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Hughes, R Gerald

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, 1962

Overt Confrontation, Covert Diplomacy and Downright Luck

R. GERALD HUGHES*

I never thought I would live to see the day when I wanted to go to war.

General Earle Wheeler, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, October 20, 1962¹

If they carry out an attack on Cuba, a barbaric, illegal, and immoral act, then that would be the time to think about liquidating such a danger forever through a legal right of self-defense. However harsh and terrible such a decision would be, there is no other way out in my opinion.

Fidel Castro to Nikita Khrushchev, October 27, 1962, "Black Saturday"²

The Cuban Missile Crisis, known as the October Crisis to the Cubans; and the Caribbean Crisis to the Soviets/Russians, was a 13-day standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1962. For the US, the crisis was initiated by the deployment of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba. In the end it was resolved by negotiation, although the clandestine nature of much of this meant that the details remained a closely-guarded secret for many years after the crisis. The reasons for Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's decision to deploy the missiles have been hotly disputed ever since although, as James Hershberg argues, Khrushchev's decision "defies mono-causal explanation".³ The confrontation is widely considered to be the closest that the Superpowers came to a nuclear war during the entirety of the Cold War and was later described by one Kennedy aide, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., as "the most dangerous moment in human history".⁴ Against this, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze argued that US local superiority in the Caribbean, allied to global strategic nuclear superiority, meant the risk of nuclear war over Cuba was minimal.⁵ The Cuban Missile Crisis represented the culmination of a period of tension that began with the Cuban Revolution of 1959. In April 1961, a US-sponsored invasion of Cuban exiles failed miserably (at the Bay of Pigs) and relations deteriorated further as the US launched Operation Mongoose (which included a program of sabotage and an intention to assassinate the Cuban leader, Fidel Castro). It seemed only a matter of time before the United States would invade Cuba and end the Cuban Revolution permanently.⁶

Keywords: nuclear weapons – crisis – diplomacy – blockade – collective security – intelligence – information asymmetry – luck

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¹ Ernest R. MAY and Philip D. ZELIKOW (eds.), *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1997) p. 203.

² Michael DOBBS, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2008) pp. 204–205.

³ James HERSHBERG, "The Cuban Missile Crisis" in Melvyn LEFFLER and Odd Arne WESTAD (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010) p. 68.

⁴ Arthur SCHLESINGER, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: First Mariner 2002) p. xiv.

⁵ Paul H. NITZE, with Ann M. SMITH, and Steven L. REARDEN, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld 1989) p. 205.

⁶ Hugo ABEDUL and R. Gerald HUGHES, "The Comandante in his Labyrinth: Fidel Castro and his Legacy", *Intelligence and National Security*, 26/4 (2011) pp. 548–555.

1. A NUCLEAR CRISIS IN THE CARIBBEAN

1.1. FROM ESCALATION TO SECRET AGREEMENT

By June 1962 Castro had acceded to Khrushchev's request to install ballistic nuclear missiles on Cuba. The installation of these missiles began later that summer in strict secrecy. By this time President John F. Kennedy was under no small amount of domestic political pressure over Cuba. Republican politicians such as Senator Homer Capehart (R-IN) and Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) gleefully denounced Kennedy for his weakness in the face of the communist threat posed by Cuba. On August 31, 1962, Senator Kenneth Keating (R-NY) stated on the floor of the Senate that the USSR had sent 1,200 servicemen to Cuba (and these were not harmless 'technicians', but combat troops). In the Senate on October 10, 1962, Keating warned that the Soviets were actually installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. These charges were strenuously denied by the Kennedy administration, which was acutely aware that the impending mid-term elections would result in disastrous losses for the Democratic Party if there was shown to be any substance to Keating's charges. In order that the Soviets should be under no illusions as to his resolve, and in order to counter his domestic critics, Kennedy had stated publicly, on September 4, 1962, that "the presence of offensive ground-to-ground missiles ... [in Cuba would create] the gravest issues". On September 19, the CIA asserted that it was unlikely that the Soviets would deploy missiles in Cuba.⁷ In this assessment, the agency was erroneous.

On October 14, 1962, a US U2 spy plane photographed Soviet R-12 (SS-4) medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. The president was briefed on this two days later. In *Essence of Decision*, Graham T. Allison and Philip D. Zelikow identified six basic policy options that were now open to Kennedy.⁸

- Do nothing: US vulnerability to Soviet missiles was hardly new.
- Overt diplomacy: pressurise the USSR to remove the missiles.
- Covert diplomacy: make an approach to Castro to try and split him from the Soviets.
- An invasion of Cuba.
- Air strikes against Cuba.
- A blockade of Cuba.

