

## THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS IN CONTEXT

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### Abstract

*Nearly twenty years have lapsed since the end of the Cold War. Today it is relatively easy to forget the bipolar structure that dominated international relations and the intense conflict that the Cold War era generated. The Cuban Missile Crisis is arguably the most intense conflict during that era between the two superpowers. It was a time when nuclear war was not some theoretical military strategy, but a real possibility. During the crisis, President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev's decision-making processes were those of rational actors and not of crazed heads of state playing a game of nuclear brinkmanship. President Kennedy desperately sought to maintain the strategic balance of power, while Khrushchev wanted to alter the strategic balance of power in favor of the Soviet Union. President Kennedy had no choice but to respond to the Soviet nuclear missile deployment in Cuba, for if he failed to respond to this probe of Soviet intentions into the western hemisphere Khrushchev would continue to probe in all other spheres of American influence. This article attempts to build on the work of Graham Allison and Phillip Zelikow<sup>1</sup> citation needed here by placing the Cuban Missile Crisis back in the Cold War context, specifically relating the crisis to the delicate and dangerous struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States to alter the strategic balance of power.*

Numerous historical accounts relate the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Some scholars suggest President Kennedy's management of the crisis was dangerous and unnecessarily provocative, propelling the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of thermonuclear war. The crisis did thrust the two superpowers toward the precipice of nuclear war, however, the argument that revisionist historians put forth that the Soviet missiles in Cuba posed no additional danger nor did it alter the nuclear threat to the mainland of the United States is almost entirely without merit. While the argument is certainly true that revisionist historians put forth that Soviet based nuclear missiles launched from Cuba would have the same disastrous results as if they had been launched from within the Soviet Union. That fact in itself is insufficient to support the conclusion that the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba did not pose any additional danger to the United States. Most importantly, the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba did alter the strategic balance of power. Upon close examination of the historical record, alteration of the strategic balance of power was a significant motivational factor in Premier Khrushchev's decision to deploy nuclear missiles. As with most political decisions, Khrushchev's decision to deploy the missiles was multifaceted. Not only did he want to alter the strategic balance of power, he also sought to thwart the American policy of containment, especially in Berlin as well as in Latin America. Furthermore, the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba allowed Khrushchev to threaten the American mainland in the same manner in which American missiles in Europe threatened the Soviet Union. Fidel Castro was willing to accept the Soviet missiles, albeit not entirely on his terms. Like Khrushchev, Castro did agree to accept the missiles for the sake of communist expansionism, however, the primary reason he agreed to the deployment was for the salvation of Cuba. Castro was under the

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<sup>1</sup> Allison, Graham & Zelikow, Phillip. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*; (New York, NY Longman Publishing, 1999). Allison and Zelikow offer several hypotheses to explain the Cuban Missile Crisis with the strategic balance of power being one hypothesis.

misperception that an invasion of Cuba by the United States was imminent, a perception that was not without considerable merit, nor did the Kennedy administration pursue policies to halt the possibility of such misperceptions. President Kennedy's failure was not due to his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Instead, his failure was his inability to stem the misperception of an imminent invasion by United States backed forces.

Once the Soviet nuclear missiles were discovered on Cuban soil, what was the proper response by the Kennedy administration to this new act of Cold War Soviet aggression? What were the political and security implications if President Kennedy sought only a purely diplomatic solution to the conflict, or what if Kennedy chose not to respond at all? This is why it is necessary to analyze the Cuban Missile Crisis in the context of the times, specifically, during the height of the Cold War era. To examine the crisis otherwise, is to disregard the long-standing traditional adherence to the Monroe Doctrine and ignore the American foreign policy of containment. During this era, American foreign policy can be best summed up utilizing one word, containment. Without a Cold War context, the task of scrutinizing the crisis and the decision-making processes of Kennedy and Khrushchev is perilous indeed. Although the decision-making processes of both superpower leaders were occasionally faulty with some foreseen and some unforeseen harrowing consequences they were able to bring the crisis to a successful diplomatic resolution.

