



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

THE PROLOGUE

Few people now realize the significance of the Cuban Missile Crisis and what it meant for modern political history. In school books, it is explained in a paragraph or two and never with the most important point mentioned—at no point since the creation of the atomic bomb has the world truly been closer to destruction. A different decision here or there and no one is reading this history; we are in Einstein's world where the next war is fought with sticks and stones.

The opening act comes much earlier than October, 1962. It started with Castro's revolution and Kennedy's botched attempt to overthrow the Cuban communist regime with the Bay of Pigs Invasion. That attempt showed Castro the United States was serious about his removal and encouraged him to look for more and stronger support from his benefactor, the Soviet Union.

But that wasn't the start. In the 1960 election, Kennedy asserted there was a 'missile gap' between the US and Soviet Union, a false statement as the Eisenhower administration knew from its spy flights and satellite information. Since that information was secret, Kennedy had boxed himself in in terms of foreign policy; for domestic political consumption, he needed to be firm and aggressive with 'the communist menace', so he continued an Eisenhower program to deploy missiles to Europe, placing Jupiter medium-range missiles in Italy and Turkey beginning in 1961.

But it went deeper still for Kennedy. He'd met with Khrushchev in June, 1961, in Vienna, and though the media thought Kennedy the 'victor' initially, opinion changed over the following months to the point that Kennedy declared, "He beat the hell out of me." Unhappy to have been shown up, his angst was reinforced by

American inability to take effective action when the Berlin Wall was constructed that summer during the second Berlin Crisis. Faced with this impotence, Kennedy vowed that he'd be tough the next time, win the next crisis no matter the cost.

The USSR was unhappy with the missiles in Turkey, less than one hundred miles from the Soviet border. The Soviets felt this was a significant threat and said so to the United States. The US response was simple—Turkey is an independent nation and we have an agreement with them and that's that. American intransigence on what the USSR saw as a vital issue to their national security now led Khrushchev to look at American logic and formulate his own plan, what was known as Operation Anadyr.

The US had suspicions the Soviets were constructing a missile base in Cuba as early as August, but after the downing of a Taiwanese U-2 over China, the CIA was worried about surface-to-air missiles in Cuba, so that the US was relying on satellite photographs. Unfortunately, those were blocked by storms and heavy cloud cover, creating what was eventually called 'The Photo Gap'. Finally on October 14, a U-2 was finally able to overfly Cuba and return with photographs of the Soviet missile base under construction. This, according to history, is the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

THE CRISIS

When President Kennedy saw the photographs the next day, he created a committee, eventually called 'EXCOMM' to discuss options and figure a course of action. EXCOMM met for the first time the next day, the 16th. The primary US options were:

- Air strike to destroy the base before it could be completed
- Military invasion and occupation of Cuba
- Blockade Cuba
- Diplomacy
- Negotiations with Cuba looking to convince Castro to give up communism
- Do nothing

Because of his 1960 campaign and feelings on Berlin and Vienna, doing nothing was a political impossibility for Kennedy, and after the Bay of Pigs, there was no chance of Castro leaving the Soviet orbit or trusting the United States which immediately reduced the possible options. On the 18th, Kennedy spoke with Andrei Gromyko though there was no progress. It was suggested by Gromyko that the missiles were not the business of the US, that they were there with Cuban permission and that was that, using the same logic the United States used with the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

The following day, the 19th, the US began mobilizing five divisions and all continental elements of the Air Force, prepared to implement one of two plans, OPLAN 312 or OPLAN 316, while the State Department worked to prepare the structure of a new Cuban government for when Castro was removed. Kennedy wanted tough action and the US military prepared for that, though documents released in the past decade, well after the Crisis show that at no time did the Soviet military bring itself to full military readiness—and that the US was well aware of this behind the scenes.

