

# Critical and dialectical leadership in the movie *Thirteen Days*: Cinematic representations of decision-making in a crisis situation

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how the film *Thirteen Days* (2000) represents leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis through the dual lenses of critical and dialectical leadership. It aims to reveal how cinematic narratives can illuminate ethical, reflexive, and dialogic dimensions of leadership in moments of crisis. Using a qualitative film analysis, the study examines key scenes, dialogues, and *mise en scène* to interpret leadership discourse through critical (power, ethics, reflexivity) and dialectical (contradiction, synthesis, negotiation) frameworks. The analysis reveals that effective crisis leadership emerges from questioning assumptions, integrating opposing perspectives, and synthesizing divergent viewpoints. Moreover, cinematic construction of leadership calls for the masterly fusion of elements such as framing, lighting, and dialogues. As a whole, *Thirteen Days* depicts leadership as collective, emotionally intelligent, and ethically grounded behavior rather than being heroic or authoritarian. By integrating leadership theory with film analysis, this study contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of leadership in crisis, highlighting how cinema serves as a reflective medium for rethinking about power and delegation, decision-making, and moral responsibility in extreme crisis situations.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, critical leadership, Cuban Missile Crisis, dialectical leadership, film analysis, John F. Kennedy

## Introduction

The film *Thirteen Days* (Donaldson 2000) enacts the historical Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, a period marked by intense political and military conflict. It dramatizes a stretch of thirteen days during which President John F. Kennedy (JFK) was overwhelmed with tricky

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negotiations with external as well as internal forces, i.e., the intriguing Soviet Block and the very powerful and influential military-industrial lobby that every now and then pushed the political leadership into a war with the Soviet. JFK and his advisors were strained to skillfully balance the two extreme choices: military confrontation and/or diplomatic resolution. The film is particularly important for its portrayal of leadership practices that encompass both critical perspectives: (1) tactfully confronting and neutralizing the established power structures and (2) dialectical approaches that ask for practical result-oriented actions based on the synthesis of opposing forces and ideologies.

The concept of critical leadership interrogates power relations, encouraging leaders to reflect on the socio-political structures that underpin decisions (Alvesson & Spicer 2012). At the same time, dialectical leadership emphasizes the resolution of contradictions through dialogue, negotiation, and synthesis (Putnam et al. 2016). In a crisis marked by the potential for nuclear war, the film offers a compelling case for exploring how leaders negotiate these competing imperatives. The narrative centers on key figures who grapple with the dilemmas of authority, risk, and ethical responsibility—making *Thirteen Days* an ideal text for a multi-dimensional analysis of leadership.

Leadership scholarship has evolved substantially since the early conceptualizations of heroic or trait-based leadership. Traditional theories—such as transformational and transactional leadership (Bass 1985; Burns 1978)—often focus on individual charisma and influence. Transformational leadership, in particular, has been celebrated for its capacity to inspire change and motivate followers through a clear vision (Bass 1985). However, these paradigms have been critiqued for their overemphasis on individual leaders while neglecting the broader social, cultural, and political structures in which leadership is enacted (Conger & Kanungo 1988).

As a counterpoint, critical leadership emerged within a social and political critique of leadership that challenges hegemonic power structures (Tourish 2013). This perspective interrogates not only who is leading but also the socio-historical and cultural conditions that shape leadership practices. It places particular emphasis on issues of equity, voice, and the distribution of power (Collinson 2020). Proponents argue that leadership should be understood as a dynamic

process that is constantly negotiated and contested rather than a fixed set of traits or behaviors (Alvesson & Spicer 2012).

Critical Leadership Theory is grounded in critical theory and post-structuralist thought, which question established hierarchies and challenge normative practices in organizations and society (Collinson 2020). This framework highlights the importance of questioning assumptions, the language of leadership, and the implicit ideologies that underlie decision-making processes. It suggests that leadership decisions in times of crisis are not purely rational or objective but are influenced by power dynamics, cultural narratives, and ideological biases (Kremer et al. 2025).

In cinematic portrayals, critical leadership is often evident in scenes where established power is questioned by those on the margins or in moments of internal dissent among the leadership team. As Putnam et al. (2016) note, critical leadership involves a reflexive stance that enables leaders to scrutinize their own decisions and the societal structures that inform them. Within the context of *Thirteen Days*, the film invites viewers to consider how political and military leaders engage in self-reflection and public accountability during one of history's most perilous moments.

Dialectical leadership, by contrast, centers on the process of resolving contradictions through dialogue and synthesis. Rooted in Hegelian and Marxist traditions, dialectics in leadership emphasizes the idea that conflicting forces can lead to a higher-order understanding or solution (Putnam et al. 2016). Unlike models that see decisions as binary or hierarchical, dialectical approaches view conflict as an inherent aspect of leadership that, when properly managed, can drive innovation and adaptive change (Martin 2006).

