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## One Step from Nuclear War

### The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: In Search of Historical Perspective

 By *Martin J. Sherwin*

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The Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), meeting in the White House Cabinet Room, sorted through intelligence and advised the President during the Cuban Missile Crisis. (Kennedy Library, ST-A26-1-62)

[Larger View](#)

*The Cuban Missile War was the most devastating war in world history.*

*The estimated number of North American deaths was upwards of 200 million. Double, perhaps even quadruple that number of Soviet, Eastern European, and Chinese citizens perished, and no one had any reliable data on how many Western Europeans, Africans, Asians, Australians, and others were killed by the radioactive fallout as it enveloped the globe.*

*Cuba instantly became a wasteland, and there were few structures left standing in Moscow and Washington, D.C.*

*It was an unthinkable war, but not an unimagined one: In 1957 Australian writer Neville Shute described its denouement in his eerily tranquil apocalyptic novel, *On the Beach*. Adapted for the screen by Stanley Kramer in 1959, *On the Beach**

*premiered simultaneously in major U.S. cities and Moscow. There were reports of viewers sobbing as Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire, and Anthony Perkins stoically prepared for the arrival over Australia of the deadly radioactive fallout from a nuclear war in the northern hemisphere. They were the last surviving humans, going quietly into the endless night.*

*The Pentagon, opposed to any film that might undermine public enthusiasm for nuclear weapons, refused to cooperate.*

*But the Cuban Missile Crisis did not replicate *On the Beach*, and so thoughts about a Cuban Missile War passed unobtrusively into history. While participants and historians of the crisis never tire of recalling its details and its dangers, the majority of the generation that lived through it, and subsequent generations, never became emotionally engaged with its potential consequences. It was neither*

### Learn more about:

["To the Brink,"](#) an exhibit created by the National Archives and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

[Documents pertaining to the Missile Crisis](#)

[Researching records of the Cold War](#)

*Vietnam nor Watergate, nor was it Dallas on November 22, 1963.*

It was just the most devastating event in world history . . . ***that somehow didn't happen.***

Why the Cuban Missile Crisis ended peacefully, and what were its consequences, remain relevant questions for historians even 50 years later. The terrifying realization in 1962 that nuclear armageddon was merely a stumble away profoundly influenced Cold War behavior for the next 27 years, until the collapse of a wall in Berlin ushered in a second nuclear age. But that ending was far away on a portentous autumn evening when President Kennedy gave the speech "heard around the world."

### **JFK Tells the Nation: Nuclear War Possible**

The public learned that nuclear war was an imminent possibility on Monday, October 22, 1962, at 7 p.m. Eastern Daylight Savings Time.

"This Government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba," President John F. Kennedy began in what has to be counted as the scariest presidential address of the Cold War.

"Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere."

Kennedy went on to explain that Soviet officials had repeatedly lied about the buildup. He said the United States was demanding that all the offensive missiles be removed from Cuba forthwith—or else—and announced that a "quarantine" of Cuba (calling it a blockade would have represented it as an act of war) was only the first step toward forcing the removal of the offending weapons. And he added that any missile launched from Cuba would be considered to have originated from the Soviet Union and would require "a full retaliatory response" upon the USSR.

"We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth," he said, but warned, "neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced."

The blockade of Cuba, and the other responses detailed in the President's dramatic 20-minute speech, had been devised by a select group of advisers during the previous week in secret meetings that often lasted late into the night.

Officially designated the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), its members were assembled at the President's request on Tuesday morning, October 16, after National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy informed him that a U-2 had photographed the "unmistakable evidence" that he referred to in the first paragraph of his speech.

is order, force shall not be used except in  
sal to comply with directions, or with  
res of the Secretary of Defense issued here-  
le efforts have been made to communicate  
craft, or in case of self-defense. In any  
sed only to the extent necessary.

Larger View

The final, signed, page of the Quarantine Proclamation or Interdiction of the Delivery of Offensive Weapons to Cuba. (Kennedy Library)

The ExComm was initially composed of 16 members, the most influential being the President's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Among the others were Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Presidential speech writer and counsel Theodore Sorensen, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, Under Secretary of State George Ball, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Maxwell Taylor, former Ambassador to the Soviet Union Llewellyn Thompson, and Bundy.

