Cuban Missile Crisis - How Intelligence Analysts May Have Saved the World.docx

Albert E Poirier, Jr.
A CASE STUDY:

THE IMPACT OF INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

ON THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS:

HOW INTELLIGENCE ANALYSTS MAY HAVE SAVED THE WORLD!

Presented By:

Albert E. Poirier, Jr.
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Introduction

In October of 1962, the Cold War was at its height. Since the end of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union had faced each other, with a tremendous array of military might, across a no man’s land in Eastern Europe. The intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with its potent nuclear warhead had then brought both homelands under the threat of Hiroshima to the nth degree. An ICBM launched from the Soviet Union could reach U.S. cities in less than 30 minutes, as could U.S. missiles aimed at Soviet cities. Never before, in the history of conflict, had two nations faced each other with the capacity to bring upon each other total annihilation.¹

The six years of the Second World War, with its over 60 million deaths, would pale in comparison to the first hour of a thermonuclear war. ²

Toward the end of July 1962, the Soviet Union began a significant build-up of military shipments to Communist Cuba. Only 90 miles from the southern tip of Florida, Cuba had been a thorn in the side of the United States since its leader; Fidel Castro had openly embraced Communism and allied itself with the Soviet Union.

In the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev was the chairman of the central committee of the Communist Party, and dictator of the country. He was brash and arrogant, once proclaiming to the United States that “we will bury you!”³

In the United States, its young president, John F. Kennedy, who had been in office for less than one year, and was still recovering from the debacle of the Bay of Pigs. This disaster was the

¹ Poirier, A., (February 2008) The Cuban Missile Crisis, unpublished, Charles Town, WV
attempted invasion of Cuba by Cubans living in the United States, with the assistance of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The episode had been a military disaster for the Cuban invaders, and a public relations disaster for the president.

Thus the scene was set for the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War. It was a crisis that would see the world on the brink of Armageddon

The First Analysis

The first mention of the possibility of the Soviet Union placing Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM) and Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM) in Cuba came in a meeting between John A. McCone, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, Roswell L. Gilpatric, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and General Maxwell Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In this meeting, McCone told the gathering that CIA analysts had definite information on surface to air missiles (SAM) in Cuba, and he speculated on the probability that their purpose was the protection of offensive ballistic missiles.

On the following day McCone gave the same information to President Kennedy, adding estimates or the numbers of Soviet and Chinese military currently in Cuba.

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4 McCone, J.A. (1962), Soviet MRBMs in Cuba. In CIA History Staff, *CIA Documents of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (pp. 13-17) Langely, VA.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.
On August 23, McConne met again with the president and others, including Rusk, McNamara, and General Taylor, and McConne speculated on why there was the need for so many SAMs if not to protect and conceal sites for MRBMs. On August 25, McConne departed for his honeymoon in Paris. Lt. Gen. Marshall S. Carter, the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence became the Acting Director.

On September 10, McConne wired Carter that he could not understand the costly expense of building so many SAM sites unless it was to protect and conceal offensive capabilities such as MRBMs. Carter replied that the Bureau of National Estimates, CIA (BNE) analysts had advised him that the building of the sites was more reasonably explained by other than a desire to hide MRBM sites. Some scholars have speculated that:

some of the writers of the NIE (National Intelligence Estimates) might have been uncomfortable with the ‘action implications’ of including the possibility of a Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba in the estimate. By this logic, the writers would have been hesitant to include what they believed to be a very low-probability event in the NIE knowing that it might be used by others in the administration (such as McConne) who were known to be in favor of a US invasion of Cuba.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
McCone continue to press on Carter his concern that the Soviets might be in the process of placing MRBMs in Cuba and he cautioned him, that it was the duty of the CIA to give decision makers “their best estimate of possible developments and alternative situations that might evolve and unexpectedly confront us.”

