The Cuban Missile Crisis

By John Swift | Published in History Review 2007

COMMUNISM MILITARY POLITICAL COLD WAR 20TH CENTURY CUBA USA JOHN F. KENNEDY

John Swift examines the events that led the world to the brink of nuclear catastrophe.

For 14 days in October 1962 the world stood on the brink of nuclear war. The Soviet Union had secretly stationed nuclear weapons on the island of Cuba, and when the government of the United States discovered them, and demanded their withdrawal, the most dangerous confrontation of the Cold War followed. A single miscalculation made either in the White House or the Kremlin could have precipitated catastrophe.

How did this standoff arise? How did the Superpowers extricate themselves from
it? Was anything learned from the crisis? Should any party be held more at fault than the other?

**The Cuban Revolution**

In January 1959, Fulgencio Batista, the brutal, American-backed Cuban dictator, was overthrown by the guerrilla army of Fidel Castro. Initially president Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration welcomed the Cuban revolution, for Batista had long been an embarrassing ally, and a friendly, democratic government in Cuba, addressing urgent social reform, would be far more stable and reliable. Yet such views did not last long.

For America, Cuba provided a naval base at Guantanamo; it was an exotic, but conveniently close, tourist resort; and low paid Cuban labour made it an attractive investment area, much of the island’s agriculture and industry being American-owned. Hence governments in Washington had never hesitated to intervene to protect American interests. The problem was that Castro could never tackle desperate problems of poverty, ill-health and illiteracy without harming US interests. Indeed to Castro, and to a large proportion of the Cuban people, American domination was a root cause of Cuba’s problems, and it must be ended. Castro in fact articulated a widespread revulsion against this humiliating position. The United States was deeply detested on the island.

As American property was expropriated by the new government, Castro’s defeated enemies were treated mercilessly and elections were postponed while Castro secured his grip on power. Yet as ever more vicious anti-American diatribes came from the new leader, his popularity in Cuba grew. In the United States, however, he became increasingly unacceptable. Eisenhower decided that Castro was a communist. Whether this was true then is debateable, but Castro was certainly to turn to communism in the face of US hostility.

Eisenhower ordered the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow him, and the CIA orchestrated sabotage raids on Cuba to destabilise the regime. Attempts were made to assassinate Castro, reputedly using the mafia (the first of at least eight assassination attempts was planned as early as August 1960). Economic sanctions
were imposed, especially against Cuba’s sugar crop, which was its main export.
Yet rather than undermine Castro, this hostility made him more secure, and an
increasingly bitter and vocal enemy of the United States. In the logic of the Cold
War, this made him a potential partner of the Soviet Union. Steadily growing ties
with the USSR made him appear a growing threat to US hegemony in the western
hemisphere which could not be tolerated.

The Bay of Pigs

Among the steps taken by the CIA to remove Castro, a brigade of about 1,400
anti-Castro Cuban exiles was raised. The CIA decided to use this force in a large-
scale invasion of the island, with the backing of its own air force. This, it was
assumed, would trigger mass risings and overthrow Castro’s government. Yet
Eisenhower, who had after all been Supreme Allied Commander at D-Day,
recognised the risks of failure and hesitated. His successor in January 1961, John
F. Kennedy, would be left to decide whether or not to launch the invasion.

Perhaps Castro hoped that a new president would be less hostile to his revolution.
If so, he hoped in vain. Kennedy had used Cuba repeatedly in the election
campaign, accusing his Republican opponents of being soft on communism,
insisting that Cuba was America’s ‘most glaring failure’, one that endangered the
‘whole Western Hemisphere’. This rhetoric would be difficult to forget once
Kennedy was in office. Business interests, alarmed that if Castro was left
unpunished he might start a fashion for nationalising US investments in Latin
America, and vocal Cuban exile groups, were determined not to allow him to
forget it.

Furthermore, Kennedy seems to have been personally offended by Castro, who
had defied the might of the United States and refused to be intimidated. Castro’s
survival was an affront to American pride. Kennedy became obsessed with the
fear that Castro might prove able to export his revolution to other Latin American
nations. Defence Secretary Robert McNamara later admitted the administration
was ‘hysterical’ over Castro. Kennedy was even more hostile to Castro than
Eisenhower had been, and a great deal less cautious.
Kennedy was probably unaware that there were risks attached to the CIA’s plan. He approved the project, which was put together in a remarkably slipshod manner. Mass risings were expected on the basis of nothing more than wishful thinking. Virtually nothing seems to have been done to prepare a new government that might enjoy some degree of popular support. If no mass risings occurred, then the brigade of Cuban exiles was expected to withdraw into the interior and launch a guerrilla campaign. But the chosen landing ground, called the Bay of Pigs, led only to a swamp – and so there was no possibility of this happening. Most bizarrely, Kennedy was convinced it would be possible to launch this invasion without the world being aware of American involvement. He felt he could convince the international community that Cubans were liberating themselves, using only their own resources. Yet as there was already speculation in the press that the CIA was planning an invasion, this belief was quite astonishing. Kennedy appears to have been swept along by a sense of urgency, and warnings that the whole idea was half-baked, for example from Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, were ignored.

