

## THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, OCT. 16-28 1962

### I. BACKGROUND

- A. The US had massive 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 US perhaps could have struck the Soviets first and wholly escaped nuclear retaliation.
  - > During 1955-1960 U.S. Air Force leaders argued that the U.S. faced a "bomber gap," and then a "missile gap," in which the Soviets had or were gaining a first-strike capability over the U.S. U.S. photo-reconnaissance satellites verified the reverse--U.S. nuclear superiority--only in 1960. U.S. knowledge of its superiority was revealed to the public and the Soviets in a press briefing by Roswell Gilpatrick in October 1961. Until then Soviet leaders probably thought the U.S. (1) believed Soviet forces were vastly larger than they were; and (2) didn't know where Soviet forces were. The Gilpatrick briefing must have come 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; the Phibriglex exercise, 1962, to liberate a Caribbean island from the dictator "Ortsac"; and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's reported memo of 10/6/62 ordering execution of plans to invade Cuba. Did the US plan to invade Cuba???
- C. America 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?

- A. To acquire some nuclear strength, thereby escaping the shadow of US nuclear superiority?
  - B. To deter the US from a feared invasion of Cuba?
  - C. To humiliate U.S. President John F. Kennedy (JFK)?
- Historians and Soviet crisis participants interviewed later both favor explanations #1 and #2. In 1962 JFK's policymakers favored explanation #3.

Note: the Soviet deployment included 60 nuclear warheads for long-range IRBM missiles; 36 IRBMs; and about 100 tactical nuclear weapons plus short-range missiles or aircraft to deliver them--the latter being ideal for nuking a US invasion force.

### III. THE U.S. 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 U.S. 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. U.S. 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 if the missiles stayed in Cuba.
- 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 most of JFK's advisors favored option #3, Surprise Attack and Invasion. But JFK 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. THE SETTLEMENT

- A. Khrushchev sent JFK a letter on Friday Oct. 26 offering to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba in exchange for a U.S. no-invasion pledge regarding Cuba. The next day he sent a second letter adding a demand: the U.S. 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 U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba. He spiced this acceptance with a private ultimatum (24 hours to agree or the U.S. would attack the missiles) and sweetened it with a secret concession (withdrawal of U.S. 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?

#### V. HINGES OF THE CRISIS

- A. U.S. officials feared war at three points:
- At the beginning of the crisis--when the U.S. considered launching war.
  - On October 24, when Soviet ships approached the line of U.S. ships blockading Cuba.
  - On October 27, when Khrushchev seemed to stiffen his terms and a Soviet missile shot down a U.S. U-2 over Cuba.
- B. Two hawk vs. dove disputes occurred in the U.S. government:
- The bomb-vs.-quarantine debate early in the crisis.
  - A later debate over whether to trade U.S. Jupiters to get Soviet missiles out of Cuba.

#### VI. HOW DANGEROUS WAS THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS?

- 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 they

- nearly overlooked the no-invasion pledge as a solution to the crisis.
3. Khrushchev didn't expect the U.S. 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 they 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 roughly 100 Soviet tactical warheads and means to deliver them in Cuba. (US leaders did correctly believe the Soviets probably had some IRBM warheads in Cuba although they lacked hard information on this.)
  6. Castro was unaware of US nuclear superiority. Also, Castro thought that the US was bent on invading Cuba. So ... he urged the Soviet Union to forestall this US invasion with nuclear strikes!
  7. 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."
- B. How tight was central control on military operations? Not very!
1. The Oct. 27 Soviet shootdown of the U.S. 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 U.S. 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 had briefly considered arming his nuclear torpedoes.
  3. A U.S. U2 strayed over Siberia during the crisis. The Soviets could have thought this a precursor to a U.S. first strike.
  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 U.S. intelligence ship remained close to Cuba early in the crisis--an inviting target.
  6. A pre-planned retaliatory strike was nearly conducted after the U2 shootdown--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? Only in extremis. We now know he made a plan (the Cordier plan) to agree publicly to withdraw the U.S. IRBMs from Turkey if this was necessary to resolve the crisis.
- E. What if someone else had been President? JFK was markedly more dovish than other U.S. 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: 3 REVISIONS TO RFK'S ACCOUNT

- The Cordier plan--JFK's hidden plan to pursue a public Jupiter trade.
- The Soviet nukes in Cuba, including tactical nukes. Soviet commanders did **not** have predelegated authority to use these weapons but there is no guarantee they would have gone unused in event of war.
- US plans to invade Cuba?

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

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

- A. Causes: US nuclear superiority? Lack of clear "rules of the game"? U.S. belligerence toward Cuba? Soviet desire to humiliate JFK and the USA?
- B. Why war was avoided: Lack of Soviet military options? JFK's hidden concessions?
- C. The effects of U.S. 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: sometimes military superiority is desirable, sometimes not.

X. CRISIS HISTORY WRITING: Is the writing of history biased against diplomacy and conciliation as tools of problem-solving? Leaders emphasize their threats and conceal their concessions, as JFK did, so the historical record does too. Victorious wars are featured, successful conciliations are downplayed. See Smith, "Peace Presidents," assigned.

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