

# BLACK SWANS/ WHITE HOUSE: WHY JFK MATTERS A HALF CENTURY AFTER DALLAS

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Blight and Lang are authors or co-authors of more than a dozen books on the foreign policy of JFK, including *Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived* (2009, Rowman & Littlefield), which was named by *The Wall Street Journal* one of the five best books ever written on John F. Kennedy. Their most recent book is *The Armageddon Letters: Kennedy/Khrushchev/Castro and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2012, Rowman & Littlefield).

For more information about the authors' transmedia projects, see:

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## KEY POINTS

The intuitive skepticism and caution that were hallmarks of John F. Kennedy's (JFK's) decision making have recently been codified by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2010) as "Black Swan logic" — Taleb's term for improbable events which, when they do happen, can have enormous consequences. The following points are the characteristics and outcomes of JFK's black swan logic:

- **Heroic non-action.** A half century after his murder in Dallas, we now know that JFK was repeatedly subjected to intense pressure by his hawkish advisers to take the nation to war. JFK avoided disastrous wars *through* his heroic non-action in all six major war-threatening crises of his presidency, any one of which might have led to a nuclear catastrophe.
- **Deep skepticism.** JFK was deeply skeptical of the claims of experts of all kinds. His doctors did not know how to treat his many illnesses. His surgeons exacerbated his debilitating back pain with botched surgeries. His military commanders sent him and his fellow sailors into battle in the Pacific during World War II without understanding the horrific implications of their orders. As president, he refused to act on the advice of his expert hawkish advisers.
- **JFK's vindication.** The historical record is clear: JFK was right to doubt the confident advice of the hawks, who told him that the Soviets would not respond due to overwhelming US nuclear superiority. The Soviet response in many cases would have been quick and devastating.

*Black Swan logic makes what you don't know far more relevant than what you know.*

— Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan*

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## AUTHORS’ ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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*The...[hawks]...always give you their bullshit about their instant reaction and their split-second timing, but it never works out. No wonder it’s so hard to win a war.*

— John F. Kennedy<sup>1</sup>

*There’s always some son of a bitch who doesn’t get the word.*

— John F. Kennedy<sup>2</sup>

## ALAS, JFK = ELVIS: FROM KENNEDY KITSCH TO A DEEPER PITCH, A HALF CENTURY AFTER DALLAS

On November 22, 2013, the world observes the fiftieth anniversary of JFK’s assassination. The media coverage of the anniversary will surely prove in spades that, alas, people still find the circumstances of Kennedy’s death far more interesting than the achievements of his presidency. Dallas is Graceland; JFK might as well have been Elvis. As Peter Baker (2013) writes, a “quick Amazon browse” yields a staggering 140 *new* JFK-related book titles published in English this year alone. JFK is regularly ranked by the American public as the most popular president of the post-World War II period. But even this does not seem to adequately explain the Kennedy media blitz in 2013.

*JFK deserves better.* He was far from perfect as a president, husband and father; yet, as we now know from both

1 See Reeves (1993, 363).

2 Here, JFK is referring to a US spy plane’s untimely overflight of the western Soviet Union during the most dangerous phase of the Cuban missile crisis. Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman delivered the message to JFK and his executive committee on the afternoon of Saturday, October 27, 1962, eliciting this remark (Reeves 1993, 416).

oral testimony and declassified documents, the Cold War produced no greater hero. This conclusion has nothing to do with Camelot fantasies and everything to do with the relevant historical facts. But to grasp the nature and significance of his heroism, we need to go deeper into what he actually *did*, and perhaps more importantly, what he did *not* do. Standing firm against many advisers who tried to push him to use the massive US military force, JFK prevented several disastrous wars. Were it not for his skepticism of hawkish advice and his steely determination to prevail over the hawks, any one of a half-dozen crises could have escalated to a nuclear catastrophe involving the United States and the Soviet Union.

*We also deserve better*, a half century after Dallas, as we confront a violent world that seems, at times, to be coming apart at the seams. We need to appreciate what we like to call JFK's *heroic non-action* in the face of excruciating pressure from hawks, and we need to learn how to apply its principles to the world of the second decade of the twenty-first century. We need to map black swan logic onto the decision making of twenty-first century leaders when war and peace are on the line. In our global village, a black swan anywhere can be a threat to peace and stability everywhere.