The years preceding the Cuban Missile crisis are particularly relevant to the crisis itself, for several events directly influenced key decision-making processes during the crisis. Those years reveal an extremely pervasive and robust Cold War atmosphere, hence, the rationale why the missile crisis needs to be analyzed in the Cold War context. After the successful launch of Sputnik on October 4, 1957, the American public was in a state of near hysteria over the perceived might of Soviet technocracy. No event influenced American perception of Soviet superiority more than the successful launch of the first artificial satellite. A Gallup poll in January 1958 revealed that 67% of Americans believed the Soviet Union was ahead of the United States in the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> The successful flight of Yuri Gagarin in 1961, the first human to orbit the earth, only added to the American public misperception of Soviet technological and military superiority. In 1960, historians, political scientists, and sociologists heralded an "age of consensus," a time when social protest in America was rendered obsolete by agreements on numerous issues, one of which was a nearly universal fear of communism.<sup>3</sup> Gallup Polls conducted in the period leading up to 1960 confirm the nearly universal aversion to communism by the American public, in 1953, 1954, and in 1956, Americans had an unfavorable opinion of Communism/Soviet Union of 88.5%, 91.1% and 86.4% respectively.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, no polling data exists during the exact period of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in fact data of American attitudes toward communism and the Soviet Union emerges again only in 1966. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow whose seminal work on the Cuban Missile Crisis entitled the *Essence of Decision* specifically addresses the crisis in the context of the Cold War, noting, "It is difficult today to recapture just how pessimistic many Americans were about the likely outcome of the Cold War."<sup>5</sup> With the end of the Cold War, nearly two decades old it is much

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<sup>2</sup> Payne, Rodger A. "Public Opinion and Foreign Threats: Eisenhower's Response to Sputnik." *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol.21, 89-112 (1994).

<sup>3</sup> Gillon, Steven M. *The American Paradox: A History of the United States since 1945*; (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Tom W. "The Polls: American Attitudes toward the Soviet Union and Communism." *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer, 1983), p. 280.

<sup>5</sup> Allison, Graham & Zelikow, Phillip. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*; (New York, NY Longman Publishing, 1999), p. 90.

easier to dismiss the threat of communism and the nearly universal fear that Americans held regarding Soviet aggression.

The Cold War and the strategy of containment were more than political policies or ideals; it was an American way of life that provided a common identity for Americans in the post-war era. In the late 1940's, 1950's and early 1960's, several strategic geopolitical areas challenged the American policy of containment, but the two that would have the utmost impact on the Cuban Missile Crisis was Berlin and Cuba. When President Kennedy took office, he inherited, from his predecessor, President Eisenhower, a covert military operation designed to overthrow the newly installed communist regime of Fidel Castro. The covert military plan, later to be known as the Bay of Pigs, and subsequently as a fiasco, was an absolute failure of policy and decision-making.

Professor Irving L. Janis cites the Bay of Pigs invasion plan of Cuba as a perfect illustration of groupthink mentality and faulty decision-making. Janis addresses specific areas in which the Kennedy administration made dreadful and faulty decisions, namely that the group suffered from the illusion of invulnerability, the illusion of unanimity, a suppression of personal doubts, the docility fostered by suave leadership and a taboo against antagonizing new group members.<sup>6</sup> President Kennedy's failure, for which he claimed sole responsibility, afforded the opportunity to learn from the failures of the group decision-making process in the Bay of Pigs invasion plan. Thus, the pitfalls of not questioning intelligence services, military advisors, and a desire to seek consensus within the group without alternative viewpoints would be avoided during the next crisis, which turned out to be far more complex and precarious than the Bay of Pigs. Nevertheless, the Bay of Pigs invasion and the failure to halt the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) backed plan precipitated a military rapprochement between the Soviet Union and Cuba,<sup>7</sup> which aided Premier Khrushchev's decision to transport Soviet nuclear missiles to the island nation of Cuba.

The other geopolitical area of instability and conflict that highlighted Cold War tensions during the same epoch was Berlin, Germany. The Kennedy Administration also inherited the "Berlin problem." "In November 1958, Khrushchev presented the United States, Great Britain and France with an ultimatum: either convert West Berlin into a "free city" within six months, or he would act unilaterally and give control over Western access to Berlin to the government of the GDR [East Germany]."<sup>8</sup> Although Khrushchev would keep postponing the deadline, he nevertheless kept pressing for a solution to the "Berlin problem" that would remove the allies of World War II from the city of Berlin to form an exclusive sphere of Soviet influence. At the summit conference in Vienna, on June 4, 1961, Khrushchev's opinion of Kennedy was that he was weak and ill prepared to ward off realpolitik diplomacy the way the Eisenhower administration had successfully done, therefore, he tried to bully Kennedy into capitulation over the Berlin issue. During the summit, Khrushchev handed Kennedy an aide-memoire that issued a new ultimatum on Berlin.<sup>9</sup> The following day Khrushchev traveled to East Germany and formally announced a December 31, deadline for a Berlin settlement.<sup>10</sup> The harshness and assertiveness of Khrushchev in Vienna left Kennedy with the distinct impression that the Soviets, particularly Khrushchev, threatened not only West Berlin, but also the American policy of containment

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<sup>6</sup> Janis, Irving L. *Victims of Groupthink*; (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), pp. 36-48.

