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Summer September 1, 2019

Cuban Missile Crisis.doc

Albert E Poirier, Jr.

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/albert_poirier/12/
THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

BY

ALBERT E. POIRIER, JR.

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INTRODUCTION

On its website *Revelations from the Russian Archives*, the Library of Congress reflects, “The Cold War was a period of East-West competition, tension, and conflict short of full-scale war, characterized by mutual perceptions of hostile intention between military-political alliances or blocs.”¹

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’s 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. 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

Early in 1962, President Kennedy had read Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*, detailing the events leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. He was impressed with how the lack of communication and misunderstanding of relatively minor incidents led to a conflagration of immense proportions.³ He was determined that a failure to communicate clearly would not cause a Third World War. Throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis, despite harsh rhetoric on both sides, President Kennedy and Premier Kruschev continued to communicate, on an almost daily basis. It was this communication, in the form of letters and cables, which prevented the crisis of October from spiraling out of control.

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CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE SCENE

The island of Cuba lies just 90 miles from the Florida Keys. From 1934 through 1958, it was under the despotic control of General Fulgencio Batista who, according to the Marxist History of Cuba, had murdered over 20,000 workers and peasants\(^4\). The Batista regime welcomed American businesses to whom he granted concessions at the expense of his people. He also welcomed American tourists who would visit Havana because of the legalized gambling and spend millions in the casinos and hotels.\(^5\)

On January 1, 1959, a revolution headed by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara ousted Batista and sent him and his supporters scurrying to Miami. In a major speech to the Cuban people on January 21, 1959, Castro gave the first indication of his antipathy toward the United States. Before millions of Cubans, he declared that the United States had started “a campaign against the people of Cuba.”\(^6\)

On December 19, 1960, in a joint communiqué with the Soviet Union, the government of Cuba “openly aligned itself with the domestic and foreign policies of the Sino-Soviet bloc.”\(^7\) On May 29, 1962, “Fidel Castro informed the visiting Soviet officials that Cuba [would] accept the deployment of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to U.S. invasion.”\(^8\) That summer the Soviet Union, under Nikita Kruschev, began the process of installing both medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles (MRBM’s and IRBM’s), with nuclear warheads, on the island of Cuba. These missiles, with ranges from 1200 to 2000 nautical miles, could have reached most of the cities in the United States.


\(^6\)Ibid.

\(^7\)Ibid.

In the United States, the young president, John F. Kennedy, in office slightly over a year, was reeling from the debacle at the abortive Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba by American trained and armed Cubans. Having inherited the CIA plan for the invasion from the Eisenhower administration, he refused to provide American military help when the invasion faltered on the beaches. As a result, “the bullet-riddled band of anti-Castroites surrendered.”11 The President did authorize attempts to assassinate Castro and approved the planning of OPERATION NORTHWOOD, a top secret Pentagon plan to develop justification for an invasion of Cuba12

The Soviet response to the Bay of Pigs and the threat of American invasion of Cuba was to “[work] quickly and secretly to build missile installations in Cuba.”13 By October, the Soviet had placed sixty missiles and warheads in Cuba. The stage was set for the crisis that was “the closest the world ever came to nuclear war.”14 For two weeks, the world stood on the brink of Armageddon!

"National security must come first...we can't negotiate with a gun at our head...if they won't remove the missiles and restore status quo ante, we will have to do it ourselves.”

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10* Cuban Missile Crisis, The Players: Nikita Kruschev,” http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/people/khrushchev.html


14Kurt Wiersma, and Ben Larson, “Fourteen Days in October,” http://library.advanced.org/11046/

15* The Cuban Missile Crisis, Ends of a Rope,” http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/rope.html
THE FOURTEEN DAYS

Day 1 – Monday, October 15: CIA photo interpreters, analyzing pictures taken the previous day, by a U-2 spy plane flying covertly over Cuba, realized that what they originally thought were SAM2 anti-aircraft missiles were, in fact, SS-4 medium range nuclear-armed missiles.

Day 2 – Tuesday, October 16: Presidential Aide McGeorge Bundy informed President Kennedy that proof existed that the Soviets had placed offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba, despite their assurances that all military aid to that country was strictly defensive. Kennedy met that day with a team of trusted advisors referred to as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EX-COMM). Included in this group were the President’s brother and Attorney-General Robert Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Presidential Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and others. At this meeting, they discussed possible courses of action. EX-COMM decided that the President would maintain his normal schedule in order not to alert the Soviets that the United States knew about the missiles.