**YOU DON'T KNOW JACK:  
A NEW JFK BIOGRAPHY  
(IN ABOUT 250 WORDS)**

The JFK we have come to know retrospectively is not your parents' (or your grandparents') JFK. In the past quarter century, our image of JFK has been transformed in fundamental ways:

- Formerly thought of as a jingoistic cold warrior and hawk, he was actually cautious and had a spine of steel in resisting his hawks, who, on at least six

occasions, tried to talk him into taking the nation and world to war.

- Once believed to be the paragon of “vigah,” health and vitality, he was in reality one of the sickest, most physically compromised presidents in US history. He was given last rites by a priest at least four times, and possibly a fifth — the latter while he was president, in June 1961.



*From his early years until his death, JFK wore a tight-fitting brace to try to lessen his near-constant back pain. (Art by Wesley Blondin.)*

- We also know from the archives in Moscow, Havana and Hanoi that Kennedy was right to resist his hawks. If war came, initiated by the United States, most of Kennedy's advisers told him the Soviets would not respond, due to the US's overwhelming nuclear superiority at the time. We now know from

interviews and archives that the responses would have been devastating, probably uncontrollable and possibly apocalyptic.

- JFK’s near-death experiences, horrible back pain and barely controlled Addison’s disease provided the crucial “body boot camp” that taught him to never trust experts — whether doctors or generals — and made him a lifelong skeptic regarding the advice he was given. His diseases and unpredictable chronic pain also taught him to distrust predictions made by analysts — whether medical or military.<sup>3</sup>

### JFK’S BLACK SWAN LOGIC

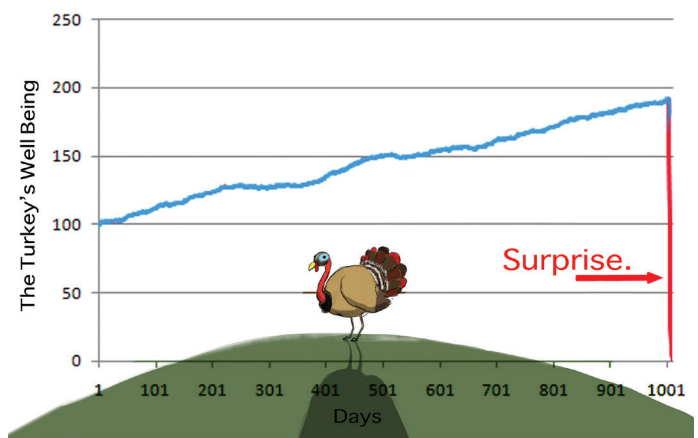
We can now see that what seemed so maddeningly illogical to JFK’s hawkish advisers has, in fact, a profound logic of its own: *black swan logic*. The aptness of the term “black swan” derives from the belief that, since all previously encountered swans are white, one becomes convinced, perhaps unconsciously, that all swans are white, and thus is shocked when confronted by a black swan — which are metaphorical everywhere outside western Australia, where they actually exist. The idea has been around since at least the time of Aristotle; in the twentieth century, its foremost advocate was Sir Karl Popper. Recently, it has been embraced and applied

<sup>3</sup> Scholarship on JFK’s health issues was, for many years, thin and misinformed, due to the JFK Library’s decision to withhold his medical records. Distinguished historian Robert Dallek finally obtained permission to examine the records in 2001, with the stipulation that he must be accompanied by a physician. Soon after reviewing the records with Dr. Jeffrey Kelman, Dallek published two landmark works in Kennedy scholarship (see Dallek 2002; 2003); all subsequent scholarship on Kennedy’s health derives from Dallek’s pioneering work. More recently, psychiatrist Nassir Ghaemi (2011) has suggested that, during late June 1961 (Kennedy’s first year as president), he may have nearly died of complications from his treatment for Addison’s disease. The records that Ghaemi expected to find from a roughly two-week period are uncharacteristically absent, which he interprets as the result of a cover-up. But records of JFK’s drug intake, along with a nurse’s notes, suggest that Kennedy may have briefly gone into a coma. See Ghaemi (2011), chapters 11 and 12, which are devoted to JFK.

to decision making of all sorts by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2004; 2010; 2012) in three landmark books.<sup>4</sup> As Taleb explains it “A Black Swan is an event with the following three attributes: First, it is an *outlier*, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence *after* the fact, making it explainable and predictable” (2010, xxii, emphasis in original).