Carter then communicated to McCone the findings of the Cuban Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), unfortunately stating that, in the opinion of the BNE, “establishment of MRBMs in Cuba would be incompatible with Soviet policy – and indicate a greater willingness to increase risk in US/Soviet relations than the Soviet Union had displayed so far.” It was an assessment that the analysts in the BNA would soon come to regret. The analysts had committed a grievous error by assuming that the Soviets would behave as we would have behaved and discounted the fact that the Soviet Premier might think that he could present the president, who had been in office for less than a year, with a fait accompli and thus gain an immeasurable strategic advantage. As Jonathan Renshon described it,

The US assessed Soviet intentions taking into account only the risks and costs – the ‘downside’ – of deploying strategic weapons into Cuba, and failed to consider the potential benefits that such a deployment would have for Khrushchev, as

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10 Ibid, p. 15.

11 Ibid, pp 15-16.


13 Note: There is some disagreement of the spelling of Kruschev, or Krushchev. At Brown University I met and got to know Nikita Krushchev’s son, Sergei, who was on the faculty there and use the spelling that he used. I use the spelling Kruschev that he used.
well as the reasons he might have for believing that such a move would be successful.\textsuperscript{14}

Blight and Welch also took the BNA to task because, as they concluded, U.S. intelligence was predisposed to the conviction that the placing of offensive missiles in Cuba would be inconsistent with Soviet policy and that this predisposition was the primary reason for their inability to predict the deployment.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{The Light Begins To Dawn}

In an undated memorandum to the Director of the CIA titled “Action Generated by DCI Cables Concerning Cuban Low-Level Photography and Offensive Weapons”, the Executive Director, Lyman B. Kirkpatrick gave the first indication that McCone’s “hunch” might be accurate. In paragraph 5 of that memorandum he states that the low-level photography mission of August 26 had “led our analysts to suspect the presence of another kind of missile site – possibly surface to surface – at Banes.”\textsuperscript{16} Unfortunately, there had recently been two incidents of U-2 spy planes being lost, one over China and the other over Sakhalin Island, which made the administration leery of Cuban over flights, as a result CIA analysts could not get all the photographic evidence they desired. The CIA requested that low-level photography over flights be scheduled and presented details of the proposed routes which avoided the known SAM sites.


\textsuperscript{16} Kirkpatrick, L. B. (1962), Action generated by DCI cables concerning Cuban low-level photography and offensive weapons. In CIA History Staff, \textit{CIA Documents of the Cuban Missile Crisis} (pp. 38-44), Langley, VA, Central Intelligence Agency, p. 38
In mid-September, the CIA had received two reports of a Soviet convoy travelling to San Cristobal with large, canvas-covered items which the observers believed were SS-4 (medium range, nuclear armed) missiles. At that time, the CIA analysts were leery of reports from Cubans because, as Blight and Welch, comment, “[m]ost [Cuban] reports were of no value, or perhaps negative value; there were literally thousands of reports of missiles in Cuba in the period before any missiles were actually brought there.” However, the stories from the two observers dovetailed sufficiently that CIA analysts believed that the observers may have actually seen SS-4s in this convoy which led them to raise the priority level for over flights in the San Cristobal area. Again, as Blight and Welch put it, “[w]e do know that a few reports from Cuban sources were gems - very precise and very detailed descriptions of what, in retrospect, almost certainly were Soviet MRBMs. It was this request that brought about the over flight of October 14.

The Smoking Gun

Within the United States Intelligence Board there existed an inter-agency committee called the Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance, which was responsible for planning and approving the use of U-2 spy planes, and other air reconnaissance assets. Normally, the Committee would approve two U-2 over flights per month over Cuba, however, because of the Soviet build-up the Committee increased that to four for the month of September 1962. To successfully photograph

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18 Lehman, R. (1962), CIA handling of the Soviet build-up in Cuba. In CIA History Staff, CIA Documents from the Cuban Missile Crisis (pp. 99-102), Langley, VA, Central Intelligence Agency.


20 (1962), U-2 overflights of Cuba, 29 August through 14 October 1962. In CIA History Staff, CIA Documents from the Cuban Missile Crisis (pp. 127-137), Langley, VA, Central Intelligence Agency.
from a U-2 it required that the cloud cover be less than 25%. Unfortunately, during the month of September the weather over Cuba was consistently bad and only two of the four authorized flights took place with little usable intelligence resulting. The situation remained pretty much the same for the first part of October. 

