The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited

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More than a quarter century has passed since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 placed the world on nuclear alert. The debate among historians continues regarding the motivations of the participants. The strategic and political results the confrontation had on the governments of the two superpowers is also controversial. Yet, in a unique conference held in January, 1989 in Moscow, a number of President Kennedy's cabinet members participated in a roundtable discussion with Soviet and Cuban representatives. The results shed some new, if not completely illuminating light in the subject. Though no major deviations were suggested from official versions provided by each government in 1962 Soviet and Cuban officials did provide some surprising quantitative data and unusual perspectives regarding the nuclear missile arsenal on Cuba and its intended usage. It is the intent of this paper to examine a number of historical perspectives, vis a vis the Cuban missile crisis, including the views of U.S. participants, opinions of revisionists from the right and left, the limited interpretation of Sovietologists, and, finally, to note the significant disclosures made at the Moscow conference.

The personal accounts of American participants comprise most of the data that exists today, though recently some government documents have been declassified. The first account, from a high ranking cabinet member who played a major advising role during the crisis, was Theodore C. Sorensen's Kennedy. As Special Council to the President, Sorensen states the Executive Committee of the National Security Council considered five theories for Soviet placement of nuclear missiles in Cuba: 1) Cold War politics to test U.S. resolve, 2) a diversion to cover a Soviet move on Berlin, 3) a defense of Cuba to strengthen the Soviet Union in its competition with China regarding world communist leadership, 4) a leverage for bargaining for the withdrawal of U.S. overseas bases, and 5) a means of altering the strategic balance of power. 1 According to Sorensen, the President leaned towards reasons three and five.

In Kennedy, Sorensen continues his analysis when discussing the Executive Committee's (Ex Com) six courses of action: 1) do nothing, 2) use the United Nations or Organization of American States to bring diplomatic pressure to bear on the Soviet Union, 4) initiate indirect military action via a naval blockade, 5) carry out an air attack on the missiles of Cuba. 2 Hawkish advice came from the McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and General Maxwell Taylor, spokesman for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They both called for an air strike, while Taylor went so far as to recommend a complete naval blockade and preparation for an invasion following the air strike.

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2 Sorensen, ibid., 771.
Adalai Stephenson, Ambassador to the United Nations, advised using the floor of the UN to influence world opinion and thereby pressure the Soviets to withdraw the missiles. According to Sorenson, the majority of Ex Com agreed with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and supported a quarantine. The President decided upon the more moderate strategy, calling for a limited naval blockade. Diplomatic measures were seen as too passive a response for such an aggressive maneuver by the Soviets. However an air strike might provoke a military confrontation, further escalating the crisis.

The general consensus among the personnel of Ex Com is that Kennedy reacted rationally, reasonably, and with unwavering strength. They also agree that intelligence on both sides of the crisis made some significant errors. U.S. intelligence never seriously considered that a predominantly conservative Soviet Politburo would place nuclear missiles in Cuba and thereby alter the strategic balance of power. Conversely, Sorenson points out that Soviet intelligence miscalculated the American response, resting on the assumption that the U.S. would either acquiesce or negotiate a settlement through diplomatic channels.

Whereas the conservative element in Kennedy's cabinet disagreed with the administration's strategy, they did see a decisive, quick-thinking president at work. This observation cannot be applied to the right wing interpretation of the missile crisis. Kennedy's leadership was viewed as weak, and where the administration claimed victory the conservative found only defeat.

Right wing critics believe the Kennedy's lack of decisive leadership created additional foreign policy blunders vis a vis the neutralization of Laos, the Berlin Wall crisis, and the Bay of Pigs invasion. This led Premier Krushchev to judge the President as young and lacking in experience. Krushchev then challenged Kennedy personally by placing missiles in Cuba. Once the missiles were in place, the conservatives criticized Kennedy for a policy far too conciliatory towards the Soviet Union. The result of the crisis was therefore defeat, not victory. Castro and communism were still entrenched in Cuba and the Soviets still maintained a foothold in the Western Hemisphere.

