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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Few events have been as studied and analyzed as the Cuban missile crisis. Drawing on previously undiscovered archival materials and interviews with Soviet and American veterans of the crisis, Michael Dobbs has taken a fresh look at the history of those fateful thirteen days. In his book, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*, Dobbs argues that the real danger of war arose not from the actions and wishes of Kennedy and Khrushchev, but unpredictable events that neither leader was fully able to control. As a USIP senior fellow in 2006–07, Dobbs researched the Cuban missile crisis at the National Archives, the Naval Historical Center, and the Library of Congress; concluded research in Russia and Cuba; and wrote the book. In this Special Report, Dobbs distills the key findings of his book, including ten lessons for a modern-day president.

Michael Dobbs was a foreign correspondent for the *Washington Post* for nearly fifteen years, representing the newspaper in Belgrade, Warsaw, Paris, and Moscow. He subsequently served as the newspaper's diplomatic reporter and a reporter on the national desk. He has held fellowships or visiting scholarships at Harvard, Princeton, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the U.S. Institute of Peace. His previous books include *Down with Big Brother: The Fall of the Soviet Empire*, *Madeleine Albright: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, and *Saboteurs: The Nazi Raid on America*.

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Michael Dobbs

Why We Should Still Study the Cuban Missile Crisis

Summary

- Some scholars have questioned the utility of studying the Cuban missile crisis as a model for executive decision making during times of crisis, arguing that it offers little guidance for policymakers today.
- Many accounts of the missile crisis are incomplete, inaccurate, and too narrowly focused on the “rational actors” at the center of the drama while overlooking the “irrational actors.”
- Nonetheless, the Cuban missile crisis remains the best-documented study of presidential decision making at a time of supreme national danger. It offers policymakers and students of history unique insights into the interplay between the debates in the Oval Office and fast-moving events in the rest of the world.
- For decades, the Cuban missile crisis has been studied and analyzed as a case study in presidential power and crisis management. It is better understood as an example of the limits of presidential power and the haphazard returns of crisis management.
- The missile crisis illustrates the sometimes pivotal role of personality in politics. Had someone else been president in October 1962, the outcome could have been very different.

Introduction

Just over twenty years ago, a prominent military historian, Eliot A. Cohen, wrote a provocative essay entitled “Why We Should Stop Studying the Cuban Missile Crisis.”¹ According to Cohen, the problem was not simply that the missile crisis offered “precious little historical guidance for American statesmen today” and was “unrepresentative” of other post-war crises. Cohen argued that the hubris engendered among the small circle of aides

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around Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson following the “eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation” with Nikita Khrushchev helped pave the way for a series of disastrous foreign policy decisions, most notably in Vietnam.

Having just completed an exhaustive study of the thirteen days in October 1962 when the world had its closest-ever brush with nuclear destruction, I share many of Cohen’s concerns about the misinterpretation of history.² He makes a valid point when he argues that the “best and the brightest” fell victim to their own propaganda about their skill at “crisis management” and “calibrated” message sending. Furthermore, the circumstances of the Cuban missile crisis—the leader of the rival superpower deploying nuclear weapons 90 miles from American shores—were indeed unique. History never repeats itself exactly.

At the same time, the missile crisis offers many useful lessons for contemporary policy makers. Viewed in their proper historical context—a big caveat—the dramatic events of October 1962 offer extraordinary insights into the functioning of the modern American presidency at a time of extreme tension. For those of us who have never experienced the stresses of the Oval Office, they remain the best-documented case study of how a president makes vital national security decision and the real-world impact of those decisions.

Unfortunately, most histories of the missile crisis have focused on the debates in the White House and paid much less attention to events in the rest of the world. An academic cottage industry has sprung up around the forty-three hours of tapes featuring President Kennedy and his closest advisers as they agonized over the secret deployment of Soviet missiles fifteen minutes flying time from Washington and other big American cities.³ Transcribed and dissected by rival groups of scholars, the tapes are exceptionally important historical documents, but they represent just one slice of a much larger story. To understand the significance of the White House debates, you have to be able to follow everything that was happening along the entire Cold War battlefield, much of which was invisible to the man in the Oval Office. President Kennedy was at the center of this maelstrom but was often only dimly aware of what was going on elsewhere.