<sup>7</sup> Janis, Irving L. *Victims of Groupthink*; p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Zubok, Vladislav M. *A Failed Empire; The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*; (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> Fursenko, Aleksandr & Naftali, Timothy. *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary*; (New York, NY: Norton Publishing, 2006) p. 362.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

in which Berlin was always the paramount geopolitical demarcation line that physically and psychologically prevented the spread of communism. Berlin directly influenced President Kennedy's decision-making process during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Because of Khrushchev's forcefulness on the "Berlin Problem," Kennedy invariably linked Berlin with Cuba. The acceptance of missiles in Cuba could have also have meant capitulation over the "Berlin Problem." To Kennedy, holding the line on Cuba inevitably meant holding the line on Berlin. To lose Berlin to the Soviets was equivalent to nullifying containment. The Cuban Missile Crisis was complex with numerous political antecedents directly influencing the crisis, but one of the most important events was the Bay of Pigs failure.

After the Bay of Pigs failure, Khrushchev supplied Castro with more advanced weaponry to act as a deterrent for any possible future invasion by the United States and to protect the communist foothold in the western hemisphere, strategically located just ninety miles from the U.S. mainland. President Kennedy was aware of the Soviet military build up on Cuban soil; on September 4, 1962, he issued a statement read by press secretary Pierre Salinger, it stated, that there was "no evidence... of significant offensive capability in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance. Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise...."<sup>11</sup> Kennedy felt it necessary to continue issuing threats of deterrence, as a result he held a news conference on September 13, 1962. During the conference, he declared, if Cuba were to "become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies."<sup>12</sup> On October 3, 1962, the United States Congress passed a resolution authorizing the President to use any means necessary, "including the use of arms" to prevent the installation of missiles in Cuba.<sup>13</sup> These series of increasingly heightened political affirmations by Kennedy indicated resolve on part of the United States that the installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba was intolerable. Why then did Khrushchev install missiles in Cuba?

The answer is multifaceted, ambiguous, and complex; however, the question requires analysis in the context of Cold War politics in which misperceptions and miscalculations of ones adversary were commonplace. Foremost, Khrushchev miscalculated President Kennedy's response to the installation of missiles in Cuba. He wrongfully perceived Kennedy would have no choice but to accept the Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba especially because he intended to reveal the clandestine installation after the November mid-term elections.<sup>14</sup> Scholars offer many different interpretations of why Khrushchev went ahead with the deployment of missiles in Cuba. Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis cites Khrushchev's desire to spread communism in Latin American as the chief reason for the deployment.<sup>15</sup> Would Khrushchev embark on such a risky maneuver if his principal aim were to spread communism to distant third-world nations? It is highly improbable that this was Premier Khrushchev's rationale for the deployment of nuclear missiles; however, the hypothesis has substantial merit as a contributing factor in Khrushchev's decision-making process.

Another plausible explanation that has been more recently advocated by historians is that Khrushchev was intent on protecting Fidel Castro and his communist regime from an imminent

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<sup>11</sup> Munton, Don & Welch, David A. *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History*; (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 43, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Presidential News Conference given Thursday, September 13, 1962 at 6:00 P.M., State Department Auditorium.

<sup>13</sup> Schulzinger, Robert D. *United States Diplomacy Since 1900*; (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 226. Also see, *By the President of the United States of America: A Proclamation*. Retrieved from <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kencuba.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Allison, Graham & Zelikow, Philip. *Essence of Decision*; p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Cold War: A New History*; (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2005), p. 75.

American invasion. Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara conceded at the Moscow Conference, “If I was a Cuban and read the evidence of covert American action against their government, I would be quite ready to believe that the U.S. intended to mount an invasion.”<sup>16</sup> The Kennedy administration’s failure to refrain from covert operations to overthrow Castro’s communist state enhanced the Kremlin’s misperception that an invasion was imminent. Khrushchev’s personal memoirs indicated that he was “purely motivated by the defense needs of Cuba.”<sup>17</sup> However, Khrushchev at the time explained to his colleagues that the deployment was an offensive policy.<sup>18</sup> Contradictory statements cast doubt on which explanation is accurate. It is highly probable that Khrushchev sought to justify his actions in a more favorable light in his memoirs and substantially more credible that Khrushchev did indeed install the nuclear missiles as part of an offensive strategic Cold War maneuver. For if Khrushchev’s plan was solely defensive, why did he conduct the deployment clandestinely? Furthermore, when faced by the ultimatums of the Kennedy administration to remove the missiles, why did Khrushchev fail to consult Castro on the issue of removal?