One of the first written criticisms from the right appeared in 1963 in National Review. In his article entitled, "U.S. Cuban Policy: Illusion or Reality", David Lowenthal attacked Kennedy for settling on a maintenance of the status quo when he had the opportunity to force the Soviets out of the hemisphere and demand free elections in Cuba. The U.S., according the Lowenthal, was relinquishing its role as the leader of its hemisphere. "Nothing closer to an explicit retraction of the Monroe Doctrine has ever been made by any President." 3 Because Kennedy agreed not to invade Cuba, the crisis "showed our unwillingness to act for Cuban liberty with anything like the forcefulness with which the Russians acted for Hungarian oppression" 4

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4 Lowenthal, ibid., 63.
Richard Nixon, in 1964, criticized the administration for not calling an air strike or an invasion which "enabled the United States to pull defeat out of the jaws of victory." 5 Nixon and Lowenthal agreed that Kennedy's major mistake was not responding to the crisis militarily and calling Krushchev's bluff.

The conservative consensus supports the view that the U.S. did not respond strongly enough to the Soviet Union's placement of missiles in Cuba. Conversely, criticism from leftist revisionists finds U.S. actions far too aggressive and motivated by personal and political needs. The security of the nation, and the world itself, was not met by an administration bent on publicly challenging the Soviet Union and thereby threatening the world with nuclear annihilation. The general feeling among the left is that the Kennedy administration purposely took a political problem and raised it to a crisis level unnecessarily, rather than exercise a private diplomatic dialogue to responsibly end the conflict.

Roger Hagan, editor of The Correspondent, referred to the administration's reaction as a policy of "righteous realpolitik". In a 1963 article, Hogan claimed that Kennedy's actions were based on falsehoods. Hagan challenged Kennedy's assertion that Soviet medium range missiles in Cuba disturbed the strategic military balance of power. He asserted that the U.S. first-strike and retaliatory second-strike capabilities were not compromised by the missiles in Cuba. Hagan's attack intensified as he referred to Kennedy's motivations as "self righteous" when the President asserted that Soviet missiles in Cuba were offensive, while U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy were defensive weapons. 5

The left also seemed to believe that Soviet motivations were completely misinterpreted by the administration. The President stated that the Soviet Union was attempting to destabilize the Carribbean and Latin America. Elements of the left asserted that Soviet ambitions were to protect Cuba from invasion and negotiate a "communist" solution to the Berlin issue. 7

Professor Leslie Dewart probably suggested the most liberal interpretation of the missile crisis in a 1965 article published in Studies on the Left. Dewart argued that, indeed, Krushchev's goal was to settle the Berlin conflict and that he was willing to negotiate away the Cuban missiles. By slowly placing the missiles in Cuba, Dewart believed that the Soviets wanted to make sure that the U.S. was aware of their actions so as to prevent a sudden reaction. Krushchev's only deception, according to Dewart, was the Soviet Premier's claim that the missiles were under Cuban direction. In truth, the Soviets maintained complete control of the missiles. Indeed, Dewart argues that the U.S. was the deceptive participant, not the Soviet Union, for it led Krushchev to believe that the missiles in Cuba were tolerable. Dewart states that the U.S. became aware of the missile placement in September and waited until the right political moment to first, publicly expose its

7 Ibid., 19.
"surprise" at Soviet maneuvering, and then manipulate public opinion to support its demand that all missiles and bombers be withdrawn.

Finally, the left wing summarized its perspective with its indictment of President Kennedy. For the sake of personal prestige and congressional elections, the President conducted an act of war (the naval blockade) and brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. The result, according to this interpretation, was the loss of U.S. credibility with its allies and the initiation of U.S. policy to respond militarily to diplomatic problems. This mentality contributed to American involvement in Vietnam and a rise in the nuclear arms race, thereby discrediting the administration's optimism over the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Indeed, it has been suggested that the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis was the creation of an "arrogant" American philosophy of military solutions to purely international political problems.  