The fundamental proposition, according to Taleb, is this: “Black Swan logic makes *what you don’t know* far more relevant than what you know” (2010, xiii, emphasis in original). In a vivid metaphor, Taleb says that black swan logic helps insulate its user against “the great turkey problem” (2012, 92–3). With each passing day, the turkey becomes more confident that butchers love turkeys. In fact, the turkey is *most* confident on the day before Thanksgiving, at the very moment the butcher brings the cleaver down on its neck. Oops. The narrative of the turkey-friendly butcher was convincing, but alas untrue.

1,001 Days in the Life of a Turkey



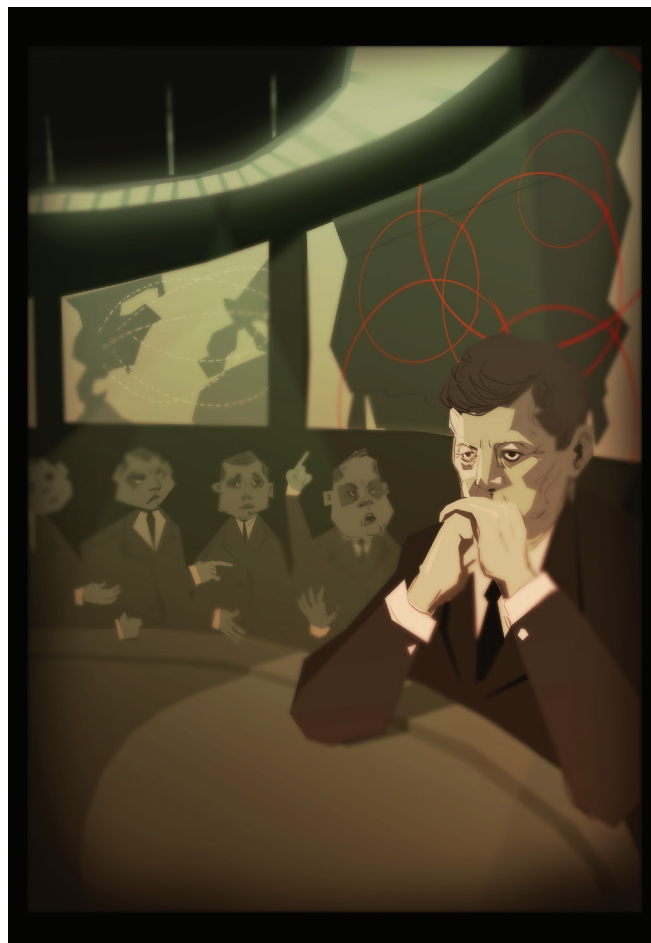
*There is a deadly but unseen black swan waiting for the turkey. (Art by Wesley Blondin.)*

<sup>4</sup> Of the trilogy, *The Black Swan* (2010) is Taleb’s masterpiece, full of applicability far beyond the world of Wall Street where he once made his living as a bond trader and “quant” investor.

JFK was a thoroughgoing practitioner of black swan logic. In his view, the world was filled with improbable but potentially ferocious black swans, which lay in wait for inattentive decision makers, who, like Taleb's proverbial turkey, "confuse absence of evidence for evidence of absence" (ibid., 93).

## STEELY JACK: BLACK SWAN LOGIC IN ACTION IN THE KENNEDY WHITE HOUSE

Much less appreciated than the circumstances of JFK's assassination is the well-documented record of his decisions on matters of war and peace. It is as astonishing as it is unambiguous. We now know that no president was ever pressured more intensely or more often than JFK to take the United States to war. His advisers lobbied him, attempted to intimidate him and schemed mightily throughout the 1,036 days of his presidency to force him to authorize direct US military interventions. The pressure was most intense over Cuba (twice, in April 1961 and October 1962); Laos (spring 1961); the Berlin Wall (summer and fall 1961); and in South Vietnam (twice, November 1961 and October 1963). In each case, JFK successfully resisted their pressure to intervene with US combat troops even though, on each occasion, intervening would have been politically popular — at least initially. The declassified documents and oral testimony that have become available over the past quarter century (a good deal of it unearthed by our colleagues and ourselves in our critical oral history research projects) are unequivocal: JFK was regularly out in front of his advisers, articulating what might go wrong if military force was used as an early option rather than, as he believed, an option of last resort, and how such action, if taken, could escalate into a disaster.



