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The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*

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On 14 October 1962, a US surveillance plane, the U-2, photographed medium-range (approximately 1000 miles) missile sites under construction in Cuba. The revelation marked the beginning of a thirteen-day crisis that saw the United States deliver a public ultimatum to the Soviet Union, saw Soviet and US warships come close to tangling on the high seas and, indeed, saw the world verge on a nuclear holocaust. The British historian A.J.P. Taylor characterised the Cuban missile crisis as the two most important weeks in human history. Taylor may have overstated, but he reminded us that this was the closest we have come to extinguishing human civilisation. This crisis, which saw the Soviet Union accede to US demands, has been called President John F. Kennedy's and America's finest hour. It has also been described as a sobering experience for the president and the superpowers, leading to détente. But, in current historical revision, the missile crisis has also been called a reckless display of power that had some unfortunate repercussions. Almost everyone over the age of forty or so remembers the events of the thirteen days in October. This paper reviews the causes of the crisis, the conduct of the crisis and the significant results.

NEW EVIDENCE

It is particularly appropriate to review the Cuban missile crisis because of the abundance of new evidence that has become available in the past three years. As part of the process of *glasnost* and the thawing of the Cold War, there has been a series of Soviet-American conferences attended by the surviving participants of the crisis. Presidential advisers like McGeorge Bundy, C. Douglas Dillon, Robert MacNamara and Theodore Sorensen have joined these conclaves. On the Soviet side, most of the key actors are dead, but those who were younger, junior officials have offered their views. We have heard from, among others, Sergei Khrushchev, the Soviet leader's son, Fyodor Burlatsky, one of Nikita Khrushchev's speechwriters, and Sergo Mikoyan, son of Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan. The Soviet-American exchanges at these conferences on the missile

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crisis have been both lively and revealing. And the Soviet participants have readily granted interviews: Sergei Khrushchev, for example, has related what his father told him many years ago about the missile crisis. But scholars know that they must examine these dialogues and interviews carefully. Particularly in regard to the Soviets, their accounts must be classified not as direct testimony but as 'historical hearsay'.¹ Neither the Soviet Union nor Cuba has yet declassified documents on the missile crisis.

We do have, however, significant new evidence on the US side, because scholars, the John F. Kennedy Library and organisations like the National Security Archive of Washington, DC, have used the mandatory declassification review process and the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to open files.² This adds to material that was declassified in 1975 by the Senate Select Committee headed by Senator Frank Church of Idaho, which investigated the subject of US-directed assassination efforts.³ This new documentary evidence has encouraged Kennedy-era officials to speak extensively about the crisis. My own contribution to the historical debate comes through my book *Eisenhower and Latin America*.⁴ Using newly declassified evidence, I traced the growing hostility between the United States and Fidel Castro's Cuba.

ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS

The bulk of the new documentary evidence relates to the origins of the crisis, and I shall devote much of my paper to this subject.

In retrospect, scholars agree that the Soviet Union gambled recklessly by placing missiles in Cuba. Premier Khrushchev must have anticipated that President Kennedy and US intelligence agencies would quickly discover the ballistic missiles. Khrushchev should have known that Kennedy would have to react. Indeed, Kennedy believed that he would be 'impeached' if he did not respond to the challenge. What then were the Soviet leader's motives? Why would Khrushchev risk such a momentous confrontation?

In his memoirs, *Khrushchev remembers*, the Soviet premier stated that he wanted to protect Castro and counterbalance US missiles in Turkey. As he wrote, he would teach Americans 'just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you; we would be doing nothing more than giving them a little of their own medicine'.⁵ The new evidence suggests that Khrushchev may have had real

1. Raymond L. Garthoff, 'Comment: evaluating and using historical hearsay', *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990), 223–9.

2. Some of the new material has been published. See James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the brink: Americans and Soviets reexamine the missile crisis* (New York, 1989); 'White House tapes and minutes of the Cuban missile crisis', *International Security* 10 (Summer 1985), 164–203; 'October 27, 1962: Transcripts of the meetings of the EXCOMM', McGeorge Bundy transcriber, James G. Blight, ed., *International Security* 12 (Winter 1987–88), 30–92. Archival materials are on deposit at the Kennedy Library in Boston and the National Security Archive in Washington, DC.

3. US Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged assassination plots involving foreign leaders*, Senate Report No. 465, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, 1975).

4. Stephen G. Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: the foreign policy of anti-communism* (Chapel Hill, 1988), pp 117–33, 162–73.