In *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Schein (2010) calls attention to dialectical leadership process that involves the leader's ability to steer through and align opposing forces such as stability and change, hierarchy and collaboration, tradition and innovation within an organization. Schein argues that effective leaders must interpret and reshape culture through ongoing dialogue, reflection, and learning. Dialectical leadership involves managing paradoxes rather than eliminating them, fostering adaptive cultures where diverse perspectives coexist productively. By engaging in open communication and sense-making, leaders become cultural architects who continuously balance competing values to sustain organizational

learning, resilience, and long-term effectiveness in complex, evolving environments.

In crisis contexts, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the necessity for rapid decision-making often brings conflicting opinions to the fore. Dialectical leadership encourages openness to dialogue, where contradictory views are not silenced but explored and integrated into a cohesive strategy. This form of leadership is particularly relevant in *Thirteen Days*, where the tensions between military and diplomatic imperatives are navigated through intense negotiation and debate. Dialectical leaders, according to scholars like (Putnam et al. 2016), are those who can mediate between extremes and forge policies that reflect a synthesis of diverse perspectives.

Film as a medium has long been an influential tool in the portrayal of historical and political leadership. Scholars have noted that cinematic representations often idealize leadership through heroic narratives, yet they may also reveal the complexities and contradictions of decision-making in times of crisis (Bordwell & Thompson 2021). Movies such as *Thirteen Days* use narrative tension, dialogue, and visual symbolism to construct a layered narrative of leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In cinema, *mise en scène*—the arrangement of everything that appears in the framing of a film—plays a crucial role in conveying meaning. Lighting, camera angles, set design, and costume all contribute to how leadership is visually represented. In *Thirteen Days*, the interplay between shadows and light, close-ups of key decision-makers, and the dynamic editing of boardroom discussions all work together to create an atmosphere of tension and urgency. These techniques, when analyzed alongside the film's dialogues and thematic content, reveal both the overt and subtle dimensions of leadership under pressure. Against this backdrop, this study raises two research questions:

1. How does the film *Thirteen Days* represent critical leadership and dialectical leadership?
2. How does the film's dialogue and *mise en scène* contribute to an integrated understanding of the leadership dynamics during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

## Methods

This paper leverages the dual lenses of critical and dialectical leadership to analyze the film *Thirteen Days*. The analytical

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framework posits that effective leadership during a crisis can be understood through two interrelated dimensions:

*Critical leadership dimension*

- Questioning norms and established power: Leaders who challenge established power centers, conventional wisdom, and the status quo.
- Reflexivity: Leaders who are self-aware about their biases, the influence of ideology, and the socio-political context of their decisions.
- Ethical accountability: Leadership that is sensitive to issues of equity, voice, and responsibility.

*Dialectical leadership dimension*

- Contradiction management: Leaders who can negotiate between conflicting demands (e.g., military imperatives vs. diplomatic negotiation).
- Synthesis of diverse perspectives: The capacity to integrate opposing viewpoints into a unified strategy.
- Dynamic decision-making: An adaptive approach that continuously revises decisions in response to emergent circumstances (Collinson 2020).

The research adopts a qualitative approach to film analysis, combining cinematic discourse analysis with leadership theory. The study involves:

*Selection of scenes, dialogues, and mise en scène*

Several scenes within *Thirteen Days* were selected for detailed analysis:

- The Crisis Briefing Scene: A meeting of key advisors and political leaders where decisions about military response versus diplomatic negotiation are debated.
- The “Back-Channel” Dialogue: A sequence wherein a character, acting as a mediator, presents alternative perspectives that challenge the prevailing military view.
- The Final Decision-Making Sequence: A climactic scene where leadership must synthesize conflicting advice to prevent catastrophic action.

Within these scenes, dialogues are examined for how they articulate the tension between maintaining authority and engaging in critical self-reflection. Likewise, *mise en scène* elements—such as the use of dim lighting, close-up shots of facial expressions, and contrasting spatial arrangements—are analyzed to understand how they contribute to the portrayal of leadership in crisis.

## Analysis

*Thirteen Days* is set during one of the most dangerous periods in modern history: the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The film meticulously reconstructs the atmosphere of urgency, fear, and ambiguity that characterized these thirteen days. Political leaders are portrayed as being caught between the imperatives of national security and the risk of global catastrophe. In this context, leadership is not a matter of unilateral decision-making but one that involves intense dialogue, negotiation, and moral reasoning. The film situates its narrative within a realistic framework, using historical documents and personal recollections to ground its portrayal of the crisis.