As Cohen notes in his essay published in the *National Interest*, the Cuban missile crisis has traditionally been taught in American universities as “a shining example of crisis management. . . . It demonstrates how the national security apparatus really works—how bureaucrats clash and maneuver, how politicians react to the pressure of narrowing options, how important decisions get made. . . . The twists and turns of Kennedy administration policy in October 1962 represent the swaying of an accomplished (or lucky) tightrope artist negotiating the way to terra firma over a thermonuclear abyss.” One of the most celebrated studies of the missile crisis, Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decision*, developed three different prisms through which to view the decision-making process: the “Rational Actor” model, the “Organizational Process” model, and the “Bureaucratic Politics” model.⁴

The problem with all these models is that they offer a rational, government-centric view of the world, leaving out all the unpredictable, unforeseen incidents that played havoc with the careful calculations of both Kennedy and Khrushchev. As we have belatedly come to understand with the war on terrorism, history is determined not just by the so-called rational actors, the men (or women) in suits, the bureaucrats, and the top military brass. “Irrational actors”—fanatics of various descriptions, men with long beards, ideologues living in caves, and assassins with rifles—also play a role. Sometimes, minor characters thrust themselves onto the middle of the stage without warning. At other times, history can be yanked from its normal path by a combination of chance events, such as an airplane going astray, a soldier losing his temper, or a spy misidentifying a piece of weaponry. Statesmen try to bend the chaotic forces of history to their will, with varying degrees of success. The likelihood of an unpredictable event occurring that can change the course of history is always greater at times of war and crisis, when everything is in flux.

In my study of the Cuban missile crisis, I tried to integrate the debates in the White House with a minute-by-minute narrative of events in the rest of the world. The discon-

nect was often jarring. Information flowed into ExComm (the executive committee of thirteen “wise men” established by President Kennedy to manage the crisis) that was often incomplete, misleading, or simply wrong. The tapes offer a wonderful fly-on-the-wall perspective on what the president said and did, but they cannot be taken as an accurate account of everything that transpired during the crisis. They do not even tell us everything that happened in the White House: The president’s most confidential and intimate exchanges with his brother Robert went unrecorded for the most part.⁵

By triangulating information from a wide variety of sources, including the White House tapes, interviews with Soviet military officers deployed to Cuba, previously undiscovered documents in the National Archives, and raw U.S. intelligence film, I believe that I have been able to assemble the most complete and detailed history of the decisive hours of the crisis. I was stunned by the amount of documentary material ignored or unappreciated by other historians. My book, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*, includes an exclusive account of Soviet plans to attack Guantanamo naval base with tactical nuclear weapons, the first detailed description of the handling and movement of Soviet nuclear warheads around Cuba, and previously unknown details about CIA activities inside Cuba. I was amazed to discover that an episode that has become part of the mythology of the missile crisis—the confrontation at sea on October 24 between U.S. warships and Soviet freighters carrying missile parts to Cuba—never actually happened. “We were eyeball to eyeball and I think the other fellow just blinked,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk is supposed to have told ExComm.⁶

U.S. and Soviet archival records demonstrate that Khrushchev had turned around his missile-carrying ships more than twenty-four hours earlier.⁷ The Soviet leader did not want to risk a confrontation with the U.S. Navy on the high seas. But the imagery of the “eyeball-to-eyeball” showdown (shades of *High Noon*) was easily understandable by journalists, historians, and political scientists and lent itself naturally to dramatic re-creation in movies like *Thirteen Days*. It has become a staple part of the popular understanding of the missile crisis. By contrast, a much more dangerous moment, the unauthorized ninety-minute overflight of the Soviet Union by a U.S. spy plane at the height of the crisis, has received scant attention from historians. When Kennedy found out that a U-2 had gone missing over the Soviet Far East, he gave vent to his frustration. “There’s always some son of a bitch that doesn’t get the word.”⁸ This incident on October 27—a day that came to be known around the White House as “Black Saturday”—symbolizes all the unexpected things that can happen once the machinery of war is set in motion. Such episodes were—and remain—infinately more dangerous than the wishes and decisions of more or less rational policymakers.

As the Iraq war has amply demonstrated, the important role played by mistakes and miscalculations should never be underestimated in world affairs. For all his failings, Kennedy understood from personal experience that there can be a huge gulf between the orders and wishes of the man in the Oval Office and how these orders are actually implemented on the ground. His experiences commanding a patrol boat in the Pacific during World War II, reinforced by the lessons from the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961, had taught him to mistrust the assurances of military leaders. One of his lasting impressions from World War II was that “the military always screws up everything.”⁹

Since history is written by the victors, at least initially, the missteps often get short shrift. For many years, the Cuban missile crisis was presented to the public as a case study in courage, wisdom, and fine-tuned signal sending on the part of Kennedy and his aides. Camelot’s court historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., summed up the general euphoria by writing in 1965 that President Kennedy had “dazzled the world” through a “combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve, and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated.”¹⁰

