

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, OCTOBER 16-28 1962

I. BACKGROUND

The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 brought the world close to nuclear war. Some of President John F. Kennedy's (JFK's) advisers recommended that the US launch a surprise air attack on Cuba and invade Cuba. This would have led to direct combat between US forces and Soviet forces. Both sides were armed with tactical nuclear weapons. Other advisers counselled Kennedy to launch preventive general nuclear war against the USSR. During the crisis Cuban dictator Fidel Castro urged the Soviet leaders to launch nuclear war against the US if the US invaded Cuba. The world held its breath! What caused this crisis? How close did we come to war? Why did the crisis end peacefully?

A. The US had nuclear superiority over the USSR in 1962.

Specifically, the US had a clear second-strike countervalue capability (the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on Soviet society after absorbing an all-out Soviet surprise counterforce attack) and **perhaps also had a first-strike counterforce capability** (the capacity to strike first with enough force to leave the Soviets unable to inflict unacceptable damage in retaliation). The Soviets had a total of 42 nuclear-armed ICBMs, of which 36 could be launched on 15 minute warning; of these, 26 were deployed in hardened silos.¹ How many could survive US attack and fly to the US???

> During 1955-1960 US Air Force leaders argued that the US faced a "bomber gap," and then a "missile gap," in which the Soviets had or were getting a first-strike capability over the US. US photo-reconnaissance satellites verified the reverse--that the US had nuclear superiority--in 1960. US knowledge of its superiority was revealed to the public and the Soviets in a press briefing by Roswell Gilpatrick on October 21, 1961. Until then Soviet leaders probably thought the US (1) believed Soviet forces were vastly larger than they were; and (2) didn't know where Soviet forces were, hence couldn't target them. The Gilpatrick briefing likely came as a great shock to Soviet leaders.

B. The US plotted Castro's downfall, 1959-1962. US actions: a "covert" invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, 1961; Operation Mongoose and its planned Cuban uprising, 1961ff; and the Phibriglex exercise, 1962, to liberate a Caribbean island from the dictator "Ortsac." US overthrow efforts were inept but serious in intent. They convinced Castro that a US invasion was inevitable.

¹ Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight* (Vintage, 2007): 190.

C. The US sent nuclear-armed intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) to Britain, Italy and Turkey, 1957-1962.

II. THE SOVIETS SEND MISSILES TO CUBA, MAY-OCTOBER 1962: WHY? AND WHY DID THEY DO IT SECRETLY?

The Soviets sent the missiles to Cuba ...

- A. To acquire enough nuclear strength to escape the shadow of US nuclear superiority?
- B. To deter the US from a feared invasion of Cuba?
- C. To acquire enough nuclear strength to force the US to settle the Berlin crisis in the Soviets' favor?
- D. To humiliate US President John F. Kennedy (JFK)?

Historians and Soviet crisis participants interviewed later favor explanations #1 and #2, with focus on #2. A few favor #3. In 1962 JFK's policymakers favored explanation #4.

Note: the Soviet deployment included 60 nuclear warheads for medium and intermediate-range MRBM and IRBM missiles; 36 IRBMs; and 98 tactical nuclear weapons plus short-range Luna (Frog) missiles and Ilyushin 28 Beagle bombers to deliver them. The Lunas and Beagles were ideal for nuking a US invasion force.

III. THE US RESPONSE

- A. JFK warns Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to deploy no missiles in Cuba, Sept. 4 and Sept. 13, 1962.
- B. The Soviet missiles are discovered, Oct. 16. JFK decides they must go. Why?
 - 1. Fears for US credibility, NATO unity: "If we cave NATO will collapse!"
 - 2. Fears that the missiles would give the Soviets an unacceptable military advantage? No: JFK expressed little concern about the military consequences of the Soviet missile deployment.
 - 3. US domestic politics? Did JFK fear attacks from the right if he caved? The White House tapes don't reveal such concerns; and non-elected officials were more hawkish than JFK, suggesting that electoral political concerns weren't driving hawkish thinking. But JFK did privately express fear of impeachment or defeat in the 1964 election if the missiles stayed in Cuba. "Kenneth Keating will be the next president."
- C. The ExComm considers three options, Oct. 16-Oct. 22:
 - 1. Quiet diplomacy. Threaten Khrushchev privately while making no public military moves.
 - 2. Blockade ("quarantine") Cuba. Exclude only missiles and warheads for now, to freeze the military status quo. Maybe extend the blockade to cover oil and other items later, if necessary, to strangle Cuba.
 - 3. A surprise US conventional air strike against the Soviet missiles, followed immediately by a US military invasion of Cuba.

Early in the crisis JFK and most of his advisors favored option #3, Surprise Attack and Invasion. But JFK eventually

chose option #2, Quarantine.

US officials didn't come up with the Quarantine idea until Oct. 19, three days into the crisis. Governments think slowly!