Throughout *Thirteen Days*, leadership is continuously characterized by profound dilemmas. First, the dilemma between authority and accountability: Leaders must balance the exercise of authority with the ethical imperative of accountability. For example, JFK, the president, in the film is depicted as both a decisive leader and a cautious mediator, hesitant to unleash irreversible military action. Second, the dilemma of traditional command structures versus emergent dialogue: Traditional hierarchical structures, which emphasize rapid command decisions, are challenged by the need for open dialogue and the incorporation of dissenting voices. This tension illustrates the need for critical leadership—where decision-makers are encouraged to question dogmatic approaches—and dialectical leadership—where contradictions are seen as opportunities for synthesis. Third, the dilemma of risk management: The film details how leaders are compelled to deliberate over risks not only in terms of military engagement but also in the moral and ethical dimensions of their decisions. The fear of nuclear annihilation forces a re-evaluation of established norms, aligning with critical leadership's call for reflexivity and ethical accountability.

*Critical leadership in the film:* Questioning established power structure Critical leadership is visible in several key moments in *Thirteen Days* where established hierarchies and assumptions are openly challenged. The great power and influence of the US military in collusion with the arms industry is well-recorded. However, in this case, when military advisors present rigid plans for an air strike, a dissenting voice arises from within the ranks. This voice stresses the need for measured responses and criticizes the assumption that military might is the sole determinant of national security. The Executive Committee of the

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National Security Council (ExComm) meeting stirs a montage of differing voices:

- Pushing hard the military option: “We have to get those missiles out.” (Donaldson 2000, 00:17:10). Some urged immediate force. “We hit them... An air strike.” (Ibid, 00:16:31)
- A voice of caution. “I still think there are diplomatic approaches we haven’t considered yet.” (Ibid, 00:20:01)
- A note of urgency: “If we decide to strike, we must agree now to do it before the missiles become operational.” (Ibid, 00:16:41)
- A concern for ethics and image of the US: “How will that make us look? A big country blasting a little one into the Stone Age.” (Ibid, 00:26:41)

Dean Acheson, Former Secretary of State, comes out with what seems to be a well-articulated consequence-conscious strategy: “Your first step, sir, will be to demand that the Soviet withdraw the missiles within 12 to 24 hours. They will refuse. When they do, you will order the strikes, followed by the invasion. They will resist, but will be overrun. They will retaliate against a target somewhere else in the world, most likely Berlin. We will honor our treaty commitments and resist them there, defeating them per our plans.” (Ibid, 00:22:14-00:22:40)

JKF, a truly critical leader, dismantles this compelling narrative with a no-offense counter question: “Those plans call for the use of nuclear weapons. ... And what is the next step?” (Ibid, 00:22:42-00:22:53)

Acheson is taken aback, but ominously pronounces that “Hopefully cooler heads will prevail before we reach the next step.” (Ibid, 00:22:54-00:22:58)

JKF exposes the non-serious rhetorical bravado of Acheson with a single verbal stroke. This dialogue encapsulates the tenets of critical leadership. The film highlights that rather than blind obedience to established hierarchies and norms, effective leadership requires an ongoing process of questioning—of assumptions, strategies, and potential consequences. This reflective process is a hallmark of critical leadership, whereby leaders engage in self-critique and are open to feedback from all quarters (Collinson 2020).

A critical leader, JFK is endowed with reflexivity --one who is self-aware of his limitations -- specifically against the America First ideology rooted in the US politics and socio-cultural imagination. Even though he is the highest executive of the state of America, as a leader,

JFK is vulnerable to the notorious powers of the US military and media to manipulate the resources of the state and the public sentiment to escalate a situation that can go beyond his control. JFK's preemptive actions against the internal syndicate are achieved through a series of measures, executed mostly by his strong and loyal team:

1. Formation of ExComm as a counter to the pervasive power of the US military that can raise a war in collusion with the arms industry and the media (Ibid, 00:18:44).
2. Maintaining the official secrecy so that the crucial information never reaches to the media (Ibid, 00:18:56 & 00:33:30 & 00:36:56-58 & 00:37:44-48) and provocative information to the public (Ibid, 00:43:25-38).
3. Strict control over the frenetic acts of the military commanders in the sea in proximity to the Russian ships so that any act of arrogance or indiscipline triggers a war with the Soviet (Ibid, 01:17:44–01:21:38). JFK commands: “Captain. I want you to maintain contact with the ships and do nothing until I order otherwise. Is that clear?” (Ibid, 01:19:42-46)
4. Breaking the established protocol or communication channels, and allowing his personal assistant, Kenneth O'Donnell, to engage in personal communication with the pilot of the air craft who was designated to survey the Soviet activities in Cuba (Ibid, 00:59:00–01:00:04).