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The Uses and Misuses of History

In his essay, Cohen argues convincingly that Kennedy acolytes such as Robert McNamara and Walt Rostow were victims of hubris. After successfully facing down Khrushchev, they thought they had mastered the art of “crisis management.” The missile crisis, writes Cohen, “gave them a tremendous sense of their own competence, their ability to handle complex politico-military situations confidently and independently of military advice.” Cohen draws a tight connection between “the success in Cuba” and the subsequent failure of U.S. policy in Indochina. Instead of devising a strategy for winning the Vietnam War, the White House whiz kids settled on a policy of “signal sending” through the “tightly controlled escalation of the air war over North Vietnam,” including the personal selection of bombing targets by President Johnson. The objective was not to defeat the North, but to use U.S. air power to send signals of intent to Hanoi, much as President Kennedy had used the quarantine of Cuba to send a signal of determination to Khrushchev. Unfortunately, the North Vietnamese communists failed, or refused, to read the signals Washington was sending. Instead of backing down, they matched the Americans escalation for escalation.

Support for Cohen’s argument comes from former defense secretary Clark Clifford, who eventually took over from McNamara. In his 1991 memoir *Counsel to the President*, Clifford wrote that the architects of the Vietnam War were “deeply influenced by the lessons of the Cuban missile crisis.”¹¹ They thought that concepts like “flexible response” and “controlled escalation” had helped Kennedy prevail over Khrushchev—and would work equally well in Vietnam. “Their success in handling a nuclear showdown with Moscow had created a feeling that no nation as small and backward as North Vietnam could stand up to the power of the U.S.,” Clifford explained. “They possessed a misplaced belief that American power could not be successfully challenged, no matter what the circumstances, anywhere in the world.”

Modern-day neoconservatives drew a somewhat different—but equally flawed—lesson from the Cuban missile crisis. In planning for the war in Iraq, they shared the conceit that the political will of the president of the United States trumps all other considerations. They were fervent believers in the “eyeball-to-eyeball” version of history, but they took the argument one step further. In a speech in Cincinnati five months before the war, George W. Bush praised President Kennedy for being willing to resort to force to eliminate a new kind of peril (the “mushroom cloud”) to the American homeland.¹² He drew the attention of his audience to Kennedy’s televised warning to the American people on October 22, 1962, that “we no longer live in a world where only the actual firing of nuclear weapons represents a sufficient challenge to a nation’s security to constitute maximum peril.” In effect, Bush was crediting President Kennedy as the authority for junking the cold war strategy of containment that had been in effect for more than half a century. What he omitted was that his predecessor stubbornly resisted calls from some of his closest advisers for a military strike during the crisis.

There is a good argument to be made that U.S. leaders drew the wrong lessons from the Cuban missile crisis in the case of both Vietnam and Iraq—the two greatest military disasters in modern American history. With a track record like that, we have every reason to be exceptionally cautious in drawing sweeping foreign policy conclusions from the events of October 1962. It is particularly dangerous to use history as a propaganda argument. It is safe to say that when President Bush referred to the lessons of the Cuban missile crisis in Cincinnati, he was not engaged in a detached academic analysis of a historical event. He was using history to lay the political groundwork for justifying a war with Iraq.

History rarely offers a clear guide for how political leaders should respond to international crises. There are always unique circumstances to consider. Nevertheless, as I researched the crisis in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I was repeatedly struck by parallels between then and now. There are many lessons to be derived from the missile crisis and other similar historical episodes—not simplistic guides to action of the kind

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often favored by policymakers, but cautionary reminders of the pitfalls and opportunities that have confronted previous presidents at moments of extreme national danger.

In that, more modest spirit, here is a list of ten lessons from the Cuban missile crisis, nearly half a century after the event. I have addressed the lessons to a hypothetical future president facing a grave international crisis, but they could equally well be addressed to any student of history.

Ten Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis

1. The first rough drafts of history are almost always unreliable.

If you are going to draw lessons from history, wait until you can get the full story. The journalistic accounts written in October 1962 captured only a small fraction of what was happening within the Kennedy administration and largely ignored the Russian and Cuban perspectives.¹³ Over the next few years, these early accounts were supplemented by memoirs written by the key participants, the best example of which was Robert F. Kennedy's posthumous account, *Thirteen Days*, which first appeared in 1969. All the early versions of the crisis were heavily influenced by the Kennedys and their immediate aides and told the story from their point of view.