All the Joint Chiefs attended one meeting, as did President Harry Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson.

While deciding how to respond to the Soviet deception, the committee had one great advantage: neither Khrushchev nor Castro knew that their missile sites had been discovered.

### "I Doubt My Presidency Could Survive Another Catastrophe"

During that first (covert) week of the crisis preceding the President's speech—October 16–22—the ExComm members debated whether to bomb the missile sites, invade Cuba, surreptitiously approach Khrushchev with an ultimatum, or begin the effort to force the removal of the missiles with a blockade.

Despite McNamara's view (contested by the Joint Chiefs) that the Soviet missiles did "*not at all*" alter the "strategic balance," the option of accepting their deployment as a *fait accompli* was rejected out of hand. Even if they did not pose a serious military risk, their presence was deemed politically unacceptable.

"I doubt my presidency could survive another catastrophe like this," Kennedy had written to Democratic presidential confidant Clark Clifford shortly after the Bay of Pigs in 1961, and the shadow of that debacle hung heavily over decision making during the 13 tense days of the crisis.

Several months earlier, Kennedy had directed the Secret Service to install recording systems in the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room, the location of the majority of the ExComm's meetings. In 1985, transcripts and tape recordings of those meetings started to surface, and based on this new information, historians began to backfill, revise, and reinterpret critical aspects of the crisis.

Writing about the decision-making process from the perspective of "a fly on the wall" was irresistible, and the new information revealed who said what, to whom, when, and how. It made Robert Kennedy's special status clear. It lay bare the dynamics between senior advisers and contradicted many of their recollections. It exposed their confused views of Soviet objectives, revealed their analytical instincts (and lack thereof), and exposed whether they had what can only be referred to as good sense. And it raised deeply troubling questions about the judgment of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The transcripts also indicated that the committee members were divided, inconsistent, often confused, and appropriately frightened. The seriousness of the encounter they were embarked upon, and their lack of confidence that any proposed strategy would accomplish their goal, led most of them—along with the Joint Chiefs—to initially favor some form of military action—to strike, as it were, like cornered animals.

The list of incorrect assumptions, false information, and bad judgments that ran through the committee's discussions is alarming.

When trying to discern Khrushchev's motives and intentions, the State Department's leading Soviet experts, former ambassadors to Moscow Charles E. "Chip" Bohlen and Llewellyn Thompson (who later provided very good advice) argued for a military strike on the assumption that Khrushchev intended to use the missiles in Cuba to force the Western powers out of Berlin. Another member of the ExComm, seemingly on the edge of hysteria, wrote to the President "that the survival of our nation demands the prompt elimination of the offensive weapons now in Cuba."

Former Secretary of State Acheson, perhaps the nation's most experienced Cold War diplomat, gave equally dangerous advice. Invited to the October 18 meeting at the President's request, he merely repeated the old canard that military force was the only way to deal with the Soviets and urged an immediate surprise assault to destroy the missiles. When his recommendation was challenged, he declined to attend further meetings.

The intelligence the CIA provided was flawed and inadequate. Not only had the agency missed the deployment of the medium- and intermediate-range missiles until it was almost too late to respond, but it was also unaware that the Soviets had on hand 35 LUNA battlefield nuclear weapons that would have devastated any American landing force. The CIA's best estimate of the number of Soviet ground forces in Cuba was 10,000–12,000; in fact, more than 40,000 battle ready Soviet combat troops were prepared to confront a U.S. assault.

If the President had approved an attack on Cuba, Guantanamo Bay's reinforced garrison was primed

to participate. But the Soviets had moved a battlefield nuclear weapon into range of the base with the intention of destroying it before a single marine could pass through the gate.

### While the ExComm Debated, Chaos Proved Troublesome

Other near disasters, oversights, and accidents added to the chaos within the crisis. Several anti-Castro groups, operating under a CIA program (code-named Mongoose) directed by Robert Kennedy, went about their sabotage activities because no one had thought to cancel their mission, which could have been mistaken for assault preparations.

Authorities at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California were seemingly oblivious to the crisis. They test-fired a missile without first contacting the Pentagon. At the Pentagon, no one dealing with the crisis appeared to be aware of the scheduled test to assess whether the Soviets might misinterpret the launch as a hostile action.

