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The Cuban Missile Crisis: Miscalculation, Nuclear Risks, and the Human Dimension

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ABSTRACT: Nuclear weapons have vastly raised the stakes and potential costs of crisis, making leadership and related human qualities of judgment and temperament crucial. This article analyzes in depth one exceptionally dangerous US-Soviet confrontation, which barely averted war. Military and policy professionals will see how understanding the perspectives, incentives, and limitations of opponents is important in every conflict—and vital when facing crisis situations like nuclear war.

Keywords: Cuba, deterrence, leadership, missile crisis, nuclear weapons

The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Cuba remains the closest the world has come to nuclear war. The enormously high stakes involved and the fact the two superpowers barely averted nuclear war provided powerful incentives to avoid another such confrontation. However, there has been the potential for nuclear war since then. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War, US President Richard Nixon ordered a worldwide strategic alert of American military forces, and Israel may have readied nuclear weapons. In 1983, Moscow misinterpreted the annual Able Archer military exercise conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as preparation for an attack. Professor John Lewis Gaddis of Yale University described this event as “probably the most dangerous moment since the Cuban Missile Crisis.”¹

The Cuban Missile Crisis remains distinct for the closeness of nuclear weapons to the United States; the proximity of American and Soviet warships (particularly nuclear-armed submarines) to one another; and the public unfolding of the crisis following US President John F. Kennedy’s speech of October 22, 1962, which began the public turmoil, though vital crisis resolution occurred privately. Nearly 60 years later, the Cuban Missile Crisis reminds the international community of how nuclear weapons raise the stakes and potential costs of any crisis. It is a regular topic for quantitative and

1. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), 518–25 (Israel nuclear weapons), 585; and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War – A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 227–28. Excellent background information on the Yom Kippur War is provided by the Cold War Archives at George Washington University, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB98/index.htm>.

theoretical policy analysis, in particular game theory. While these approaches can aid crisis analysis, they can also distort reality and encourage false confidence.² Unlike theory, the reality of a crisis is that events can quickly become unpredictable, and strong leadership becomes crucial to a successful resolution.

Start of the Nuclear Era

The detonation of atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 brought Japan's swift and unconditional surrender. Horror at the destruction they caused tempered the world's relief at the war's end and acted as a deterrent against their future use. In the following years, the expansion of nuclear arsenals, the development of the hydrogen bomb, and the creation of modern delivery devices, especially the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), reinforced this deterrence.

Following World War II, several major attempts were made to curtail the use and stockpiling of atomic weapons. Named for financier and public servant Bernard Baruch, the United States presented the Baruch Plan to the United Nations in June 1946. Based on *The Report on the International Control of Atomic Energy*, the plan proposed an internationally supervised phased reduction of the US stockpile of atomic weapons. The Soviet Union vetoed this initiative. Other arms control efforts included the 1959 demilitarization of Antarctica, achieved by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty reached by Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1963.³ For most of the early nuclear era, the atomic arms race and threat of mutual destruction seemed reliable deterrents. Then Cuba became a central nation in the race to expand one superpower's sphere of influence.

Concern about Cuba as a security threat to the United States began early in 1959—shortly after the victory of revolutionary forces led by Fidel Castro. Support for Castro as a successor to corrupt dictator Fulgencio Batista ended with mass executions and a new dictatorship. Castro's steady drift into the Soviet orbit raised alarm in the United States and elsewhere, and Cuba became a central

2. Ananyo Bhattacharya, *The Man from the Future: The Visionary Life of John von Neumann* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022); and Edward C. Rosenthal, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Game Theory* (New York: Alpha-Penguin Group, 2011), a serious, clear, and practical guide to this complex subject.

3. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*.

topic during the 1960 presidential campaign between Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy.⁴

Senior Soviet representatives consistently denied any intent of placing long-range nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba. These statements were revealed as lies early in the crisis, providing the Kennedy administration with a significant advantage in world, public, and diplomatic opinion.⁵

Conferences among surviving participants of the Cuban Missile Crisis, beginning with the initial meeting at Hawk's Cay, Florida, in March 1987, provided valuable information on what was happening in the command centers of the two superpowers, plus Cuba, and within their militaries.⁶ Particularly important, but not evident during the crisis, is that the Soviet Union already had shorter-range tactical nuclear-capable missiles and warheads in Cuba.

On the Soviet side, General Anatoli I. Gribkov was responsible for the planning and execution of Operation Anadyr, the top-secret shipment of missile forces to Cuba. Gribkov testified premier and chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikita Khrushchev gave General Issa Pliyev, commander of Soviet forces on Cuba, "authority to use his battlefield weapons and atomic charges if, in the heat of combat, he could not contact Moscow."⁷ Gribkov was present for Khrushchev's conversation with Pliyev. Marshal Marvei Zakharov, chief of the general staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, signed an order to Pliyev to that effect but Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, minister of defense, chose not to sign the document approving this order, telling Gribkov, "We don't need any extra pieces of paper."⁸

As the crisis approached, an increasingly anxious Khrushchev contacted the Soviet military in Cuba, emphasizing restraint. One particularly forceful message occurred on October 22, about 30 minutes before Kennedy announced to the American people and the world the discovery of Soviet long-range missiles in Cuba and initial US responses.⁹ For Soviet personnel in Cuba, Khrushchev's message

4. Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1961); W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Real Making of the President: Kennedy, Nixon, and the 1960 Election* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

5. Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), 64.

6. James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

7. Anatoli I. Gribkov and William Y. Smith, *Operation Anadyr: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Alfred Friendly Jr. (Chicago: Edition q, Verlags GMBH, 1994), 4.

8. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 6.

9. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 62.

reiterated the status quo. Pliyev did not share the private verbal authorization he had received.¹⁰

A related important interpersonal revelation concerns the exceptional heroism of Vasili Arkhipov, a Soviet staff officer of a submarine flotilla off Cuba. During the height of the crisis, he proved instrumental in preventing a Soviet submarine commander from launching a nuclear torpedo.¹¹

Prelude

As the spring and summer of 1962 unfolded, Kennedy came under increasing domestic political criticism. The failed invasion of Cuba by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-backed anti-Castro force at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 represented a massive political failure and military defeat for the United States. Kennedy was widely criticized for refusing to provide air support to protect the force, including leaks to the press from US military officers incensed by the president's decision and the consequent failure. The White House had vetoed direct combat intervention by US forces.¹² Observers have argued Khrushchev's willingness to take the risk of placing missiles in Cuba was spurred by the Bay of Pigs and the Vienna Summit shortly after that, where the Soviet leader sized up the young and inexperienced American president as a weakling.¹³

Both general and specific considerations were involved in the criticism and concern. The Cold War had been intense but predicated on the idea that both sides were "rational actors," and the actions of the two sides likely would be limited. Ideology and competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, focused on Europe and made global by the Korean War, had possessed relative geographic stability. Each side had been reluctant to engage in large-scale strategic moves. The boundaries of conflict seemed known and relatively limited. Shifts were minor (such as the neutralization of Austria in 1955 and the movement of Yugoslavia toward an independent and neutral stance vis-à-vis Moscow). The 1949 communist victory in taking control of China created a great political

10. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 6.

11. Serhii Plokyh, *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2021), 259.

12. Jim Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs* (New York: Scribner, 2011).

13. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 23–25. Abel also speculates the Bay of Pigs experience encouraged Kennedy to doubt reports of missiles in Cuba, in other words "once burned, twice shy," 28.

and strategic shift, reverberating in the United States in intense, emotional anti-communism, but that development was distinctive.¹⁴

Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union threatened the stability of the Cold War in several important ways. First, there was the possibility of Castro's regime sponsoring communist insurgencies elsewhere in Latin America. Second, as the Soviet military buildup in Cuba proceeded, the danger that the island could become a direct strategic military threat to the United States grew. Senior Kennedy administration officials, however, were convinced Moscow would never introduce nuclear weapons on the island.¹⁵