Detailed documentary evidence about the crisis did not begin to become available to scholars until the late 1980s when the National Security Archive in Washington fought a landmark court battle for access to the records of the State Department historian. The Soviet and Cuban versions of events only emerged in the 1990s following the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and landmark conferences in Havana in 1992 and 2002. Even today, official Soviet and Cuban records are largely inaccessible to western historians. By my estimate, less than 50 percent of U.S. records on the crisis are publicly available, including most records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Defense Department, the Strategic Air Command, and the U.S. Air Force. Despite three years of Freedom of Information Act requests, I was unable to get the Air Force to release a single piece of information about the accidental October 27, 1962, overflight of the Soviet Far East by Captain Charles Maultsby, an event that Khrushchev told President Kennedy could "push us to a fateful step." Incredibly, the official Air Force history of Maultsby's unit describes his air sampling mission (he was meant to fly to the North Pole from Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska) as "100 percent successful" and makes no mention of his 1,000-mile detour.¹⁴

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2. Mistrust the "spin machines."

In the immediate aftermath of the missile crisis, President Kennedy and his aides fed stories to the press putting themselves in the best possible light. President Kennedy gave a long off-the-record interview to one of his closest journalistic friends, Charles Bartlett, which became the basis for a laudatory account of the president's handling of the crisis in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Bartlett and his coauthor, Stuart Alsop, depicted President Kennedy as the steely minded leader who "never lost his nerve" despite going "eyeball to eyeball" with Khrushchev.¹⁵ Robert Kennedy was the "leading dove" on ExComm who argued passionately that an unannounced air strike against Cuba would be "contrary to all American traditions." The article suggested that the Kennedy brothers had stood up not only to Khrushchev, but also to U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson, who wanted to trade away U.S. missile sites in Turkey, Italy, and Britain for Soviet missile sites on Cuba.

The official version of history, as relayed to Bartlett and Alsop, omitted some inconvenient facts. The tapes of the ExComm meetings make clear that Robert Kennedy's position was more ambiguous and contradictory than the early accounts suggest. He was hardly "a dove from the start," as Schlesinger claimed in his 1978 biography, *Robert Kennedy*

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and His Times.¹⁶ On the first day of the crisis, he was one of the leading advocates for invading Cuba and even ruminated aloud about staging a “Sink the *Maine*” type incident as a pretext for getting rid of Castro. He veered from one camp to another depending on the signals he was getting from his brother and from Moscow. As for President Kennedy, the historical record shows that he was willing to go to great lengths on Black Saturday to avoid a showdown with Khrushchev. He authorized his brother to tell Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that he was prepared to dismantle U.S. missiles in Turkey “within four to five months” of a Soviet pullback from Cuba.¹⁷ The main difference between Kennedy and Stevenson was that the president wanted to keep the missile swap idea as a last-minute gambit to avoid war while the ambassador was willing to put it onto the negotiating table from the very beginning.

3. Presidential decision making—under any administration—is a lot more chaotic than the memoir writers would have you believe.

In their desire to claim credit for Khrushchev’s sudden about-face on the morning of Sunday, October 28, Kennedy aides came up with the notion of the “Trollope ploy” to describe the U.S. diplomatic strategy on Black Saturday. The gambit was named after a scene from a novel by Anthony Trollope in which a lovesick Victorian maiden chooses to interpret an innocent squeeze on the hand as an offer of marriage. By this account, accepted for many years by missile crisis scholars, it was Robert who came up with the idea of the “Trollope ploy.” He suggested that his brother simply ignore Khrushchev’s call on Saturday morning for a Turkey-Cuba missile swap and instead accept his ambiguously worded offer of Friday night to dismantle the missile sites in return for a U.S. guarantee not to invade Cuba. It was, wrote Schlesinger, “a thought of breathtaking ingenuity and simplicity.”¹⁸

The “Trollope ploy” contains a kernel of truth. With the help of Special Counsel Theodore Sorensen, Robert Kennedy did rewrite the reply to Khrushchev to focus more on the conciliatory-sounding parts of his first letter. On the other hand, the reply was the work of many authors. Far from ignoring the second Khrushchev letter, President Kennedy ordered Robert to tell Dobrynin that the United States would withdraw its missiles from Turkey. He also began laying the diplomatic groundwork for a public Turkey-Cuba swap should one become necessary. In general, the “Trollope ploy” version of history ascribes greater coherence and logic to the tense ExComm debate of Saturday afternoon than anybody felt at the time. The meeting was a case study of government by exhaustion, in which frazzled policymakers weighed down by heavy responsibility argued and stumbled toward a mutually acceptable compromise.