If the Cuban defense hypothesis is insufficient because the deployment of missiles was not solely for the defense of the Castro regime, then what other motives did Khrushchev have? Khrushchev was vehemently annoyed by the proximity of American Jupiter missiles located so close to the border of Russia, in Turkey. In regards to his fervent opposition to the Jupiter missiles Khrushchev expressed the notion of ... “putting one of our hedgehogs down the Americans’ trousers.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, part of Khrushchev’s motivation to deploy nuclear missiles was based on the proximity of Cuba to the United States, and to give the U.S. a dose of its own medicine. In the case that the Soviet Union ever had to withdraw the missiles, Khrushchev could always point to the American missiles in Turkey as well as other NATO countries, which housed similar missiles, as a bargaining chip for their removal. To cite Turkey as the singular motivation to deploy missiles would be an oversimplification of Soviet intentions, for the Jupiter missiles in Turkey were outdated and could be readily replaced by Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs). Further, it is highly unlikely Khrushchev would embark on such a risky venture, because it did not alter the balance of power one iota. Perhaps Khrushchev had a larger prize in mind, namely a resolution to the Berlin problem.

Khrushchev could also utilize West Berlin as a bargaining chip. West Berlin was a prize that eluded Joseph Stalin and an ultimate trophy of the Cold War conflict. Confidential correspondence between Khrushchev and Kennedy illustrates that the subject of West Berlin was the foremost issue on the agenda.<sup>20</sup> If the United States were to lose Berlin the entire strategy of containment could be nullified, furthermore, the Cold War victory by America with the enormously successful Berlin Airlift would have been destroyed. Throughout the entirety of the Cuban missile crisis, the fate of Berlin weighed heavily on President Kennedy. Kennedy linked the fate of Berlin with the Cuban crisis, theorizing if the United States were to attack Cuba then the Soviet response would be to move on West Berlin.<sup>21</sup> In a remarkable act of diplomacy and non-partisanship that is difficult to envision today, President Kennedy telephoned

<sup>16</sup> Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, David A. Welch. “Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana and the Cuban Missile Crisis”; *International Security*, Vol. 14 No. 3 (Winter, 1989-1990), p. 145.

<sup>17</sup> Fursenko & Naftali. *Khrushchev’s Cold War*; p. 435.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Fursenko & Naftali. *Khrushchev’s Cold War*; p. 431.

<sup>20</sup> Allison & Zelikow. *Essence of Decision*; p. 105. Figure-1 enumerates all the confidential correspondence between the two superpower leaders with Berlin as a topic 12 out of 17 times.

<sup>21</sup> May, Ernest R. & Zelikow, Philip D., Editors. *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis*; (New York, NY: Norton Publishing, 2002), pp. 111-114. Conversation on White House taping system Friday, October 19, 1962 at 9:45 meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

former President Dwight Eisenhower not only to keep him abreast of the situation in Cuba, but also to seek advice. By Monday, October 22, President Kennedy had formally decided against the military air-strike option, but now viewed West Berlin as the strategic objective the Soviets were after and would bargain for, in exchange for the missiles in Cuba.<sup>22</sup> Former President Eisenhower articulated, that in respect to the trade off, that “I just don’t quite go along... with that thinking.... And I don’t believe they [the Soviets] relate one situation with another.”<sup>23</sup> Yet President Kennedy continued to equate the two issues, perhaps Kennedy was unable to overcome the forcefulness of Khrushchev’s demands in Vienna. Even during the last day of the crisis, Kennedy continued to perceive a linkage between Cuba and Berlin. Once again, Kennedy telephoned Eisenhower; Eisenhower reaffirmed his earlier statements regarding Berlin, that “...it may have been a mistake to equate, Berlin with Cuba or anything else.”<sup>24</sup> Prior to the Vienna summit, President Kennedy met with French President De Gaulle who also gave him advice with regard to the “Berlin problem.” De Gaulle reminded Kennedy, “that the Soviet leader had a habit of issuing ultimatums and then forgetting about them. If he wanted to go war, he could have already.”<sup>25</sup> Khrushchev possessed an extremely boisterous personality, who habitually made brazen statements he knew to be false, which may have had more to do with the fact his communist regime centered on public perceptions of Soviet might, not on actual capabilities. Interestingly, at no point during the crisis did Khrushchev even intimate the possibility of an attack against Berlin.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, “Khrushchev dismissed all suggestions from his subordinates to respond to the American actions [the naval quarantine] against Cuba with a blockade of West Berlin.”<sup>27</sup> Berlin was never an issue during the crisis, despite Kennedy’s perception of linkage. If Berlin was not the strategic objective of the Soviet leader, then what was?