Kennedy was not the only one to delude himself. He made it very clear to the CIA that US forces would not intervene if the plan went awry. Senior CIA officers, however, aware of the weaknesses of the plan, remained convinced that once the invasion was launched, US prestige would be so bound up in its success that Kennedy would have to support it. Perhaps this explains why, in April 1961, they were willing to commit about 1,400 ill-trained, poorly equipped exiles to what became a humiliating fiasco.

Everything that could go wrong, did so. Air attacks failed to destroy Castro’s air force completely. Most of the ammunition and communications equipment was destroyed before it could be landed. Castro’s forces fought well, and enjoyed massive popular support. There were no risings, and US forces did nothing to support the exiles. Within two days over 100 exiles had been killed and nearly 1,200 had surrendered.

**Operation Mongoose**
The Bay of Pigs was a shattering blow to Kennedy, who had to face international ridicule for the fiasco. But Castro did not escape unscathed. Any possibility of mending fences with Washington was lost. He now faced the undying hostility of the United States. A US invasion was not an option in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, since Kennedy could hardly claim to be liberating a people who had rallied to Castro. But the President did authorise the CIA to undertake Operation Mongoose. This amounted to renewed attempts to destabilise the Cuban regime. Sabotage raids multiplied, Castroites were assassinated, foreign suppliers were bribed to send faulty goods to Cuba. Kennedy also warned the Soviet Union against challenging the USA in the western hemisphere. Sending defensive weapons, such as surface to air missiles (SAMs) would be tolerated; surface to surface missiles, which carried nuclear warheads, would not. Perhaps more threateningly, in 1962 a large-scale military exercise was undertaken by US forces in the Caribbean, in which 40,000 military personnel practised invading an unnamed island to overthrow a dictator threateningly codenamed Ortsac. Kennedy wanted to alarm Castro, and he succeeded. But he also alarmed Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

The Soviet government had welcomed the Cuban revolution; and as American hostility to it grew, so did Soviet support. Cuba was never really an unquestioning servant of Moscow, but the state was growing increasingly dependent upon Moscow for military and economic aid. In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, Castro had declared his commitment to Communism for the first time. And in Moscow, as in Havana, there was a growing conviction that Kennedy was preparing to invade Cuba. As it was the only communist state in the western hemisphere, Khrushchev could not allow this.

**Soviet Initiatives**

Khrushchev also had other concerns. Since the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik 1 in October 1957, Khrushchev had proclaimed an entirely fictitious superiority in Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). Kennedy had campaigned for the presidency proclaiming he would match the supposed Soviet advantage, closing the ‘missile gap’ as it was known. Even when he found that the strategic balance was, in reality, heavily in America’s favour, Kennedy still
ordered a major expansion of US ICBM forces. Khrushchev, who was desperate to divert resources from the military to domestic reform, was now caught by his own bluff and faced ruinous expense to fill a very real ‘missile gap’ that was in America’s favour.

But American actions perhaps suggested a way out for Khrushchev. In 1962 American Jupiter missiles were stationed in Turkey, well within range of Soviet targets. Why not follow their example and station Intermediate Range and Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs and MRBMs) in Cuba, where they could threaten most of the continental USA? This would be a cheap way to offset the American missile advantage, it would deter an American invasion of the island, it would be a proportional response to the missiles in Turkey, and it might make the United States more accommodating over other issues, such as Berlin.

West Berlin was a western enclave deep in East Germany. Its very existence repudiated the East German government’s claim to be the legitimate government of all of Germany. Twice (in 1948 and 1958) war had seemed near as the Soviet Union tried to force the west out. In 1961 the Berlin Wall had been built to prevent a mass exodus from East to West Germany. Yet Khrushchev still wished to remove the western presence totally. Also, according to international law, if Cuba was willing to accept these weapons, it was perfectly legitimate to send them.

