

LOOKING BACK: Reconsidering the Perilous Cuban Missile Crisis 50 Years Later

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LOOKING BACK

Reconsidering the Perilous Cuban Missile Crisis 50 Years Later

Last month I said we weren't going to [allow Soviet missiles and nuclear weapons in Cuba]. Last month I should have said we don't care. But when we said we're not going to, and they [the Soviets] go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then I think our risks increase.

— President John Kennedy, in the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, October 16, 1962¹

Fifty years ago during the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union and the United States came dangerously close to war. It could have escalated too easily into an all-out nuclear exchange.

In October 1962, the United States had about 27,000 nuclear weapons, and the Soviets had about 3,000. In a first salvo of a nuclear exchange with its intercontinental adversary, the United States could have launched about 3,000 nuclear weapons and the Soviets about 250.² The total megatonnage in that initial exchange would probably have been approximately 50,000 to 100,000 times greater than that of the Hiroshima bomb. Such use of nuclear weapons in 1962 would have imperiled not only the Soviet and U.S. peoples, but much if not all of humankind.

In seeking to determine policy in October 1962, President John Kennedy met in secret from October 16 to 22 with his chosen high-level advisers in the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm.

To the world, the week of the Cuban missile crisis began publicly on October 22, with Kennedy's dramatic TV and radio announcement of what he termed Soviet "offensive" missiles in Cuba.

He declared that the weapons must be withdrawn and that he was establishing a naval quarantine.³

To do nothing in the face of the Soviet act would be unacceptable, he indicated. The implication of Kennedy's October 22 speech and various other U.S. government statements was that the Soviet deployment in Cuba was overturning the strategic nuclear balance and that unless the Soviet missiles in Cuba were removed, they would place the United States in imminent military peril.

Kennedy also implied that first trying secret diplomacy would have been inadequate and that a public confrontation, the quarantine, was both essential and prudent. Left unspoken in public by Kennedy on October 22 and throughout the week by the U.S. government was what would happen if the Soviets militarily challenged the U.S. quarantine or if they did not soon agree to withdraw their missiles from Cuba. The odds of war seemed quite high.

The near-deadly week of dramatic public confrontation, with the U.S.-imposed quarantine and the dangers of a shoot-out at sea or far worse, seemed to end when the Soviets backed down

on October 28. They publicly promised to withdraw their missiles from Cuba, and the United States seemed to promise not to invade Cuba in the future. In fact, the crisis continued, although behind the scenes and in greatly reduced form, for some weeks in the fall of 1962 while the two great powers argued about the removal of Soviet bombers from Cuba and whether there would be on-site inspection of the removal of the Soviet missiles.⁴

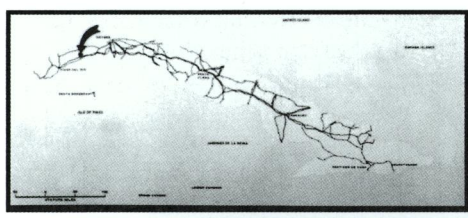
The missile crisis raises many important and often interrelated questions that are considered in this article. How did the public understand the crisis at the time, and how did memoirist-historians and others present it for a number of years afterward? What of significance was covered up or not addressed in those published treatments? In particular, what were the limitations and failures of U.S. decision-making during the crisis, and how should newer evidence and interpretations influence assessments of the crisis?

How close did the crisis come to going out of control and spiraling into war? What are the implications of such near-disasters for managing crises and for high-level decision-making, especially when involving nuclear weapons? What role did ethical thinking play in the high-level decision-making?

The 'Finest Hour' Interpretations

In the fall of 1962 and for about a quarter-century afterward, Kennedy's handling of the missile crisis was viewed as his finest hour. By the official and quasi-official U.S. versions of events, which generally dominated popular and scholarly understanding into the mid-1980s, Kennedy had been skillfully tough and resolute and therefore eminently

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AFP/Getty Images

A base for medium-range missiles in San Cristóbal, Cuba, is shown in this photo from October 23, 1962.

successful. He had, through shrewd intelligence and careful planning, avoided war while compelling Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to back down.

