



# Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis

Three key questions to frame any discussion of one of history's most frightening military confrontations.

Francis J. Gavin

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**The Balance of Strategic Nuclear Forces:** One of the most controversial issues from the crisis is calculating what the precise balance of strategic nuclear forces actually was and what role this imbalance played in determining the outcome. There is little doubt that the United States possessed an overwhelming superiority in deliverable strategic nuclear capability, as much as seventeen to one in some estimates. To what extent did this superiority matter? Many scholars have argued it is impossible to translate nuclear superiority into effective coercive power, while others have argued the opposite. For the Cuban Missile Crisis, this question turns on whether both sides in the crisis believed the United States could have launched a first strike that would have destroyed the Soviets' ability to respond in kind—the so-called splendid first strike—and whether these perceptions influenced each side's behavior during the crisis.

**The Balance of Resolve:** In a non-nuclear world, the credibility of threats often turned on calculations of the balance of conventional military power between adversaries. A threat made by a country with more tanks, battleships and troops than its adversary often carried more weight, and was more likely to be successful, than threats from states that lacked military superiority. In the nuclear age, however, there is little agreement on whether and how nuclear threats work, regardless of the balance of forces. In a world where any nuclear

use may be irrational, might the side with the greatest willingness to take risks prevail?

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### The Fallout

What were the consequences and larger meaning of the crisis?

**The origins of détente:** 1962 was an extraordinarily dangerous year. 1963, however, saw a dramatic decrease in tensions and the beginnings of what we might call détente between the superpowers. While there were dangers to be sure—the Cold War rivalry heated up considerably in the

late 1970s and early 1980s—never again was the danger of thermonuclear war so imminent. The crisis ended peacefully, tensions over Berlin abated and negotiations commenced for a limited test-ban treaty. Was this cooling of tensions simply a response to coming so close to and ultimately averting catastrophe? Or were the fundamental clash of interests that drove the crisis in the first place somehow resolved? While U.S.-Soviet relations improved, America's relations with key NATO partners such as France, Great Britain and West Germany became, in different ways and at different levels, more turbulent and strained. What was the connection?

**The origins of a quagmire:** Many scholars have pointed to the deliberations of Kennedy's executive committee during the "thirteen days" as a model for managing complex, dangerous crises. A less useful consequence of the executive-committee process may have been a misplaced faith by American policy makers in their ability to control and dictate crises, send effective signals and calibrate escalation, lessons that many believe led to some of the tragic mistakes behind the military escalation in Southeast Asia. Did the wrong lessons learned by the decision makers in Camelot bring the disaster of the Vietnam War?

### The Role of Nuclear Weapons

As policy makers debate the consequences of how to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, understanding the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis may be more valuable than ever. Did the presence of nuclear weapons prevent a crisis from exploding into a thermonuclear war? In other words, did deterrence work? Or were the Soviets and

Americans simply lucky to avoid a catastrophe? And would such a crisis ever have occurred in a world that had no nuclear weapons?

The final historical lesson may be about the validity of historical lessons themselves. How much of what happened fifty years ago was unique to its time and place, and how much is generalizable to the world we live in today? For decades, policy makers and international-relations experts have crafted theories, morals and rules from this brush with Armageddon and applied them to contemporary foreign-policy dilemmas.

But for the average college student born after the end of the Cold War, the bigger question may be why the Soviet Union and the United States were willing to rest the fate of the world on the placement of missiles that would soon be irrelevant, particularly once the Soviets achieved a secure second-strike force by the mid- to late-1960s (a fact both sides knew). The crisis, like much of the Cold War, seems bizarre. It is still hard to place and make sense of it.

Perhaps on a similar anniversary fifty years from now, a student, not yet born, will wrestle with the same dilemma about our current standoff with Iran.