And, most extraordinarily, the commander of the Strategic Air Command, Gen. Thomas Powers, on his own authority, without informing the President or any national security staff member, raised the Defense Condition (DefCon) level to 2—one level short of war—and broadcast his order "in the clear" (uncoded). Obviously trying to intimidate the Soviets, his behavior was confirmation of Gen. Curtis LeMay's troubling assessment that Powers was mentally "not stable."

Also on Saturday morning, October 27, the tensest day of the crisis, a U-2 pilot was killed when his plane was shot down over Cuba by a Soviet surface-to-air (SAM) missile. All of the ExComm's members assumed that the order to fire had been issued by Moscow; in fact, the decision was unauthorized and had been taken by the local commander.

The response of the Joint Chiefs was to pressure the President to bomb the offending SAM site, but he had the good sense and will to reject their insistent requests. And, as if following an improbable Hollywood script, that very afternoon, a U-2 flying on an air-sampling mission to the Arctic circle—which also should have been scrubbed—accidentally overflew Soviet territory when the pilot made a navigation error. The Soviets could have interpreted that reconnaissance flight as anticipating an attack.

But the most dangerous moment of the crisis occurred late on Saturday afternoon, and the United States did not learn about it until almost 40 years later.

Four Soviet submarines were being tracked in the area of the blockade line, but no American knew that each had a 15-kiloton nuclear torpedo aboard that their captains were authorized to use. At about 5 o'clock, the commander of submarine B-59, Capt. V. G. Savitskii, convinced that he was being attacked by the practice depth charges and grenades that U.S. Navy anti-submarine warfare (ASW) forces were dropping to force him to surface, loaded his nuclear torpedo and came within seconds of launching it at his antagonists. Had he fired that weapon, there is no doubt about the devastating consequences that would have followed.

### "Any Fool Can Start a War"

All of these incidents and mistakes, as well as the misunderstandings documented in the verbatim ExComm records, makes it clear that crisis management is a myth. The fundamental flaw in the concept is that *accurate information*, the most important element in coping with any serious crisis, is invariably unavailable. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, good luck substituted for good information and good judgment, hardly a model of policymaking to celebrate or recommend.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the crisis, the ExComm's discussions became the central focus of historians' efforts to understand the process that led to its peaceful resolution. The members of the



A P2V Neptune U.S. Navy patrol plane flies over a Soviet freighter. (428-N-1065352)



committee, as well as the President, promoted that idea, touting its work as a classic example of the administration's ability to skillfully manage international challenges.

A collection of early histories that relied on interviews with participants supported the view that the ExComm had been composed of "wise men" who had diligently worked through the most sensible policy options to reach the most appropriate decisions. And in 1968, Robert Kennedy published (posthumously) a memoir of the crisis, *Thirteen Days*, that continues to reinforce that view.

This attention to the words of "the wise men" led to many misconceptions, but initially, and in particular, to two historical distortions. The first was the *incorrect* impression that ExComm decisions had dictated the President's policies. The second was to isolate the crisis from its broader historical Cold War milieu.

Dangerously incorrect lessons are drawn when the ExComm is credited with successfully managing the Cuban Missile Crisis. War was prevented for two reasons, and the ExComm's members were responsible for neither. The first, and most important, is that Khrushchev did not want a war. His objective was to protect Castro's government by deterring, not fighting, the United States. "Any fool can start a war," he often remarked; and he had experienced more than enough of war's horrors.

The second reason that war was avoided is that the President, not the members of the ExComm (and certainly not the Joint Chiefs, who unanimously and persistently recommended attacking Cuba), insisted on providing Khrushchev with a politically acceptable exit from his failed gamble. The challenge was to find a resolution that gave the Soviet leader options other than *capitulate or fight*. To do so, it was necessary for the President to empathize with his adversary, to see the crisis from Khrushchev's perspective. He was encouraged in this by two unsung, consistently level-headed advisers.

### **"The Existence of Nuclear Missile Bases Anywhere Is Negotiable"**

The ExComm recordings, for all the detailed, fascinating information they reveal, do not tell us nearly enough about the views of the most important member of the administration, John Kennedy. Inclined toward military action early in the crisis, the President quickly grew increasingly wary of its unpredictable consequences.