Alteration of the balance of power, if successful, would enable the Soviet Union significant increased leverage in global international relations, and could potentially negate the long-term American foreign policy of containment. A shift in the balance of power is the objective that Khrushchev desperately sought. In 1962, the United States was the much stronger superpower and was constantly thwarting Khrushchev’s initiatives.<sup>28</sup> If President Kennedy failed to respond to the Soviet missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev would have a much freer hand to act against Berlin or challenge America in other arenas of global contest. Moreover, Kennedy’s acceptance of the Soviet missiles in Cuba would have altered the balance of power within the western hemisphere. Khrushchev boasted that the Soviet Union was producing Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) “like sausages.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, in 1962, satellite intelligence revealed that the Soviet Union only possessed twenty ICBMs, while the United States had 180 ICBMs in their nuclear arsenal as well as 630 bombers stationed in the U.S., Asia, and Europe.<sup>30</sup> Nuclear parity did not exist, the supposed “missile gap” did not favor the Soviets; it drastically favored the United States.

<sup>22</sup> May & Zelikow. *The Kennedy Tapes*; Telephone conversation with Dwight Eisenhower, Monday, October 22, 1962 at 10:40 A.M., pp. 142-146.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 405-407. Telephone conversation with Eisenhower Sunday, October 28, 1962 at 12:08.

<sup>25</sup> Fursenko & Naftali. *Khrushchev’s Cold War*; p. 359.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 470.

<sup>27</sup> Zubok, Vladislav M. *A Failed Empire*; p. 150.

<sup>28</sup> Fursenko & Naftali. *Khrushchev’s Cold War*; p. 434.

<sup>29</sup> Munton & Welch. *The Cuban Missile Crisis*; p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Allison & Zelikow. *Essence of Decision*; pp. 92, 93.

Therefore, “the Soviets were worried about an American first-strike capability.”<sup>31</sup> The deployment of medium and intermediate ballistic missiles, which the Soviets possessed in abundance, onto Cuba soil, negated the American first-strike capability. Khrushchev in effect, could more readily and more cost effectively alter the balance of power by the Cuban deployment, than by any other means, as long as Kennedy acquiesced to the presence of the missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev was taking an enormous gamble, but it also had the potential to reap significant rewards.

Cuban officials also viewed the missile deployment as a shift in the balance of power. “Emilio Aragonés, one of the six members of the Cuban Communist Party Secretariat in 1962, claimed that Castro and the Cuban leadership accepted the deployment for two reasons: first, because the missiles in Cuba would have shifted the global correlation of forces in favor of socialism; and second, because Cuba should accept its share of the risk.”<sup>32</sup>

Not everyone in the Kennedy administration espoused the view that the missiles in Cuba transformed the strategic balance of power. When Robert McNamara was asked this question, he responded, “Not at all.”<sup>33</sup> However, McNamara’s opinion was the minority view.<sup>34</sup> Years later, the United States discovered that the Soviets intended to develop Cuba into a full-scale strategic Soviet base.<sup>35</sup> The security implications of a major Soviet military base located just ninety miles from the coastline of the United States were enormous and unacceptable. Although the development of a full-scale Soviet military base was unbeknownst to Kennedy at the time, at no time during the Cold War could any President resign the doctrine of containment to the scrap heap. John Lewis Gaddis echoes this interpretation in *Containment: Its Past and Future*. Gaddis explains that the doctrine of containment was sometimes applied very differently in different presidential administrations. Nevertheless, all Presidential administrations have viewed “American security as tied up with the maintenance of the global balance of power and all have seen the Soviet Union as the major threat to that balance...”<sup>36</sup> Soviet intervention in Cuba was a direct challenge to American prestige, power, and the policy of containment.

