The Cold War was undertaken by a monopoly trading ministry, so sales were subject to government-to-government negotiation and had to fit into the requirements of the five-year economic plan or else was regarded as outright aid.

The real "battleground" of the Cold War after the early 1960s was thus competition for influence in developing countries through trade, financial and technical aid, and military assistance in the form of equipment and training. Both the USSR and the United States also had programs for bringing students to their respective universities. The Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatolii Dobrynin, lamented, in his memoirs, published many years later, that "détente was to a certain extent buried in the fields of Soviet-American rivalry in the Third World."4

Recession and recovery

From the perspective of Soviet leaders, the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s was doing very well in its economic competition with the United States. Its aggregate production had risen slowly but steadily relative to US production, and output of products of special interest, such as steel, had come to exceed US production. The major hard-currency exports of the Soviet Union, crude oil and gold, had enjoyed substantial increases in price on the world market. At the same time, the "capitalist" world economy was in turmoil, experiencing its worst recession since the 1930s. The Bretton Woods system of financial cooperation was in disarray, and the onset of "stagflation" created serious dilemmas of policy in most market-oriented economies. In short, Communists still confidently expected the ultimate victory of Communism against the ailing capitalist system.

This self-satisfaction neglected the fundamental recuperative capacities of market capitalism. Incentives for adaptation, innovation, and private initiative remained strong. To take only one example, the integrated circuit, introduced in the early 1970s, was to revolutionize computation, communication, and much else, including military applications.5 While the Communist system could dictate heavy investment in traditional products, it did so inefficiently and ineptly, without extensive innovation. It could not adapt well to changes in technology and to changes in the composition of demand. By the mid-1980s, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev would declare, "We cannot go on like this," and inaugurated his ultimately unsuccessful economic reform of the Soviet system of Communism.

15 See David Reynolds's chapter in volume III.

The Cuban missile crisis

October 1962, the Cold War endured its most perilous passage—and humanity survived its closest brush with the ultimate man-made catastrophe: a thermonuclear war between the United States and Soviet Union that could have incinerated scores of cities and killed half a billion people, rendered much of the northern hemisphere uninhabitable, lacerated industrial civilization, and stamped a lethal exclamation point on a century already twice bloodied by outbursts of global carnage that would now pale in comparison.

On its surface, the Cuban missile crisis involved a single discrete set of circumstances: It stemmed from Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev's secret dispatch of nuclear missiles to Fidel Castro's revolutionary Cuba and US President John F. Kennedy's determination to reverse that deployment—and climaxed during the famous "13 Days" "eyeball-to-eyeball" "on the brink" (the crisis birthed so many clichés that one can string them together to evoke it) extending from Washington's detection of the missiles in mid-October to Khrushchev's coerced consent to remove them on October 28.

Yet, any serious analysis requires assessing how multiple narratives converged to bring the Cold War to its tensest apex. Most broadly, the crisis starkly dramatized the chasm between ends and means that Hiroshima for international affairs. Cuba itself represented a vital interest for neither the United States nor the Soviet Union; both proclaimed their ideological contest should be decided through gradual historical processes, not war; and both Khrushchev and Kennedy sought their political goals short of a hazardous military collision.

Nevertheless, in the supercharged atmosphere of the missile crisis, with forces on high alert, any direct clash, whether intentional or accidental, was fraught with the danger of uncontrollable escalation. As Khrushchev wrote Kennedy, "If indeed war should break out, then it would not be in our power to stop it, for such is the logic of war. I have participated in two wars and know..."
that war ends when it has rolled through cities and villages, everywhere sowing death and destruction."1

Had full-scale war erupted, it would have dwarfed all others since humans bashed each other with stone clubs over raw meat and choice cave locations: though the nuclear balance overwhelmingly favored Washington—possessing, in 1962, about 27,300 nuclear warheads, including more than 7,000 strategic thermonuclear weapons, to Moscow’s roughly 3,300 nuclear warheads, about 500 of them strategic2—the two countries had more than enough firepower to justify Kennedy’s acknowledgment that “even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth”3 and Khrushchev’s warning that a lack of wisdom could lead to “a clash, like blind moles, and then reciprocal extermination will begin.”

Kennedy and Khrushchev managed to avoid yanking their fellow lemmings over the precipice—though how close they came remains disputed—and as the fear and patriotic fervor faded, the ludicrous dissonance between the crisis’s nearly apocalyptic outcome and ephemeral causes began to inspire ridicule, symptomatic of a slackening of reverence for Cold War orthodoxies. Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964) fused subversive humor and technical verisimilitude to depict accidental nuclear war and hilariously mock Cold War paranoia. “So long, Mom, I’m off to drop the bomb,” sang Tom Lehrer a year later in a bit of “pre-victory would be ashes in our mouth” and Khrushchev’s that a lack of wisdom could lead to “a clash, like blind moles, and then reciprocal extermination will begin.”