5. Quoted in Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev remembers*, translated by Strobe Talbot (New York, 1971), pp 546–7.

concerns not only about missiles in Turkey but also about sharp disparities in the strategic nuclear arms race.

During the 1960 presidential campaign, candidate John Kennedy alleged that during the 1950s the Eisenhower/Nixon team had allowed a 'missile gap' to develop. Khrushchev knew that Kennedy and the US Defense establishment understood that there was a 'missile gap' but that it favoured the United States. In fact, Department of Defense official Roswell Gilpatric pointed to the US strategic superiority in a speech in October 1961. Nonetheless, President Kennedy accelerated US military spending. By mid-1962, the United States had 5000 strategic warheads; the Soviets had 300 warheads. In terms of inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the United States had a better than four to one advantage and was rapidly expanding its advantage. Under the Kennedy build-up, the number of ICBMs would increase from 53 in 1961 to 424 by 1963, with the installation of Minuteman missiles. By comparison, the Soviets had approximately twenty ICBMs on their soil in October 1962.⁶

Secretary of Defense MacNamara has now conceded that the Soviets could possibly have surmised that the United States was contemplating developing a first-strike capability. MacNamara has pointed to the heavy imbalance in warheads and missiles, loose statements emerging from the Pentagon and his own 'counterforce' speech of June 1962, when he spoke of the growing accuracy of weapons and their theoretical ability to attack enemy weapon systems in place.⁷

The fifteen Jupiter missiles positioned in Turkey also bear re-examination. The Kennedy administration's stance after the crisis was that these medium-range missiles were old, obsolete, unthreatening, and that, in any case, Kennedy had previously ordered their removal. The Soviets presumably should have been unconcerned. But the minutes of the meetings of the special committee, the so-called EXCOMM group, convened by President Kennedy to consider the crisis suggest different perceptions. At the beginning of the crisis, on 16 October, the president speculated on Soviet motivations. Kennedy said: 'It's just as if we suddenly began to put a major number of MRBMs in Turkey. Now that'd be goddamn dangerous'. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy responded: 'Well, we did Mr President'. To which Kennedy replied: 'Yeah, but that was five years ago'.⁸

The president's recollection of the history of the missiles in Turkey was inaccurate. Although the Jupiters had been authorised in 1959, President Dwight Eisenhower delayed their deployment, probably judging that they were unnecessarily provocative. The missiles were deployed in mid-1961 after the stormy meeting in Vienna between Kennedy and Khrushchev, became operational in April 1962, and were turned over to Turkish forces on 22 October 1962, the very day Kennedy publicly demanded that the Soviets dismantle their missiles in Cuba. To be sure, Kennedy had previously ordered a study to consider the missiles in Turkey, but he had not actually ordered their removal.⁹

6. John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States* (New York, 1990), pp 245–8, 260.

7. Ronald E. Powaski, *March to Armageddon: the United States and the nuclear arms race, 1939 to the present* (New York, 1987), pp 93–105.

8. Quoted in Thomas G. Paterson, 'Cuba', in Thomas G. Paterson (ed.), *Kennedy's quest for victory: American foreign policy, 1961–1963* (New York, 1989), p. 143.

9. Barton J. Bernstein, 'Commentary: reconsidering Khrushchev's gambit—defending

Whereas the imbalance in the nuclear arms race may have prompted Khrushchev to embark on a hazardous course, it was in Cuba that he chose to confront the United States. Why would Fidel Castro permit Soviet missiles on Cuban territory? As a client state of the Soviet Union, Cuba is frequently depicted as a pawn in the Cold War. But the release of the photographs taken by the U-2 reconnaissance plane led to calls in the United States for an invasion or bombing of Cuba. Could Castro not have foreseen this? Why would he risk endangering the Cuban Revolution? Was he a desperate man? Put another way, did he strike a bargain with Khrushchev, because he and the Soviet Union feared a 'second Bay of Pigs'? It is on these questions that the most new documentary evidence exists.

The most likely sequence of events that led to a Soviet-Cuban agreement on offensive weapons is that in the spring of 1962 Khrushchev and his advisers began contemplating sending missiles to Cuba. This plan was initiated by Raúl Castro, the Cuban leader's brother, during his visit to Moscow in July, and an accord was reached in late August/early September when Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara, Fidel Castro's trusted adviser, travelled to Moscow.