Three days later, the US briefed NATO and allied leaders on possible Soviet actions. Approval was unanimous from the NATO nations, at which point the media was informed and a blockade, referred to as a quarantine, was put in place, enforced by several nations, though primarily by the US Navy. It was important that it be referred to as a quarantine—a blockade was an act of war and the US did not want to be seen as provoking World War Three.

With the world now aware of the situation and the potential stakes involved (though details were secret, there was no question of what the ultimate fear was), efforts now began to lessen the tension or find a diplomatic solution. Using backchannels, the United States now let it be known they would consider the removal of the Turkish missiles if the Soviets

ceased construction in Cuba and removed the missiles there. Added to this, on the 25th, a message from the Pope urging peace was broadcast worldwide (though it was not broadcast in the USSR until the 26th). The Pope's message was critical, changing the course of the crisis and giving a rational reason for both sides to back away from saber-rattling and intractable positions. In the meantime, at the same time as the Pope recorded his message, Khrushchev wrote a letter to Kennedy informing the President that Soviet ships would continue towards Cuba and that the US had no business stopping them, leaving unsaid an implicit 'or else' and setting up a confrontation between the two navies.

But Khrushchev was never a man to put all his eggs in a single basket and even as he told Kennedy that Soviet ships would violate the quarantine, a dozen Soviet merchant ships turned away from Cuba rather than be boarded by US Navy vessels. That was not enough for members of EXCOMM, and one of Kennedy's advisors, Curtis LeMay, demanded the US take the opportunity given to provoke a war and eliminate communism and the Soviet threat once and for all, even as the committee saw evidence that Soviet forces were not mobilizing for war. At the behest of men like LeMay, for the first and only time in history, the president authorized the raising of military alertness to "DEFCON 2", putting B-52 bombers in the air everywhere, armed with nuclear bombs. The only alternative left was to wait....

Twenty-four hours later, a letter arrived from Khrushchev, suggesting that the knot of war not be pulled so tight that it could not be undone. Later, Kennedy would say Khrushchev blinked, but at the moment, it provided another reason to climb down from the brink. The basis of negotiations would be the removal of missiles from Turkey in return for the removal of the Cuban base. The timing of that consensus was important. Even as the two sides were reaching an agreement, a U-2 was shot down over Cuba on the orders of a local commander and against the wishes of Khrushchev. The US had decided that if a U-2

was shot down, it meant outright war, but Kennedy decided not to take the next step, hoping that the decision was an accident or taken by an 'itchy trigger finger' on the scene and not representative of Soviet intent.

Just as important, out at sea, a US destroyer spotted a Soviet submarine on sonar and dropped training depth charges (basically hand grenades), forcing the Soviet sub to remain submerged to the limit of its engines and oxygen. On board the sub, a debate raged whether the depth charges permitted the use of the nuclear torpedo on board. To launch required unanimity, but the vote was 2-1; the first officer refused to agree even when pressured by the political officer on board. If it had been launched, nuclear war would have been unavoidable.

Even then, that was not the last threat to peace. Behind the scenes, Fidel Castro urged Khrushchev to use the missiles and planes already in Cuba to launch a first-strike on the US, going so far as to suggest that he would rather see his own land vaporized than the Americans win. Castro even formulated plans for his own soldiers to seize the Russian nukes and use them himself against the United States. Luckily cooler heads prevailed.

On October 28, the day after these incidents, the crisis 'ended'. The US guaranteed it would not invade Cuba or sanction invasion by Cuban emigres, and that it would remove the Jupiter missiles from Europe—something already planned for 1963 anyway (though the USSR did not know that). In return, the Soviet Union dismantled its missiles in Cuba.

THE AFTERMATH

The 'quarantine' was lifted in November and the Jupiters were gone in April, but repercussions continued. Buoyed by his success, Kennedy decided a harder line and a more active US role in fighting communism could work, setting the stage for Vietnam. Unhappy that Khrushchev backed down in a way that

cost the USSR prestige, he was removed almost exactly two years later in a conspiracy led by Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev wanted stability, something the erratic Khrushchev was not known for, and thus the era of bureaucracy overtook the Soviet Union.