This second graver possibility grew as a topic of concern in the American press and public debate as the Soviet military involvement in Cuba increased in July and August 1962. In July, Havana and Moscow reached their fateful secret accord to emplace strategic nuclear missiles on Cuban soil. Meanwhile, poet Robert Frost returned from a trip to the Soviet Union, quoting Khrushchev and other leaders saying the United States was "too liberal to fight." The Republican senatorial and congressional campaign committees declared Cuba would be "the dominant issue of the 1962 campaign," and opinion polls indicated increasing American frustration.¹⁶

New York Republican Senator Kenneth Keating derided the Kennedy administration, repeatedly declaring that Soviet troops and missiles were in Cuba before any confirmed evidence existed. Kennedy aide Theodore C. Sorensen brushed off suggestions that the White House was insensitive to the possibility of the missile move. In this regard, the loyal aide was not alone—and the point is fundamental to this analysis.¹⁷

As the political atmosphere intensified, Kennedy engaged with the public more directly. Various administration officials had made statements about the distinction between "offensive" and "defensive" missiles, resulting in inconsistency and confusion. In a September 4, 1962, statement and a September 13 press conference, Kennedy defined long-range, ground-to-ground missiles as offensive and unacceptable. U-2 reconnaissance photographs of August 29 indicated the Soviets were installing surface-to-air antiaircraft missile (SAM) sites in Cuba. At this point, Kennedy wisely avoided issuing an

14. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 2005). See the author's publications about Ambassador George F. Kennan, architect of containment.

15. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 19; and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 798–99.

16. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 24; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 821, argues Frost misinterpreted and misquoted Khrushchev.

17. Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, Bantam Books, 1966), 754–58. Sorensen does credit CIA Director John McCone's accurate foresight regarding Soviet intentions.

ultimatum. While indicating the United States would tolerate the presence of the surface-to-air antiaircraft missile sites, the president stated that if evidence emerged of “significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction,” then “the gravest issues would arise.”¹⁸

Concerns

The United States received reports from Cuban refugees and sources on the island that “missiles” were being introduced. However, when reports could be verified, they turned out to be surface-to-air antiaircraft missiles or politically motivated fiction. Although reports increased over summer 1962, no evidence emerged to suggest a shift from the status quo of sometimes heated rhetoric but caution regarding troops and weapons movements. In August, Kennedy convened a series of White House meetings to review the situation, emphasizing the particulars of Soviet involvement. The United States photographed every Soviet ship en route to Cuba and patrolled the island twice monthly with camera-equipped U-2s. Remarkably, the Kennedy administration remained more concerned about Berlin and Germany. Sorensen quotes Kennedy, “If we solve the Berlin problem without war, Cuba will look pretty small. And if there is a war, Cuba won’t matter much either.”¹⁹

On September 19, the Board of National Estimates met in Washington. CIA Director John McCone was convinced unfolding events could culminate in Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. However, Board Chairman General Marshall S. Carter and others felt McCone’s inexperience in intelligence was misleading him. Following the Bay of Pigs invasion, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., another Kennedy aide, contended that Moscow might take steps to protect Castro. He noted “No one in the intelligence community (with one exception; for the thought flickered through the mind of John McCone) supposed that the Soviet Union would conceivably go beyond defensive weapons.”²⁰

On September 21, Washington received the first reliable report that more than just surface-to-air missiles were being unloaded on the Havana docks. An agent had seen long missile trailers moving down a highway. One night, Castro’s pilot publicly stated that Cuba no longer feared the Yankees and their nuclear weapons. He declared, “We will fight to the death, and perhaps we can win because we have everything, including atomic weapons.” On October 3, reports indicated strange activity “probably connected with missiles” in the

18. “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961–September 1962,” Office of the Historian (website), n.d., <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d411>.

19. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 754.

20. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 798.