In Cold War history, the crisis culminated a decade-and-a-half of superpower Trusting and groping toward tacit “rules of the game.” To block Communist expansion, John Foster Dulles had espoused “brinkmanship”4—the doctrine to stall until, when challenged, the nerve to risk nuclear war—and Khrushchev embraced this recipe for his own ratcatching up of tensions to discover whether the West would cave. In no place was his strategy more apparent than Berlin, where, in late 1958, he launched a drive to expel US and allied military forces from the western sector of the divided capital and, eventually, ease its absorption into East Germany. Though Dwight D. Eisenhower and Kennedy (JFK) vowed they would stay put, Khrushchev repeatedly turned up the heat. At a June 1961 summit in Vienna, he brusquely told JFK that he had until the end of the year to relent or else Moscow would sever West Berlin’s access routes to West Germany, and refurbished his cautious against “miscalculation” (yet he would let the ultimatum lapse). Khrushchev once likened the capital city to the “testicles of the West”—it hollered whenever he squeezed—but to colleagues in January 1962, he used a more genteel metaphor to describe his tactic of keeping East–West relations on a knife-edge to extract maximum concessions: filling a wineglass just past the brim, so the liquid formed a ”meniscus” yet never quite overflowed.5

So harrowing were the years leading up to the Cuban crisis that they were compared to the atmosphere pervading J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, laden with evil and imminent doom.6 Sooner or later, the superpowers would have to break their habit of meeting at the brink—because a crisis exploded into all-out war or grew so terrifying as to sober them up.

Countdown to crisis: Khrushchev’s decision

Why did Khrushchev send nuclear missiles to Cuba? The question has gnawed at officials and analysts since they were first discovered. "Well, it’s a goddamn mystery to me," JFK confessed, as to why the "awfully cautious" Soviets would take this most provocative step since the Berlin blockade.7 "It’s all gray to me, this whole Russian thing," he mused. "... ahh ... someday."8

4 NBC-TV nightly news co-anchors David Brinkley and Chet Huntley.
June 10. The "Joint defense" plan envisioned shipping 24 R-12 battlefield missiles to six warheads for short-range (about 600 miles) IL-28 FKR-I nuclear cruise missiles to nine warheads for Frog/Luna or Castro's). On May 21, 1962, he formally proposed secretly deploying that—plus half that amount of missiles in reserve equipped with 200 kt-I MT medium- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs) to Cuba; the Presidium provisionally approved his concept three days later and, once a delegation to Havana secured Castro's wary approval, ratified it on June 0. The "joint defense" plan envisioned shipping 24 R-12 (SS-4) MRBMs with a 1,100-mile range and 16 R-14 (SS-5) IRBMs with a range roughly double that—plus half that amount of missiles in reserve—equipped with 200 kt-I MT warheads. Khrushchev also sent tactical nuclear weapons. After JFK publicly warned in early September against introducing "offensive weapons" to Cuba, the Soviet leader upped the ante by augmenting (and sending nuclear-armed submarines to escort) this battlefield atomic arsenal, which ranged from eighty short-range FKR-1 nuclear cruise missiles to nine warheads for Frog/Luna battlefield missiles to six warheads for short-range (about 600 miles) IL-28 bombers. The total buildup, apparent to US reconnaissance by late summer, also included tanks, surface-to-air missiles (SA-2s), MiG-21 jet fighters, and roughly 50,000 soldiers and technicians. 

Khrushchev's venture defies mono-causal explanation; like Harry S. Truman's dropping of the atom bomb on Japan (which combined short-term military and postwar political aims), it had overlapping objectives. Seeking a panacea to alleviate manifold ailments, Khrushchev prescribed "a cure-all, a cure-all that cured nothing."9

Most US officials presumed Khrushchev's decision stemmed from a desire to redress Soviet nuclear inferiority, which Washington (after fretting over a purported "missile gap") had trumpeted the previous fall to deflate his truculence on Berlin. By establishing Cuba as an unsinkable strategic missile base, Americans guessed, Khrushchev sought to double Soviet capacity to hit targets in the continental United States more cheaply and easily than with intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) stationed at home. The nuclear balance did, indeed, vex Khrushchev—especially in view of his lagging ICBM program—and enhance the deployment's attractions. Yet, attributing it to his motive alone shortchanges other considerations.

For instance, Americans generally derided as a patent propaganda ploy Khrushchev's claim that he acted to defend Havana from aggression. But information emerging from US and then Russian sources has gradually led historians to take his assertions more seriously. Besides its open campaign to isolate Havana diplomatically, politically, and economically following the failed April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, the Kennedy administration sponsored secret actions—covert harassment ("Operation Mongoose"), assassination plots, military muscle-flexing—that might have fanned fears of attack both in Havana and in Moscow, even as Washington grossly underestimated Khrushchev's personal commitment to Castro's revolution. Safeguarding Cuba—strategic missiles to "restrain the United States from precipitous military action,"10 tactical weapons to fight if deterrence failed—was a key Khrushchev aim.

Other Cold War hot spots may also have swayed the Kremlin boss. He watched the idea of sending missiles to Cuba while visiting Bulgaria in May 1962, as he paced a Black Sea beach and brooded over nuclear-tipped Jupiter MRBMs pointing at his homeland from over the horizon in Turkey. Forcing the Americans to swallow comparable rockets on their doorstep would merely dispense "a little of their own medicine."11 (Khrushchev's bid to swap the missiles in Cuba for the Turkish Jupiters, however, was improvised rather than premeditated.)

Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali speculate that Laos, of all places, may have been the "ultimate trigger for the decision to put missiles in Cuba." On the eve of his Cuban venture, Khrushchev raged at JFK's rushing troops to northern Thailand (to counter a Communist offensive) and grumbled that he was pursuing a Dulles-like "position-of-strength policy."12

Looming over everything, however, was Berlin, where Khrushchev had been stymied. Kennedy suspected that leverage he had was the "ultimate trigger for the decision to put missiles in Cuba." On the eve of his Cuban venture, Khrushchev raged at JFK's rushing troops to northern Thailand (to counter a Communist offensive) and grumbled that he was pursuing a Dulles-like "position-of-strength policy."12

Looming over everything, however, was Berlin, where Khrushchev had been stymied. Kennedy suspected that leverage there was the Cuban deployment's real aim, and during the missile crisis set up a special high-level group to deal with a possible counter-blockade around West Berlin. Though it didn't happen, a successful Cuban gambit might have emboldened the Soviet leader to resume squeezing.

Though it remains uncertain whether Khrushchev devised any specific plan, timetable, or "grand strategy" to exploit a fait accompli in Cuba (as Fursenko and Naftali contend), he counted on it to enhance his overall position on the Cold War chessboard for subsequent moves in Berlin or elsewhere. More important than the missiles' military impact, the Kremlin

11 Ibid., 492-94.
12 Fursenko and Naftali, Khrushchev's Cold War, 433, 513.
leader hoped they would alter the political and psychological "correlation of forces" in his favor. "This will be an offensive policy," he vowed to associates.13

Khrushchev's ploy also promised to boost his leadership of international Communism. Acting decisively to protect revolutionary Cuba would counter Chinese claims that the Soviet "revisionists" had gone soft. Khrushchev also wanted to avoid losing ground to Beijing in Havana itself. While dependent on Soviet economic aid since the rupture with Washington, Cuban leaders such as Che Guevara ideologically skewed closer to Beijing's avid support for armed uprisings throughout Latin America. With Soviet-Cuban ties strained in early 1962 as Castro purged pro-Moscow Communists, Khrushchev believed that sending missiles might reinforce the alliance and fence out China.

Khrushchev also had economic incentives. Like Mikhail Gorbachev, he genuinely wished to reduce Soviet military spending drastically in order to improve his people's lot. Yet, unlike his reformist successor, Khrushchev also indulged in threatening behavior that undercut East-West progress. The first half of 1962 impaled him on the horns of this contradiction: secret plans to expand commitments abroad coincided with discontent at home at the poorly performing economy. As Khrushchev puzzled over how to save Cuba, the prohibitive cost of fending off its giant neighbor magnified the allure of a nuclear deterrent - much as his enemy had laid a tripwire in West Germany rather than match Soviet conventional forces. Khrushchev thereby emulated not only Dulles's "brinkmanship," but also Eisenhower's "New Look" of seeking "more bang for the buck" through increased reliance on nuclear weapons.

Finally, personality mattered, not just abstract historical forces. Khrushchev steamrollered the Presidium, but odds are remote that his associates, if in power, would have chanced nuclear war for Cuba's sake. Though hardly irrational, the deployment did not simply flow from a detached reckoning of Soviet interests. Khrushchev's idiosyncratic sensibilities and temperament - and misjudgment of his youthful adversary produced a step the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) judged "incompatible with Soviet practice to date and with Soviet policy as we presently estimate it."14


Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell D. Taylor; Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson; CIA director McConie; Secretary of the Treasury C. Douglas Dillon; speechwriter Theodore C. Sorensen; and most importantly, the president's brother. As later caricatured, Excomm "hawks" favored military action, while "doves" preferred political and diplomatic pressure. In fact, debate frequently shifted, as participants oscillated between camps or advanced arguments that combined approaches.

From the outset, all agreed the United States could not passively accept the missiles. Debate revolved around the means of removing them – if possible without sparking World War III. The option of doing nothing received scant consideration, though JFK mused that a month earlier, "I should have said that we don't care ... What difference does it make? They're ve've got enough to blow us up now anyway."16 Kennedy leaned strongly toward a no-warning attack, and his brother belligerently exhorted the CIA to intensify Mongoose operations and brainstormed a provocation to justify an invasion "through Guantanamo Bay or ... you know, sink the Maine again or something."17

By Tuesday evening, McNamara had limned the parameters of the secret debate. Fearing escalation after a first strike and less concerned than the uniformed military over the missiles' strategic impact (primarily a "domestic political problem"), he shunned either preemptive military action or a purely political-diplomatic path and instead proposed, as a moderate alternative, a partial blockade on offensive weapons shipments to Cuba.18

Over the next few days, Kennedy felt rising pressure to act: U-2 flights spotted more MRBMs plus IRBMs bases; the clock ticked toward the missiles going operational; and worries of a leak grew. Amidst the intense deliberations came one of the Cold War's most duplicitous encounters: On October 18, Kennedy and Andrei Gromyko conversed politely for more than two hours in the Oval Office. Neither put his cards on the table. JFK hid the fact that he had caught the Kremlin red-handed, and resisting temptation to display the incriminating U-2 photos in his desk drawer, reaffirmed warnings against introducing offensive weaponry to Cuba. The unsuspecting foreign minister repeated Moscow's false assurances and, despite noticing: Rusk's "crab red" face, blithely cabled home that the situation seemed "completely satisfactory."19 (Khrushchev, disdaining Castro's argument that a no-invasion strategy couldn't be trusted, later noted that Gromyko had told JFK "that we have atomic missiles in Cuba. And he was lying. And how! And that was the right thing to do; he had orders from the Party. So, the imperialists cannot trust us either."