The crisis also showed the two superpowers that they needed quicker communications and that there were too many ways miscommunication could lead to unwanted drastic actions. Initially, this meant the creation of the Hotline, a direct phone link between Washington and Moscow in case of emergencies. Later, but before the decade was ended, Brezhnev reached a consensus with President Nixon that continuing an arms race hurt both nations, so that 'detente' was born, solidifying Brezhnev's quest for stability and reducing the ruinous military spending of both nations.

History has been cruel and kind to the actors in the Cuban Missile Crisis. While criticized for allowing ego to drive him to push the situation into a crisis, Kennedy's cool at the key moment prevented nuclear war. Similarly, while Khrushchev had gone forward with the missiles, knowing it would cause a US reaction, he quickly backed away from the brink.

How do you explain the brink of nuclear war to someone who did not live through it? Is there a way to explain life with two nuclear superpowers and the potential for World War Three on any given day for any given reason to the generations who have been born since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989? Our remoteness from events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis should not lessen our worry over how close we came to destroying civilization in 1962 or that such a crisis could happen again whether in Kiev, Seoul, or Cairo. Will the leaders in such a crisis be as level-headed and determined to avoid Armageddon? We can only hope.

SCORING CARDS

Berlin: The site of two earlier crises in 1948 and 1961, most prognosticators figured that Berlin would be the spark which would set off a US-Soviet conflict within Europe given the city's divided status and location far within the Soviet zone (which became the German Democratic Republic). West Berliners understood that in case of war, they would be overwhelmed by Communist forces.

Italy: It may seem hard to believe today, but in the 1950s and early 1960s, Italy's economy was the second most prosperous in Europe (behind West Germany's), making it a critical nation for rebuilding the continent in the years after World War Two. A loyal ally of the United States and staunchly anti-communist (perhaps a feeling leftover from its decades of fascism), Italy gladly permitted US bases on its soil as well as Jupiter missiles positioned around the airbase at Giola del Colle. The Jupiters were used as tokens in negotiations during the Cuban crisis

Turkey: With a long hatred of Russia, communist or otherwise, Turkey's military happily agreed to host a squadron of Jupiter missiles. Negotiated with Eisenhower, the missiles were deployed after Kennedy was in office. Turkey's outright hostility to the Soviet Union made it a staunch advocate of American hardline positions, while the US enjoyed having an ally adjacent to the Soviet Union, capable of restricting Soviet naval movement to the Black Sea vis a vis control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.

US CARDS

Air Strike: The US prepared to flatten Cuba if need be, deploying B-47 bombers to the American Southeast. Pilots were trained to launch rapidly in case of nuclear war,

sometimes taking only 10-15 seconds between take-offs. Cuba's close proximity to the US (and distance from the USSR) was a significant military advantage for the US during the Crisis.

EXCOMM: The Executive Committee of the National Security Council, set up to handle the Crisis and advise Kennedy. Historians have credited the core committee members with avoiding 'groupthink' and remaining open to all possibilities rather than marching headlong towards full conflict. Given their ages and knowledge of World War Two, and that it was less than twenty years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, those life experiences probably served to temper any aggression members held towards the USSR.

Eyeball to Eyeball: Castro was furious when Khrushchev agreed to remove missiles from Cuba to defuse the Crisis. He felt it would encourage anti-communist emigres in Florida and hurt his own chances of survival. The phrase is a quote from Secretary of State Dean Rusk: "We went eyeball to eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked."

Invasion of Cuba: One option for the US was an immediate invasion of Cuba. The US was not fully prepared for this and had to rush to make sure a replacement government could be made available quickly. While the idea had some backers (such as Gen. LeMay), it was never given extended, serious consideration by EXCOMM.