In 1962 Khrushchev decided to send secretly three MRBM and two IRBM regiments to Cuba – a total of about 80 missiles in all. Also sent were 12 tactical, or battlefield, nuclear missiles, to be used by the Soviet commander, at his own discretion, if the island was invaded. Soviet documents released after the ending of the Cold War also suggest that Khrushchev, always a gambler, felt the need to assert himself in the Kremlin, where he still stood in Stalin’s shadow. His only doubt seems to have been that Castro might refuse the missiles, though in fact the Cuban leader accepted them with little hesitation.

**The Blockade**

The entire project was meant to be kept secret until the missiles were operational, and then a fait accompli would be presented to the USA, which would have to
learn to live with them. But the project was too big to be kept secret for long. The Soviet technicians were told that speed was their first priority and they made few attempts to camouflage their work, which would probably have been impossible completely to disguise anyway.

By August 1962 the first rumours of Soviet missiles in Cuba, from émigré reports and CIA leaks, appeared in the US press. Soviet diplomats, unaware of the project, issued flat denials. This made the sense of shock when they were discovered by a U-2 spy plane, on 14 October 1962, even more profound. Kennedy was stunned. He felt Khrushchev’s conduct was inexplicably provocative. Khrushchev, in fact, had never considered that the presence of missiles in Cuba would be deemed a monstrous threat in the United States. Nor had he realised that Kennedy and the United States would not tolerate the massive blow to their prestige that would result if the weapons were allowed to remain. In fact the weapons would make very little difference to a strategic balance that was massively in America’s favour. But their presence would give the appearance of a weakened America, and in the Cold War appearances were vital. For his part, Kennedy gave no thought to Khrushchev’s motives: the missiles had to be removed, and initially he favoured air strikes and an invasion of Cuba to achieve this.

Yet the Bay of Pigs had taught Kennedy the dangers of acting impetuously. Within two days, he formed a special advisory group to weigh various options; this was named the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. Excomm – made up of ‘hawks’ who favoured the immediate use of force and ‘doves’ who preferred to avoid a conflict – met almost continuously for 13 days and subjected proposals to resolve the crisis to intense scrutiny.

The dangers of using force soon became clear. An unprovoked attack, involving air strikes probably followed by an invasion, would be hard to justify; and Castro’s forces would resist and could be expected to fight a prolonged and bitter guerrilla war, the same sort of war they had fought so successfully against Batista. The projected casualties were alarming. Also, large numbers of Soviet technicians would be killed, and this might lead to war between the Superpowers – or Khrushchev might launch the surviving missiles, and at least ten per cent of the
missiles might survive an air strike. Nevertheless, even the ‘doves’ in Excomm were largely agreed that the missiles must go, and without American concessions in return.

Yet there was an alternative to invasion – a naval blockade of Cuba, though President Roosevelt’s term ‘quarantine’ was preferred by Kennedy, as it would be seen as less of a warlike act. This would violate international law, and while it would prevent new weapons arriving, might do little to remove those already on Cuba. But it was a limited and measured response, which would avoid forcing Khrushchev into a corner where he have to fight to avoid utter humiliation. If it failed, the military option was still open.

Only on the 22 October, when the blockade was prepared, was news of the missiles and America’s response made public. It caused immense shock in the USA and internationally – it had to, to drown out the Soviet response that they were acting legally and responding in kind to US actions in Turkey. Khrushchev’s reply was to bluster that the USSR would assert its rights on the high seas and to accuse Kennedy of bringing the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe.

Throughout the world forces went on high alert. World War III seemed imminent and, across the globe, terrified people prepared for Armageddon. On 23 October, as 27 Soviet ships headed towards the blockade, many carrying military equipment, presumably including missile parts, Kennedy, who had assumed that Khrushchev would back down, had to consider what to do if his blockade was defied. As the world stood on the brink of nuclear war, news reached Kennedy that the first Soviet ships had stopped and turned back.

**Resolving the Crisis**

The crisis was not over. Nuclear missiles remained on Cuba and Kennedy was determined to remove them. A resolution had to be found, and quickly, before Kennedy was pushed by the national panic he had generated to launch an attack on Cuba. Both leaders, it is clear, had become horrified at the prospects in front of them. Kennedy, desperate to avoid pushing Khrushchev too far, to the disgust of Excomm ‘hawks’, ordered the navy to allow Soviet and Soviet-chartered merchant
ships not carrying arms to pass unsearched. Khrushchev, for his part, sent a long, rambling letter to Kennedy, appealing to reason and trust to prevent a catastrophe, and insisting that if US threats to Cuba were ended, the issue of weapons would disappear. We now know, from recently released archives, that Castro was urging Khrushchev to use the missiles if Cuba was invaded. Khrushchev’s response was to order his military commander in Cuba to do nothing of the sort without direct orders from Moscow. Thus both sides were under immense pressure to resolve the crisis.