The adherence to the strict policy of containment by the Kennedy administration, much like his predecessors foiled Khrushchev’s risky gamble, as a result, American prestige increased and Soviet prestige declined. However, if Khrushchev calculated differently, namely by going public, his risky gamble might have succeeded. President Kennedy made repeated explicit public warnings that Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba would not be tolerated by the United States. Khrushchev, instead of going public with the missile deployment as Castro had urged him prior to Kennedy issuing any warning statements regarding U.S. policy, decided to keep the deployment secret.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the Soviets publicly and definitively denied that the Soviet Union would export nuclear warheads to third-world nations,

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<sup>31</sup> Pious, Richard M. “The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Limits of Crisis Management: *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 116, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Allyn, Blight, & Welch. “Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana, and the Cuban Missile Crisis”; *International Security*, p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> Allison & Zelikow. *Essence of Decision*. pp. 95, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>36</sup> Gaddis, John Lewis. “Containment: Its Past and Future”; *International Security*, Vol. 5. (Spring, 1981). In “*International Conflict and Conflict Management: Readings in World Politics*”; p. 476. Gaddis examines conflict, concluding that containment has worked very successfully in the past and will continue as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy in the future.

<sup>37</sup> Munton & Welch. *The Cuban Missile Crisis*; p. 38.

specifically mentioning Cuba.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations, Valerian Zorin denied the existence of the missiles in Cuba before the United Nations Security Council. When U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson publicly confronted Zorin with intelligently worded diplomatic rhetoric along with definitive photography of the missile sites, it became abundantly clear that the United States declaration of the existence of the nuclear missiles was accurate.<sup>39</sup> Stevenson's performance and the veracity of his statements along with incontrovertible evidence badly damaged Soviet credibility and enhanced the justification for the naval blockade. Years after the Crisis senior Kennedy officials revealed that if Khrushchev would have gone public with the deployment, it "would have been much more difficult for the Kennedy administration to oppose."<sup>40</sup> The intense desire for secrecy that figured so prominently in Soviet domestic and foreign policies often crippled its ability to win public opinion and support from the international community, and the missile crisis was no exception.

Conversely, the Kennedy Administration courted world public opinion. President Kennedy announced in a televised address a strict naval quarantine of all offensive military equipment bound for Cuba.<sup>41</sup> Kennedy specifically used the term quarantine in his speech, because the use of a naval blockade was contrary to international law, nevertheless, Kennedy acted transparently, opening himself and his administration to criticism. To provide for the quarantine's legitimacy, Kennedy sought and won a unanimous resolution of the Organization of American States (OAS), which authorized the use of force in maintaining a naval blockade, either individually or collectively.<sup>42</sup> Through proper decision-making and acting transparently, Kennedy was able to garnish public support and transform skeptics of U.S. policy during the crisis. The successful application of transparency stood in stark contrast to Soviet policy, enabling the United States to maintain moral authority that made the choice of the naval blockade acceptable and ultimately more palatable to the Soviets.

The establishment of a naval blockade of Cuba was not President Kennedy's initial choice upon discovery of the Soviet missiles. Initially he opted to act unilaterally and for a military air strike to remove the missiles,<sup>43</sup> subsequently, he heeded the recommendations of National Security Council Executive Committee (ExComm), which recommended not only the blockade but also a greater multilateral approach to the resolution of the crisis. The blockade had two major drawbacks, one, it would not remove the missiles already located on the island. Two, Soviet ships bound for Cuba would inevitably encounter American warships and if those ships chose to ignore the blockade an escalation of the crisis could easily propel the two superpowers to thermonuclear war. Some scholars such as Irving Horowitz suggest that President Kennedy initiated an "unnecessary dangerous game of chicken"<sup>44</sup> with

<sup>38</sup> Allison & Zelikow. *Essence of Decision*; p. 79. The government of the Soviet Union authorized the media agency TASS to release a statement that Soviet nuclear weapons were so powerful that there was no need to export nuclear weapons beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union, giving more credence to the theory the Soviet Union wished to alter the balance of power.

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*; (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971), pp. 57-59. Also see Muntton & Welch. *The Cuban Missile Crisis*; pp. 66, 67. Ambassador Zorin at the time genuinely believed Soviet missiles had not been installed in Cuba, because he was never informed about the Soviet installation. Zorin's denials, challenged by Ambassador Stevenson's overwhelming evidence before a global television audience revealed the extent of Soviet deceit and secrecy.

<sup>40</sup> Muntton & Welch. *The Cuban Missile Crisis*; p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> May & Zelikow. *The Kennedy Tapes*; p. 186.

<sup>42</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*; (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), pp. 813,814.

<sup>43</sup> May & Zelikow. *The Kennedy Tapes*; p. 30. Initially President Kennedy does not believe he should include NATO members or the OAS.