To sum up, by adopting the principles of state command over the military and control over the communication grapevine, JFK rises strategically over his limitations and harbors peace amid turmoil.

The critical leadership of JFK is also grounded in ethics. He is particularly sensitive to issues of equity, voice, and responsibility. He listens patiently to the intriguing voices of the war-mongering military but keeps his decisions alive without being swayed away by their rhetoric of fear and power. Secondly, he is also sensitive to America's commitments to the UN and the NATO, particularly, to the peace and tranquility of America's allies in the Western Europe.

Finally, the film's narrative structure itself reflects critical leadership by undermining the myth of the omniscient leader. Instead, decision-making is shown as being distributed among a group of advisors, with power emerging not solely from the title but from an individual's willingness to disrupt established protocols. This depiction resonates with the broader theories on leadership that questions heroic

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individualism and calls attention to a more networked and accountable model of leadership (Alvesson & Spicer 2012).

*Dialectical leadership in the film: Conflict, contradiction, and synthesis*

Dialectical leadership is most apparent in scenes characterized by intense and contradictory viewpoints. During the crisis meetings, leaders and their advisors are seen engaging in heated debates that expose the inherent contradictions in policy proposals. For instance, the Pentagon meeting opens with urgency: “The situation is worse than we thought.” (Donaldson 2000, 00:28:16) The generals push a counter offensive narrative by staging the numbers of Russian weapons in Cuba: “We now count 40 missiles.” (Ibid, 00: 28: 18) Psychologically thickening the air with threat, they explode: “They can hit every place in the country except Seattle.” (Ibid, 00:28:26) One of the generals pumps the rhetoric of speed and force: “You give me the order right now; my planes will be ready to carry out the air strikes in three days’ time.” (Ibid, 00:28:33) His confidence in a precision strike turns into pressure tactic as he pushes for: “All you gotta do is say go.” (Ibid, 00:28:37) However, cutting through the clamour, President JFK resists the haste with a calm question: “General LeMay, do you truly believe that’s our best course of action?” (Ibid, 00:29:03) That moment reflects dialectical leadership — JFK listens to all corners of the table; marshals through the contradictions between the civilian executives and military leaders. Notwithstanding the heated rhetoric of fear and war mongering, he refuses to surrender his judgment. General LeMay further insists: “It is the only course of action. America is in danger.” (Ibid, 00:29:06) However, JFK’s restraint keeps open the space between fear and reason. Psychologically, he works through the terrains of uncertainty; counters the false bravado of the Generals; engage the members in a democratic debate; and while peaceful, diplomatic resolution is his forte, he keeps all options open.

The exchange then unfolds into a lesson in democratic leadership. LeMay speaks in monologue—“It’s our duty, sir, our responsibility to the American people to take out those missiles.” (Ibid, 00:29:21) Yet JFK turns the one-way command into dialogue. “Now, General, what are the Soviets gonna do when we attack?” (Ibid, 00:31:07) His tone remains civil but sharp. LeMay replies with fatal confidence: “Nothing.” (Ibid, 00:31:13) JFK’s quiet rebuke shows moral clarity: “If we kill Soviet soldiers, they’re gonna respond.” (Ibid, 00:31:29) His question —“How would we respond if they killed ours?” (Ibid,

00:31:34) — brings empathy into strategy. He listens, he questions, and he teaches restraint by example. This is democratic leadership—built on patience, reason, and the courage to disagree respectfully. Even when mocked with, “You’re in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President.” (Ibid, 00:30:47), JFK’s sharp reply restores balance: “Maybe you haven’t noticed—you’re in it with me.” (Ibid, 00:31:01) This cool rebuttal reaffirms civilian authority over military license without degrading to mutual disgrace and humiliation.

Likewise, in every meeting or interaction, JFK ensures that tension is resolved through a dialectical process by engaging all important persons in iterative dialogues where each argument builds upon its contrary reaching to a nuanced consensus. Dialectical leadership, in this sense, involves embracing contradictions and using them as a crucible for creative and responsible decision-making (Putnam et al. 2016). The narrative further illustrates that the capacity to integrate divergent perspectives is central to preventing catastrophic outcomes. By demonstrating that a leader who remains open to conflicting voices can harness the wisdom inherent in dissent, *Thirteen Days* reinforces the idea that leadership is not merely about exerting power but about engaging in transformative dialogue that transcends simplistic binaries.