Now the traditional explanation of US policy during the Soviet-Cuban plotting is that the United States was shocked by the 14 October discovery. After the Bay of Pigs invasion fiasco of April 1961, the United States claimed that it confined its actions to warning the Soviets about putting offensive weapon systems in Cuba, conducting reconnaissance flights over the island and gathering intelligence. In short, between April 1961 and October 1962, the United States launched no hostile missions against Castro's Cuba. After 1975, that history had to be modified with the revelations of the Church Committee. From 1960 through 1963, the United States persistently attempted to assassinate Fidel Castro. The Church Committee recorded eight specific attempts on the Cuban's life. These included plots to poison his drink, poison his cigars, explode exotic seashells near his favourite skin-diving area, and hire underworld figures to arrange a 'gangland-style hit'.¹⁰

The assassination schemes were supported by 'Operation Mongoose'. Approved by President Kennedy in November 1961, Operation Mongoose authorised the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to train Cubans to infiltrate the island and carry out sabotage activities. Drawing upon a \$50 million annual budget, over 400 CIA agents and thousands of Cuban exiles, under the command of Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, made war against Cuba. CIA-trained saboteurs burned cane fields and blew up factories and oil storage tanks. CIA agents contaminated goods leaving European ports for Cuba, and they bribed European manufacturers to produce faulty equipment for Cuba, such as off-centre ball bearings.¹¹

Yet, none of these operations led to the overthrow or death of Castro. When faced with this new evidence in the mid-1970s, Kennedy administration officials tended to dismiss Operation Mongoose as a harassment and spoiling campaign, not a second Bay of Pigs. But, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs failure, President Kennedy was unrepentant, proclaiming on 20 April 1961: 'Let the record

the Soviet Union and Cuba', *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990), 233.

10. Senate Select Committee, *Alleged assassination plots*, pp 72–82.

11. Thomas G. Paterson, 'Commentary: the defense of Cuba theme and the missile crisis', *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990), 252–4.

show that our restraint is not inexhaustible'.¹² The new documentary evidence demonstrates that the president meant what he said.

The documents suggest that a US invasion of Cuba was central to hopes for Operation Mongoose's success and that the covert programme was intended to have the capacity to produce a pretext for direct US intervention. Hopefully an uprising could be sparked that would provide a justification for a massive rescue mission carried out by US armed forces. This interpretation emerges from the guidelines established for Operation Mongoose and from the declassified minutes of Colonel Lansdale's group meetings. Moreover, during the first ten months of 1962, the Pentagon, on orders from the president and secretary of defense, worked intensively on contingency plans for an invasion of Cuba. The documents point to an invasion scheduled for 20 October 1962.

Time will not permit us to pore over all key documents. Let me just highlight a few critical decisions.

On 5 October 1961, President Kennedy ordered the joint chiefs of staff (JCS) to begin contingency planning for Fidel Castro's removal. By February 1962, the US Army was noting that 'the seriousness of planning' for an invasion was emphasised by the JCS, 'when they established a first priority for the completion of all Cuban contingency plans'. As part of the planning process, in April, May and August of 1962, US military forces carried out large-scale manoeuvres in the Caribbean. For example, the April manoeuvres involved 40,000 military personnel, culminating with a 10,000-man amphibious assault on a small island near Puerto Rico.¹³

The Kennedy administration also tied the contingency planning for an invasion to the covert campaign against Castro's Cuba. On 23 August 1962, Kennedy authorised the development of 'Operation Mongoose Plan B Plus', which called for provoking a full-scale revolt in Cuba requiring a US military response. On 2 October, Secretary of Defense MacNamara ordered the JCS to intensify preparations for either an air strike or invasion of Cuba by 20 October. On 4 October, Attorney General Robert Kennedy told Lansdale and the CIA that he wanted 'massive sabotage activity' directed immediately against Cuba. And, on 6 October, after discussions with MacNamara, the JCS ordered the 'highest state of readiness' for Plans 312, 314 and 316, which were respectively air strikes to be followed by an invasion of Cuba. Over the next ten days, before the discovery of the missiles, the Pentagon ordered aircraft, ships and troops into position in Florida, reinforced the US military base at Guantánamo Bay, and pre-positioned supplies such as petroleum, oil and lubricants.¹⁴ These plans and movements indicate something more than routine contingency planning.

Before drawing conclusions from this new evidence, however, we should be cautious. We should remember that the unfolding of events is a dynamic process. Intensive preparations for an attack on Cuba are related to growing alarm in the United States about Soviet shipments of conventional weapons, including surface to air missiles (SAMs), to Cuba. Attention should also be paid to chronology. The Soviets, in deciding in the summer of 1962 to station medium-range

12. Kennedy, quoted in *General Services Administration, Public papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, 1962), pp 304–6.