Kennedy, in that popular version, had on October 27 resisted the Soviet Union's public demand for a trade of the 15 U.S. intermediate-range Jupiter missiles in Turkey in return for Soviet removal of its missiles from Cuba. Kennedy had maintained the NATO alliance, defended the U.S.-led system of collective security, and showed that victory could be won without yielding to Communist demands. It was a story of American pluck and skill, of U.S. strength and power, and of wise presidential leadership in managing a crisis.

Such general contentions were promoted in the memoirs-cum-histories by Kennedy aides Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in their heralded, mid-1960s volumes on the Kennedy administration.⁵ Their uncritical

analyses of the missile crisis were further advanced in the late 1960s by Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days* on that dangerous period. (President Kennedy's brother, Robert, who was attorney general at the time of the crisis, was a member of the ExComm.)

The truly great triumph of the pro-Kennedy memoirists was the celebration of U.S. and Kennedy success and the creation of often false history that sometimes involved knowing deception on crucially important matters in the Cuban missile crisis.

Uncovering a Different History

As key documents and the tapes of the ExComm meetings were slowly declassified and other new information became available, the narrative and interpretation advanced by the ardently pro-Kennedy literature on the crisis were punctured decisively. Declassified documents revealed that, on October

16, building on earlier small attacks (Operation Mongoose), President Kennedy and his brother Robert had wanted new sabotage expeditions against Cuba, apparently without realizing that such quasi-military activities could have led the Soviets and Cubans to believe that a U.S. attack was beginning and to respond by unleashing military retaliation directly against the United States.⁶

The ExComm recordings, when declassified, also underscored that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had first interpreted the Soviet missile emplacement in Cuba as constituting a domestic political threat to the administration, not a significantly increased military threat to the United States. McNamara, national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, and President Kennedy had all agreed that the Soviet missiles did not realistically increase the military threat to the United States.⁷

At the time of the crisis, the United

States assumed it had significant superiority over the Soviet Union in intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and other delivery systems capable of reaching its main adversary. The U.S. numbers included about 177 ICBMs versus what was believed, incorrectly, to be about 75 Soviet ICBMs. It turned out, according to Soviet information released much later, that the Soviets probably had only about 20 to 44 ICBMs. Thus, the U.S.-to-Soviet ratio of at least 4-to-1 and possibly more than twice that gave the United States a near-counterforce capability.⁸

In other words, a U.S. first strike could destroy a very high number of the Soviet land-based ICBMs and might, according to the then-recent public explanations of counterforce thinking, make any Soviet retaliatory strike unlikely. Such analysis, with the continuing large U.S. buildup in missiles under Kennedy, meant that the Soviets were dangerously behind and that the situation would worsen for them.⁹

In looking back on the missile crisis and in particular in focusing on the ExComm transcripts, analysts should be struck by the poor intellectual quality of the discussions at those high-level meetings. The dialogue was sometimes spastic and frequently desultory. Some of the most important issues were treated inadequately or virtually ignored.

One of the most important such issues was why, in the analysis of ExComm members, the Soviets had put the missiles in Cuba. That was possibly the crucial question. It was not pursued systematically; distressingly, it was treated in piecemeal ways. The general answers often converged, albeit loosely, on the idea that Khrushchev was seeking to gain valuable leverage in the ongoing Berlin problem, probably to challenge U.S. credibility and that possibly he hoped to weaken U.S. support in Latin America. Much of that could be cast as likely challenges to the United States' and Kennedy's "courage and commitments."¹⁰

The analysis of a likely Berlin motive for Khrushchev was possibly correct,¹¹ although the evidence on that interpretation is still not adequate. Yet, other Soviet motives now generally recognized as important received little attention from Kennedy and the members

of the ExComm in October 1962.

Aside from a few passing comments, mostly by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and CIA director John McCone,¹² no one in the ExComm focused on the fact that the Soviets were far behind in the strategic arms race and might well be acting, in part, to narrow that gap or to stop it from getting worse. Excluding that motive undoubtedly helped greatly narrow the range of options that U.S. decision-makers considered during the crisis.