- D. JFK's counter-*fait accompli*: the Quarantine announcement of Oct. 22.

IV. SCARY EVENTS AT SEA

The Soviets deployed four Foxtrot-class submarines near Cuba during the crisis. Unknown to the US, each sub carried one nuclear-armed torpedo. Each was perhaps authorized to use it in event they were attacked.

The US devised a system to signal these subs to surface by exploding practice depth-charges near the sub, and transmitted this scheme to Moscow during the crisis. Moscow never forwarded this news to the submarine commanders. Hence they interpreted depth-charge explosions not as signals but as an attack meant to sink them. One sub commander considered nuking a US destroyer in response.²

V. THE SETTLEMENT

- A. Khrushchev sent JFK a letter on Friday Oct. 26 offering to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba in exchange for a US no-invasion pledge regarding Cuba. The next day he sent a second letter adding a demand: the US must also remove its missiles from Turkey. Oh dear!

- B. JFK's Oct. 27 answer: He ignored the second letter and publicly accepted Khrushchev's first offer--a Soviet withdrawal of its missiles from Cuba in exchange for a US pledge not to invade Cuba. He spiced this acceptance with a private ultimatum (24 hours to agree or the US would attack the missiles) and sweetened it with a secret concession (withdrawal of US missiles from Turkey within six months). Khrushchev quickly accepted Kennedy's offer on Oct. 28.

Question: Was the spice in Kennedy's letter smart? The sweetener?

VI. HINGES OF THE CRISIS

- A. US officials feared war at three points:

- On October 16-18--at the start of the crisis--when US officials considered launching war.
- On October 24, when the U.S. thought Soviet ships were approaching the line of US ships blockading Cuba.
- On October 27, when Khrushchev seemed to stiffen his terms, a Soviet missile shot down a US U-2 over Cuba, and Castro's forces began firing on US low-level recon planes.

- B. Two hawk vs. dove disputes occurred in the US government:

² Svetlana V. Savranskaya, "New Sources on the Role of Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis," Journal of Strategic Studies, 28:2: 233-59 at 234-35, 249-51.

- The bomb-vs.-quarantine debate early in the crisis.
- A later debate over whether to trade US Jupiters to get Soviet missiles out of Cuba.

VII. HOW DANGEROUS WAS THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS?

JFK estimated the risk of war at between 1 in 3 and 1 in 2.

A. How accurate were perceptions on both sides? Not very!

1. JFK didn't expect a USSR missile deployment to Cuba. That's why he warned publicly against it--he thought his bluff wouldn't be called.
2. US policymakers didn't see a chief USSR motive for deployment (defend Cuba from invasion). Hence nearly overlooked the no-invasion pledge as a solution to the crisis.
3. Khrushchev didn't expect the US to detect his missile deployment.
4. US leaders wrongly assumed Khrushchev ordered the Oct. 27 U2 shootdown.
5. US leaders underestimated Soviet and Cuban military capabilities in Cuba.
 - a. The US thought the Soviets had 8,000-10,000 troops in Cuba. In fact the Soviets had 43,000 troops. Cuba had another 270,000 well-trained troops. The US planned to invade with only 140,000 troops. This war won't end well for the USA!
 - b. More interestingly, the **US was unaware that the Soviets had 98 tactical warheads and means to deliver them in Cuba.** Wow!
6. US leaders were unaware:
 - > That the four Soviet Foxtrot submarines near Cuba each carried one nuclear-armed torpedo; and were perhaps authorized to use it in event they were attacked.
 - > That the commanders of these subs were unaware of the US scheme to signal their subs with practice depth charge explosions. Hence the US used the depth charges.
7. Castro was unaware of US nuclear superiority. Also, Castro thought that the US was bent on invading Cuba. And **... he urged the Soviet Union to answer a US invasion, if it occurred, with nuclear strikes on the US!**
8. JFK was unaware of symmetry of Soviet and US missile deployments. JFK: "It's just as if we suddenly began to put a major number of MRBMs in Turkey. Now that'd be goddam dangerous, I would think." McGeorge Bundy and Alexis Johnson then explain "Well, we did, Mr. President."
9. On October 28 Khrushchev thought JFK intended to announce the start of war at 5:00 p.m. that day. Not so.