As a dialectical leader, JFK is gifted with dynamic decision-making: An adaptive approach that continuously revises decisions in response to emergent circumstances (Collinson 2020). Although he consistently guards against war as a solution to conflicts, but keeps options open vis-à-vis the actions and response of the Soviet leadership. Secondly, he does not abandon the military options, but leverages it as a strategic back up to diplomatic maneuvers. At discursive level, he captures the best of both realms by formulating the word “quarantine” that brilliantly masks the military “blockade” with the sweet nuances of diplomatic checkmate.

#### *Dialogues, mise en scène, and representation of leadership*

The film’s *mise en scène* plays an integral role in conveying leadership dynamics. Camera angles and framing are of particular note, especially, the shot selection.

- **Close-Up Shots:** Frequently employed during crisis discussions, close-ups capture the emotional gravitas on the faces of key decision-makers. These shots invite the viewer into the internal conflicts and moral dilemmas that underpin the dialogue, emphasizing the human dimension of high-stakes leadership.

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- **Wide-Angle Shots:** In sequences set in war rooms and briefing halls, wide-angle shots are used to visually represent the collective burden of leadership. They illustrate the tension between the individual and the group, underscoring that decision-making is distributed across a network rather than concentrated in a singular authoritative figure.

The role of *mise en scène* in the representation of JFK's leadership can be traced to several other cinematic effects such as dichotomous lighting, symbolic color palettes, set design and spatial composition, and music and the tone of delivery of dialogues. In *Thirteen Days*, the ExComm meeting where JFK and his advisors debate between launching a military strike or imposing a naval blockade represents a critical juncture in the narrative. This scene (Figure 1) encapsulates the tension between immediate military action and cautious diplomacy, reflecting the complexities of decision-making during the Cuban Missile Crisis. JFK navigates these conflicting perspectives by engaging in a dialectical process. He challenges the assumptions of both camps, probing the potential consequences of each action. This deliberative approach reflects his commitment to a nuanced strategy that balances national security concerns with the imperative to avoid nuclear war.

Figure 1: JFK as a patient listener during the early ExComm meeting



Visually, the scene at the Pentagon employs a somber color palette, with dim lighting and tight framing to convey the gravity of the situation. The use of close-up shots on JFK's face captures his contemplative demeanor, emphasizing the weight of leadership. The

setting—a secure briefing room—adds to the atmosphere of urgency and confinement. The *mise en scène* reinforces the themes of isolation and pressure, as JFK is physically surrounded by advisors, yet mentally isolated in his role as the ultimate decision-maker. The visual composition mirrors the internal conflict and the burden of responsibility he bears.

JFK embodies dialectical leadership by refusing to act on the first impulse (military strike). He invokes reflection, synthesis, and consultation with advisors, managing contradictions between military urgency and diplomatic caution. He begins with a cautious, information-gathering phase—an "interest-based" strategy (Fisher et al. 2012), seeking facts before positions. The dimly lit Situation Room emphasizes urgency and shadowy ambiguity as JFK remains visually centered, framed between military and civilian advisors—a metaphor for dialectical mediation (Figure 2).

Figure 2. JFK visually framed as a moderator between the civilian and military leaders in the next round of ExComm meeting



The scene unfolds in the White House Cabinet Room as JFK, his brother Robert F. Kennedy (Bobby), and key members of the ExComm debate possible responses to Soviet nuclear missiles discovered in Cuba. The main options on the table are: (1) Air strike: A sudden military attack to destroy the missile sites; (2) Blockade/Quarantine: A naval blockade to prevent further shipments of missiles to Cuba, framed as a “quarantine” to avoid the legal connotations of war.

This debate represents a critical decision-making juncture that could lead either to escalation into nuclear war or to a controlled diplomatic

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response. JFK deliberately invites dissent and listens to hawkish voices like General Curtis LeMay and other military advisors advocating for an air strike. At the same time, he considers the cautious counsel from Bobb yand Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who favor a diplomatic and less aggressive approach. JFK does not dismiss either side but forces them to articulate their reasoning.

Key dialogues (Donaldson 2000, 00:28:20–00:28:50):

LeMay: Mr. President, we don't have the luxury of time. We must eliminate these missiles now with an air strike.

JFK: And when we kill a few thousand Russians? What happens then, General? Does this help us avoid war, or does it start it?

This demonstrates a dialectical tension—JFK recognizes the logic of a military strike (removing immediate threat) but juxtaposes it with the risk of escalation. JFK's leadership reveals integrative thinking, a hallmark of dialectical leadership. Instead of choosing between diplomacy and aggression, he frames a third path—a naval quarantine that is assertive yet not overtly aggressive. The quarantine approach satisfies the need for firm action while leaving room for negotiation.