Pinar del Rio region. These reports, transmitted through the CIA, failed to heighten Washington's concern, at least at the top.²¹

U-2 flights over Cuba on September 5, 7, 26, and 29 and October 5 and 7 failed to reveal evidence of unusual hostile military buildup, beyond MIG fighter aircraft, or Komar torpedo boats armed with short-range missiles. Surprisingly, only the September 5 flight covered the western portion of Cuba, where the offensive Soviet missiles were eventually discovered. This restraint followed a September 10 meeting of the administration's Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance, which made the self-limiting decision to dip in and out of Cuban airspace rather than conduct extensive and continuous flyovers. A principal reason was that a Taiwan-based U-2 was destroyed over mainland China the day before. US Secretary of State Dean Rusk urged shorter, more frequent flights as the new approach to avoid a similar incident. Along with the desire to protect pilots' lives, there was anxiety any incident could provoke an international outcry and lead to curtailing flights indefinitely. The Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance never considered dropping flights entirely.²²

Contrary to Schlesinger's assertion, McCone consistently advocated that the Soviets and Cubans would install strategic missiles on the island. His sustained defense of this position proved crucial in pushing the Kennedy administration to discover the missile threat. When McCone returned to Washington following his honeymoon, he was appalled to find the U-2s had avoided western Cuba, where the surface-to-air missiles were concentrated for nearly a month. On October 4, McGeorge Bundy, the president's special assistant for national security affairs, and his colleagues agreed that all of Cuba would be covered. Pentagon sources reported a new SAM site, laid out in a distinctive trapezoidal pattern, had been spotted near the village of San Cristóbal, and the decision was made to examine the area closely.²³

The debate over alternative approaches to gathering this intelligence, plus reports of approaching bad weather, delayed the next flight until October 14. Developing and evaluating the resulting film took until late afternoon of the

21. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 13.

22. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 14, 25–26. Sorenson, *Thousand Days*, 672, differs somewhat from other authors on September flight dates.

23. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 15–16.

following day. Analysts declared evidence of long-range missiles not “conclusive” but “compelling.” Bundy agreed.²⁴

Reaction

Bundy presented the evidence to Kennedy, but not until the following morning. Meanwhile, the always-efficient aide systematically double-checked and reviewed the evidence and prepared answers to the questions he anticipated from Kennedy.²⁵ There were no long-range missiles in these photographs, but there was telling evidence. Experienced photo analysts pointed to missile erectors, launchers, and trailers, all placed within a signature trapezoidal area. A SAM site guarded each corner of the trapezoid. This additional detail was congruent with the profile of intermediate- and medium-range missile deployments inside the Soviet Union.²⁶

When compared with earlier photographs, the pace of constructing temporary launching sites was remarkably rapid, with clear evidence of permanent missile sites. The Soviets were constructing 24 launching pads for medium-range missiles that could be used more than once and 16 for intermediate-range missiles. A total of 42 medium-range missiles were known to be brought into Cuba.²⁷

Kennedy and his advisers were stunned by a Soviet move contrary to their assumptions and Moscow’s reassurances. In one of the most insightful analyses of the missile crisis, Roberta Wohlstetter describes the American reaction.²⁸ The move was not a function of naiveté, for this administration emphasized worldliness and hard-nosed realism; it was out of character based on history. Kennedy was concerned about other disastrous experiences (such as the Bay of Pigs invasion), while the White House escalated efforts to overthrow Castro covertly.²⁹

Perhaps because official advisers had been mistaken, Kennedy relied from the start of the crisis on an *ad hoc* handpicked team, later titled the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). This informal approach

24. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 31–32, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was more skeptical, 38.

25. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 801–2.

26. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 28–29, 43, 46–47.

27. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 796.

28. Roberta Wohlstetter, “Cuba and Pearl Harbor: Hindsight and Foresight,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 1965): 691–707.