On October 4, the Committee met and John McCone, who had returned from his honeymoon, made a strong appeal for extensive over flights of Cuba. The Committee requested the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA to examine all alternative methods of aerial reconnaissance. On October 9, the Committee met again to hear the report. At this time the report from the CIA analysts that something suspicious was going on in the San Cristobal area, and that it might involve MRBMs was received and, as a result, the route for the next over flight was adjusted to cover that area.

The weather on October 10, 11, and 12 remained unacceptable. On the 12th, operational control of the U-2s was transferred to the Strategic Air Command (SAC). On the 14th, SAC successfully flew the mission and, for the first time, evidence of the existence of MRBMs was found.

On October 16, 1962, the CIA issued a memorandum in which it stated that two sites, approximately 5 nautical miles apart, had what appeared to be trailers which carried SS-3 or SS-4 ballistic missiles. The SS-3 has a range of approximately 700 nautical miles, the SS-4 a range of 1000 nautical miles (a nautical mile is equal to approximately 1.15 land miles.) Both carry a warhead capacity of 3,000 lbs. which is sufficient to carry a low-megaton nuclear warhead.

\[ \text{Ibid.} \]
\[ \text{Ibid.} \]
\[ \text{Ibid.} \]
Because the SS-3 requires liquid oxygen for an oxidant, and the SS-4 used stored propellants, CIA analysts determined that the missiles were probably SS-4s.\textsuperscript{24}

The CIA estimated that the missiles had probably arrived sometime in September and, assuming the warheads, fuel, and guidance equipment was already in Cuba, the sites could be operational within a few weeks. In addition, the memorandum detailed the potential targets within range of the SS-4. These included many military facilities as well as population centers, including Washington, D.C. The addition of nuclear warheads would give the Soviets an immense strategic advantage.\textsuperscript{25} We now know that, in fact, nuclear warheads were in route to Cuba aboard Soviet merchant ships and that the KGB was in control of the warheads.\textsuperscript{26} It was now obvious that the United States would have to take action, before the IRBM and MRBM missiles became operative.

**The Crisis**

When the crisis began, the role of intelligence analysts did not end, as evidenced by the SNIE (Special National Intelligence Estimate) 11-18-62, titled “Soviet Reactions to Certain U.S. Courses of Action in Cuba,” and dated November 19. In this estimate, the CIA opined that if the United States allowed the build-up to continue, “it would provide strong encouragement to

\textsuperscript{24} CIA (1962), Probable MRBM sites in Cuba, In CIA History Staff, *CIA Documents from the Cuban Missile Crisis* (pp. 139-143), Langely, VA: Central Intelligence Agency.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

Communists, pro-Communists, and the more anti-American sectors of opinion in Latin America and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{27} In addition, they foresaw deterioration in American prestige and influence. The estimate then proceeded to predict what response the Soviets might have to warnings, blockades, air strikes and invasion. All were possible courses of action that had been discussed by the President’s team. In its final paragraph the estimate makes the sobering observation that the Soviet leaders would not institute a general (read nuclear) war, nor take actions that could lead to a general war.\textsuperscript{28} To those of us without the insights available to the CIA, this was not so obvious! Being 15 at the time of the crisis, the prospects did not look good for a 16\textsuperscript{th} birthday.

Throughout the crisis, the intelligence community continued to provide insight into possible reactions to various course of action, but its role became less critical as the direction of American policy was held firmly by the President and his chief advisors.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Cuban Missile Crisis showed both the weakness and the strength of the intelligence community and those analysts whose job it was to interpret the myriad of information coming in from various sources. The great weakness was their inability, or unwillingness, to predict the introduction of offensive missiles into Cuba. CIA Director McCone was alone in predicting that the purpose behind the SAM missile installations was to protect and shield offensive missile sites. However, their ability to determine that the missiles did exist and to do so before the SS4s and SS5s became operational may have saved the world, for who knows what would have


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
happened if they had not done so, and had not provided the President with the evidence needed to confront Krushchev and ultimately get the missiles removed.
References:


CIA. (1962). Probable Soviet MRBM sites in Cuba. In CIA History Staff, *CIA Documents from the Cuban Missile Crisis* (pp. 139-143). Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency.