<sup>44</sup> Janis, Irving L. *Victims of Groupthink*; p. 143.



the Soviets, risking nuclear war. To make such conclusions is to ignore the context of the Cold War epoch and Khrushchev's intentions. Khrushchev believed Kennedy to be weak willed and ill fitted<sup>45</sup> for the task of halting Soviet aggression. Kennedy aide and historian Arthur Schlesinger summed it up best when he wrote, "Khrushchev's dispatch of missiles to Cuba obviously represented the supreme Soviet probe of American intentions." Diplomacy without deterrence would not have any impact on Khrushchev; it would have only strengthened his resolve to probe much further.

The day after announcing the establishment of the naval blockade President Kennedy expressed his grave concerns about the conflict with his brother Robert F. Kennedy. President Kennedy stated, "... there is no other choice. If they [the Soviets] get this mean on this one, it's just a question of where they go next."<sup>46</sup> Robert Kennedy responded, "Well there isn't any choice. I mean, you would have been impeached."<sup>47</sup> The President concluded that his brother's analysis was correct... stating, "That's what I think. I would have been impeached."<sup>48</sup> Two issues are discussed in this brief excerpt of their conversation. One, the President clearly expresses his concern that if he fails to contain the current threat of Soviet aggression, the consequences of his inaction will encourage further Soviet incursions into American spheres of influence. Second, Congress would interpret President Kennedy's failure to respond to the communist threat, as such an egregious capitulation that it warranted impeachment, as it unnecessarily endangered the vital security interests of the United States. A failure to respond to Soviet aggression, especially in the western hemisphere during this era was simply politically untenable.

Some scholars interpret President Kennedy's decision-making during the crisis as purely political, dangerous and excessively concerned with public opinion. Political science professor Timothy J. McKeown's article entitled *The Cuban Missile Crisis and Politics as Usual* specifically cites the Kennedy administration's decision-making process was formulated based on public opinion. The available evidence does not support McKeown's thesis. In his article, he downplays the role of ExComm in the decision-making process. Former Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon, a member of ExComm commented, "I never heard in the ExComm any comment about public opinion or how our choices fly politically or anything else like that ... that wasn't our role and we didn't discuss it."<sup>49</sup> Obviously, politics play a role in nearly every decision-making process by a presidential administration; however, politics was never the primary focus during the crisis. Professor Irving L. Janis offers a much better analysis of the Kennedy administration's decision-making process during the crisis.

Whereas the decision-making process during the Bay of Pigs illustrated groupthink mentality, Professor Janis found in his analysis of Cuban missile crisis an absence of the symptoms of the groupthink decision-making process that previously plagued the Kennedy administration.<sup>50</sup> Kennedy had learned not to overly rely upon the military and intelligence community enabling him to avoid the pitfalls and poor reasoning exemplified by the Bay of Pigs decision-making processes. Had President Kennedy relied heavily on the advice of the military and went ahead with his initial inclination to utilize air strikes against Cuba, the consequences of that decision would have meant nuclear war.<sup>51</sup> The White

<sup>45</sup> Allison & Zelikow. *Essence of Decision*; p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> May & Zelikow. *The Kennedy Tapes*; p. 219.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> McKeown, Timothy J. "The Cuban Missile Crisis and Politics as Usual." *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Feb., 2000), p. 78.

<sup>50</sup> Janis, Irving L. *Victims of Groupthink*; p. 138.

<sup>51</sup> McNamara, Robert S. *The Fog of War*; documentary, Sony Pictures Classics, (2004). In an interview-styled documentary, McNamara relates a meeting he had with Fidel Castro in 1992. Castro informs McNamara if the U.S. responded by a military attack against Cuba itself that he recommended to Khrushchev using the nuclear warheads against the United

House tapes reveal intense thoughtful discussions to allow for the proper decision to be made and for the implications of those decisions to be fully analyzed. Janis points to several aspects of the decision-making process that highlight the avoidance of groupthink. Namely, President Kennedy brought in other distinguished leaders outside his inner circle to facilitate broader discussions and his brother Robert F. Kennedy purposely acted as an antagonist to challenge different points of view.<sup>52</sup> Further, the administration acknowledged grave dangers even after arriving at a decision; there was also an explicit discussion of moral issues, reversals of judgments, non-stereotypical views of the enemy, and an avoidance of humiliation to allow Khrushchev a face-saving way out of the crisis.<sup>53</sup> In addition, President Kennedy “consciously removed himself from a number of the sessions of the ExComm, so that his presence would not inhibit the broadest possible review of the options.”<sup>54</sup> Painstaking efforts employed by the Kennedy administration allowed for the peaceful resolution to the crisis.