29. See Mark J. White, ed., *The Kennedys and Cuba: The Declassified Documentary History* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 78–80 and passim.

is notable and consistent with the practices of other presidents throughout American history.³⁰

Crisis

The ExComm had to address two questions: What were the actual military and political significance of the missiles, and what should be done about them? Opinions ranged widely. Initially, McNamara argued they had no military value. Paul Nitze, assistant secretary of defense, and others strongly disagreed and argued for a “surgical” air strike to destroy the sites. Prompting by Kennedy revealed such a strike would not be “surgical.” Collateral damage would be inevitable, killing Soviet personnel and Cubans. As reality sank in, a consensus emerged for a naval blockade or “quarantine” of Cuba. The latter term was preferable to declaring a blockade, which under international law constitutes an act of war.³¹

Within a broader context, ExComm members employed legal and moral arguments in their initial discussion. Professor Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard University and others have observed that the US blockade was questionable on legal grounds.³² The White House developed a legal brief defending the move. While Kennedy gave less weight to the United Nations than his three predecessors, he wanted the evidence of Soviet actions presented to that body and the Organization of American States.³³ His concerns included preventing arguments that the United States was the aggressor.³⁴ Moral considerations also played a role. Most notably, Attorney General Robert Kennedy objected to former Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s suggestion of a surprise air attack on the missile sites, comparing it to Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. An irritated Acheson made clear his disdain for the attorney general’s reasoning. Elie Abel, in one of the first and most insightful published analyses of the crisis, emphasized Kennedy’s concern for restraint and skepticism about keeping military action limited.³⁵

On October 18, Kennedy met with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. With self-control evident throughout the crisis, the president read aloud his September statement on the definition of offensive missiles. Gromyko, who must

30. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch of the Arrows* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

31. “The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law,” Médecins Sans Frontières (website), n.d., <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/blockade/>, Doctors Without Borders provides background on the subject in the context of providing humanitarian relief; and Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 59, Leonard C. Meeker, deputy legal adviser to the State Department, suggested the term “quarantine.”

32. Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver’s Troubles or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), also describes managing the crisis as Kennedy’s “finest hour,” 297.

33. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 73; and Sorensen, *Decision-Making*, 796–97.

34. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 807–12, indicates the importance of the UN dimension and Ambassador Adlai Stevenson’s role.

35. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 50, 66–67, 78.

have known about the missiles and therefore was lying, repeated past Soviet assurances. Kennedy said nothing in response and, through silence, maintained American initiative. Bundy later argued this was the critical moment that sealed the American case for Soviet duplicity and dishonesty: “It made all the difference—I felt then and have felt since—that the Russians were caught pretending, in a clumsy way, that they had not done what it was clear to the whole world they had in fact done.”³⁶

On October 22, after the text of Kennedy’s address to the nation on the Soviet missiles in Cuba had been reviewed and rechecked, the president delivered the televised speech. He summarized the situation in Cuba and listed the initial moves taken by Washington, stressing these were only the first steps:

- acceleration of surveillance of Cuba;
- a “quarantine,” the euphemism for naval blockade, would be imposed around Cuba;
- a clear declaration that any missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as a Soviet attack on the United States and would bring a full American response against the Soviet Union;
- a call immediately to convene the Organization of American States to consider the threat;
- a call to convene an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council; and
- a personal appeal to Khrushchev to “abandon this course.”³⁷

A week of extraordinary tension followed. On October 24, the Soviet Union had diverted 12 of 25 ships on course for Cuba, presumably because they carried military cargo. The following day, influential columnist Walter Lippmann proposed trading Soviet missiles in Cuba for American missiles in Turkey that vexed Khrushchev. Soviet officials assumed Lippmann was publicly presenting a White House suggestion. In fact, ExComm members put exceptional weight on private meetings between Alexander S. Fomin, a Soviet embassy official, and

36. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, footnote, 64.

37. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 104–6; and Schlesinger, *Decision-Making*, 812–13.