*We know that JFK was right to resist the hawkish advice he received from his generals. (Art by Wesley Blondin.)*

## THE BLACK SWANS WERE REAL! THE SCHOLARLY VINDICATION OF KENNEDY'S BLACK SWAN LOGIC

A half century after Dallas, we now know that JFK was *right*, and that those counselling the use of force were *wrong*. This is because, during the past 25 years, we have gained access to a treasure trove of important documents and oral testimony from former Cold War adversaries: from Russia, Cuba, Vietnam, East Germany and elsewhere.

Many of JFK's advisers argued that the Soviet Union, woefully inferior to the United States in deliverable nuclear weapons, would act "rationally" by not acting at all, rather than challenging the United States with a counterattack. But we now know that JFK's advisers

were wrong. Aggressive US military action over Berlin or Cuba, for example, would have led to war between US and Soviet forces, perhaps initially limited, but carrying a very high risk of escalation to a nuclear catastrophe.

Regarding Vietnam, we can be very confident that JFK's skeptical cautious approach was wise. Unlike JFK, his successor Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) caved in again and again to the hawks he had inherited from Kennedy, as he "Americanized" the conflict in Vietnam. The result was a humanitarian catastrophe in Southeast Asia, a humiliating defeat for the United States and a foreshortened presidency for LBJ, who lacked altogether JFK's cautionary impulse and steely determination to stand up to misplaced hawkish advice.

**TWO TAKEAWAYS: ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN, AND EVERYTHING MAY BE AT STAKE**

We need to look for clues as to how to navigate in a black swan universe, even though our life histories may bear little or no similarity to JFK's. Think of it this way: there are natural athletes who excel primarily on the basis of their inherited hand-eye coordination and related abilities, while others are self-made athletes who excel by dint of their work ethic, along with sport-related strategic and tactical thinking. Likewise, we must find ways to teach and learn the kind of attitudes, skills and fortitude that fostered JFK's black swan logic.

**ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN**

Anything can happen at any time. History doesn't just accumulate in regularized intervals; it only seems to do so because your narrative conveniently leaves out

the black swans: the unanticipated leaps, bounds and fractures as you move forward in time and space. Take nothing on faith. Do not accept on faith what the experts tell you. Don't be afraid to cross the street. But be very afraid to cross the street blindfolded (Taleb 2010, 49).

**EVERYTHING MAY BE AT STAKE**

In his fine biography of JFK, Chris Matthews (2011) writes:

At the peak of the Cold War, an American president saved his country and the world from a nuclear war. How did Jack Kennedy gain the cold detachment to navigate this perilous moment in history? What prepared him to be the hero we needed? This is my attempt to explain [that].

The claim would formerly have seemed implausible, just another pie-eyed Camelot fantasy. But Matthews' remark now strikes the informed reader as a statement of fact. We now know that JFK did indeed make many crucial and difficult decisions that helped "save the country and the world from a nuclear war." It is a matter of record that happens to matter very much.

**THREE RECOMMENDATIONS: SKEPTICISM, NON-ACTION, BLACK SWAN DETECTION**

**BE SKEPTICAL: THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS**

Here are some rules of the road that help us stick to black swan logic, to prevent us from drifting instinctually back into our shell of wishful thinking and selective blindness to the randomness all around us.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> These rules are adapted from Taleb (2010, 50).

- **Confirmation, shmonfirmation.** Do your best to refute your own arguments and interpretations. Be very tough epistemologically on yourself and others.
- **Don't surrender to the narrative fallacy.** Don't accept uncritically any stories that purport to explain events, especially your own stories. Be rigorous in mastering the documented chronology of the events in question. The black swans often lurk in the (overlooked) details.
- **Exit the antechamber of hope.** Eliminate your wishful thinking. Black swans will not be wished away.
- **What you see is all there is (WSIATI).** Do not cave in to the fallacy of believing this.<sup>6</sup> History hides its black swans. Beware of silent but relevant information. Do not mistake absence of evidence for evidence of absence.
- **Do not engage in tunnelling.** Dig yourself out from the tunnel of the comfortable and familiar. Don't assume that black swans will come from familiar sources of uncertainty.
- **Control is elusive.** Do not exaggerate the degree of control you have over outcomes that are important to you.
- **Beware — optimism is often delusional.** Get your advice from a diverse group of subordinates who are not afraid to criticize you.
- **Trust, but verify (especially in crises).** Don't reject arguments by doves seeking negotiated solutions because adversaries can't be trusted.
- **Be prepared to cut losses.** You can cut your losses, no matter what hawkish advisers say. Finding an exit ramp as soon as possible is often the best option.

