- you won't find this in the history books--he actually negotiated back and forth, and he gave a...

David McWilliams (04:49): Dobrynin was the guy.

Harald Malmgren (04:50): Yeah. It wasn't Kissinger or someone, it was Dobrynin. But he got underplayed in the history, because who wants to write about Russians being smart?

David McWilliams (05:00): Doesn't sell well in American airports.

Harald Malmgren (05:01): No, no. We tend to dismiss these left-wing fanatics. We still dismiss them. Try to, anyway. So, no, this was a scary moment. But there's one thing I have to add: At the time, because I was in that particular role, everything, we knew all the intelligence at every level--because intelligence has all these grades, things that only the president knows, all the way down to things that the generals know, and then the public knows-- but they had to give me *everything*. And I said, well, one of our problems is all our radars face north. And the Russians are trying to devise a weapon that they can bring around from the south with a suborbital satellite, and put a nuclear weapon on it and blow it up at about 80 miles

above the us. And if they could do that, they could use an electromagnetic pulse and that would destroy a command and control system. Our missiles wouldn't fire. We'd be paralyzed.

(06:14): Well, the Russians didn't master it, but I never forgot because in a few hours I was given to sit with a bunch of scientists trying to figure out, could they do this? And we finally figured out, well, they were close but not quite there.

And the reason I mentioned it is, how many years later, *this year*, we got this problem in North Korea, and I was invited to a meeting with what I call the core people around Trump, who are not Trump people, but the thinking ones. [General laughter.]

David McWilliams: Well, that's kind of reassuring that there are...

Harald Malmgren: No, no, it's actually mostly military guys, who are really keeping peace in Washington because they're in charge of the weapons. And people ask me, if Trump says, "go to war and use the nukes," this crowd, whom I know really personally—they are three Marines, General Mattis, General Dunford, and John Kelly who's in the White House, and I know them well, I briefed all the Marines not long ago.

So the question is, if the President ordered them to go ahead and fire the nukes, their answer would be, "Mr. President, of course we'll do what you request. But that takes a lot of planning. We're going to have to set up a task force to study how to do this." [general laughter] And in government how that goes, you just put it off for a while, and you'll ask from time to time, you ready yet? And pretty soon his mind will drift in some other direction. [general laughter] Encourage him to tweet something else."

David McWilliams (07:50): But I love to see that the safety of the world is hanging on his inability [inaudible].

Harald Malmgren (07:56): So all of you who see these news reports that we have a junta running the government now, just be thankful we've got three generals who are not about to let the nation blow up because this guy's got an impulsive feeling, that he wants to teach somebody a lesson.

[end of Kilkenomics YouTube video]