John Scali, an American journalist, with the former assumed to have a direct line to Soviet leaders.³⁸

The evening of Thursday, October 25, witnessed the start of a dangerous duel off the coast of Cuba between a Soviet submarine and United States surface ships and aircraft, which came close to starting a nuclear war. Soviet submarine B-59, spotted and identified by US aircraft, became the target of devices dropped by antisubmarine surface ships as signals to surface. Explosive charges banged on the sides of the hull and generated severe pulses that made breathing difficult.³⁹

On Saturday, October 27, the duel escalated further. Three US destroyers, the *Beale*, *Cony*, and *Murray*, unsuccessfully tried to establish contact and then began dropping practice depth charges followed by hand grenades. The atmosphere in the Soviet submarine was becoming extremely hot, with carbon dioxide rising to dangerous levels as equipment began to break down. Men began to pass out and collapse. B-59 Commander Valentin Savitsky tried to shake off the relentless pursuers for four hours without success. The presence of the potentially lethal Americans on the surface reinforced the claustrophobia and anxiety experienced by the crew of the Soviet submarine.⁴⁰

Finally, exhausted and enraged, Savitsky ordered the officer responsible for the vessel's atomic torpedo to arm and prepare the weapon for launch. The US Navy also had nuclear torpedoes but gave them less priority. Nuclear weapons occupy a distinct dimension—separate weapons in kind and degree. The Soviets were more inclined to regard armed conflict as one continuum, at least through the introduction of smaller nuclear weapons. This belief reflects the Soviet total war doctrine, which involves a perspective different from the United States.⁴¹

On the precipice of nuclear war, Arkhipov made an unconventional move and intervened. He was the chief of staff for the submarine flotilla, with a rank equal to Savitsky but without direct-line authority over this specific vessel. His presence on this submarine proved extraordinarily fortunate.⁴²

The B-59 surfaced to recharge low batteries and secure desperately needed fresh air. The US destroyer *Cory* was close by and aircraft hit the Russian officers

38. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 155–58; and Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Vintage, 2009), Dobbs argues Fomin (a.k.a Feklisov) had no significant influence; and Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly*, 200, 271, disagrees and indicates influence.

39. Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly*, 267.

40. Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly*, 267–68.

41. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 355–79. Throughout the book, he compares Soviet and US approaches to strategy, with the former emphasizing maximum force, the latter much more inclined to intellectualize. US President Ronald Reagan's update of containment and Soviet reactions is particularly instructive.

42. Sergo Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November*, ed. Svetlana Savranskaya (Washington, DC/Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Press/Stanford University Press, 2012), 137. This book further confirms Arkhipov's presence on B-59.

with blinding searchlights and flares, as they walked up to the submarine's deck, to confirm identification and photograph the submarine. The flares made loud booming noises as they exploded. American planes flew low over the submarine and fired tracer bullets into the water. Savitsky, driven beyond endurance, decided this was indeed war, and possibly general hostilities had already begun between the two superpowers. He ordered the nuclear torpedo readied for firing. Torpedo tubes on the Soviet submarine opened. The US Pentagon had assured civilian superiors that Moscow was informed these explosive devices were purely for signaling. The Soviet government, however, never acknowledged receipt of this message and never relayed the contents of the message to commanders on the scene.⁴³

Arkhipov successfully dissuaded Savitsky with American help. He demonstrated impressive interpersonal skills and the advantage of equal rank. Savitsky calmed down, and the psychology of intense crisis gave way to a willingness to at least reconsider. Vadim Orlov, the head of the signals intelligence team on the submarine, revealed Arkhipov's heroism in detail many years later.⁴⁴

Commander William Morgan, captain of the destroyer *Cory*, remained calm throughout the ordeal. He ordered Ensign Gary Slaughter to transmit by searchlight signals an apology to the Soviet military men on deck for the dangerous, aggressive behavior of the American pilots. Slaughter's message quickly compensated for the reckless airmen, provided a reassuring tonic to the Soviets on the submarine, and effectively defused the situation. Arkhipov saw the dramatic signal and alerted his comrades. Savitsky, reluctant throughout to commence hostilities, grasped the importance of Morgan's gesture. He ordered the torpedo tubes, which had been open and pointing at the *Cory*, to close. One of the tubes contained the atomic torpedo. Slaughter remembered later that Arkhipov had quickly gestured to him in reply to acknowledge with appreciation the American signal. Slaughter also reported the follow-up order he received from Morgan: "Keep that Russian bastard happy."⁴⁵