B. How tight was central control on military operations? Not very!

1. The Oct. 27 Soviet shootdown of the US U2 was unauthorized by Moscow.

2. US anti-submarine operations were more aggressive than JFK knew. Indeed, they were more aggressive and dangerous than the US Navy itself knew. On Oct. 27 the Navy forced to the surface a Soviet submarine that, unbeknownst to the Navy, carried a nuclear torpedo and was commanded by a Soviet officer that feared he was under attack and briefly considered firing his nuclear torpedo.
 3. A US U2 strayed over Siberia during the crisis. The Soviets could have thought this a precursor to a US first strike. The Soviets scrambled fighters to shoot it down; the US scrambled nuclear-armed fighters in response.
 4. US test intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) were armed with nuclear warheads during the crisis; and a scheduled test from this test-field was still conducted.
 5. A US intelligence ship remained close to Cuba early in the crisis--an inviting target.
 6. A pre-planned retaliatory strike was nearly conducted after the Oct. 27 U2 shutdown--another near-oversight.
- C. False warning problems. The US jury-rigged south-directed warning system had a hidden common-mode failure: it would see a Cape Canaveral launch as a Cuban launch.
- D. Would JFK have pushed matters to war? If forced to decide on Day 1, yes. Later, only in extremis. We now know he made a plan (the Cordier plan) to agree publicly to withdraw the US IRBMs from Turkey if this was necessary to resolve the crisis. But JFK did formulate his last offer/threat as an ultimatum with a deadline--a risky act.
- E. What if someone else had been President? JFK was markedly more dovish than other US policymakers. Had he not been President history probably would have been different and more exciting. The military favored war. Acheson favored war.

VII. LATER HISTORICAL REVELATIONS: REVISIONS TO RFK'S ACCOUNT

- The Cordier plan. JFK had a hidden plan to pursue a public Jupiter trade.
- The Soviets had nukes in Cuba, including tactical nukes, commanded by officers with predelegated authority to use these weapons at the outset of the crisis. Khrushchev withdrew this authority during the crisis but there is no guarantee these weapons would have gone unused in event of war.
- The US seriously intended to oust Castro. It was probably provoked the Soviet missile deployment. It also provoked Castro to **seek nuclear war** if Cuba was invaded.
- A soviet sub commander considered launching a nuclear weapon at a US destroyer.

VIII. PERSISTING MYSTERIES OF THE CRISIS

- Why the rush by the US? The US was in a great rush to resolve the crisis, pressing matters at a desperate pace on October 27, when Kennedy told the Soviets that the US would

use force unless matters were resolved in a day or two. What drove JFK's sense of urgency?

Would a longer US blockade of Cuba have succeeded in persuading the Soviets to remove their missiles from Cuba?

- What US response would have occurred had the Soviets not accepted Kennedy's terms on Oct. 28? (Would Kennedy have implemented the Cordier plan? Gone to war?)
- What were Soviet and American plans for war if the war erupted?

IX. WHAT CAUSED THE CRISIS? WHY WAS WAR AVOIDED?

- A. Causes: US belligerence toward Cuba? US nuclear superiority? Soviet recklessness? Lack of clear "rules of the game"? US domestic politics?
 - > Re: US belligerence toward Cuba: perhaps the US could have avoided the crisis by leaving Castro's regime alone.
 - > Re: US superiority: there are some capabilities one does not want to have.
 - > Re: US domestic politics:
 - > Soviet missiles in Cuba did not give the USSR a first-strike capability; and added little to Soviet second-strike capability.
 - > The Soviets could and did greatly expand their second-strike capability during the next 12 months by deploying ICBMs in the USSR. So any second-strike benefit to the USSR would be brief; and any harm to the US would be delayed only a year.
 - > JFK said he warned the Soviets against deploying any missiles in Cuba on Sept. 4 and 13 because the Soviets had told him they wouldn't deploy any. He would have set a higher ceiling had he thought the Soviets were deploying.
 - > Implication: the crisis was caused by JFK's public warnings of Sept. 4 and 13, and the domestic political risk these warnings created for JFK. The real military stakes were trivial.
 - > Further implication: did nuclear war almost happen to save JFK's political skin?
- B. Did JFK and Khrushchev bring the world close to nuclear war over trivial issues?
 - > Soviet missiles in Cuba were not militarily very important. The Soviets achieved a second-strike countervalue capability using forces based in the USSR about 18 months after the missile crisis (in spring 1964). Was Khrushchev wise to take huge risks just to try to advance this event by a few months? Was JFK wise to risk war in response?
 - > US missiles in Turkey were not militarily important. Yet both JFK and Khrushchev were sticky about them.
- C. Why war was avoided: Lack of Soviet military options? JFK's hidden concessions?
- D. The effects of US nuclear superiority were starkly different in the early 1950s (the Soviets stood down in response) and

the early 1960s (the Soviets secretly moved missiles to Cuba, nearly provoked war).

> Competing explanations:

-- Khrushchev was more of a risk-taker than Stalin.

-- Khrushchev had an aggressive option--moving missiles to Cuba--that Stalin didn't have. What if Stalin had had such an option?

> Implication: military superiority can be good or bad.

X. CRISIS HISTORY WRITING: Perhaps the historical record understates the prevalence and effectiveness of conciliation as a tool of statecraft. Leaders tout their threats and conceal their concessions, as JFK did. Hence history features successful acts of belligerence while successful conciliations are downplayed. See Smith, "Peace Presidents," assigned.

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17.40 American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, Future
Fall 2017

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