By Thursday, the Excomm had swerved behind the blockade. Most importantly, JFK had edged away from his initial impulse toward an airstrike (although hearing General Curtis LeMay, the cigar-chomping air force chief, that a blockade would be "almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich" quietly reminded him of the domestic political hazards of appearing weak). Maintaining the charade of normality, the president left for a scheduled campaign swing. To convince hardliners they were getting a fair hearing, he secretly instructed Bundy to keep the airstrike option alive. But after cutting short his trip on Saturday (on the pretext of a cold) to return to Washington, and hearing closing arguments from the bitterly split Excomm, he reaffirmed a preference for a limited blockade.

Attention turned to divulging the news before it leaked. By Monday afternoon, when the White House announced that the president would address the nation at 7 p.m. on a "matter of highest national urgency," a crisis atmosphere gripped Washington. After sending special envoys to brief key allies (Harold Macmillan, Charles de Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer) and telephoning predecessors (Hoover, Truman, Eisenhowen), Kennedy informed congressional leaders and heard some of them rip the blockade as a futile half-measure. Irked, he then walked to the Oval Office to tell the world of its predicament.

Why did Kennedy ultimately choose the blockade? First – McNamara disclosed decades later – JFK felt deterred by the prospect of a single Soviet nuclear warhead detonating on an American city,20 and his military advisers could not guarantee a surprise airstrike would wipe out all the missiles. Second, Kennedy derived thin comfort from the hawks' forecasts that the Soviets would swallow a first strike on Cuba without retaliating elsewhere. He expected a

16 Excomm meeting transcript, 6:30 p.m., October 16, 1962, in May and Zelikow (eds.), Kennedy Tapes, 92.
17 Ibid., 100-01.
18 Ibid., 86-87; 59, 112-13.
During the Cuban missile crisis, US newspapers carried maps showing that Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba could reach any point in the continental United States except the Pacific northwest.

strike on Cuba to provoke Khrushchev to seize West Berlin, "which leaves me only one alternative, which is to fire nuclear weapons - which is a hell of an alternative ..." Third, Kennedy worried that military action to erase a threat Europeans had learned to endure, risking Berlin or general war, would undermine the support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Fourth, a limited blockade could be intensified.

Finally, Kennedy recoiled at a surprise attack liable to kill thousands of Cubans and Soviets. "I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor," his brother jotted wryly. "Though hawks bitterly rejected the analogy, RFK passionately argued that a sudden strike would be "very, very difficult indeed for the President ... with all the memory of Pearl Harbor and with all the implications this would have for us in whatever world there would be afterward. For 175 years we had not been that kind of country. A sneak attack was not in our traditions."25

23 JCS meeting transcript, 9:45 a.m., October 19, 1962, in May and Zelikow (eds.), Kennedy Tapes, 176.
Cuban army and with all the power of the Soviet forces, except nuclear warheads.27

The next day, both sides dug in. US, Soviet, and Cuban military establishments went on high alert. Rusk quipped mordantly to an aide that they had won a "considerable victory" since they were still alive – Khrushchev had not retorted with a preemptive strike.28 As the United Nations (UN) Security Council opened emergency debate, Kennedy secured unanimous endorsement of the blockade by the Organization of American States (OAS), and NATO allies also quickly closed ranks.

In a private letter, Khrushchev curtly demanded Kennedy renounce the quarantine, a "gross violation" of international law threatening "catastrophic consequences."

Less belligerently, the Soviet leader deflected suggestions to erect a retaliatory blockade around Berlin. Ready to settle for a "halfway successful" outcome, he ordered two IRBM-transporting ships to stop shy of the quarantine line while instructing one vessel to run for Cuba before it went into effect. He leaned toward Mikoyan's cautious advice to order nuclear-armed Foxtrot submarines to avoid the area around Cuba over his defense minister's brash confidence that the noisy vessels could evade US detection - but that instruction seems never to have reached the commanders of the submarines.30

Rebutting Khrushchev, Kennedy warily stressed that both leaders should "show prudence and do nothing to allow events to make the situation more difficult to control than it already is."

To convey his rage more vividly, he sent his brother to see Dobrynin on Tuesday, opening a vital back channel (replacing Bolshakov). RFK vented the president's ire at being "deceived intentionally," and the two argued hotly.