The early sentiments of a majority of ExComm members, under tremendous emotional pressure, had been to respond to the Soviet missile deployments in Cuba with a conventional military attack. Stresses resulting from the US naval blockade and the ongoing direct yet uncertain Soviet-American military confrontation were

43. Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 299–300; and Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly*, 267–68. US President Kennedy and Defense Secretary McNamara clearly believed Soviet Navy personnel were aware the explosions were from purely signaling devices. They were not.

44. Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 303, 317, 399.

45. Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly*, 271.

comparable. Not surprisingly, Soviets on the islands—and at sea—had similar desires to strike back militarily. The Cubans shared this sentiment as well.⁴⁶

Resolution

Meanwhile, on October 26, ExComm officials received a long, rambling, and conciliatory message from Khrushchev. The following day Radio Moscow broadcast a harsh, inflexible message, insisting on the Cuba-Turkey missile trade, which the White House publicly stated was unacceptable. That same day an American U-2 inadvertently penetrated Soviet airspace, leading the Kennedy administration to observe wryly that there “is always some so-and-so who doesn’t get the word.”⁴⁷ Even more ominous, a Soviet missile shot down a U-2 over Cuba and killed the pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson. The Soviets on the ground, isolated without communications and under pressure, fired. Wisely, Washington maintained self-control and did not attack SAM sites or other targets in Cuba.⁴⁸

Kennedy and the ExComm decided to ignore the second tougher message and accept the first conciliatory one. Known only to a select few, Robert Kennedy assured Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that if the Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba, the United States would remove its missiles from Turkey. The US withdrawal would occur after a sufficient interval to avoid the appearance of direct trade. On October 28, Moscow publicly accepted the American offer to pledge not to invade Cuba after the missiles were removed.⁴⁹

Kennedy, suffering criticism since the Bay of Pigs invasion, realized the extent of the victory.⁵⁰ According to Schlesinger, Kennedy was relieved and fatalistic, observing: “Now is the night to go to the theatre, like Abraham Lincoln.”⁵¹

What were the Soviet motivations for placing missiles in Cuba? Opinions varied widely within the ExComm. They were an inexpensive way to secure nuclear weapons equivalence with the United States. Additionally, they could deter the invasion of Cuba, the claim consistently emphasized later by Soviet officials.⁵²

Regarding the balance of nuclear forces, the ExComm members, by fall 1962, were aware the alleged “missile gap” with the Soviet Union was nonexistent. Yet, there seemed little realistic appreciation of how inferior the Soviet forces were. Khrushchev was under enormous pressure to maintain substantial nuclear and

46. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 66–68.

47. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 173.

48. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 827.

49. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 428–45; Schlesinger, *Decision-Making*, 830; and Sorensen, *Decision-Making*, 807–9.

50. Sorensen, *Decision-Making*, 798.

51. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 830.

52. See Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 10–12.

conventional military forces while responding to growing demands to provide resources for the consumer sectors of the Soviet economy.⁵³

The United States' credibility to defend Europe in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states would have been reduced if there were strategic missiles in Cuba. Although Moscow's initial plan for installations appeared to involve 64 missiles, there is no indication the Soviets would have stopped there. While missiles in Cuba most likely would not have resulted in true nuclear parity with the United States, they would have significantly evened the imbalance. The true strategic balance notwithstanding, Soviet missiles in Cuba would have changed perceptions regarding the balance of power, and perceptions matter in international affairs.