JFK: We are not going to be the ones who escalate this into a war. A blockade... no, let's call it a 'quarantine.' We will stop the missiles without firing the first shot. (Donaldson 2000, 00:31:10–00:31:30)

JFK's choice of terminology—"quarantine" instead of "blockade"—is itself a negotiation strategy, softening the perception of aggression in the international arena. JFK's decision reflects moral reasoning underpinned by dialectical thought. He questions the ethical implications of a pre-emptive strike, balancing the protection of national security with the avoidance of unnecessary loss of life and a potential global conflict.

The scene depicting President JFK's televised address to the American public during the Cuban Missile Crisis stands as a defining moment of leadership in *Thirteen Days*. On October 22, 1962, JFK's speech was a masterful exercise in dialectical leadership and rhetorical strategy, crafted to balance transparency, resolve, and calm reassurance amid unprecedented peril. This public communication was a critical component of the administration's negotiation strategy, as it publicly revealed the Soviet missile threat while outlining the U.S. response and appealing for national unity.

JFK's speech embodies dialectical thinking by addressing two conflicting imperatives: the need to inform the public fully and honestly about the grave threat posed by Soviet missiles in Cuba, while simultaneously maintaining calm and avoiding panic. This balancing act is central to effective crisis communication, demonstrating leadership that synthesizes transparency with reassurance.

The President's decision to publicly disclose the crisis after days of secret deliberation reflects a strategic use of openness as a form of pressure on the Soviets, coupled with a message designed to unify the American public. He states, "Unmistakable evidence has established the facts that a series of offensive missile sites are now in preparation on that imprisoned island." (Donaldson 2000, 00:51:07-00:51:16) Here, JFK chooses direct language to reveal the threat without resorting to alarmist rhetoric, thereby managing public perception. He proceeds:

....it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union. (Donaldson 2000, 00:52:10-00:52:23)

This dialectical leadership contrasts the adversarial tone against the Soviet Union with the conciliatory appeal for peace, encapsulating the tension between confrontation and diplomacy. JFK's speech not only informs but also positions the United States morally, justifying the quarantine and warning of the consequences of Soviet provocation, while simultaneously expressing hope for a peaceful resolution.

The speech's stylistics is characterized by formal, measured, and carefully crafted language designed to convey authority and composure. JFK employs a mix of declarative statements, conditional clauses, and appeals to shared values, creating a rhetorically balanced address. For example, he uses the phrase, "To halt this offensive build up, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated" (Donaldson 2000, 00:51:34-00:51:41). The term "quarantine" is repeated deliberately to emphasize the legal and measured nature of the response.

Visually, the scene (Figure 3) recreates the historic moment of JFK addressing the nation from the Oval Office, bathed in soft, natural light that highlights the President's solemn expression and composed demeanor. The framing centers JFK, underscoring his role as the nation's leader. The set is minimalistic and iconic—the Presidential

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Lectern, the American flag, and the presidential seal—symbols of authority and continuity. These elements reinforce JFK's legitimacy and the gravity of the message. Close-ups on JFK's face capture subtle emotional cues—resolve mixed with a hint of vulnerability—that humanize the political leader and invite empathy. The restrained color palette, featuring muted blues and grays, contributes to a sober atmosphere that aligns with the serious subject matter. Intercut shots of American families watching the broadcast emphasize the speech's societal impact, showing a spectrum of reactions from concern to steadfastness, thereby reinforcing the address as a national unifying moment.

Figure 3: JFK addressing the nation over the television (In black and white shot)



The stylistic choices in the speech reinforce the administration's narrative of measured strength and moral clarity. The calculated use of repetition, parallel structure, and precise diction illustrates how language operates as a tool for shaping public opinion and diplomatic messaging. Visually, the *mise en scène* complements the speech's rhetorical power by portraying JFK as a calm, resolute leader embodying the nation's hopes and fears. The interplay between JFK's composed delivery and the visible reactions of citizens watching the broadcast highlights the speech's role in forging collective resolve. Ultimately, the scene reveals how effective crisis leadership necessitates not only strategic decision-making but also the ability to communicate with clarity and empathy, balancing competing demands to sustain national unity and deter adversaries.

Bobby's secret meeting with the Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin (Donaldson 2000, 02:09:11-02:12:01) is cast in a tense, dimly lit sequence. He conveys the unofficial compromise that the U.S. will remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey quietly later without a public declaration of the deal. This meeting is the film's moral and diplomatic climax — the moment that averts nuclear war.

Bobby initiates his verbal exchange with a public vow that sounds like democracy: "My brother, my friends, my countrymen, and I cannot and will not permit those missiles to become operational. I promise you that" (Donaldson 2000, 02:09:11–02:09:16). The sentence reaches outward. It invites collective trust. It is rhetorical and inclusive. Yet the room quickly pivots from public address to private calculus. When the Dobrynin counters, "Then I fear our 2 nations will go to war... And I fear where war will lead us" (Ibid, 02:09:19), the language tightens. The momentary dialectic — mutual speaking, mutual fearing — gives way to discrete bargaining. Leadership moves from speech to decision.