Khrushchev’s message seemed to contain the basis of a settlement. But matters took a turn for the worse. A new message was received from Moscow offering a specific deal by which the missiles in both Turkey and Cuba would be removed and the USA and USSR would jointly guarantee the security of both nations. This was deemed unacceptable by Excomm, as it would mean backing down in the face of Soviet pressure.

Yet Kennedy was interested. It was not an unreasonable deal: the Turkish missiles were obsolete and were soon to be withdrawn anyway, and the crisis was escalating. On 27 October a U-2 was shot down over Cuba – it later turned out on the order of the local Soviet commander on his own initiative. But it seemed initially that Khrushchev was escalating the crisis, something he was in fact desperate to avoid. Kennedy outraged the ‘hawks’ by ordering the Turkish missiles to be disabled to prevent any accident. In the message to Khrushchev agreed by Excomm, Kennedy insisted that the missiles in Cuba must be removed and offered to end the blockade and pledged not to invade Cuba if that happened. But when he delivered it to the Soviet ambassador, Kennedy’s brother, Robert, added a private message that once this was done, after a few months had passed, the Turkish missiles would be withdrawn (which in fact happened in April 1963).

Had Khrushchev rejected the deal, it is likely that an American invasion of Cuba would have been launched within days. Had the Russian used tactical nuclear weapons, whose presence was not suspected by the Americans, a full-scale thermonuclear war would probably have followed. But Khrushchev, himself desperate to find a settlement and aware that a non-invasion pledge would meet
his most important need, did agree. Tedious and frustrating negotiations followed over the means of verifying the departure of the missiles, largely caused by the obstruction of Castro, who was enraged that Khrushchev had not consulted him over the settlement.

In the end the Russian ships departed with their hatches uncovered, allowing the Americans to see the missiles leaving. To repay Castro for his awkwardness, Kennedy refused to confirm the pledge not to invade Cuba. In fact, however, it was observed, though small-scale sabotage raids by the CIA continued.

**Credit and Blame**

Kennedy certainly came out of the crisis with a reputation greatly enhanced in the west. Khrushchev, for his part, was deemed by his colleagues to have suffered a humiliation, and the crisis was one of the issues that led to his being deposed in October 1964.

Certainly once the enormity of the situation became clear to both men, they showed responsible leadership and a determination to find a peaceful resolution. Both rejected hard-line advice and were careful not to escalate the crisis. Khrushchev might even be said to have shown greater courage in making what was publicly seen as the larger concessions.

In the aftermath of the crisis they both worked to improve relations and prevent a recurrence of such a confrontation. The ‘hotline’, allowing direct communication between both leaders, was installed and the Partial Test Ban Treaty of September 1963 signified a first step towards arms controls. Kennedy’s hope to build on these steps, brutally ended by his assassination in November 1963, further heightened his statesman-like image.

However, both men had acted recklessly in bringing the crisis about. Khrushchev (and Castro) should have realised the dangers of surreptitiously introducing nuclear weapons into Cuba. They could not realistically be kept secret, and the US reaction should have been predictable. Conventional forces, perhaps a couple of Soviet armoured brigades, should have been enough to deter a US invasion of Cuba, without risking a major confrontation. Kennedy, for his part, allowed his
vendetta against Castro to overcome good sense. Operation Mongoose was hardly the act of a statesman. He also rejected the use of discreet diplomacy. A secret message to Moscow, requiring the quiet removal of the missiles, might have avoided a confrontation, though admittedly giving Khrushchev the chance to prevaricate until the missiles were operational. But perhaps Kennedy felt he had to make a tough stand after the Bay of Pigs, and – though there is no proof of this – he may have had an eye on the impact this would have on the forthcoming Congressional elections.

In the final analysis, the world was fortunate that the greatest crisis of the Cold War arose when it did. In 1962, Kennedy and Khrushchev had days to consider their position and think through their options. At a later date, when technological advances had made missile launch times shorter and submarines quieter and when decisions could be made in minutes, the consequences could easily have been catastrophic. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, both sides were careful to avoid such circumstances. One Cuban Missile Crisis was enough.

John Swift is a Lecturer in History at St Martin’s College, Lancaster, and the author of The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of the Cold War.

**Further reading:**

- Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of a Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Longman, 1999)