Significantly, no ExComm member suggested that Khrushchev and the Soviets might have been acting, at least in part, to defend Cuba from a feared U.S.-sponsored attack.¹³ Yet in a well-publicized statement of September 11, 1962, the Soviets emphasized their commitment to defending Fidel Castro's regime against a U.S. attack and seemed genuinely to fear that the United States (after the 1961 Bay of Pigs venture) might sponsor such an attack.¹⁴ Moreover,



U.S. President John Kennedy announces the blockade of Cuba during a televised address on October 22, 1962.

as some ExComm members knew, the United States had carried out a series of secret CIA marauding attacks on Cuba in the preceding 12 months as part of Operation Mongoose and had developed secret plans for possible large-scale U.S. military attacks.

Surprisingly, aside from a few, rather oblique passing comments, no one in the ExComm concluded that Khrushchev and the Soviets might have been responding to the very recent U.S. emplacement of Jupiter missiles in Turkey. At one

uncture, Kennedy did briefly liken the Soviet emplacement in Cuba to a U.S. missile emplacement in Turkey, but he apparently had forgotten that the United States already had put missiles in Turkey. When he was told that the United States had done so, he seemed to lose interest in thinking about explaining the Soviet reaction as a response to the U.S. action in Turkey.¹⁵ Yet, years later, Khrushchev was publicly and quite plausibly to claim exactly that.¹⁶

It still remains something of a puzzle

that the ExComm almost completely ignored these multiple explanations of likely Soviet motives: protecting Cuba, narrowing the gap in strategic nuclear missiles, and responding to U.S. missiles in Turkey. There was a marked failure of intellect in the ExComm, as well as a marked failure to seek, even briefly, to view the international situation from an adversary's perspective.

Such failures, as McNamara pointed out in later years, suggest the need to learn an important lesson: seek to understand the adversary and how the situation looks to that country's leadership. That may require a level of empathy and a reduction in self-righteousness.¹⁷

The various pro-Kennedy memoirs also concealed a crucial set of facts that significantly alters the narrative. On October 27, Kennedy made a deal with the Soviets through his brother Robert under which the United States would yield to the Soviet demand for removal of U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey. One term of the deal, however, was that the deal had to remain secret. Only about half of Kennedy's top U.S. advisers knew of that agreement.¹⁸

The deal was kept secret for about 25 years, and thus most of the attentive world did not know that Kennedy, despite the many claims about his steady toughness, had actually "softened" to make a deal in order to achieve a U.S.-Soviet settlement. Even Lyndon Johnson, who, as Kennedy's vice president, succeeded him as president after his assassination in 1963, was not aware of the deal.

As president, Johnson often was driven by his sense of rivalry with his dead predecessor. One must wonder whether Johnson, in his lengthy quest for victory in Vietnam, would have clung so resolutely to a policy of toughness in that conflict if he had known that the key claim of Kennedy's finest hour was factually false. If Johnson had known that, might he have been more flexible in Vietnam and have conducted meaningful negotiations to end that costly war?¹⁹

Managing a Crisis?

Another issue, probably separate from the problems of generally not understanding Soviet motivation,



Cuban leader Fidel Castro (left) and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev pose on May 6, 1963, during Castro's visit to Moscow.

was failing to anticipate the profound difficulties of managing a crisis and of avoiding potentially catastrophic errors. In discussing U.S. responses to the Soviet missiles in Cuba, no one in the ExComm dwelled on the likelihood of catastrophic error and thus on the need to take that

possibly presaging to a wary Soviet Union a likely U.S. first strike; a test launch in California of a U.S. ICBM that might have been interpreted by Soviet agents as the beginning of a U.S. first strike; a Soviet submarine captain in the Caribbean apparently coming close

diplomacy.

Probably the most spirited argument along the lines of trying diplomacy first came in an October 18 letter of advice to Kennedy from Charles Bohlen, a former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union and recognized Soviet expert. Bohlen

Kennedy, despite the many claims about his steady toughness, had actually “softened” to make a deal in order to achieve a U.S.-Soviet settlement.

issue into account.