### **INSTITUTIONALIZE BLACK SWAN DETECTION: DO YOUR PRE-MORTEM!**

Imagine that you are the new special assistant to the head of state for black swan detection. The following are your instructions for your boss, whenever war and peace is on the line.

Chief, be relentless in doing pre-mortems.<sup>8</sup> That's right, **pre-mortems!** You are the leader and your advisers recommend the use of military force in dealing with an adversary. Everyone agrees that, all things considered, the chosen approach is the best one. But you have not yet given the authorization to implement it. Now tell everyone in the room to imagine it is a year from now. Imagine that the plan was implemented. Imagine, further, that the outcome was a black swan — an unmitigated disaster. Tell everyone to take

### **CONSIDER NON-ACTION: COUNTER HAWKISH "HARDWARE" WITH JFK'S BLACK SWAN "SOFTWARE"**

- **Attribution errors are mutual.** Resist labelling adversaries as sinister, even evil. Search for clues in your own actions that may have provoked an adversary.

<sup>6</sup> WYSIATI is derived from Kahneman (2011, 85–8).

<sup>7</sup> These takeaways are excerpted from "The Outlier: How JFK Resisted His Hawks" section in our longer CIGI Paper (Blight and Lang 2013).

<sup>8</sup> We owe the use of the term "pre-mortem" to Gary Klein, as channelled by Kahneman (2011, 264–5).

a half hour and sketch out a brief history of the disaster, addressing such questions as: What caused it? What was overlooked or misunderstood? How could the black swan have been avoided? What are the lessons of the smack-down by this particularly nasty black swan? When everyone has finished, and the results are shared by the whole group, repeat the question to your advisers: how many are now in favour of the original decision? How many are anxious to move ahead with the original proposal to use military force?

Make sure your team is composed of unlike-minded associates. But also make sure all are committed to team solutions. You are going to need such a team. Badly.

Now ask them again if they are still anxious to move ahead. Repeat this as often as it takes to make them understand the vastness of the chasm between the ease of starting a conflict and the difficulty of ending it before it escalates out of all proportion to its alleged purpose. Some constituents will still resist your black swan logic. They will call you Chicken Little and tell you that the sky is not falling. Listen carefully to them. Acknowledge that you may be wrong and they may be right. But then ask yourself, as Winston Churchill put it: in which direction do I want to make the error — to jaw-jaw when I should have ordered war-war?<sup>9</sup> Or the other way around?

Prepare to call on all your collective virtuosity in explaining to your constituents why, in case after case, less is more, more is dangerous, and that cautiousness is in the interests of all. Ask them to remember that in politics, as in medicine, the rule must be: first, do no harm.

Good luck!

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9 This is a slightly re-worked variant of Churchill's remarks at a White House luncheon, as reported in *The New York Times* on June 27, 1954.



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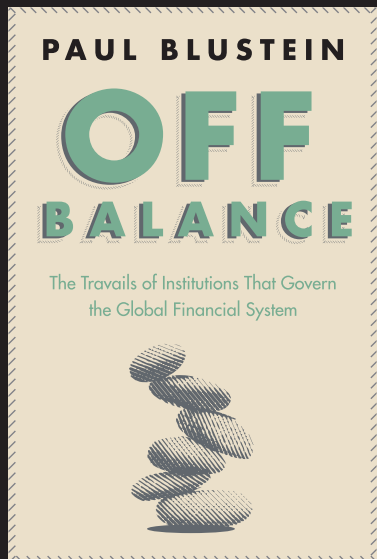
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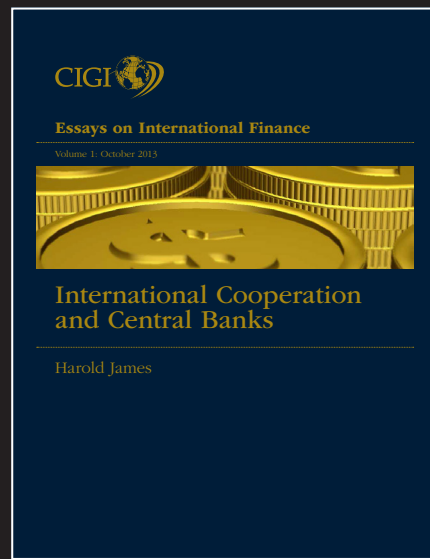
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Paul Blustein

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CIGI Policy Brief No. 28

Richard Gitlin and Brett House  
August 2013

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