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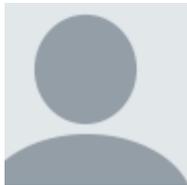
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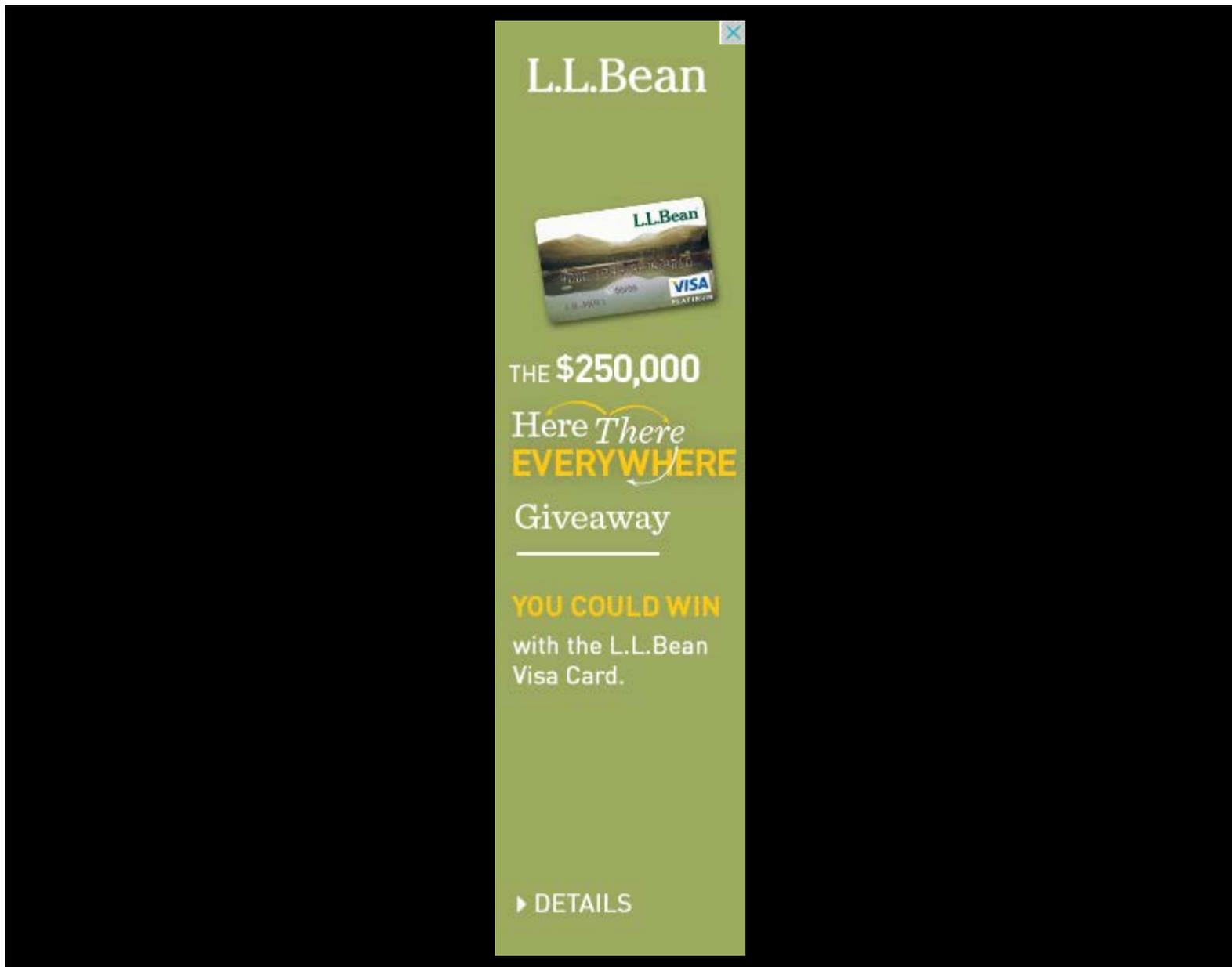
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