Sovietologists have nearly always been forced to interpret the actions of the Kremlin on the basis of limited information. The Cuban missile crisis is no exception. Official Soviet versions of the events of October can be found in Nikita Khrushchev's two volumes entitled, Khrushchev Remembers and Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament. In volume one, Khrushchev claims it was his commitment to avoid nuclear war that influenced the Soviets to withdraw the missiles following Kennedy's ultimatum, claiming the U.S. President faced a military overthrow if he did not respond militarily. In The Last Testament Khrushchev claims an agreement had struck between the two superpowers. Nuclear missiles would be withdrawn immediately and bombers were to leave Cuban soil in thirty days in exchange for the U.S. removal of Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy. Through Kennedy took pains to publicly avoid any semblance of conceding to the Soviets, Khrushchev believed the two world leaders acted as responsible statesmen and avoided a military confrontation by negotiating a peaceful solution.  

In Power in the Kremlin, French Sovietologist, Michael Tatu argues that the protection of Castro's regime was not the reason for the missile placement. Tatu, an expert on the Kremlin, suggests that the responsibility for nuclear missiles in Cuba rests only with one man--Khrushchev. To maintain his power and personal prestige within the Politburo, he found a rather cost effective way to bridge the missile gap and pressure the U.S. to negotiate away Berlin. But Khrushchev and Soviet intelligence failed to anticipate Kennedy's quarantine response, and the Premier was surprised to find himself in a power struggle with the American President as well as his own Politburo. Tatu uses the famous two-letter escapade to support his Politburo power struggle thesis. He suggests that the first conciliatory letter was Khrushchev's personal appeal to Kennedy, whereas the second formal letter demanding withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey was drafted by the collective leadership of the Politburo. Tatu argues that the results of the Cuban missile crisis ended any Soviet designs on Berlin and led to the eventual ousting of Khrushchev.  

8 Ibid., 17-19.  
Adam Ulam suggests an entirely different theory for Soviet motivation in his book The Rivals. Neither the threat to Cuba nor the political situation in Berlin influenced the Soviets. Indeed, it was not U.S. foreign policy that the Soviets feared, but Chinese actions around the world, particularly their quest for nuclear capability. According to Ulam, the Kremlin wanted to prevent the installation of nuclear missiles in Germany as well as prohibiting China's acquisition of nuclear weapons. 11

The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 has raised many questions, and, unfortunately, information received from the Moscow conference answers only a few of them. Some revelations were made, primarily on the Soviet and Cuban side, although documentation was provided by the U.S. delegation only. Those who study foreign relations, especially the October crisis, were no doubt frustrated to find the two day conference open to the media for only the last hour. Information gathered was either acquired during the open hour or from comments made by the participants afterwards.

The roundtable discussion included high-ranking members of Kennedy's cabinet, Soviet foreign ministry officials, and members of the Cuban Politburo. Representing the U.S. elite were former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and former White House security advisor McGeorge Bundy. In attendance for the Soviet Union were former Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko, former Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly F. Dobrynin, and Sergei Khrushchev, the Premier's son. Jorge Risket Valdes, a Castro confidant, led the Cuban delegation.

There was apparently little deviation from what has been professed by the participants since 1962. The Soviet delegation continued to support its assessment that Cuba was about to be invaded by the U.S. and that the missile emplacement was purely a defensive measure. In fact, recently declassified U.S. government documents suggest that an invasion was seriously being considered by the President and his cabinet. In a recent New York Times column, former Kennedy Press Secretary Pierre Salinger discusses a declassified report in the Cuban crisis. The report states that the commander-in-chief of the Atlantis Forces, Admiral Robert L. Dennison, received a memorandum on October 6, 1962 from McNamara telling the Joint Chiefs of Staff to implement directives 314 and 316, which were contingency plans for the invasion of Cuba.