Forced to maintain his schedule, so as not to raise suspicions that something untoward was occurring, he missed many of the meetings during the week preceding his speech. But within 48 hours of being briefed by Bundy, he privately told his brother to back away from the military option and bring the committee members around to support a blockade.

It is clear that Khrushchev's crude deception had, at least initially, trumped any inclination the President had to seek a diplomatic exit from the crisis. But what restored his commitment to diplomacy is less clear, although circumstantial evidence suggests that the cogent arguments presented to him by Under Secretary of State George Ball and Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson contributed to turning him against a military assault.

"We tried Japanese as war criminals because of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor," Ball wrote after the first day's discussions in a strongly worded rebuttal to the hawkish views of his colleagues. A surprise attack [on Cuba], "far from establishing our moral strength . . . would, in fact, alienate a great part of the civilized world . . . and condemn us as hypocrites."

Expanding on McNamara's view that the missiles were not strategically significant, Ball condemned the idea of igniting a war on their behalf. His alternative was to begin the process of eliminating the missiles with a blockade.

Stevenson's contribution to reason was more detailed and direct. Having fortuitously arrived in Washington on October 16 to attend a White House luncheon, the President briefed him after lunch about the missiles and the conclusions of that morning's ExComm meeting.

"The alternatives are to go in by air and wipe them out," he told his ambassador, "or to take other steps to render the weapons inoperable."

Stevenson strongly demurred. "Let's not go into an air strike until we have explored the possibilities of

a peaceful solution," he insisted, and then composed a memorandum that, in effect, outlined 90 percent of the steps that Kennedy followed in resolving the crisis.

Stevenson pointed out that while the United States had superior force in the Caribbean, any military action against Cuba could be countered by the Soviets in Berlin or Turkey, and that process would most likely escalate rapidly out of control.

"To start or risk starting a nuclear war is bound to be divisive at best," he dryly noted, "and the judgments of history [a serious concern to JFK] rarely coincide with the tempers of the moment." He understood the President's dilemma, he said, but wrote, in an underscored sentence: "the means adopted have such incalculable consequences that I feel that you should have made it clear that the existence of nuclear missile bases anywhere [e.g., the Jupiter missiles in Turkey] is negotiable before we start anything."

The problem with this interpretation is that Kennedy intensely disliked Stevenson, for both political and personal reasons. His enmity went so deep as to lead him to plant false stories after the crisis portraying his ambassador as having advocated "another Munich." They suggested that Stevenson was a coward, not cut from the same heroic cloth as the Kennedy brothers.

But, in fact, Stevenson had been heroic in his dissent and, during those first confused days, had provided the clearest analysis of the dangers the crisis raised and the range of possible peaceful solutions.

That thought nettled the President. Like it or not, however—and Kennedy hated it—the Stevenson (and Ball) view made a lot more sense to him than the war whoops of the Joint Chiefs and the ExComm's majority. The psychology is complicated, but despite the President's personal dislike of Stevenson-the-man, Stevenson's intellect had spoken clearly, directly, and persuasively to Kennedy's intellect. That "conversation" planted the seed for a diplomatic solution that Kennedy would cultivate and harvest as his own over the next 12 days.

### "We Would Have a Balance of Fear"

The Cuban Missile Crisis was Khrushchev's colossal, irresponsible gamble, which in retrospect appears almost incomprehensibly stupid. But it was a gamble based on 17 years of nuclear experiences going back to Hiroshima. A review of his reasoning reveals the historical roots of his thinking and its crude mimicking of United States nuclear policies.

By 1962, nuclear weapons played a major role in U.S.-Soviet diplomacy. This included how each nation tested and deployed them, how they figured into diplomatic exchanges, and how strategists and generals promoted their use in war.

This state of affairs tempted Khrushchev to bet that their secret deployment to Cuba would solve many of his problems. But the attempted deployment also motivated Kennedy to demand their removal lest their existence, even if unused, destroy his presidency.

, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather  
sum and threatening that if we do not give  
se force. Consider what you are saying!  
agree to this! What would it mean to agree  
guiding oneself in one's relations with c  
, but by submitting to arbitrariness. You



Soviet Premier Khrushchev responded to President Kennedy on October 24, stating that "You are no longer appealing to reason, but wish to intimidate us." (Kennedy Library)

The plan was bizarre, vintage Khrushchev, a wild gamble that promised a huge payoff for both his domestic and foreign policies. He had thought of it himself, and so he pushed it through the presidium, manipulating the doubters with alternating displays of reasonableness and combative confidence.

He began by enlisting the support of the equally facile enthusiast, Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, his minister of defense. A military mind with no political sense, Malinovsky told a visiting Cuban delegation: "There will be no big reaction from the U.S. side. And if there is a problem, we will send the Baltic Fleet."

Khrushchev had become consumed after the April

Castro's communist government.

"I was sure that a new attack was inevitable, and that it was only a question of time," he wrote in his memoirs. Moreover, there was the reputation of the Soviet Union to consider.

"If we lost Cuba," Khrushchev concluded, "our prestige in Latin American countries would diminish. And how would everybody look at us afterwards? The Soviet Union is such a great country but could not do anything except make empty proclamations, threats and speeches in the U.N."

Thinking about Cuba in these terms had the effect of shifting it from the periphery to the center of Soviet priorities and, in Khrushchev's mind, inextricably linking Soviet leadership of the Socialist world to the survival of Castro's government. That conundrum appeared to be insoluble until Khrushchev alighted on the idea of emulating U.S. missile deployments to its NATO allies.

"And then I thought," Khrushchev wrote, "what if we put our nuclear missiles in Cuba. . . . I came to the conclusion that if we organized everything secretly, even if the Americans found out about it, they would think twice before trying to liquidate Castro once the missiles were operational." It was a strategy that President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, would have recognized: a Soviet version of brinkmanship, just 90 miles off the Florida coast.

Khrushchev's calculations were both irresponsible and realistic. He assumed that while the United States could destroy most of his missiles before they could be launched, he also knew that the United States could never be certain that it could destroy them all. That, he reasoned, provided Cuba with a second strike, an idea that had been promoted for almost a decade by America's nuclear strategists.

"Even if only one or two nuclear bombs reached New York City, there would be little of it left," Khrushchev reasoned. "We would have a balance of fear, as the West phrased it," and Cuba would be safe.

### **Soviet Presence Grows To Protect Missiles**

When Khrushchev reflected on the balance of U.S. and Soviet nuclear forces, what impressed him most was the *imbalance of fear*. The proximity to his country of U.S. nuclear forces in Europe heightened Soviet fears of a nuclear strike far beyond what Americans experienced. "They [Americans] surrounded us with military bases and kept us at gunpoint," he angrily recalled. But if his Cuban ploy succeeded, he thought, "the Americans would share the experience of being under the [nuclear] gun."

Khrushchev's assessment of U.S. caution in the face of a possible nuclear strike was confirmed years later by McNamara, who said that Kennedy chose the blockade option as a precaution against the possibility of even a lone nuclear warhead being fired from Cuba at an American city.

Khrushchev's plan began simply enough. Missiles that could devastate a few United States cities would be secretly shipped to Cuba, and when they were ready to fire, he would announce their presence. But as the process of organizing the mission evolved, the plan took on a life of its own. Simplicity gave ground, one decision at a time, to increasing complexity, as military planners added requirement upon requirement.

For purposes of deception, the enterprise was designated Anadyr, the name of a well-known river in the frozen far northeast of Siberia. It was launched with the decision to ship 24 R-12 (NATO designated SS-4) medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM), each with a range of 1,100 miles, and 16 R-14 (SS-5) intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) capable of traveling 2,500 miles. The missiles carried warheads ranging from 200 kilotons TNT equivalent to 1 megaton. This array of nuclear firepower would provide almost total coverage of the United States.

The growing began almost immediately.

"We decided if we put missiles in Cuba, then we needed to protect them. So we also needed infantry . . . approximately several thousand." (Eventually the number climbed to somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000.) Of course, those troops also had to be protected, especially against an air attack, and so anti-aircraft batteries were added.