Leaving, the attorney general asked what orders Soviet captains approaching the blockade held. Khrushchev still exuded belligerence. Besides telling an American businessman that JFK better not hit Cuba or they would all "meet in Hell,"36 he sent RFK a note blasting the blockade as "outright banditry or, if you like, the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war."37

On Thursday, the international spotlight shone on the UN Security Council. Dramatically, Stevenson insisted his Soviet counterpart answer the "simple question" of whether Moscow was placing MRBMs and IRBMs in Cuba. "Yes or no?" the US ambassador demanded. "Don't wait for the transatlantic call, yes or no?"

Removing his earphone, to nervous laughter, Valerian Zorin demurred: "I am not in an American courtroom, and therefore I do not wish to answer a question that is put to me in the fashion in which a prosecutor puts questions."

33 Kennedy, Thirteen Days, 67.
“You are in the courtroom of world opinion right now,” Stevenson shot back, “and you can answer yes or no.”

“You will have your answer in due course.”

Indicating he could wait “until hell freezes over,” the American then achieved a public relations coup by unveiling enlarged U-2 images of the missile bases.

Combining pressure and restraint, Kennedy had McNamara keep tight reins on navy commanders implementing the blockade and scotched any boarding of Eastern bloc ships; but he added, “we must act soon because work on the missiles sites is still going on and we must back up very soon the firmness we have displayed up to now.”38

Behind Moscow’s outward defiance, Khrushchev decided to cut his losses. Masking his retreat with gibes at JFK’s cowardice, the Soviet leader scaled back visions of a Cold War masterstroke. Confirming a decision that ships ferrying missile bases.

Unaware of his adversary’s modified stand, Kennedy seemed gloomy, even fatalistic. Convinced the quarantine would merely hasten an eventual confrontation (“which may or may not be desirable”), he suspected the only realistic ways to expel the missiles were negotiations or “to go over and just take them out.”39

But during the evening of Friday October 26, a long private telegraph from Khrushchev – one of the Cold War’s most remarkable communications – clattered in. Reaching out in personal, emotional terms, Khrushchev vescerally evoked the horrors of war and also implied a deal. If JFK ended the blockade and foreswore attacking Cuba, “this would immediately change everything.”

Let us therefore show statesmanlike wisdom. I propose: we, for our part, will declare that our ships, bound for Cuba, are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its forces and will not support any sort of forces which might intend to carry out an invasion of Cuba. Then the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear.

... Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot. And what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose.

Consequently, if there is no intention to tighten that knot and thereby to doom the world to the catastrophe of thermonuclear war, then let us not only relax the forces pulling on the ends of the rope, let us take measures to untie that knot. We are ready for this.40

Khrushchev’s proposal also arrived more explicitly through an unorthodox channel: a journalist related that a Soviet embassy contact (KGB rezident Aleksandr Feklisov, under diplomatic cover) had urgently inquired whether Washington might agree not to invade Cuba if Moscow dismantled the missile bases under UN scrutiny – terms mirroring Kremlin thinking so closely that it almost certainly was an authorized feeler.

In Havana, meanwhile, Castro geared for apocalyptic battle. Judging an attack “almost imminent within the next 24 to 72 hours,” he composed a letter Friday night advising Khrushchev that if “the imperialists invade Cuba with the goal of occupying it, the danger that the aggressive policy poses for humanity is so great that following that event the Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialists could launch the first nuclear strike against it ... that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other.”41

For Kennedy, October 27 (“Black Saturday”) started out bad and steadily deteriorated. First, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported that Soviet diplomats in New York were preparing to burn their papers. Then, Radio Moscow broadcast a tougher, more impersonal Khrushchev message demanding that in exchange for removing Soviet missiles from Cuba, Kennedy withdraw “analogous means” from Turkey.42 Inspired by a

38 Excomm minutes, October 25, 1962, ibid., 209.
39 Presidium notes, October 25, 1962, Miller Center website.
40 Excomm meeting transcript, 10 a.m., October 26, 1962, in May and Zelikow (eds.), Kennedy Tapes, 464, 468.
Thursday column by journalist Walter Lippmann, Khrushchev hoped this new demand might yet enable him to “win” the duel.44

Confused by the discordant messages, some on the Excomm blanched at rewarding nuclear blackmail. JFK, however, saw that stand as untenably rigid. Long wishing to replace the obsolete, vulnerable Jupiters with nuclear-armed Polaris submarines, he observed that the United States would be hard-pressed to justify war over “useless missiles in Turkey” and “to any man at the United Nations or any other rational man, it will look like a very fair trade.”45

Washington couldn’t openly pressure Ankara, but the Turks themselves might request the Jupiters’ departure given the “great danger in which they will live during the next week and we have to face up to the possibility of some kind of a trade over missiles.”46

As the Excomm squirmed on Saturday afternoon – “Let’s not kid ourselves,” said JFK, Khrushchev made a “very good proposal”47 – U-2 incidents jangled already frayed nerves. A weather-sampling mission strayed over Siberia, rousing Soviet interceptors to scramble. US fighters escorted the petrified pilot to safety, but Khrushchev later admonished Kennedy that at such an anxious moment “an intruding American plane could easily be taken for a nuclear bomber, which might push us to a fateful step.”48