The refusal of a public *quid pro quo* exposes the shift to controlled channels. "That's not possible... The United States cannot agree to such terms under threat" (Ibid, 02:09:54). Public posture stays firm. Then a private path opens: "While there can be no quid pro quo on this issue, the United States can offer a private assurance" (Ibid, 02:10:20). The move is calculated: Leadership now uses secrecy as a tool. The public remains soothed while the chain of command executes the practical trade.

The deal insists on verification yet forbids publicity: "If the Soviet Union halts construction immediately, removes the missiles, and submits to U.N. inspection... the United States will pledge to never invade Cuba" (Ibid, 02:09:36–02:09:43). Inspection appears as a democratic check. In practice, it reassigns power to watchers. The U.N. inspectors become instruments of command. The state authorizes visibility but controls its meaning. Watching thus enforces compliance while preserving plausible deniability.

The private assurance is staged as both personal and administrative. "Now, our Jupiter missiles in Turkey are obsolete... This withdrawal should take place within, say, 6 months" (Ibid, 02:10:30–02:10:40). The timetable converts diplomatic morality into logistics. The caveat follows: "Of course, any public disclosure of this assurance would negate the deal... This private assurance... is not to be made public" (Ibid, 02:10:42–02:11:13). Authority now functions through tight

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information control. Who watches, who reports, and who relays define power. The command rests on selective visibility.

An acute realization of the urgency of the situation drives the discussion into mutual obligations: “And we must have an answer tomorrow, at the latest. I cannot stress this point enough” (Ibid, 02:11:17). The tempo forces a decision. Dobrynin leaves Bobby with an assurance and urgency, “Then you must excuse me and permit me to relay the substance of our discussion to my superiors” (Ibid, 02:11:30). The democratic ritual of debate ends in delegative action. Leadership becomes choreography of backchannels, messengers, and sealed reports.

The diplomatic language throughout the negotiation avoids inflammatory rhetoric, instead emphasizing mutual respect and practical compromise. This reflects the real-world complexity of Cold War diplomacy, where face-saving and strategic communication was essential. On the American side, JFK and his advisors respond with cautious optimism. Their dialogue conveys relief but also the recognition of ongoing geopolitical tensions, reinforcing the notion that the resolution is a fragile but necessary step toward peace.

In the White House, lighting brightens subtly as JFK receives Khrushchev’s message, symbolizing hope and relief. The contrast between the dark Soviet setting and the more open, light-filled American room visually narrates the shifting mood—from brinkmanship toward cautious optimism. Maps and communication devices appear prominently in settings, visually linking the two sides and reminding viewers of the continuous back-and-forth dialogue and monitoring underlying the resolution.

The stylistic choices in dialogue emphasize the delicate balance of power and the importance of rhetoric in maintaining face and facilitating peaceful outcomes. The avoidance of triumphalism in language reflects an understanding of the high stakes and the need to preserve future dialogue. Visually, the *mise en scène* reinforces the psychological and political dimensions of the crisis. The use of lighting, space, and body language effectively conveys the tension, isolation, and relief experienced by leaders on both sides. Ultimately, the scene serves as a compelling dramatization of how thoughtful leadership and communication can avert disaster, underscoring the film’s broader themes of responsibility, diplomacy, and the human capacity for reason under pressure.

## Discussion

The analysis of *Thirteen Days* through the lenses of critical and dialectical leadership yields several important implications for leadership studies.

First, the film demonstrates that effective leadership in crisis is not merely a function of decisive action; rather, it hinges on the ability to question, reflect, and synthesize divergent perspectives. This has practical implications for contemporary leadership in organizations and political institutions, emphasizing the need for structures that encourage reflexivity and open dialogue (Kreamer et al. 2025).

Second, the integration of critical and dialectical leadership in the film challenges the traditional heroic narrative often associated with leadership. In *Thirteen Days*, leaders are portrayed as fallible, conflicted, and deeply human—attributes that align with modern leadership theories that call for accountability, empathy, and ethical responsibility. By underscoring that leadership is inherently a collaborative and iterative process (Collinson 2020), the film contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how decisions are formulated under extreme conditions.

Third, the study's findings suggest that cinema can play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of leadership. By dramatizing the complexities of crisis management and the ethical dimensions of decision-making, films like *Thirteen Days* serve as cultural texts that inform—and sometimes challenge—conventional views about authority, responsibility, and the potential for transformative leadership.