Then, Khrushchev recalled, "we decided that we needed artillery and tanks in case of a landing assault." Other significant weapons that followed included IL-28 (nuclear-capable) bombers, MIG-21 fighters, an array of battlefield nuclear weapons that included about 80 short-range FKR-1 nuclear-capable cruise missiles (that could be fired at attacking U.S. Navy vessels), several dozen LUNA (NATO designated FROGS) tactical nuclear weapons (that could be used to kill assault troops as they landed), and submarines armed with nuclear torpedoes.

If deterrence didn't work, Khrushchev's Cuban brigades were prepared for nuclear war.

### **A Dangerous Confrontation on the High Seas**

The crisis that resulted from this deployment was a deadly confrontation between three countries, their governments, and their leaders.

At its core, however, it was a Shakespearian drama between two men. Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev and John Fitzgerald Kennedy made all the critical decisions: the decisions that led to the crisis, the decisions that shaped the crisis, and the decisions that ended the crisis—peacefully. Fidel Castro played a significant, but decidedly secondary, role.

The crisis reached its apogee on Saturday, October 27, three days after the U.S. Navy deployed an armada of nearly 200 ships along a blockade arc 500 miles north of Havana.

By this time—five days after Kennedy's speech—it was apparent to Khrushchev, Kennedy, and Castro that the military activities of each passing day exponentially increased the danger of an incident escalating out of control. Along with potential clashes on the quarantine line, tension had been increased by the well-publicized buildup of U.S. forces in the United States and Europe. The three contending leaders became acutely aware, and worried (at least Khrushchev and Kennedy were), that at any moment events could slip from their control.

Over the past week, Castro had become increasingly enraged, apparently beyond worry. Well informed about U.S. military preparations, he was certain that an attack "is almost imminent within the next 24 to 72 hours."

In response to Kennedy's speech, he ordered general mobilization and commanded his antiaircraft batteries to shoot down U.S. aircraft that overflew his island; several low-flying Air Force reconnaissance jets had close calls.

Certain that he could do little to prevent an assault, he became grimly fatalistic, determined to confront the inevitable head-on regardless of the consequences. If "the imperialists invade Cuba with the goal of occupying it," he wrote to Khrushchev that night, "the Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialists could launch the first nuclear strike against it." Embracing Armageddon as an act of retributive justice, he urged Khrushchev to prepare to strike first.

Castro's letter struck Khrushchev as yet another warning (following the unauthorized destruction of the U-2) that the situation in Cuba was slipping out of control. Desperate to avoid Armageddon, or anything approaching it, he was, nevertheless, determined not to remove his missiles without receiving a *quid pro quo*. Moreover, he considered the blockade an illegal, outrageous act of war.

It was "outright banditry . . . The folly of degenerate imperialism . . . [and an] act of aggression that pushes mankind toward the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war," he had angrily written to Kennedy on October 24. He appeared determined then to dare the Americans to sink a Soviet vessel.

### **"The Knot of War"**

But now, three days later, circumstances changed his tone, and he anxiously remained in his office throughout the night. He was 9,000 miles from Havana but only 32 minutes from an intercontinental missile launched from the United States. As U.S. antisubmarine warfare forces closed in on Soviet submarines that had reached the blockade line, he wrote a personal, beseeching letter:

Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied.



And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot. And what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose.

Kennedy, too, had been roiled for days by conflicting emotions. At times he was not sure if he was being too cautious, too aggressive, too flexible, too rigid, or simply too worried.

"Pierre," he said earlier to his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, "Do you realize that if I make a mistake in this crisis 200 million people are going to get killed?" He was infuriated with his military chiefs for their cavalier attitude toward war, and he had lost patience with his advisers, who continued to offer contradictory recommendations. Like Khrushchev, Kennedy wanted a peaceful resolution, but he too had a bottom line: the Soviet missiles must be removed from Cuba.

Kennedy and Khrushchev were enemies, ideological and military adversaries, who blundered into a dangerous confrontation that neither wanted nor anticipated.

Each was aware that an accident, or even a misinterpretation, could set off a nuclear conflagration. Yet the circumstances of their political and international obligations, as well as their personal interests, compelled them to press their goals despite their recognition that nothing they could achieve was worth the consequences of a nuclear war.

Yet, by this night, they had nudged each other so close to the edge of the nuclear precipice that terror had entered their calculations.