Over Cuba, an SA-2 missile downed a U-2, killing its pilot. The news stoked fear on the Excomm – uncertain whether Moscow had authorized the act (it hadn’t) – that the Soviets had deliberately “fired the first shot” in the crisis. “Well, this is much of an escalation by them, isn’t it?” the president remarked.49

But Kennedy cautiously deferred authorizing a reprisal against the SAM site and prodded aides to refocus on Moscow’s “inconsistent and conflicting proposals.” Most Excomm members adamantly opposed a public swap and several advisers, including RFK, Bundy, and Thompson, urged JFK to eschew the Turkish offer and instead “accept” the deal implicit in Khrushchev’s private letter – an idea that would go down in crisis lore as “The Cuban missile crisis” after the Victorian novelist’s description of a damsel’s accepting an innocuous gesture as a marriage proposal.

Kennedy grew dismayed as conversation turned toward the likelihood of imminent combat, especially if firing at surveillance flights persisted. When General Taylor reported that the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged a “big strike” no later than Monday, followed by an invasion, RFK drolly remarked, “Well, that’s a surprise.”50 McNamara hawkishly advised removing or defusing Jupiters in Turkey and Italy to dissuade Moscow from reprisals – and then invading Cuba... nonplussing CIA director Mccone and Lyndon Johnson, who wondered, then, why not trade and avoid the casualties?

The president – freshly sensitized to history’s judgment from reading Barbara Tuchman’s The Guns of August – feared the consequences of rash military action or political intransigence more than anyone:

We all know how quickly everybody’s courage goes when the blood starts to flow, and that’s what’s going to happen to NATO. When we start these things and they grab Berlin, everybody’s going to say: “Well, that was a pretty good proposition.” ... I think we’re better off to get those missiles out of Turkey and out of Cuba because I think the way of getting them out of Turkey and out of Cuba is going to be very, very difficult and very bloody, in one place or another. ... Of course, what we would like to do is have the Turks come and offer this ... We can’t very well invade Cuba, with all the tool and blood it’s going to be, when we could have gotten them out by making a deal on the same missiles in Turkey. If that’s part of the record, then I don’t see how we’ll have a very good war.51

In his reply to Khrushchev, JFK converted the private letter’s hazy terms to a firm proposition: should Moscow “agree to remove these weapons systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision” and prevent their reintroduction, Washington would lift the quarantine and “give assurances against an invasion of Cuba.” “[S]uch a settlement on easing world tensions,” he noted, “would enable us to work toward a more general arrangement regarding ‘other armaments,’ as proposed in your second letter which you made public.”52

But Kennedy anticipated only further stalling from Khrushchev, and on Saturday night he desperately searched for an escape hatch from the crisis. As nukes, warplanes, and troops massed around Cuba, and pressure for an attack built – a conference ended with the wisecrack, “Suppose we make Bobby

44 Fursenko and Naftali, Khrushchev’s Cold War, 488.
45 Excomm meeting transcript, 10 a.m., October 27, 1962, in May and Zelikow (eds.), Kennedy Tapes, 498.
47 Excomm meeting transcript, 10 a.m., October 27, 1962, in May and Zelikow (eds.), Kennedy Tapes, 512.
49 Excomm meeting transcript, 4 p.m., October 27, 1962, in May and Zelikow (eds.), Kennedy Tapes, 571.
50 Ibid., 563.
51 Ibid., 548–49, 578, 602.
mayor of Havana? — he took a series of secret initiatives to create alternatives to using force.

First, he had his brother assure Dobrynin that if Khrushchev removed his missiles, the Jupiters would be gone from Turkey within four to five months. But in a de facto ultimatum, RFK stressed that Khrushchev must answer tomorrow: his brother faced intense pressure to respond violently should flights over Cuba be fired on again, and a grave danger existed that “a chain reaction will quickly start that will be very hard to stop,” killing millions of American and Soviet citizens. “Time is of the essence and we shouldn’t miss the chance.”

Second, JFK authorized Rusk to telephone an associate of UN secretary-general U Thant with the terms of an appeal Thant might issue (if prompted) calling on Washington and Moscow to remove their respective missiles in Turkey and Cuba. Finally, Kennedy’s ambassador in Rio was instructed to give the Brazilian government a message it could present (in its own name) to Castro, prodding him to evict the missiles in exchange for a rapprochement with the United States.

None of these efforts struck Kennedy as promising, so it was with surprise bordering on disbelief that he learned the next morning that Khrushchev had agreed, in exchange for the no-invasion vow, “to dismantle the arms which you describe as offensive, and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union,” and even to permit the UN to verify the process.

Why had Khrushchev folded so quickly? After all, JFK (via RFK) had only requested a commitment to withdraw the missiles sometime on Sunday, so he had more hours to haggle. Yet, the Kremlin leader rushed to accept Kennedy’s secret Turkish concession in the belief that he needed to “act very quickly” since Washington soon might attack, and before the belligerent Castro dragged the USSR into mortal conflict. Appalled by the Cuban’s implicit advocacy of a preemptive nuclear strike, he scorned: “Only a person who has no idea what nuclear war means, or has been so blinded, for instance, like Castro, by revolutionary passion, can talk like that.”