After serious deliberations and the weighing of all options, the crisis ended with a compromise. The United States pledged not to invade Cuba and outdated U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be secretly dismantled at an undetermined later date. The missiles in Turkey were removed later to avoid the appearance of a negotiated quid pro quo settlement, while the Soviets were required to immediately remove the Soviet missiles from Cuba. Thus, it appeared as if the Soviets unilaterally withdrew the deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba in the face of American military pressure. Indeed that perception remained for many years, in part, because the Soviets upheld the negotiated arrangement to keep the removal of the missiles from Turkey secret. Robert Kennedy’s book, *Thirteen Days*, clearly states that the diplomatic deal struck between the Soviets and the U.S. was not a quid pro quo deal.<sup>55</sup> However, this old interpretation of events is false. Theodore Sorenson aide to President Kennedy and ExComm member, “admitted when he edited Kennedy’s [Robert] diary for publication he falsified the account to disguise the fact the President had authorized a secret assurance to Khrushchev that the Jupiter missiles would be removed from Turkey.”<sup>56</sup> Such was the nature of the Cold War; even the appearance of anything except a hard-line stance on communism or the Soviet Union was simply unacceptable and political suicide.

Immediately following the crisis there was a temporary cooling of Cold War tensions. A limited Test-Ban Treaty of nuclear weapons was signed on August 5, 1963<sup>57</sup> and a hotline (direct teletype machine) was installed in Washington and Moscow to hasten communication in case of another crisis. However, the cooling off period was short lived as the Soviets sought and achieved nuclear parity with the United States. European allies of the United States felt hopelessly trapped by the bipolarity of Soviet and American dominance. One British cabinet official recalled, “we were kept fully informed... But we were not actually consulted about the actual decisions as they affected Cuba itself.”<sup>58</sup> Whether valid or not, both France and England sought to acquire nuclear weapons after the crisis to thwart what they perceived as American unilateralism.

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<sup>52</sup> Janis, Irving L. *Victims of Groupthink*; pp. 149-165.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Russert, Bruce, Starr, Harvey & Kinsella, David. *World Politics: the Menu for Choice*; (Boston MA: Schirmer Cengage Learning, 2006), p. 180.

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. *Thirteen Days*; p. 83.

<sup>56</sup> Scott, Len & Smith, Steve. “Lessons of October: Historians, Political Scientists, Policy-Makers and the Cuban Missile Crisis.” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Oct., 1994), p. 669.

<sup>57</sup> Zubok, Vladislav M. *A Failed Empire*; p. 152.

<sup>58</sup> Costigliola, Frank. “Kennedy, the European Allies, and the Failure to Consult.” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (1995), p. 113.

Upon reflection, on the last day of the year in 1962, President Kennedy came to see the missile crisis in a different light. “He hoped that he had made to Khrushchev in the Atlantic in October 1962, the point he had failed to make sixteen months before in Vienna – that neither side dare tamper carelessly with the delicate and complex equilibrium of world power.”<sup>59</sup> An assassin’s bullet ensured that Kennedy would not see the future implications of the Cuban missile crisis, namely, that the two superpowers never again challenged the delicate balance of power enough to risk thermonuclear war.

Khrushchev, although willing to accept the risky gamble that President Kennedy would not militarily object to the missile deployment, was nevertheless a rational actor who realized the consequences of his and President Kennedy’s actions and pursued a diplomatic solution to avert nuclear holocaust. If President Kennedy accepted the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, the Soviet Union stood to gain international prestige, shift the balance to power toward the Soviet Union and communism and would have every reason to continue to challenge American spheres of influence globally. The risk of placing the missiles in Cuba was extreme, but the benefits were enormous, Khrushchev simply miscalculated Kennedy’s response. Kennedy had to act assertively, an emboldened Khrushchev who perceived Kennedy as weak would not merely acquiesce without some form of deterrence from Washington. Furthermore, Khrushchev miscalculated the overwhelming anti-communist ideology of the American people and their elected officials. It was politically impossible for Kennedy not to confront the Soviet Union over Cuba due to the significant security implications along with the threat of further communist expansionism. During the era of the Cuba Missile Crisis, Cold War tensions dominated not only the domestic security politics of the United States but also dominated international relations. To analyze the missile crisis without this context is tantamount to analyzing the American Civil War and disregarding the context slavery played. Leaders in Washington won elections for their hard-line stance on communism and were held accountable to contain it.

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