Lessons of Munich: Ever since the agreement in 1938, any time discussions take place with an authoritarian regime, the name 'Munich' is brought up along with the word 'appeasement'. The difficulty is that historians do not agree whether the concessions made to Hitler at Munich were good or bad for the long term, but for a generation which grew up or fought during World War Two, there is no question: 'Munich' was a very bad thing, something to avoid being compared to.

Mathematical Precision: Beginning with World War Two, math was applied to war more effectively, starting first with Robert McNamara's analyses of US firebombing of Japan. This meant that by the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, bombs and missiles were far more accurate, so that strikes designed to hit specific targets (such as missile launch rails) were now feasible and effective.

Non-invasion Pledge: Suggested by the UN Secretary-General, Kennedy's promise that the US would not invade Cuba helped de-escalate the Crisis. Along with the removal of the Jupiter missiles from Italy and Turkey, this pledge gave Khrushchev enough political maneuvering space to turn his boats around and agree to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba.

Offensive Missiles: Practically speaking, there was no difference between missiles in Turkey pointed at the USSR and missiles in Cuba pointed at the US, but to Kennedy and his advisers, the difference was significant since the US had no intention of beginning a war and believed the USSR did. Thus, the missiles in Cuba offered the Soviets a chance at a crippling first strike.

Operation Mongoose: A series of plans created by the CIA for the overthrow of Cuba, including the use of propaganda, assassination of communist leaders, faking a Cuban attack on the US to justify intervention, and the covert destruction of Cuban crops. As of 2015, Fidel Castro and the Communist Party remain fully in control of Cuba.

Public Protests: Europeans protested American military deployments and nuclear missiles regularly, right up to the end of the Cold War. In most instances, the US and NATO ignored the protesters, but in others, the US used the protests to justify actions (such as reducing deployments or engaging in arms talks) which may otherwise have been damaging within US domestic politics.

Quarantine: The US euphemism for 'blockade'. The use of the term is important. With a quarantine, the US was in the gray area of legality when it came to searching ships approaching Cuba. A blockade was an act of war, and while the US was escalating the Crisis when the quarantine was declared, Kennedy did not want to go straight to war with the USSR.

U-2 Photographs: The spyplane proved necessary over Cuba when weather blocked satellite surveillance. The U-2 was no longer fit for duty by 1962, as surface-to-air missiles could now reach its flight altitude. Indeed, at a critical moment during the Crisis, a U-2 was shot down while flying over the Soviet missiles.

Wave and Smile: Kennedy continued to exude confidence during the Crisis, hoping to keep the American public calm—and confident in his leadership. Eisenhower had been similar, smiling and golfing regularly, noting to friends that if the President can smile and golf, it means the American public doesn't need to worry. A calm president is a safe America.

SOVIET CARDS

Bay of Pigs: A 1961 CIA operation to land Cuban emigres to overthrow Castro's regime. The operation was poorly planned and lacked proper intelligence, relying on the word of emigres about conditions instead of actually checking them. Kennedy went forward with the operation even though Eisenhower had warned him not to (during the transition period between November 1960-January 1961).

Berlin Blockade: In 1948, Stalin attempted to force the Allies out of Berlin by cutting off all ground access to the

city. This was averted by the Berlin airlift, a constant flight of planes bringing in supplies, but the blockade was a fear that never went away even as decades passed. The Soviets would occasionally use this threat to exact concessions in various negotiations with the US, or even the Federal German Republic.

Defensive Missiles: Counter to American claims, Khrushchev said the deployment to Cuba was purely defensive. In the realm of nuclear weapons, this was plausible, as it countered the American deployment on the Soviet border (in Turkey). Realistically, however, Khrushchev and his circle of advisers had to know the US would react like a beehive hit with a stick when the missiles were found.

Fidel Castro: Communist leader of Cuba, he denied being communist until the Bay of Pigs invasion. After that, he outlawed all non-Communist parties and made Cuba a single-party state. During the Crisis, Castro demanded Khrushchev strike at the US, and even plotted to seize Soviet missiles and use them himself against the United States, even if it meant destroying Cuban territory, incensed by repeated and constant attempts by the CIA and the US government to remove him from power (or assassinate him).