The headstrong Castro might have seen an invasion of his country as the start of World War III, but Khrushchev did not, and on Saturday he had “categorically” re-ordered his commanders in Cuba not to fire any nuclear charges without Moscow’s express consent.

Khrushchev’s surrender ended the crisis’s most acute phase, but it took several weeks for US and Soviet negotiators to sort out the debris. Despite Castro’s departure by flying low over the ships carrying them away as sailors pulled back the covering tarps, a procedure that humiliated Soviet naval commanders. After Khrushchev grudgingly accepted Washington’s demand to remove the IL-28 bombers, JFK lifted the quarantine on November 20.

Khrushchev assured Kennedy that all Soviet nuclear weapons were gone from Cuba — but the tactical nuclear weapons weren’t shipped out until early December. (Had US intelligence uncovered this fresh deception, the crisis might have restarted amid irresistible pressure for an invasion.) Though Kennedy never formalized the no-invasion vow due to Cuba’s blocking of on-site inspection, on January 7, 1963 Washington and Moscow jointly requested the issue’s removal from the Security Council agenda.

How dangerous was the crisis? How close did it come to nuclear catastrophe? Those at the top concurred that it came very close indeed. “This time we were really on the verge of war,” Khrushchev told a visitor. Kennedy indepdently agreed, estimating the odds of the Soviets going to war at somewhere between one and three and even.

Though scholars still hotly debate the level of nuclear danger, evidence suggests a mixed retrospective judgment. Probably the peril of intentional escalation was less acute than once formerly believed. As the crisis climaxed, Khrushchev and Kennedy veered toward compromise rather than belligerence. The Soviet leader, as noted above, secretly resolved by October 25 to compromise for terms Washington could accept, and JFK’s frantic search for an escape hatch two days later suggests that, rather than approve an airstrike to remove the missiles early the next week, he would have tightened the blockade, or even publicly bartered missiles. Both leaders increasingly recognized their shared, transcendent interest in avoiding the ultimate catastrophe.

Yet, the risk of inadvertent escalation appears to have been even greater. Contingent events might have been disastrously misinterpreted or caused an
accidental clash, and revelations about Soviet nuclear weapons in and around Cuba other than the strategic missiles— including the tactical nuclear weapons (which local commanders under attack might have used regardless of Moscow’s edicts), and nuclear-armed submarines maneuvering around the blockade— suggest even a limited or accidental collision risked ballooning to general war, since any nuclear use against US forces would have provoked instant nuclear retaliation. At least one frazzled Soviet submarine commander on the blockade line, stalked and harassed by American ships and planes and out of touch with Moscow, is reported to have concluded that war had begun and considered firing his nuclear torpedo.

In sum, the crisis still earns its status as the most dangerous moment in history.

Consequences and controversies

The crisis had important consequences for the subsequent course of the Cold War and nuclear-arms race, and for the fates of its principal figures. Kennedy’s success in compelling Khrushchev to pull out the missiles struck most Americans as a glorious victory. He won kudos for toughness in domestic politics (the Jupiter deal remained safely buried) and gained confidence and plume for the duration of his shortened presidency, at home and abroad. Khrushchev had a tougher time coping with the fallout. Castro was enraged by the Soviet leader both for his concessions to JFK and for his failure to consult him before making them. To mollify him, Khrushchev sent Mikoyan to Havana for weeks of tense secret negotiations, a hidden November Crisis that buffeted the Soviet-Cuban ties. The Kremlin’s decisions to extract additional hardware (IL-28s, the tactical nuclear weapons) only intensified Castro’s fury, while Khrushchev grew increasingly exasperated at the Cuban leader’s intransigence. Though the alliance survived, the crisis’s humiliating outcome gravely tarnished Khrushchev’s standing within the Kremlin. Together with other steps, it solidified a sense that his erratic foreign policy had to end and that it was time for Khrushchev. By contrast, Castro remained the Cuban government for decades. Despite chagrin at the way the crisis ended, he owed his regime’s long-term survival partly to JFK’s no-vow. Khrushchev’s claims to have “saved” Cuba, hollow at the time, in retrospect have some validity.

In the Cold War and nuclear arms race, the crisis heralded an era of relative stability in superpower relations. In June 1963, JFK made a singularly conciliatory speech toward the USSR, hailing its World War II role and emphasizing two nations’ common humanity and interest in avoiding nuclear ruin. Thereafter, Washington and Moscow established an emergency hotline—a step directly attributable to exasperation over the cumbersome methods used during the crisis — and agreed to a limited nuclear test ban, a major arms control advance that pointed the way toward a 1968 nuclear non-proliferation pact and also exacerbated the Sino-Soviet split as Beijing (nearing its first atomic blast) decried superpower collusion.

Perhaps even more significant was what didn’t happen after the crisis. Khrushchev lost his appetite for a new showdown. Within a decade, Moscow and Washington ratified the
status quo of a split Berlin and Germany. After Cuba, neither side wanted to risk a repetition along the heavily armed divide in Europe – as the Americans showed by wary responses to upheavals in Czechoslovakia (1968), Poland (1970, 1980–81), and all of East-Central Europe (1989).