These options were summarily reduced to three by the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor: one, "take them out"; two, "squeeze them out"; and, three, "buy them out".⁹ Thomas Powers noted that Kennedy made only two crucial decisions in the first week of the crisis. First, the Soviet missiles in Cuba had to go. Second, he would state this publicly before taking any action.¹⁰ On October 16, the main actors in the National Security Council (NSC) began to meet as the so-called Executive Committee (ExComm), although this body was only officially established on October 22. By the afternoon of October 19, 1962, senior figures in the Kennedy administration was leaning towards the blockade option, but a significant—and skeptical—minority advocated air strikes to neutralize the threat from Cuba.¹¹ In particular, Kennedy's military advisers remained unconvinced,¹² and it was clear that more moderate responses were strictly limited in the time they had to effect a change in Soviet policy. On October 22 Kennedy addressed the nation and made it clear that he would not permit offensive weapons to remain in

⁷ SNIE 85-3-62, "The Military Buildup in Cuba", September 19, 1962. CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01676R001800050003-7.pdf>>.

⁸ Graham T. ALLISON and Philip D. ZELIKOW, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edition (New York: Longman 1999) pp. 111-116.

⁹ Raymond GARSTOFF, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, revised edn. (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution 1989) pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ Thomas POWERS, "And after we've struck Cuba?" (1997) in *Intelligence Wars: American Secret History from Hitler to Al-Qaeda* (New York: New York Review Books 2004) pp. 183-184.

¹¹ David R. GIBSON, *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2012) pp. 99-101.

¹² ALLISON and ZELIKOW, *Essence of Decision*, pp. 189-203.

Cuba. The US was thus imposing a naval blockade on Cuba (this was termed a “Quarantine” as, under international law, a “Blockade” was an act of war).

After several days of tension, on October 26 Khrushchev sent a conciliatory proposal that, whilst still under consideration in Washington, was followed by a letter setting out a hard-line position. The world seemed to be on the brink when, on October 27 (“Black Saturday”), a U2 was shot down over Cuba by a surface-to-air missile (killing the pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson). Crucially, Kennedy decided not to retaliate. At this juncture Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, the president’s brother, suggested replying only to Khrushchev’s first letter, and accepting its terms. This proved acceptable to Moscow. The deal that ended the crisis entailed the Soviet Union dismantling and removing its offensive weapons from Cuba. In return, the US agreed to issue a “no-invasion” pledge. (If one accepts that Khrushchev’s motive was to defend Cuba and not to restore nuclear parity, then the guarantee not to invade Cuba casts the Soviet leader in a more favorable light.) The deal also involved a secret assurance whereby the US agreed that it would dismantle all its Jupiter MRBMs in Turkey. The first letter on the fateful weekend of the crisis had requested only the “no-invasion” pledge from the US; the second additionally demanded the removal of the Jupiters from Turkey. To accede to this latter demand in public would have been political suicide for Kennedy. A secret agreement effectively robbed Khrushchev of any significant political capital he could derive from the resolution of the crisis.

1.2. HESITATING AT THE BRINK OF NUCLEAR WAR

For many years, the members of the group that had conducted US policy during the crisis (the ExComm) acted to preserve the myth that Kennedy had stood firm and refused to withdraw the Jupiters. Kennedy’s National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, eventually conceded that “we misled our colleagues, our countrymen, our successors, and our allies”.¹³ For his part, Kennedy aide Ted Sorensen admitted that he had deliberately falsified Robert Kennedy’s posthumous memoir¹⁴ of the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁵ The president’s willingness to remove the Jupiters was made clear by his brother to Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on October 27, 1962 (Dobrynin’s report to Moscow corroborated this).¹⁶ Thus whilst Khrushchev may have “blinked”, so too did Kennedy. The archival record thus demonstrates the lack of appetite for nuclear war on both sides that fateful weekend; at the meeting of the Soviet Presidium on October 28 it is clear that Khrushchev had already told his comrades it was necessary to retreat *before* he learned of Robert Kennedy’s meeting with Dobrynin.¹⁷

The “Quarantine” of Cuba ended on November 21, 1962, following the departure of the Soviet missiles. Influential insider accounts cast Kennedy in heroic mold, an individual who had mastered the structures of international politics.¹⁸ And, in fairness, the taped consultations demonstrate that Kennedy had successfully managed the crisis to a remarkable extent, although he had been assisted by Khrushchev and enjoyed some real strokes of fortune.¹⁹ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara opined that the Cuban missile crisis was “the ‘best managed’ crisis of the last half of the century, but we were very lucky as well”.²⁰ Former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson ascribed the avoidance of nuclear war to “plain, dumb luck”.²¹ Sheldon Stern, former historian at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, asserted that “Nobody really

¹³ McGeorge BUNDY, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House 1988) p. 434.