Other recently declassified top secret documents reveal a U.S. covert program to destabilize Castro's regime. Entitled "Operation Mongoose", its aim was to bring down the communist

11 Adam Ulam, The Rivals (New York: The Viking Press, 1971),329. Gordon Chang, in his article entitled "JFK, China and the Bomb", Journal of American History (March 4, 1988), 1287-1310, states that President Kennedy and his advisors discussed taking military action against China with the Soviet Union. Joseph Alspop, "Thoughts out of China, Go versus no Go", New York Times Magazine (March 11,1973), 30-31, 100-105, 108, claims that Khrushchev knew that Kennedy's representatives at the Test Ban Treaty negotiations in 1963 were ordered to sound him out regarding a joint operation to bomb Lop Nor, China's nuclear weapon development facility. Chang points out that the result of the Test Ban Treaty was a U.S.-Soviet Stewardship of the world, which was one of the goals of the Kennedy administration.
government in Cuba before October 20, 1962--or before the November Congressional elections. General Taylor's March 14, 1962 memorandum stated, "In undertaking the cause to overthrow the target government, the U.S. will make maximum use of indigenous resources, internal and external but recognizes that the final success will require decisive U.S. military intervention." 12 On October 4, Robert Kennedy told CIA Director John A. McCone that the President was "very concerned" about developments in Cuba and urged the director to carry out "massive activity" under the framework of "Operation Mongoose". 13

These documents were made public just prior to the conference, yet McNamara asserted that the U.S. never seriously considered these plans. He did mention at the conference that he better understood how the Soviets and Cubans could have interpreted U.S. actions for an imminent invasion. "I said that I could understand, that it is perfectly clear now, that Cuban leaders at that time believed the U.S. was intending to invade Cuba." 14

Mainly due to these declassified documents, Salinger takes exception to McNamara's continued assertion that Ex Com never intended an invasion. "I have a lot of respect for Mr. McNamara, and I consider him a friend. But his insistence that the U.S. never intended to invade Cuba either before or during the crisis flies in the face of the facts. Even he (McNamara) says that when he left the White House that night (October 28) he had the impression that he might not be alive the next Saturday." 15

For their part, the Soviets confirmed some U.S. assumptions and surprised them with other revelations. Sergei Khrushchev told reporters that twenty nuclear warheads were in Cuba, and, though they were not attached to the missiles, they could have been very quickly. Apparently U.S. officials were not sure whether the Soviets had delivered the warheads to Cuba, but according to Bundy, "the only prudent course was to assume that the warheads might be in place." 16 Khrushchev, who was an engineer specializing in rocketry in 1962, claimed that "even in the event of an American invasion or air strike, Soviet officers in Cuba had no orders to use the missiles. 17

General Dmitri Volkogonov, head of the Moscow Military History Archives Institutes, disclosed that the nuclear warheads arrived as early as September---a month before the President announced on national television that Soviet missiles were placed in Cuba and that he was ordering a naval blockade of the island. According to Volkogonov, the quarantine prevented another twenty warheads from arriving in Cuba.

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15 Salinger, E25.
16 Keller, 10.
17 Ibid., 1.
Americans were not the only ones unsure of the status of the missiles in Cuba. Dobrynin admitted in a repartee with Gromyko that even he was kept in the dark. According to one participant at the conference, Gromyko interrupted Dobrynin and asked, "Didn't I tell you about that when you saw me off at the airport on my way back to Moscow?" "No, you didn't," Dobrynin responded. "Oh. It must have been a big secret," replied Gromyko with a slight smile. 18

Another significant disclosure at the conference came from General Volkogonov, who was instructed to study the documents involved with the crisis. The General surprised the American contingent when he informed them that in 1962 the Soviet Union had only 20 intercontinental missiles aimed at the U.S. from Soviet territory. The U.S., at that time, calculated the number to be between 75 and 100 missiles. In fact, Volkogonov revealed that the U.S. nuclear superiority was even more than the 15-1 American estimate. Other quantitative data provided by the Soviets and Cubans suggests U.S. intelligence did not only error in missile estimates. McNamara stated that the U.S. estimated the presence of 10,000 Soviet and 100,000 Cuban soldiers. At the conference those numbers were increased to 40,000 and 270,000 respectively. Graham T. Allison, a Harvard Dean commented, "The figures they gave show it would have been a real war if we had gone in." 19 A Cuban delegate claimed Havana expected 400,000 Cuban Soldiers and citizens to die in a U.S. invasion. 20