In the ExComm's planning and analysis, there was usually a heady and profoundly unrealistic sense that the crisis could be well managed: Serious mistakes would not occur, organizations would not make dangerous errors, and crucial orders would not be misunderstood or violated.

The group generally ignored basic and seemingly obvious problems, such as if someone in the U.S. system launched nuclear missiles through error or anti-Soviet anger or if someone in the Soviet system did that.

In elaborate chains of command with various people operating at different levels and often acting amid anxiety and fatigue in a crisis in making crucial decisions, various mistakes—serious mistakes—are virtually inevitable. Signals will be misinterpreted, actions will not be properly calibrated, situations will be misunderstood, necessary revisions of procedures will not be made, and excessive risks will be taken. These problems may be compounded, adding to the danger that what is desired at the upper levels of government may easily unravel and come undone elsewhere in complicated systems and organizations.²⁰

Political scientist Scott Sagan and journalist Michael Dobbs have done important work in documenting this phenomenon for the missile-crisis period. Among what seem to have been unusually dangerous errors in the crisis were the following: a high-level U.S. military alert (DEFCON-2) given in the open communications system,

to using a nuclear torpedo against U.S. ships; and a U.S. U-2 reconnaissance plane straying into Soviet air space, with U.S. planes armed with nuclear weapons rushed aloft to help but fortunately no shoot-out in the air.²¹ Any one of these acts could have escalated, and some might have quickly involved the use of nuclear weapons.

In none of these frightening U.S. cases was Kennedy or even one of his top associates actually in control. Similarly, in the Soviet case of the submarine captain, Khrushchev and other high-level Soviet officials were not truly in control.²²

The many revelations, decades after the crisis, of near misses led McNamara to conclude that such crises cannot be managed and therefore must be avoided.²³

Larger Questions

For a present-day reader of the ExComm minutes and related declassified materials, it still seems lamentable and not easily explicable that Kennedy and his advisers so easily rejected an initial attempt at secret diplomacy with the Soviets before moving to the dangerous option of a quarantine. The scattered evidence indicates that no one in the ExComm significantly pushed for trying secret diplomacy first, the quarantine emerged as the responsible alternative to invasion or attack, and there was a developing majority, not including the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a few others, on endorsing the quarantine route. Those dissenters wanted stronger military action without initial attempts at

argued that diplomacy first was far safer. If it failed, the United States could still move to other routes to try to secure withdrawal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba.²⁴ In contrast, if the United States began with a public confrontation—a quarantine or even more—the result could be war.

Bohlen did not spell out the implications, but they were stark. What would happen if the war became nuclear? How could it be stopped? What would be left of the United States or other countries?

Such painful implications indirectly raise a related set of unstated issues dealing with ethical considerations. Did a U.S. leader have the moral right to choose a course that, quite plausibly, could have meant nuclear war, the deaths of many or all U.S. citizens, similar carnage in the Soviet Union and on much of the European continent, and perhaps the ending of all human life itself? In other words, what was the ethical obligation of the president and his advisers to humanity at large?

During the recorded ExComm deliberations and in the various declassified files of that time, no one in the upper reaches of government explicitly raised that profound question of ethical rights and responsibilities reaching beyond obligations to the United States itself and involving responsibilities to and the rights of other peoples elsewhere.²⁵

On the 50th anniversary of that perilous crisis, it seems appropriate now to analyze and assess it. That involves,

at least in part, focusing on the narrow U.S. decision-making, the rather quick U.S. elimination of the option of secret negotiations, and the exclusion in 1962 by both sides of large ethical questions reaching beyond the United States and Soviet Union to consider the obligations of those nation-state leaders to humankind.

ENDNOTES

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2. Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, "Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945-2010," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August 2010, p. 81; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1989), p. 208; see also Norman Polmar and John D. Gresham, *DEFCON-2: Standing on the Brink of Nuclear War During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2006), p. 16.

3. Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1962 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), 1963), pp. 806-809. This is the source for all references to Kennedy's October 22, 1962, speech.

4. Barton J. Bernstein, "Kennedy and Ending the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Foreign Service Journal* (July 1979); Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 110-114; Daniel G. Coleman, "The Missiles of November, December, January, February...: The Problem of Acceptable Risk in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 2007): 5-48.

5. Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 667-718; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), pp. 794-841.

6. Naftali and Zelikow, *Presidential Recordings*, p. 454; U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63*, Vol. 11 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1997), pp. 45-47.

7. Naftali and Zelikow, *Presidential Recordings*, pp. 440-441, 464.

8. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 202-203, 206-207 (October 27, 1962, estimate on Soviet missile-launcher numbers and the figure of possibly 44 Soviet

missile launchers, which was a much later U.S. intelligence estimate). Soviet Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov in 1989 stated that there were only "about twenty" Soviet ICBM launchers in October 1962. Most analysts seem to have accepted Volkogonov's report, not the U.S. intelligence's higher number of 44, and have assumed that the number of reported missile launchers indicated the number of Soviet ICBMs in October 1962. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 440.

9. Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, p. 430.

10. Naftali and Zelikow, *Presidential Recordings*; Sorensen memorandum, October 17, 1962, Sorensen Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA.

11. Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, pp. 441-451, 457-460, 464, 492. Analysts should have serious doubts about ascribing a Berlin motive because the evidence on that issue seems weak.

12. Naftali and Zelikow, *Presidential Recordings*, p. 410.

13. On Operation Mongoose, see Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 6-10. On anti-Castro actions and plans, see Polmar and Gresham, *DEFCON-2*, pp. 48-50, 218-230.

14. David Larson, ed., *"The Cuban Crisis" of 1962: Selected Documents and Chronology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 7-17.

15. Naftali and Zelikow, *Presidential Recordings*, p. 451.

16. Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. and ed. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 492-494; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, trans. and ed. by Jerrold L. Schechter (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), pp. 170-177; Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 10-11; for a different view, see Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, p. 492.

17. Robert McNamara, telephone interviews with author, 1990-1992; Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), pp. 322-323.

18. McGeorge Bundy, interviews with author, 1990-1992; Barton J. Bernstein, "Reconsidering the Missile Crisis: Dealing With the Problems of American Jupiters in Turkey," in *The Cuban*

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19. See Max Holland and Tara Marie Egan, "What Did LBJ Known About the Cuban Missile Crisis? And When Did He Know It?" October 19, 2007, <http://hnn.us/node/43977>.

20. These general notions are developed far more fully and with sophistication in other works. See Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living With High-Risk Technologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

21. Sagan, *Limits of Safety*, chs. 2-3, 5; Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), pp. 48-49, 60, 95-98, 174-176, 237, 271-274; William Burr and Thomas S. Blanton, eds., "The Submarines of October: U.S. and Soviet Encounters During the Cuban Missile Crisis," *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book*, No. 75 (October 31, 2002), and Alexander Mozgovoi, "The Cuban Samba of the Quartet of Foxtrots: Soviet Submarines in the Caribbean Crisis of 1962," *Military Parade*, trans. Svetlana Savranskaya (2002).

22. Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, pp. 237, 283-284, 296.

23. James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), pp. 100-101.

24. Charles Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1969* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), pp. 491-492 (October 18, 1962, memorandum).

25. See Blight and Welch, *On the Brink*, pp. 182-183 (uncritically trusts officials' highly dubious 1980s recollections on 1962 broad ethical concerns). For similar trusting use of highly dubious post-1962 materials on 1962 broad ethical thinking in the crisis, see Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, p. 271 (relying on material found on pages 106 and 127 of Robert F. Kennedy's book *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*). Because there are very substantial 1962 archival materials on the missile crisis period, including many ExComm recordings, and there is no 1962 evidence in any of these materials of such ethical thinking, analysts should not rely on much later claims by officials that such thinking occurred during the crisis. The essential evidence should be 1962 material, not later claims.