Day 3 – Wednesday, October 17: President Kennedy, following the EX-COMM recommendation, maintained a normal schedule, including a trip to Connecticut to support Congressman Abe Ribicoff. While Kennedy was in Connecticut, the military discovered, and advised the President, that the Soviets had also placed SS-5 IRBM’s in Cuba. These missiles placed every major city in the United States, except Seattle, under threat of nuclear attack. The CIA informed the President “that the 16 to 32 missiles identified could kill 80 million Americans as they had a range of 2000 miles with a flight time of 17 minutes.” The CIA also reported that 20 Soviet Ships were in route to Cuba apparently carrying additional missiles on their decks.

Day 4 – Thursday, October 18: The President met with the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, to discuss the Cuban situation. Mr. Gromyko, unaware of the President’s evidence of offensive weapons in Cuba, stated that: “[H]e wished to reiterate that the… Soviet specialists were

16Ibid.

17Ibid.
training Cubans in handling certain types of armaments which were only defensive--and he wished to stress the word defensive.”

**Day 5 - Friday, October 19:** Continuing with the plan of maintaining normalcy, President Kennedy left Washington for a political trip.

**Day 6 - Thursday, October 20:** The President cut short his trip with the public excuse of illness. Kennedy met with his advisors and ordered, “[a] defensive quarantine [be] instituted as soon as possible.”

**Day 7 - Sunday, October 21:** In a meeting with the President, Robert Kennedy expressed opposition to a preemptive air strike to destroy the Soviet missiles. “It would be a Pearl Harbor type attack”, he argued. He and CIA Director John McCone favored “initiating a blockade and thereafter ‘play for the breaks’”

**Day 8 - Monday, October 22:** At 7:00 PM, after a full day of meetings with his top advisors, the President addressed the nation:

> This government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba. Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.

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19Ibid.

20[“Notes On a Meeting With The President,” http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba036.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba036.htm)

21Ibid.

22[“Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy Goes Public,” http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/public.html](http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/public.html)
The President went on to explain the steps that the United States would take to counter this threat, saying:

I have directed that the following initial steps be taken:

- First, to halt this offensive build up, a strict quarantine of all military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated.
- Second, I have directed the continued and increased close surveillance of its military build up.
- Third, it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response on the Soviet Union.23

When Premier Kruschev read the speech, sent to him before delivery by the President, he “became infuriated. He was angry with his military for not successfully hiding the missiles and he was angered by the American ‘quarantine’ which, no matter what they called it, was an act of war.”24

**Day 9 – Tuesday, October 23:** The first of the U.S. Navy ships reached the quarantine line 800 miles from Cuba. President Kennedy received a letter from Premier Kruschev “indicating the deterrent nature of the missiles in Cuba and the peaceful intentions of the Soviet Union.”25 Kennedy then decided to withdraw the quarantine line to 500 miles from Cuba.

**Day 10 – Wednesday, October 24:** The President received another letter from the Premier, in response to his letter of the previous day. In this more aggressive letter, Kruschev stated:

You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather are setting forth an ultimatum and threatening that if we do not give in to your demands you will use force. Consider what you are saying! And you want to persuade me to agree to this! What would it mean to agree to these demands? It would mean guiding oneself in one's relations with other countries not by reason, but by submitting to arbitrariness. You are no longer appealing to reason, but wish to intimidate us.26

23Ibid.
24Ibid.
In the Atlantic, Soviet merchant vessels began to turn around and return to Europe. “This news brought a sigh of relief from EX-COMM.” While it appeared that the Soviets would not directly challenge the blockade, the danger of nuclear confrontation was still a real possibility.

In the far Pacific, the United States detonated a hydrogen bomb. Meanwhile, in Washington, the Pentagon raised the defense readiness level to DEFCOM 2, the highest it had ever been (DEFCOM 1 designated that an actual state of war existed.)

**Day 11 – Thursday, October 25:** The battle of the letters continued as Kennedy addressed another letter to Kruschev in which he laid the blame for the crisis squarely on the Soviets.

At the United Nations, U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson engaged in a feisty verbal match with the Soviet Ambassador, Valerian Zobrin. During the un-diplomatic exchange Stevenson famously told the Soviet diplomat that he was prepared to wait “until hell freezes over” for the Soviet’s answer as to whether or not Soviet missiles were in Cuba.

**Day 12 – Friday, October 26:** President Kennedy received another letter from Premier Kruschev. The letter, in four parts, was an emotional appeal to the President to resolve the crisis. The letter contained an offer from Kruschev to remove the missiles from Cuba if the United States would lift the quarantine and publicly promise not to invade Cuba. This letter played an important role in the resolution of the crisis. Meanwhile, in a letter to Kruschev, Fidel Castro recommends that the Soviet Union launch a first-strike nuclear attack in the event of a U.S. invasion of Cuba.