The good aspects of leadership behavior in the movie can be summed up as follows:

1. *Dialectical and reflective decision-making*: President Kennedy and ExComm constantly weigh opposing viewpoints—military escalation vs. diplomatic restraint—showing leadership as a process of thinking, not of impulsive command.
2. *Civilian control over the military*: JFK and Robert Kennedy assert civilian supremacy, resisting pressure from the Joint Chiefs. This reinforces democratic leadership norms during national emergencies.
3. *Ethical restraint and moral responsibility*: Leadership prioritizes the avoidance of nuclear war and civilian casualties, framing power as a moral burden rather than a tool of dominance.
4. *Backchannel negotiation and strategic communication*: The use of secret diplomacy (e.g., Robert Kennedy's meeting with Soviet

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Ambassador Dobrynin) shows pragmatic leadership that values quiet negotiation over public posturing.

5. *Team-based, inclusive leadership (ExComm)*: JFK listens to dissenting voices—Adlai Stevenson, Kenny O'Donnell, and others—demonstrating consultative leadership rather than authoritarian rule.

Despite the pedagogic importance of leadership mentioned above, some of the problematic aspects of leadership in *Thirteen Days* (2000) are worth attention:

1. *Overreliance on elite, closed-door decision-making*: Critical decisions are made by a small, elite group, excluding Congress, the public, and global stakeholders—raising democratic accountability concerns.

2. *Militaristic tunnel vision*: Some military leaders exhibit rigid, escalation-oriented thinking, prioritizing force over diplomacy and underestimating nuclear consequences.

3. *Gendered absence in leadership*: Leadership is portrayed as entirely male, reinforcing the idea that crisis leadership is a masculine, exclusionary domain.

4. *Secrecy and information manipulation*: Public communication is carefully controlled, sometimes bordering on misinformation, raising ethical questions about transparency in democratic leadership.

5. *Hero-centric narrative bias*: The film frames JFK (and close aides) as near-singular saviors, downplaying collective, international, and Soviet contributions to crisis resolution.

The interplay between artistic expression and leadership discourse is one of the most intriguing aspects of this research. *Thirteen Days* is not only a historical drama but also a reflective meditation on the nature of power. The film's cinematic techniques—its *mise en scène*, dialogue construction, and narrative pacing—are integral to understanding how leadership is embodied and performed in times of crisis. This intersection invites scholars to consider how artistic representations influence real-world expectations about leadership, inspiring a critical re-evaluation of both theory and practice.

Furthermore, the film illustrates that the representation of leadership is as much about emotion as it is about logic. The visual and auditory cues embedded in the film convey a sense of urgency, fear, and moral uncertainty that traditional leadership models often overlook. By bridging the gap between rational decision-making and the emotional undercurrents of crisis, *Thirteen Days* affirms that leadership in reality is an intricate interplay of both cerebral and affective processes.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the dual dimensions of critical and dialectical leadership in the film *Thirteen Days*. By reviewing literature on leadership theory, mapping out a theoretical and analytical framework, and analyzing key dialogues and cinematic elements, the study has demonstrated that effective leadership during crises involves both the rigorous questioning of established norms and the dynamic synthesis of conflicting perspectives.

The film's portrayal of leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights that decisive action is not synonymous with unilateral authority; instead, it is marked by an openness to dialogue, an ethical commitment to accountability, and the ability to navigate contradictions. The integrated framework presented herein shows that leadership is most effective when it embodies both critical reflection and dialectical negotiation—qualities that not only prevent catastrophic decisions but also pave the way for more responsible and resilient leadership practices.

As modern organizations and political entities continue to face complex and ambiguous challenges, the lessons drawn from *Thirteen Days* remain profoundly relevant. The film invites us to reconsider traditional hierarchies of power, to embrace the inherent uncertainties of crisis, and to see leadership as a collaborative, multifaceted process that evolves through continuous reflection and dialogue.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the broader discourse on leadership by offering an interdisciplinary examination of how leadership is constructed and communicated in crisis cinema. It underscores the need for leadership models that integrate critical questioning with dialectical negotiation—models that are better equipped to address the ethical and strategic dilemmas of the modern world.

While this paper has provided an in-depth analysis of leadership in *Thirteen Days*, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, as a cinematic text, the film is a dramatized account of historical events—an interpretation that may reflect artistic license as much as historical accuracy. Second, the analysis is largely qualitative and interpretive, meaning that alternative readings of the film might yield different emphases or conclusions.

Future research could extend this study in several directions: (1) A comparative study of crisis leadership portrayals in different films

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could illuminate the cultural specificity of leadership narratives, and (2) Empirical research investigating how audiences interpret cinematic portrayals of leadership might provide quantitative insights into the impact of film on leadership perceptions.

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