Maskirovka: The Russian term for deception. Soviet camouflage and misdirection was the best in the world, used to hide forces from the Germans during World War Two, aggressive intents in Hungary during 1956, and the construction of the missile facilities in Cuba in 1962.

Missile Trade: A key part of defusing the Crisis was Khrushchev's suggestion that the USSR would remove missiles from Cuba if the US removed their missiles from Turkey and Italy, though it is left for perpetual argument whether the same goal could have been achieved merely by threatening to position missiles in Cuba rather than actually doing it.

‘Moscow is our Brain’: A statement by Fidel Castro, the full quote is ‘Moscow is our brain and our great leader.’ It suggested that the world leader for communism was the USSR, but also that the USSR would support other post-colonial nations in their quest for independence (whether from colonial states or their remaining influence).

MRBM & IRBM: Medium Ranged Ballistic Missiles and Intermediate Ranged Ballistic Missiles. MRBM have a operational range of 2,000 miles (roughly) while IRBM have greater range, up to 3,500 miles. Soviet MRBM in Cuba could have potentially struck 2/3 of the United States, including all East Coast population centers as well as many ICBM bases in the Midwest.

National Liberation: When the USSR was founded, it was with the belief that the workers of the world would rise up and overthrow oppressive governments. That didn’t happen, nor did it happen after World War Two, not even in freed colonial territories. Thus, the Cuban Revolution was important as it represented a link to original Soviet ideology (as opposed to fraying relations with Communist China).

Strategic Balance: Khrushchev and Soviet leaders feared American efforts at containment, so that they tried to counter American actions wherever possible. In the case of the Crisis, this meant missiles in Cuba because of those in Italy and Turkey. After the putsch which removed Khrushchev, the concept of strategic balance became an underpinning for detente: that balance was more preferable than one side gaining a surprise advantage and provoking a first strike by the other side.

Suez-Hungary: When France and Israel convinced Britain to join them in invading Egypt in 1956, the Soviet Union had been dealing with uprisings within its eastern European satellites, starting with Poland, though it spread to Hungary. With attention focused on the Middle East, the USSR sent more than

a corps into Budapest and crushed Hungarian dissent. Later, the Soviet Union followed a similar strategy in timing actions with Czechoslovakia (the Prague Spring of 1968) and Poland (consenting to martial law in Poland after Solidarity’s growth in 1981).

Turn Back the Ships: Khrushchev’s decision to not test the American quarantine and provoke a confrontation kept tensions from rising. A dozen ships turned back, but not all ships heading to Cuba, suggesting that there had been many more missiles en route to the island.

U-2 Downed: On October 27, a U-2 (piloted by Rudolf Anderson) was shot down by an SA-2 Guideline SAM. The downing raised tensions—initially EXCOMM determined that if a U-2 was shot down, it meant immediate war, but cooler heads prevailed. Anderson was the only combat fatality on either side during the Crisis.

NEUTRAL CARDS

To the Brink: Many crises reach a very simple point, yes or no, war or back down. The question is always: how will the decision-makers respond? In August 1914, they went forward to war, figuring it was inevitable. At Munich, leaders backed away, afraid of another war like 1914. and they have been criticized ever since. But with the Cuban Missile Crisis, Khrushchev and Kennedy feared something far worse, the potential destruction of modern civilization.

Close Allies: Though the Cold War is usually considered to be the US vs. the USSR, neither superpower stood alone. Both had to work with allied and associated nations. In the Crisis for the Soviets, that meant primarily Cuba; Warsaw Pact nations were not consulted and were expected to toe the

line. For the US, consulting NATO, but especially Britain, France, and West Germany was critical since they would be on the frontline if the situation expanded into all-out war.