4. Beware of hubris born of past diplomatic success.

The “best and the brightest” around Kennedy, and later around Johnson, made the fatal mistake of believing their own laudatory press clippings. Success in Cuba bred overconfidence in other parts of the world. The seeds of the hubris were already on display on the afternoon of Sunday, October 28, in the immediate aftermath of Khrushchev’s climbdown. To many of the men, who had spent the last thirteen days in the Cabinet Room agonizing over the threat posed by Soviet missiles, it suddenly seemed as if the president was a miracle worker. A Kennedy aide suggested that he intervene in a border war between China and India that had been overshadowed by the superpower confrontation, telling him that he was now “ten feet tall.”¹⁹ Ever the realist, President Kennedy brushed aside his advice, saying, “That will last about a week.”

Official accounts of the missile crisis omitted any mention of the U.S. provocations and miscalculations that caused Khrushchev to deploy Soviet missiles to Cuba in the first place. According to the Kennedy version, long accepted by missile crisis historians, Khrushchev wanted to correct the nuclear imbalance between the Soviet Union and the

United States. Soviet accounts suggest that his motives were much more complex. He was worried about Soviet strategic inferiority, but also he wanted to protect the world's newest socialist state from U.S. attack. Recent revelations about Operation Mongoose, the Kennedy brothers' secret war against Fidel Castro, show that Khrushchev had real reason for concern. Cuban and Soviet fears of U.S. intervention were not simply the result of communist paranoia. In return for withdrawing the missiles, the Soviets extracted a promise from the Kennedy administration not to invade Cuba. The missile crisis ended in a humiliating climbdown for Khrushchev but helped ensure that Castro would remain in power for more than four decades.

The missile crisis helped ensure that Castro would remain in power for more than four decades.

5. The view from the Oval Office can be very limited.

The president of the United States may be the most powerful, and best-informed, person in the world, but there is still much that he does not know. Here are a few of the things that Kennedy did not know at the height of the missile crisis in October 1962 about what was happening in and around Cuba:

- Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told President Kennedy on October 20 that there were 6,000 to 8,000 Soviet technicians on Cuba (up from a September 1962 estimate of 3,000). In fact, there were 43,000 Soviet troops on Cuba, including heavily armed combat troops.²⁰
- President Kennedy was unaware that the Soviet defenders possessed ninety-eight tactical nuclear warheads, capable of wiping out U.S. beachheads and the Guantanamo Naval Base. Soviet troops moved nuclear cruise missiles to within fifteen miles of the naval base at the height of the crisis, according to Soviet soldiers who took part in the deployment. Declassified U.S. intelligence reports confirm the movement of unidentified "artillery equipment."
- He suspected that the Soviets had nuclear warheads for the strategic ballistic missiles in Cuba but did not know where they were stored.²¹
- He was misinformed about the likelihood of a clash between the U.S. Navy and Soviet missile-carrying freighters on October 24. He believed that an interception was imminent at a time when the ships were more than 500 miles apart.²²
- He was unaware that Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba could hit New York, in addition to Washington.²³
- McNamara told the president that a U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane had been "hit" by a 37 mm antiaircraft shell on the afternoon of October 27.²⁴ Although the Cubans fired at the U.S. Navy planes, the planes were undamaged. (A U-2 was shot down over Cuba by a Soviet surface-to-air missile earlier in the day.)
- McNamara told ExComm on Friday, October 26, that a Soviet freighter nearing the quarantine line was "probably" transporting missile fuel to Cuba.²⁵ In fact, CIA officials had already correctly concluded that the *Grozny* was carrying ammonia for a nickel plant.

Both McNamara and his deputy, Roswell Gilpatric, complained about the lack of timely information from U.S. Navy brass during the implementation of the quarantine. Neither man saw the messages that went back and forth between the Pentagon and the ships enforcing the blockade. U.S. admirals also were in the dark much of the time about what was going on. The overloading of communications circuits caused a four-hour delay in "emergency" message traffic and a six- to seven-hour delay in "operational immediate" traffic.²⁶ The chief of naval operations, Admiral George Anderson, grumbled to an aide that he was "amazed" at the lack of information from air reconnaissance about the movements of Soviet ships in the Atlantic.

6. Remember the “irrational actors.”

As the United States began to suffer major reverses in Iraq, General David Petraeus liked to quote the old soldiers’ maxim, “The enemy also gets a vote.” Sometimes, the enemy acts in ways that U.S. leaders consider “rational,” but often America’s enemies are driven by beliefs and motivations that are difficult for Americans to understand. During the missile crisis, Nikita Khrushchev behaved in a more-or-less “rational” manner from the American perspective: He was horrified by the prospect of a nuclear war and felt an obligation to rein in the dark, destructive forces that he had unleashed. For all his bluster and bravado, he understood that he had no real option but to back down once confronted with America’s overwhelming nuclear superiority.