13. James G. Hershberg, 'Before "The Missiles of October": did Kennedy plan a missile strike against Cuba?', *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990), 171–82.

14. *Ibid.*, 183–92.

ballistic missiles in Cuba, cannot know what Secretary MacNamara or the JCS will order in early October. Finally, when confronted with the new evidence, Kennedy administration officials have vociferously and repeatedly denied that President Kennedy would have ever ordered, without provocation, an invasion of Cuba.¹⁵

Notwithstanding these caveats and denials, a question about the origins of the Cuban missile crisis arises. Could the Soviets and Cubans have concluded that invasion was possible and devised their missile plan in response? Perhaps both the Soviet Union and Cuba sought deterrence. As Robert MacNamara has conceded, 'if I were in Moscow or Havana at that time, I would have believed that the Americans were planning for an invasion'. He has added: 'So the Soviets may well have believed we were seeking Castro's overthrow plus a first strike capability. This may have led them to do what they did in Cuba'.¹⁶

Until the Soviets and Cubans open their files, scholars must be circumspect in analysing the origins of the Cuban missile crisis. But, in the light of the newly declassified evidence on the US side, we can move beyond Theodore Sorensen's lament that 'I don't know now, and I didn't know then' why the Soviets placed missiles in Cuba.¹⁷

CONDUCT OF THE CRISIS

Compared to the origins of the crisis, there is less new material on the actual conduct of the crisis, but enough new evidence has surfaced to raise unsettling questions.

President Kennedy's performance during the Cuban missile crisis has traditionally been praised as a superb example of crisis management. With his use of a naval blockade of Cuba, labelled a military quarantine, the president achieved his demand of having the Soviets dismantle the missile sites. Americans boasted that 'we went eyeball to eyeball with the Russians and they blinked'. Biographers, such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr and Theodore Sorensen, also awarded the president high marks for resisting pressure from some EXCOMM conferees for a military strike on Cuba and for achieving a peaceful resolution of the crisis. In particular, they point to his master-stroke of seizing on a conciliatory message sent by Khrushchev and using that as a basis for settlement.

To be sure, prior to the declassification of documents, scholars had been asking hard questions, particularly about the tactic of issuing a public ultimatum to the Soviets. They have noted that the resolution of the crisis involved a diplomatic compromise. In return for the removal of missiles, the United States publicly pledged not to invade Cuba and privately assured the Soviets that the Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be dismantled. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson actually suggested this compromise at an EXCOMM meeting. But fellow members rudely dismissed Stevenson's diplomatic stance, ruled out private negotiations and recommended the public ultimatum.

Scholars have also wondered whether the 42 medium-range missiles in Cuba radically undermined the balance of power, thereby justifying a public confron-

15. Pierre Salinger, 'Gaps in the Cuban missile crisis story', *New York Times*, 5 February 1989, section 4, p. 25.

16. MacNamara, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 25; Paterson, 'Cuba', p. 141.

17. Sorensen, quoted in Paterson, 'Defense of Cuba theme', p. 251.

tation. The Cuban missiles would be under the cover of the US early-warning system for ballistic missile attacks. But, as Defense Secretary MacNamara observed during the crisis, 'a missile is a missile; it makes no great difference whether you are killed by a missile fired from the Soviet Union or from Cuba'.¹⁸ In any case, the United States would continue to retain strategic superiority, albeit that numerical superiority was of limited value. The Cuban missile crisis foreshadowed Henry Kissinger's argument of the 1970s that strategic superiority conferred negligible diplomatic or military advantage. Even without the Cuban missiles, the Soviet Union had the nuclear capacity in 1962 to inflict unacceptable damage on the United States.

The new evidence on the conduct of the crisis raises further questions about public ultimatums and the ability of leaders to control events once they have initiated them. The crisis could have escalated because of a series of close calls. At the height of the crisis, on 27 October, a U-2 plane was shot down over Cuba. The Soviet military officer who ordered the firing of the SAM did so probably without authorisation from Moscow. On the same day, another U-2, experiencing an equipment malfunction, wandered over Soviet airspace. Soviet fighters scrambled to intercept it; US fighters left Alaska to rescue it. Fortunately, an aerial dog-fight did not take place.¹⁹