Containment: Coined by George Kennan in 'The Long Telegram', containment was an American policy designed originally to prevent the USSR from expanding its influence into areas of critical importance to American economic and military security. Truman then expanded the idea, using it to justify US efforts to prevent any Soviet influence being exerted worldwide. Containment was pursued through numerous organizations and ideas. A pet theory of Kennedy was 'flexible response', and it can be argued that that idea, combined with containment, led to America's tragic decade fighting in Vietnam.

A Face-Saver: Once Khrushchev consented to removing the missiles from Cuba, it would look as if he backed down for no reason at all. Within the USSR, that would be political suicide and likely lead to a new Soviet leader pursuing a more militant policy. Thus, Kennedy agreed to remove the Jupiter missiles in Italy and Turkey, so that Khrushchev could claim some form of victory of his own.

Fifty-fifty: At the height of the crisis, Kennedy was asked the chances of war. He said, "Fifty-fifty." What has gone unsaid until recently was that the Soviets had not fully mobilized like the US had, and if war came, would have been unprepared. The chances of war were far less than 50-50 unless the US provoked it.

The Guns of August: Published by Barbara Tuchman in 1962, it is a history of the events leading up to the beginning of the Great War in Europe. Her thesis is that it was a collection of mistakes and misunderstandings which led to the war. Kennedy read the book before the Crisis and said he was greatly affected by Tuchman's conclusions.

Intelligence Reports: Lack of intelligence provoked the crisis, as the US discovered too late that the Soviets were constructing a missile base in Cuba. The Crisis also showed the limits of various forms of intel. The US lacked sources within Cuba, Cuba was capable of shooting down US spy planes, and weather prevented satellite coverage in the first part of the Crisis. The USSR was hurt by the lack of spy satellites scouting abilities on par with those possessed by US Navy fleets.

Nuclear Submarines: Faster and quieter than their World War Two counterparts, nuclear submarines could remain submerged for extended periods, ideal for vessels armed with nuclear missiles, and making any first-strike by an opponent suicidal since it would be impossible to eliminate the opposing submarines. Both sides deployed subs in the Crisis and the US 'practice' depth-charging of the B-59, a Soviet sub, almost led to the B-59's use of a nuclear torpedo.

Personal Letter: Both sides communicated via multiple written letters during the conflict. This was critical for keeping negotiations personal—that it was people on the other side of the Crisis, not just a faceless government. It was a means of private communication, but it also created some tension as in at least one instance, when Khrushchev contradicted himself in two different letters, leading to some confusion, and a debate regarding trustworthiness.

Scramble: Scrambling is the rapid launch of aircraft to either launch a strike or prevent an enemy attack. During the Crisis, the US kept multiple stations on full-alert, prepared to launch on less than 5-10 minutes notice. In the Far East, a U-2 violated Soviet air space, triggering a scramble of MiG fighters whose launch triggered the scramble of an American fighter squadron in turn.

SOPs: An acronym for 'standard operating procedures', guidelines designed to maximize efficiency and in many instances add a level of security against espionage or deception.

Speech to the Nation: Especially critical in democracies, Kennedy twice addressed the American public, once at the onset of the Crisis and again after it concluded. He did this initially to gain backing against Congressmen who wanted to use the discovery of missiles in Cuba as a pretext for aggressive action worldwide against the USSR.

Summit Meeting: Many political leaders believe that in-person discussions are more fruitful, a tradition that has continued into the modern day. Unfortunately, Kennedy's performance at the Vienna summit, convinced Kennedy he needed to be more aggressive and led to a more aggressive US approach to Cuba and thus the crisis.

U Thant: His name was actually 'Thant'. 'U' is a sign of respect within Myanmar/Burma, the equivalent of 'Mister' in the US or Britain. Thant spent a decade as Secretary-General of the United Nations. During the Crisis, Thant was the first to suggest a non-invasion pledge for Cuba and may have also convinced Khrushchev to turn ships back rather than run the American quarantine.



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