Lessons Learned

The passage of 60 years has brought significant new information on the Cuban Missile Crises and altered the understanding of the factors contributing to the events—the actual dangers at the time and the roles of principals on both sides. To a remarkable degree, vital dimensions of the confrontation and resolution of the crisis were kept secret for many years. Some of the most pivotal aspects, such as the B-59 incident and Arkhipov's heroism, became public recently. Others actions, such as the intense US efforts to assassinate Castro, became public in the mid-1970s through hearings of the special US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.⁵⁴

The Eisenhower administration managed a successful secret program to topple dangerous regimes, including those in Guatemala, Iran, and probably the Congo. The now well-known CIA effort to assassinate Castro, which included cooperation with organized crime, began under Eisenhower. The operation was accelerated following the Bay of Pigs invasion and was directly supervised by Robert Kennedy. Castro knew of this effort and alluded to it on at least one public occasion.⁵⁵

A review of the lessons learned strongly reconfirms the twin difficulties of accurate perception of developments and effective crisis management. Wohlstetter produced seminal work on the difficulty of separating accurate "signals" of an opponent's intentions from the sea of confusing information "noise" surrounding them. She applied pathbreaking analysis of the Pearl Harbor attack to the missile crisis. Technology can complicate and clarify in this regard. Kennedy administration officials appear to have been misled by a combination of false

53. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 23.

54. Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 7, 12–14, 129–31, 138, 338.

55. Powers, *Man Who Kept Secrets*, 106–7, 119–22, 132–58.

assumptions about Soviet intentions and false confidence related to advancing photoreconnaissance capabilities rapidly. The U-2 flights over Cuba revealed the Soviet missile ploy only just in time and thanks to the persistence of one official—John McCone, who illustrates the vital human dimension.⁵⁶

Kennedy's performance is highly commendable. In the prelude to the Bay of Pigs invasion, he did what Eisenhower would never do—signed off on an operation without a thorough, detailed review. Kennedy questioned and expressed concern but delegated the details.⁵⁷

In the missile crisis, Kennedy demonstrated the reverse behavior, including constant skepticism, probing questions, and innovative approaches. He absented himself from discussions to facilitate freedom of debate and interchange by subordinates likely to be intimidated by his presence. The president surreptitiously taped conversations of ExComm, a practice begun after the Bay of Pigs invasion. The transcripts confirm a striking sentiment early in the crisis favoring a military attack. Kennedy skillfully deflected this view. The quarantine of Cuba bought time. Finally, he moved decisively to resolve the crisis by privately accepting the Cuba-Turkey missile trade. Kennedy guided people and the crisis to an acceptable resolution through attentiveness, inquisitiveness, skepticism, and initiative.

The Cuban Missile Crisis reconfirmed the importance of the human factor in human affairs, including military competition. A related conclusion is that abstract analysis of matters, often conducted under the label of game theory, is of limited value. Working hard to understand the perspectives, incentives, and limitations of opponents is vital. McNamara, in particular, publicly emphasized this theme.⁵⁸

In the last 60 years, a tendency has emerged to minimize the danger of nuclear war. This perspective reflects wishful thinking and the relative security of the post-Cold War international system. For example, Harvard University Professor Steven Pinker in 2018 wrote, "The records show that Khrushchev and Kennedy remained in firm control of their governments."⁵⁹ This viewpoint, with

56. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 7–8, 12–16; and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

57. Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 321–27.

58. James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005). See Errol Morris, dir., *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (New York: Sony Pictures Classic, 2003), <https://www.errolmorris.com/film/fow.html>.

59. Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment NOW: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking/Penguin RandomHouse, 2018), 312.

no further comment, provides powerful evidence for review and reanalysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis and other high-stakes crises.

In the end, Kennedy possessed important partners on the other side. Khrushchev resisted enormous military pressures within his government, agreed to remove the missiles, and stepped back from Armageddon, which was paramount. Arkhipov and Morgan, his American counterpart, also played essential roles. Understanding the perspectives, incentives, and limitations of opponents is important in every conflict and vital regarding nuclear war—the ultimate holocaust.

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