Kennedy took two initiatives.

The first was to combine an earlier public pledge that the United States would not attack Cuba with a secret U.S. commitment, delivered that night by Robert Kennedy to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, to remove the offending Jupiter missiles in Turkey within several months.

The second initiative was to accept Rusk's suggestion to contact Secretary General of the United Nations U Thant and ask him to propose a missile swap (dismantling of the Jupiter missiles in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles). Kennedy would accept the offer, allowing him to avoid his commitment to the Joint Chiefs to begin military actions.

But Khrushchev had looked deeper into the abyss on Saturday night, and fearful that the ally he was seeking to protect was on the verge of starting a war, he precipitously ended the crisis on Sunday with a surprise announcement over Radio Moscow. "We had to act very quickly," Khrushchev told a visiting Eastern Bloc diplomat soon after. "That is also why we even used radio to contact the president. . . . This time we really were on the verge of war."

The most dangerous part of the crisis was over. What remained were negotiations related to the removal of associated weapons systems and inspection agreements (which Castro refused to accept).

### **In Search of Historical Perspective**

Looking back at the Cuban Missile Crisis from the perspective of 50 years, it is clear that the dangers were greater than contemporaries understood: that most of the advice the President received would have led to war and that Khrushchev and Kennedy entered the crisis as adversaries seeking advantages but quickly became partners in search of a peaceful resolution. In all of this, good luck was an indispensable ingredient. Five decades of research also reveals why, absent revision, history petrifies into myth.

The crisis was the transformative event in U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Cuban Cold War relations. It not only assured Castro's survival (the putative aim of the Soviet deployment), but it reset the unstated rules of the U.S.-Soviet nuclear relationship.

Nuclear deterrence could no longer be viewed as a stable condition that allowed governments to brandish nuclear weapons for diplomatic advantage. The crisis had exposed deterrence's fragilities, requiring that it be managed openly as a delicately balanced *process*. Kennedy had made the

essential point in his October 22 address:

Nuclear weapons are so destructive, and ballistic missiles are so swift, that any substantially increased possibility of their use or any sudden change in their deployment may well be regarded as a definite threat to peace.

Research also exposed the need to reexamine the definition of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Was it "The Thirteen Days" from October 16 to 28, 1962, that Robert Kennedy memorialized in his memoir of the event?

Or, was it the 13 weeks that began with the first shipments of Soviet missiles to Cuba?

Or, was it the 20 months from the debacle of the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 to November 1962, when the last of the Soviet missiles and bombers left Cuba?

Or, was it the 13 years since August 1949, when the Soviet Union successfully tested its first nuclear weapon?

The crisis fits all of those definitions, but as the historical lens is widened, more complexity, more politics, more miscalculations, more unintended consequences, and more *understanding* enter the narrative.

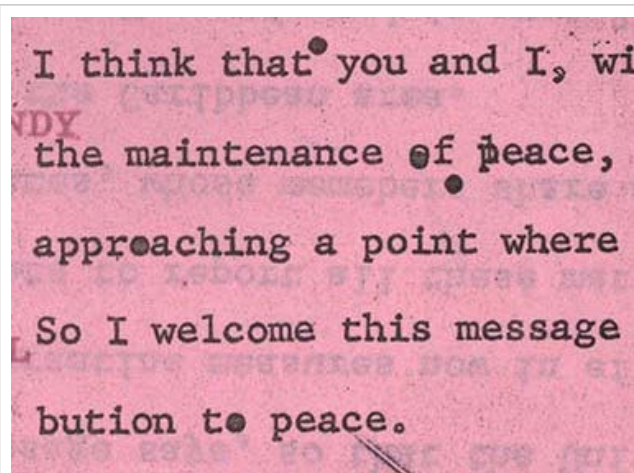
Expanding the boundaries of the 13 days to Castro's revolution and the failed Bay of Pigs invasion (1959 and 1961 respectively) explains the circumstances that made room for the crisis but does not deal with its root cause. *The root cause was the central role that nuclear weapons had come to play in the American-Soviet relationship.*

Disregarding how those weapons were seen and valued by Soviet and U.S. leaders during the 17 years that preceded the crisis is analogous to explaining the cause of the American Civil War by focusing solely on Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 while ignoring the history of slavery.