**Day 13 – Saturday, October 27:** As the CIA reported to the President that it appeared the first Cuban missiles sites were operational, an American U-2 flew over eastern U.S.S.R. Such an overflight directly violated the agreement between President Eisenhower and Premier Kruschev made after the Gary

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27b The Cuban Missile Crisis, Eyeball to Eyeball,” [http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/eyeball.html](http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/eyeball.html)


30Ibid.
Powers U-2 Incident. When Defense Secretary McNamara learned of this incursion, he "turned absolutely white, and yelled hysterically, 'This means war with the Soviet Union!'"\(^{31}\)

The White House received a second, more bellicose, letter from Premier Kruschev demanding, in addition to removing the blockade and promising not to invade Cuba, that the United States remove its missiles from Turkey. Kennedy decided to ignore this letter and proceed based on the letter of the 26th. He publicly replied to the Kruščev letter, agreeing to lift the quarantine and promising not to invade Cuba, in return for the Soviet’s removal of all offensive weapons from Cuba.

In a secret meeting, Attorney General Robert Kennedy told Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that the U.S. could not make any deals relating to the missiles in Turkey but, “[it is] our judgment that, within a short time after this crisis was over, those missiles would be gone.”\(^{32}\) Kennedy then advised the Ambassador that, unless the Soviets responded by the 29th, the U.S. was prepared to invade Cuba.

At the end of the day, Secretary of Defense McNamara was quoted as saying, "I thought I might never live to see another Saturday night."\(^{33}\)

**Day 14 – Sunday, October 28:** Having received President Kennedy’s public letter and having heard from Ambassador Dobrynin regarding his conversation with Robert Kennedy, Premier Kruščev met with senior advisors and decided against going to war. He hurriedly composed a message to President Kennedy in which he stated: “these means as I had already informed you earlier are in the hands of the Soviet officers—[who have been ordered] to take appropriate measures to discontinue construction of the aforementioned facilities, to dismantle them, and to return them to the Soviet Union.”\(^{34}\)

This letter from Kruščev effectively ended the crisis, but when Fidel Castro heard about the...
agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, he was furious. First, because he had to hear about it over the radio, as there had not been time for the Kremlin to notify him in advance of Kruschev’s response; and secondly because he felt that the Soviet action was a betrayal of a loyal friend. To mollify his ally, Kruschev explained, “not ending the crisis would have meant nuclear war,” but that, "the Soviet government under no circumstances would refuse to fulfill its international duty to defend Cuba.”

The dismantling of the missiles began that day.36

"We've been eyeball to eyeball and the other fellow just blinked."

Secretary of State Dean Rusk

35 Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

In Washington, Kennedy was hailed by many (myself included) as a hero for staring down the Soviet bear. Former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, remarked that he had written to President Kennedy remarking on his “leadership, firmness and judgement (sic)” in dealing with the crisis. Acheson also remarked that Kennedy had been “phenomenally lucky.” John F. Kennedy’s prestige rose to a new level, both at home and abroad, and he was recognized as a national leader and statesman of the highest order.

Premier Kruschev’s fate was considerably different. He was humiliated and the disgrace of the Missile Crisis lived with him until he was finally overthrown, in 1964, by a plot led by Moscow hard-liners.

Communications had solved the crisis. However, both leaders knew the inability to deal directly with each other enhanced the probability of an error in communication, and with it the likelihood of nuclear war. In 1963, the Moscow-Washington hot line was established. This would allow the leaders of the two superpowers to speak directly to one another. Since its installation, the two superpowers have not again allowed a crisis to reach the dangerous level of The Cuban Missile Crisis.

"Nuclear catastrophe was hanging by a thread ... and we weren't counting days or hours, but minutes."

-Soviet General and Army Chief of Operations, Anatoly Gribkov


38Trueman, The Cuban Missile Crisis,” http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/cuba.htm.

Cuban History, The Missile Crisis, “Part 1. U.S. Bay of Pigs Invasion,”

____ “Part 2. Toward The Deployment of Nuclear Missiles in Cuba,”


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____ “Ends of a Rope,” http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/rope.html

____ “Eyeball to Eyeball,” http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/eyeball.html


____ “On The Brink,” http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/brink.html


“Letter from Chairman Kruschev to President Kennedy, October 26, 1962” [http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_correspondence.html#k_to_jfk_oct26](http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfkl/cmc/cmc_correspondence.html#k_to_jfk_oct26).


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