Mistakes and misinformation characterised the conduct of the crisis. US leaders realised that if the United States attacked Cuba there could be Soviet casualties, but they could not calculate how high that risk was, for they believed the Soviets had a few thousand personnel in Cuba. In fact, 42,000 Soviets were deployed on the island. Another error was that, until 27 October, US officials forgot to inform the Soviets exactly where they had drawn the quarantine line. And, during the crisis, the United States launched a test ICBM that was stationed near armed ICBMs.²⁰

The Cuban missile crisis also demonstrated that in a public confrontation leaders can forfeit decision-making power to operational personnel. The commander of the Strategic Air Command, in readying his forces for nuclear war, issued DEFCON 2 alert instructions in the clear, rather than in code, because he wanted to impress the Soviets with US power. During the crisis, US warships forced Soviet submarines that patrolled near the quarantine line to surface. In one case, a naval commander chose the high-risk option of dropping light depth charges to force the Soviet submarine to surface. The Kennedy administration detained a 60-man Cuban attack team scheduled to sail from Florida, but it constantly worried that teams already in Cuba would inflame the situation with a spectacular raid or an attack on Castro.²¹

Finally, let us note the effect that the missile crisis had on President Kennedy's men, the EXCOMM committee. For thirteen days they worked continuously, under extreme pressure and with little sleep. In 1965, Theodore Sorensen wrote: 'I saw first hand how brutally physical and mental fatigue can numb the good sense as well as the senses of normally articulate men'. We now know specifi-

18. MacNamara, quoted in Powaski, *March to Armageddon*, p. 104.

19. Marc Trachtenberg, 'Commentary: new light on the Cuban missile crisis', *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990), 244–6.

20. Raymond L. Garthoff, 'Cuban missile crisis: the Soviet story', *Foreign Policy* 72 (Fall 1988), 67; Bernstein, 'Reconsidering Khrushchev's gambit', p. 238.

21. Paterson, 'Cuba', pp 148–9.

cally what Sorensen described. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson had memory lapses brought on by emotional and nervous tension. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, according to Robert Kennedy, 'had a virtually complete breakdown mentally and physically'.²² During the crisis, advisers who favoured diplomacy were unable to argue their cases effectively.

RESULTS OF THE CRISIS

We have little new evidence to assist us in assessing the results of the Cuban missile crisis and determining its effect on the history of the Cold War. At this time, we can only ask a few tentative questions.

Both John and Robert Kennedy seemed personally sobered by the missile crisis and the realisation that they could have lost control of events. As historian Robert Divine has opined, the first two years in office served as the 'education' of John F. Kennedy.²³ During his last year in office, the president launched new peaceful initiatives aimed at taming the Soviet-American confrontation. The two sides agreed to establish a direct telephone link or 'hot-line' between Washington and Moscow to prevent nuclear miscalculation. The president successfully challenged the Soviets to stop testing nuclear weapons in the atmosphere and brought about the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963. In June, President Kennedy also delivered his famous American University speech, suggesting that both sides had a mutual interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race.

The Kennedy administration also made a few preliminary gestures at normalising relations with Cuba. In November 1963, for example, Kennedy asked a French journalist to act as an intermediary between himself and Fidel Castro. Nevertheless, the covert war against Castro continued. In 1963, the administration sporadically mounted sabotage campaigns against Cuba. And, on the very day that the president was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, the CIA had a rendezvous in Paris with an anti-Castro Cuban and passed to him a pen rigged with a poisonous hypodermic needle.²⁴

In view of the agreements he struck with the United States, Nikita Khrushchev also seemed to have a new attitude about the Cold War. Within a year of Kennedy's death, however, the Soviet premier was deposed. We need to know what role the defeat in Cuba played in Khrushchev's downfall. More important, how was the Soviet Union's massive nuclear and naval build-up of the 1960s and 1970s related to its humiliation in October 1962?

Whether we can answer those questions precisely will depend upon gaining access to Soviet and perhaps also Cuban archives. When this will happen I cannot predict. When it does, we shall be able to ask new, hard questions about Soviet and Cuban behaviour and policies. We can probably expect, however, that in the 1990s all minutes of EXCOMM meetings will be declassified. When the full documentary record is open for scholarly research, we should have a full understanding of these most important two weeks in human history.

22. *Ibid.*, pp 149–50.

23. Robert A. Divine, 'The education of John F. Kennedy', in Frank Merli and Theodore A. Wilson (eds), *The makers of American diplomacy* (New York, 1974), pp 317–43.

24. Senate Select Committee, *Alleged assassination plots*, pp 88–9.