### More Than a Crisis: A Global Event

The alliance structures on both sides of the iron curtain—and the role that nuclear weapons played in maintaining those structures—made the Cuban Missile Crisis a *global* event, despite how Khrushchev, Kennedy and Castro defined it.

The Soviets called it the Caribbean Crisis, the Cubans labeled it the October Crisis. But it was also a Berlin Crisis, a NATO Crisis, a Sino-Soviet Crisis, a Sino-Indian Crisis, and a crisis in which the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations played major roles.



Kennedy immediately replied to Khrushchev that he considered the premier's Radio Moscow message "an important contribution to peace." (Kennedy Library)

It frightened people everywhere. Even a diplomat as experienced as British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan found the crisis "the week of most strain I can ever remember in my life."

The literal fright that the crisis engendered put an end to serious considerations of limited nuclear war. Having faced the possibility of such an outcome, most nuclear strategists recognized that a limited nuclear exchange would be more analogous to stumbling on a slippery slope than climbing the rungs of an escalation ladder. That recognition also brought an end to Khrushchev's efforts to eliminate West Berlin as a viable western enclave; it had been made clear that the dangers associated with such an effort could too easily slide out of control.

The crisis also exposed the multiple poles of the so-called bi-polar international system.

The United Nations, for example, played a far more important role in leading to its resolution than either the U.S. or Soviet governments were willing to acknowledge. By providing a world stage, it transformed the crisis into a public international Cold War drama that increased pressure for a peaceful resolution.

The crisis even contributed to Sino-Soviet hostility on the one hand, and on the other, to a readjustment of the ties between the United States and its European allies. It also had a salutary effect on Kennedy's Latin American outreach, "The Alliance for Progress."

The energetic effort to gain the OAS's approval for the blockade gave the nations of Central and South America a sense that they were being taken seriously, perhaps for the first time. It was a unique moment because, in effect, the United States pleaded for the support of its southern neighbors.

The effort to enlist the support of the OAS, and the Kennedy administration's choice of the UN as the forum for presenting its evidence of Soviet duplicity—the U-2 photographs—highlighted the importance of the nonmilitary dimension of the Cold War, the contest on both sides of the iron curtain for hearts and minds.

It exposed the limits of what great powers could do alone and demonstrated the influence that small states could exert—whether clients or enemies. Cuba was a major player in every aspect of the crisis, although no U.S. policy maker was willing to consider that Khrushchev was paying very close attention to what Castro was saying and doing.

There was one additional dimension to the crisis that has never received sufficient analytical attention: technology. Not just the technology that gave birth to the nuclear age but the vast array of related technologies that in many ways shaped the history of U.S.-USSR relations: ballistic missiles, surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles, and the U-2.

In important ways these technologies were actors in the Cuban Missile Crisis drama just as surely as any of the participants. It can even be argued that technology took the lead in both creating and resolving the crisis. It made things possible, and because they were possible, they were attempted. For that reason the Cuban Missile Crisis is a metaphor for modernity.

Henry Adams long ago penned that essential point: "Man has mounted science, and is now run away with."

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### Note on Sources

Even after 50 years, the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis continues to evolve. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library is the central depository for researching the American story. But documents that alter what is generally believed continue to be extracted from government files around the world.

Since the end of the Cold War, many Soviet sources describing Khrushchev's decision to ship missiles to Cuba, the details of Operation Anadyr, and the negotiations that concluded the crisis, have become available. Even Cuban sources, the most difficult to obtain, have enriched our understanding of the role that Castro played and specifics about the actions and activities of the Soviet Anadyr forces in Cuba. Some of the best Soviet and Cuban information emerged from the remarkable October 1992 Havana Conference that brought together U.S., Russian and Cuban senior veterans of the crisis for a detailed discussion and review of the events. See James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, and the 1992 ABC documentary film *The Missiles of October: What the World Didn't Know*.

In the United States, the most important source of international documents on the crisis is the National

Security Archive at George Washington University. In addition, a special issue of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars' fall 2012 *Cold War International History Bulletin* has published English-language translations of documents from archives in numerous nations: Japan, China, Hungary, France, Israel, Holland, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, and elsewhere. The crisis was truly a global event.

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