Fidel Castro was a different matter. His entire political strategy was based on convincing the United States that he was a “madman,” ready to risk the destruction of his country in order to defend its sovereignty and independence. At the height of the crisis, Castro urged Khrushchev to consider using nuclear weapons to “liquidate” the imperialist menace “once and for all” if the Americans invaded Cuba. He ordered his forces to open fire on U.S. reconnaissance planes flying over Cuba and persuaded his Soviet allies to do the same.

Under the heading of “irrational actors,” one should also include people who stumble onto the stage by chance but can change the course of history.

Under the heading of “irrational actors,” one should also include people who stumble onto the stage by chance but can change the course of history. An obvious example is Maultsby, the U-2 pilot who was blinded by the aurora borealis en route to the North Pole and ended up over the Soviet Union during the most dangerous moments of the Cold War. Neither Kennedy nor any of his advisers had any idea that the Strategic Air Command (SAC) was still conducting air sampling missions around the borders of the Soviet Union during the missile crisis. The news that a U-2 had strayed off course came as a surprise even to the commander of Maultsby’s regiment, Colonel John Des Portes, who was too busy supervising U-2 operations over Cuba during the crisis to think about seemingly routine missions elsewhere in the world. When SAC called Des Portes to ask him “what the hell are you doing with a U-2 over Russia,” he replied: “You’d better ask someone else because I have my hands full down here.”²⁷ Another U-2, piloted by Major Rudolf Anderson, had just been shot down over Cuba. According to my reconstruction of the incident, it took SAC commanders an hour and a half to report Maultsby’s penetration of Soviet air space to McNamara.²⁸ Both Kennedy and McNamara were unaware until after the event that the Soviets had sent up MiG fighters to try to shoot down Maultsby, and the Alaska Defense Command had scrambled nuclear-armed F-102s over the Bering Strait in response.

7. Be wary of conventional wisdom.

The corrosive power of conventional wisdom was fully on display during the missile crisis, particularly in intelligence gathering. Consider the U.S. intelligence trail in the case of the first medium-range R-12 missiles to arrive in the Cuban port of Mariel on board the Soviet freighter *Poltava* on September 16. The missiles were unloaded on the night of September 19 under the gaze of a CIA informant who had somehow managed to gain access to the docks. He promptly reported what he had seen to the CIA, describing “large intercontinental rockets more than 20 meters [65 feet] long” being unloaded from a Soviet ship. When the report finally reached Washington, it was treated with great skepticism by CIA analysts, one of whom added the dismissive comment, “It is more likely that source observed [surface-to-air] missiles being offloaded.”²⁹ The eyewitness intelligence report was discounted because it contradicted the conclusions of a supposedly authoritative September 19 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that stated that “the establishment on Cuban soil of Soviet nuclear striking forces which could be used against the U.S. would be incompatible with Soviet policy as we presently estimate it.”

In hindsight, the agent’s report was exceptionally accurate. An R-12 rocket packaged for transport without the nose cone measures 67 feet in length, double the length of a V-75 surface-to-air missile. But lower-level analysts were reluctant to challenge the con-

clusions of an NIE, written largely on the basis of past Soviet behavior. It was not until a U-2 took pictures of the missiles being deployed nearly a month later on October 14 that the CIA revised its initial estimate. This intelligence failure is almost the mirror image of the one that occurred during the run-up to the Iraq war in March 2003. In the Iraq case, the conventional wisdom (and the conclusion favored by the Bush administration) was that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Since it was known that he had WMD in the past, it was assumed that he still had WMD. Reporting and analysis that was at variance with the October 2002 NIE on Iraq's WMD programs was played down or dismissed.

Another example of erroneous conventional wisdom in the missile crisis was the search for the nuclear warheads. Declassified CIA records and raw intelligence film show that the agency had its eye on underground storage facilities near the Cuban towns of Bejucal and Managua. Both sites were photographed repeatedly by low-level U.S. reconnaissance aircraft during the week of October 22-27. The CIA deputy director, Marshall Carter, even informed ExComm that the Bejucal bunker was the "best candidate" for a nuclear storage site.³⁰ But both bunkers were dismissed from serious consideration because they were protected by a single security fence, in contrast to the multiple fences and guard posts visible at similar installations in the Soviet Union. Forty-five years later, I concluded on the basis of the raw intelligence film and interviews with Soviet veterans that the Bejucal and Managua bunkers served as the principal hiding places for the Soviet nuclear warheads.