¹⁴ Robert F. KENNEDY, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton 1969).

¹⁵ Bruce J. ALLYN, James G. BLIGHT, and David A. WELCH, *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Conference, January 27-28, 1989* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press 1992) pp. 92–93.

¹⁶ Richard Ned LEBOW and Janice Gross STEIN, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994) pp. 523–526.

¹⁷ ALLISON and ZELIKOW, *Essence of Decision*, pp. 283–287.

¹⁸ R. Gerald HUGHES, “‘The Best and the Brightest’: The Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy administration, and the lessons of history” in Scott and Hughes (eds.), *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 124–128.

¹⁹ Sheldon M. STERN, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2012) p. 158.

²⁰ Robert S. MCNAMARA, James BLIGHT, Robert K. BRIGHAM with Thomas J. BIERSTEKER, Col. Herbert SCHANDLER, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs 1999) p. 151.

²¹ Dean ACHESON, “Homage to Plain Dumb Luck” in Robert A. DEVINE (ed.), *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle 1971) pp. 197–198.

'managed' the Cuban missile crisis. That's the greatest myth of all."²² Traditional crisis management was plainly inadequate for a nuclear age. The nuclear age demanded better lines of direct communication and, in June 1963, the Moscow-Washington Hot Line was established. The pursuit of détente, so Kennedy's admirers insisted, would have been a central policy of a Kennedy second term.²³ The Cuban Missile Crisis stands as Kennedy's monument in history, a reminder to the world that, in the international politics of the nuclear age, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

2. AVOIDING WAR THROUGH LUCK RATHER THAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT?

Between 1987 and 1992, the historiography of the crisis was driven forward by critical oral history conferences. Certain of the participants were able to reinforce the narratives established by the first wave of informed assessments of the crisis (often comprising their own writings). After the first conference in Florida in 1987, Schlesinger recorded that he was "struck ... with special force [by] JFK's absolute determination to avoid a military confrontation".²⁴ McNamara's public insistence that there was not going to be war in 1962 was challenged by historians who deployed McNamara's own words against him.²⁵ During the 1989 Moscow conference, McNamara continued to downplay the risk of war in October 1962 and found support for his position from Sorensen and Bundy. This caused Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, to write of his "disappointment [that] ... some of the participants seemed to judge the events of 1962 from the perspective of the cooled political climate of 1989 détente".²⁶ When, at the Havana conference in 1992, it was revealed that the Soviets had a large number of operational nuclear weapons in Cuba, McNamara was alarmed when Castro confirmed that the Soviets would have used tactical nuclear weapons against a US invasion. McNamara concluded: "The indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons carries a very high risk of potential nuclear catastrophe."²⁷ For Salinger: "Neither side 'won' the Cuban missile crisis. Rather, two leaders reached an understanding that nuclear war was unthinkable."²⁸ That neither the crisis in Cuba, nor the (intimately related) confrontation in Berlin,²⁹ led to war was more down to good fortune rather than crisis management or skilled negotiation. Indeed, the underestimation of Soviet forces in Cuba in 1962, allied to the pressures for a military solution, meant that the US was far closer to war with the USSR than anyone realized at the time.

In negotiation terms, the absence of trust, the information asymmetry between the two sides and the lack of direct communication between the military headquarters make the event look very vulnerable to an escalation. Precisely those very elements led to a general confrontation in relation to Austria-Hungary in 1914, as discussed by Kevin Homrighausen in "Diplomatic Crisis in July 1914: Secrecy, Ultimatums, and Missed Opportunities" in this volume. That the Cuba crisis avoided this trap due to luck should encourage political leaders to continue to think about how to handle such extreme cases. Not surprisingly, the main practical lesson of this 1962 situation was the establishment of the Moscow-Washington hotline. This demonstrated that, beyond whatever strategies can be put in place in order to handle such gamed theoretical cases (one could think of the Thomas Schelling's "chicken game"),³⁰ crisis management and détente require constant interaction and negotiation. That the Cuban Missile Crisis so nearly ended in nuclear holocaust is hardly surprising. In "chicken", *war* is the mutual worst option, whilst *defeat* is the second-worst option.³¹

²² Sheldon M. STERN: E-mail to the author, September 17, 2014.

²³ SCHLESINGER, Jr., journal entry for January 15, 1963. Arthur SCHLESINGER, Jr., *Journals: 1952-2000*, edited by Andrew SCHLESINGER and Stephen SCHLESINGER (New York: Penguin 2007) p. 334.

²⁴ SCHLESINGER, Jr., journal entry for March 24, 1987. Schlesinger, Jr., *Journals*, p. 631.