The waning of superpower tensions fostered speculation that Kennedy and Khrushchev, had they lasted in power longer, might have ended the Cold War altogether. That seems unlikely. Neither yielded fundamentally incompatible views of ideology or the legitimacy of the postwar international order. Though military friction in Europe subsided, the superpowers repeatedly clashed indirectly in the Third World and success in Cuba may have facilitated disaster in Vietnam. In 1965, when Johnson decided to bomb the north and send hundreds of thousands of US troops to the south, his entire national security team consisted of missile crisis veterans; McNamara later acknowledged that his experience with the quarantine directly influenced his thinking on the bombing. To the extent that Cuba inculcated confidence (or hubris) that calibrated force could compel a Communist adversary to capitulate, this may have been a fateful misreading: if Khrushchev had "blinked," Castro never did – and nor did Ho Chi Minh, demonstrating anew the ferocity of revolutionary nationalism and leaving Washington painfully quagmired.

In arms control, too, the consequences varied. Furious at being forced to back down – and submit to mortifying close-range inspection – Moscow resolved to catch up in the nuclear competition as rapidly as possible and never again be vulnerable to American pressure. US leaders rationalized the rapid expansion of the Soviet ICBM force as a stabilizing component of what McNamara dubbed mutual assured destruction (MAD), and Nixon and Brezhnev enshrined it in 1972 as a state of nuclear parity. Some scholars argue the crisis reinforced a process of superpower "nuclear learning" – increasing judiciousness and responsibility, cementing a stable "long peace" – but this runs up against evidence that in late 1983 nuclear tensions led to another comparably perilous trip to the brink.

More than any other single Cold War event, the Cuban missile crisis stimulated a voluminous historiography and contentious public debate, not only over what actually happened but its implications for national security policy controversies, international relations theories, bureaucratic politics models, and a host of other fields and sub-fields. Since the rise of Gorbachev's glasnost.

Bibliographical essay

4. The Cuban missile crisis

For roughly a decade following the crisis, most accounts—by or based on information from government officials—celebrated JFK’s “crisis management” and toughness dealing with his Kremlin adversary, and tended to emphasize the nuclear balance (as opposed to U.S. hostility to Fidel Castro) as both causing the crisis and ordaining its resolution. See, e.g., Elie Abel, The Missile Crisis (New York: Bantam, 1966), Theodore C. Sorenson, Kennedy (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation (New York: Doubleday, 1967), and, posthumously, Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days (New York: Norton, 1969). “To the whole world,” Schlesinger declared (pp. 840–41), the crisis “displayed the opening of an American leadership unsurpassed in the responsible management of power … throughout the crisis [JFK] cooly and exactly measured the level of force necessary to deal with the level of threat. Defining a clear and limited objective, he moved with mathematical precision to accomplish it … It was this combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated, that dazzled the world.”

Graham T. Allison consolidated Kennedy administration perspectives in Essence of Decision (New York: Little, Brown, 1971), the dominant secondary account for the next quarter-century. The pendulum swung toward a harsher view in the 1970s. Vietnam, Watergate, and CIA scandals nourished skepticism toward hardline Cold War policies, and consequently JFK’s handling of the crisis and Cuba. Exemplary texts include the November 1975 report of the US Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, which divulged covert operations and schemes to kill Castro during the Kennedy years; Barton J. Bernstein, e.g., “The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?” Political Science Quarterly, 95 (Spring 1980), 97–125, and Garry Wills, The Kennedy Imprisonment (Boston, MA: Little, brown, 1982). In Robert Kennedy and His Times (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. acknowledged (p. 530) that the “record demands the revision of the conventional portraits of Kennedy during the crisis: both the popular view, at the time, of the unflinching leader fearlessly staring down the Russians until they blinked; and the after left-wing view of a man driven by psychic and political compulsions to demand unconditional surrender at whatever risk to mankind.”

In the 1980s, the historiography swerved again due both to new evidence and political shifts. The uproar over Ronald Reagan’s nuclear policies offered Kennedy loyalists a chance to rebut criticism of their hero. Arguing that Reagan was pushing US-Soviet relations back to the brink, former JFK aides cited his missile crisis posture as a model—not the Cold War toughness for which they once hailed him, but because, in fact, he had been the Excom’s leading dove, willing to make painful compromises (e.g., publicly trading the Jupiters) to avoid nuclear calamity. Contradicting earlier claims, they now argued that the nuclear balance was not decisive in 1962, but that, instead, US conventional superiority around Cuba forced Khrushchev to back down. See Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, George Ball, Roswell Gilpatric, Theodore Sorenson, and McGeorge Bundy, The Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Time, 27 September 1982, Robert McNamara, “The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons,” Foreign Affairs, 62, 1 (Fall 1983), 59–80, and McGeorge Bundy, Danger and Survival (New York: Random House, 1988).
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For the relationship between control of nuclear weapons and nuclear war planning, see Peter D. Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians*: *Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo:...