8. The verdict of history can shift over time.

In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, most people, certainly most Americans, would probably have singled out Kennedy as the big winner. He achieved his basic objective—the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba—without plunging the world into a catastrophic war. The big loser, at least in his own mind, was Fidel Castro. His views had counted for little. He learned of Khrushchev's decision to withdraw the missiles over the radio and was so furious that he smashed a mirror. Cuba was merely a pawn in the superpower confrontation. And yet, in a perverse way, the missile crisis guaranteed Castro's hold on power in Cuba for more than four decades. A little over a year after his greatest foreign policy triumph, Kennedy was dead, murdered by a Fair Play for Cuba Committee activist. A year later, Khrushchev was forced to retire by his colleagues in the Soviet leadership, in part because of his Cuban adventure. Castro was the great survivor.

As the years went by, it became clear that Kennedy's missile crisis victory had produced many unintended consequences. One result was an escalation in the Cold War arms race as Soviet leaders sought to erase the memory of the Cuban humiliation. "You got away with it this time, but you will never get away with it again," the Soviet deputy foreign minister, Vasily Kuznetsov, told a senior U.S. official shortly after the removal of the Soviet missiles.³¹ The Soviet Union would never again allow itself to be in a position of strategic inferiority. In order to achieve military parity with the United States, Khrushchev's successors embarked on a vast intercontinental ballistic missile program.

In yet another twist to history, this huge military buildup was one of the principal reasons for the Soviet Union's ultimate demise. Even a fabulously rich country, with huge natural resources, could not sustain the burden of ever-increasing military budgets. The free world led by the United States eventually won a victory over the totalitarian world of Soviet communism—but it came about in a different manner than many people expected.

9. Containment worked.

The missile crisis marked a turning point in the debate over whether a nuclear war was winnable. Prior to October 1962, an influential group of generals headed by Curtis LeMay

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had favored a first strike against the Soviet Union. After the missile crisis, even those generals had to rethink the notion of a military victory over the Soviet Union. Killing all the communists was obviously impossible without millions of Americans being killed as well. The United States and the Soviet Union would never again become involved in a direct military confrontation of the scale and intensity of the Cuban conflict. There would be many proxy wars—in Vietnam, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere—but no wars, or even near wars, pitting U.S. troops directly against Soviet troops.

The impossibility of military victory had the salutary effect of shifting the superpower competition to other areas, in most of which America enjoyed a comparative advantage. Countries that successfully resisted the military might of the United States—Vietnam is the most obvious example—ended up adopting free market economic systems and opening up to the outside world. Cuba is a notable exception to this trend. In his own mind, Castro won a great victory over the *yanqui* enemy merely by remaining in power for so long. In reality, he transformed the most prosperous island in the Caribbean into a defeated, impoverished country stuck in a 1950s time warp. You only have to travel to Havana from Miami to understand who are the victors and who are the vanquished.

Communism was not defeated militarily; it was defeated economically, culturally, and ideologically. Khrushchev's successors were unable to provide their own people with a basic level of material prosperity and spiritual fulfillment. They lost the war of ideas.

10. Character counts.

The Cuban missile crisis demonstrates the sometimes pivotal role of personality in politics. Character counts. Had someone else been president in October 1962, the outcome could have been very different. Robert Kennedy would later note that the dozen senior advisers who took part in the ExComm debates were all "bright and energetic...amongst the most able people in the country." Nevertheless, in Robert Kennedy's view, "if any of half a dozen of them were president, the world would have been very likely plunged in a catastrophic war."³² He based that conclusion on the knowledge that a significant minority on ExComm had favored bombing the missile sites on Cuba, a step that probably would have led to a U.S. invasion of the island.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is impossible to know what would have happened had President Kennedy followed the advice of the hawks. It is conceivable that Khrushchev would have swallowed the humiliation. It is possible that he would have lashed out in Berlin or elsewhere. It is also conceivable that Soviet commanders on Cuba would have used tactical nuclear weapons to defend themselves, whatever their instructions from Moscow. A breakdown in military communications would have devolved effective control over such weapons to the officers who commanded each individual battery. The nuclear-tipped cruise missiles aimed at Guantanamo were under the command of a major. Had the naval base been destroyed by a nuclear weapon, Kennedy would have been under enormous pressure to order a nuclear response. It would have been difficult to confine a nuclear war to Cuba.