²⁵ Deborah SHAPLEY, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: MA: Little, Brown and Company 1993) pp. 183-185.

²⁶ Pierre SALINGER, "Gaps in the Cuban Missile Crisis Story", *New York Times*, February 5, 1989.

²⁷ MCNAMARA *et al.*, *Argument Without End*, pp. 9-11. Quote at p. 11.

²⁸ SALINGER, "Gaps in the Cuban Missile Crisis Story".

²⁹ Christof MÜNGER, *Kennedy, die Berliner Mauer und die Kubakrise: Die westliche Allianz in der Zerreißprobe 1961-1963* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 2003).

³⁰ Thomas SCHELLING, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1966) pp. 116-125.

³¹ Frank C. ZAGARE, *Game Theory, Diplomatic History and Security Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019) p. 155.

2.1. THE MUNICH SYNDROME

The disastrous policy of Appeasement in the 1930s had forever handicapped policymakers in their pursuit of peaceful solutions to diplomatic crises.³² USAF Chief of Staff, the hawkish General Curtis LeMay, had been well aware of this when, on October 19, 1962, he raged at Kennedy: “This blockade and political action, I see leading into war. I don’t see any other solution. It will lead right into war. This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich.”³³ And, even after Khrushchev had accepted Kennedy’s proposals on October 28, LeMay opined: “The Soviets may make a charade of withdrawal and keep some weapons in Cuba.”³⁴ When the crisis was over LeMay, told a stunned Kennedy to his face: “We have been had. It’s the greatest defeat in our history. We should invade today.”³⁵ LeMay’s opinion echoed Churchill’s verdict on Appeasement: “We seem to be very near the bleak choice between War and Shame. My feeling is that we shall choose Shame, and then have War thrown in a little later on even more adverse terms than at present.”³⁶ For his part, after the missile crisis a shaken President Kennedy confided to an aide that his military was “mad”.³⁷

2.2. DOMESTIC POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY

It was the combination of high-risk nuclear gamble and volatile domestic political considerations that made the Cuban missile crisis so dangerous. Although Kennedy was wont to observe that “[d]omestic policy can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us”,³⁸ John Kenneth Galbraith was correct when he recalled that the “political needs of the Kennedy administration [caused] it to take almost any risk to get [the missiles] out”.³⁹ That said, the nuclear near-miss of October 1962 underlined the fact that the fear of being labelled an “appeaser” was increasingly being offset by a fear of nuclear war. In the nuclear age the delicate art of balancing the maintenance of vital national interests against the danger of nuclear war has strained the sinews of statesmen for over 70 years now. In 2018, James Blight and Janet Lang declared that their book, *Dark beyond Darkness*, had been “written as an act of resistance [...] to the widely-accepted idea that we can live forever with nuclear weapons without another Cuban missile crisis-like event, but this time, one in which our luck runs out and we destroy ourselves irreversibly”.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the First World War Georges Santayana memorably observed that ‘only the dead have seen the end of war’.⁴¹ That being so, we would be well advised to remember that the ‘warning in the Cuban missile crisis is this: it nearly happened once; it can happen again.’⁴²

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³² R. Gerald HUGHES, *The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement: British Foreign Policy since 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

³³ Kennedy meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 9.45 am, October 19, 1962. MAY and ZELIKOW (eds.), *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 178.

³⁴ Aleksandr FURSENKO and Timothy NAFTALI, “One Hell of a Gamble”: *Khrushchev, Castro Kennedy, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1958-1964* (New York: W.W. Norton 1999) p. 287.

³⁵ Michael R. BESCHLOSS, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: HarperCollins 1991) pp. 543--544.

³⁶ Churchill to Lord Moyne, September 11, 1938. Martin GILBERT (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: The Official Biography: Companion, Volume V, Part 3: The Coming of War 1936-1939* (London: Heinemann 1982) p. 1154.

³⁷ Len SCOTT, *The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Threat of Nuclear War: Lessons from History* (London: Continuum 2007) p. 127.

³⁸ SCHLESINGER, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, p. 380.

³⁹ Russell D. BUHITE, “From Kennedy to Nixon: the end of consensus” in Gordon MARTEL (ed.), *American Foreign Relations Reconsidered: 1890-1993* (London: Routledge 2002) p. 131.

⁴⁰ James G. BLIGHT and Janet M. LANG, *Dark Beyond Darkness: The Cuban Missile Crisis as History, Warning, and Catalyst* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2018) p. xiii.

⁴¹ Georges SANTAYANA, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1922) p. 102.

⁴² BLIGHT and LANG, *Dark Beyond Darkness*, p. 93.

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