Knowing what we know now, it is hard to quarrel with President Kennedy's decision to go with a blockade of Cuba rather than an air strike leading to a possible invasion. He was surely justified in not taking the risk of provoking the Russians into what McNamara called "a spasm response." We can only be grateful for his restraint.

Conclusion

For decades, the Cuban missile crisis has been studied and analyzed as a case study in presidential power and crisis management. Interviews with U.S. and Soviet participants and new archival discoveries show that the crisis is better understood as an example of the limits of presidential power and the haphazard returns of crisis management. Neither

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Kennedy nor Khrushchev wanted war in October 1962. Both men had witnessed first-hand the destruction and loss of life in World War II. As Khrushchev told Kennedy in an anguished message on October 26, war only “ends when it has rolled through cities and villages, everywhere sowing death and destruction.”

The great drama during the missile crisis was not whether Kennedy and Khrushchev *wanted* to control events; it was whether they *could*. Both leaders must bear some responsibility for the crisis. By authorizing the Bay of Pigs invasion, followed by Operation Mongoose, Kennedy had given the Soviets every reason to believe that he was determined to get rid of Castro once and for all. To protect his Caribbean ally, Khrushchev made the reckless decision to deploy nuclear missiles nearly ten thousand miles from Soviet shores, right on America’s doorstep. The story of the Cuban missile crisis is the story of two chastened leaders struggling to contain the specter of nuclear destruction that they themselves had unleashed.

Fortunately, Kennedy had studied history and absorbed some of its lessons. He viewed history not as a rationale to justify his political decisions, but as a cautionary tale. Earlier in 1962, he had read a best-selling book about the origins of World War I, *The Guns of August*, by the historian Barbara Tuchman. President Kennedy was so taken by the book that he insisted his aides read it and had it distributed to every U.S. military base in the world.³³ One of Kennedy’s favorite passages was a scene in which two German statesmen are analyzing the reasons for the most destructive military confrontation up until that time.

“How did it all happen?” the younger man wanted to know.

“Ah, if only one knew.”

As Kennedy tried to imagine a war with the Soviet Union over the missiles in Cuba, one thought kept troubling him. He imagined a planet ravaged by “fire, poison, chaos, and catastrophe.” Whatever else he did as president of the United States, he was determined to avoid an outcome in which one survivor of a nuclear war asked another, “How did it all happen?” and received the incredible reply, “Ah, if only one knew.”

The world had its closest-ever brush with nuclear destruction on John Kennedy’s watch in October 1962. To prevent such a moment from ever happening again is reason enough to continue to study the Cuban missile crisis.

The Cuban missile crisis is the story of two chastened leaders struggling to contain the specter of nuclear destruction that they themselves had unleashed.

Notes

1. Eliot A. Cohen, “Why We Should Stop Studying the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *National Interest*, Winter 1985/86.
2. Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).
3. See, for example, Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002) and Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting the ‘Final Failure’: John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
4. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).
5. An exception is a private meeting between President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy on October 23, 1962, at which both brothers express the fear that the president “would have been impeached” had he failed to take strong action over Cuba. See Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 68.
6. Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 237.
7. For the precise coordinates of the Soviet and U.S. ships, see Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 91.
8. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 221.
9. Stern, *Averting the ‘Final Failure’*, 38.
10. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 851.
11. Clark M. Clifford, *Counsel to the President* (New York: Random House, 1991), 411.
12. Speech by President George W. Bush at Cincinnati Union Terminal, October 7, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021007-8.html (accessed April 4, 2008).

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13. A good example of a first “rough draft of history” is Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966). A veteran military correspondent for the *New York Times*, Abel did a creditable job, but he had no access to archival documents, and was obliged to tell the story largely from the point of view of the Kennedy administration.
14. Air Force Historical Research Agency, History of 4080th Strategic Wing, October 1962.
15. Stuart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, “In Time of Crisis,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 8, 1962.
16. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 529.
17. Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 309.
18. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 828.
19. Theodore Sorensen, interview on “Cuba,” an episode of *Cold War*, a CNN series, November 29, 1998, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-10/sorensen4.html (accessed April 11, 2008).
20. *Ibid.*, 28.
21. For the precise locations of the Soviet nuclear bunkers, see Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 384-85.
22. *Ibid.*, 88.
23. *Ibid.*, 108.
24. *Ibid.*, 288.
25. *Ibid.*, 209.
26. *Ibid.*, 91.
27. *Ibid.*, 258.
28. *Ibid.*, 268.
29. *Ibid.*, 123.
30. *Ibid.*, 174-76.
31. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 424.
32. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 548.
33. Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 306.



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