The most thought-provoking revelation involved Fidel Castro himself. An unidentified Soviet official claimed he had "definitive" knowledge that two days before the crisis peaked Castro sent a "desperate" telegram to Moscow urging the firing of the missiles at major U.S. cities. According to this account, the telegram convinced Khrushchev that the confrontation had gone too far and he decided to withdraw the missiles. 21 Alexander I. Alekseyev, then Ambassador to Cuba, stated that Castro, fearing a U.S. strike, spent October 26 in his bomb shelter where he drafted a telegram to Moscow warning of a U.S. invasion. It is unclear if this was the cable that urged the missile firing, but when asked about the "desperate" Castro telegram, Sergei Khrushchev said, "I don't know about this." 22

Clearly, the role of Cuba in the crisis has been re-evaluated as a result of the conference. The U.S. always viewed the conflict as a U.S.-Soviet confrontation. Disclosures by Soviet and Cuban delegates alter the passive-dupe perspective of Cuba. U.S. delegate Scott Armstrong stated, "Cuba has been put back into the Cuban missile crisis in a very definite way here." 23 Indeed, Jorge Risket was quite vocal at the conference, throwing jabs at the Americans for their continued hostile policy towards Cuba and at the Soviets for not conferring enough with Havana during the crisis.

18 Ibid., 10
21 Ibid., 1.
22 Ibid., 8.
23 Ibid., 9.
Reaction to the conference in the Soviet press was placed in the context of glasnost. The Current Digest of the Soviet Press published a condensed version of Stanilav Kondrashov's analysis. Kondrashov, a political commentator for Izvestia, emphasized that the Soviet people were kept in the dark regarding the entire missile crisis, even when the western press began to report on the developments in the Caribbean. "Our whole people were brought to the edge of the nuclear abyss without knowing it, without having the opportunity to understand why—-for just what reason!" 24

Although the thrust of Kondrashov's commentary deals with the "apotheosis of secrecy" within the Soviet government, he does discuss the arguments presented at the conference. The missile placement was the personal idea of Khrushchev and approved by the Politburo. The missiles were under the complete control of the Soviet military in Cuba and were to be fired only on orders from Moscow. Kondrashov's report mentions the defensive nature of the missiles and suggests their function "of a least partially redressing the strategic imbalance that tipped sharply toward America at that time." 25

Historians who have examined the Cuban missile crisis will make few, if any, major revisions in their interpretations as a result of the Moscow conference. Yet, if the missile numbers provided by the Soviets are correct, several points need to be stressed. First, U.S. intelligence provided inaccurate data regarding overall Soviet missile strength and the number of combat Cuban and Soviet troops on Cuban soil. It has been argued that Kennedy was well aware that no missile gap existed in 1960 even though he campaigned on the issue of Soviet superiority in numbers. This implies that the President took advantage of the missile placement to score some political points.

Secondly, the nuclear missile figures provided by the Soviets at the conference can be interpreted in two ways. If indeed only twenty ICBMs on Soviet territory were aimed at the U.S., then the warheads in Cuba, as New York Times reporter Bill Keller puts it, "amounted to a doubling of their nuclear threat." 26 Conversely, forty nuclear missiles trained on U.S. cities is still roughly half of what U.S. officials believed was a Soviet threat. Some military analysts have said that the twenty missiles in Cuba did not jeopardize U.S. first strike or retaliatory capabilities.

Thirdly, if the Soviets indeed had four times and the Cubans nearly three times the U.S. estimates in troop strength in Cuba, the Cuban/Soviet fear of a U.S. invasion would seem justified—-particularly based on recent U.S. declassified documents. This raises further questions. Would a U.S. invasion encounter the Soviet military on the beaches of Cuba and precipitate a nuclear war? Sergei Khrushchev claims Soviet officers, who had complete control of the missiles, had standing orders not to use them in the event of an air strike or invasion. Nothing was said regarding the use of Soviet troops.

25 Ibid., 1.
26 Keller, 10.
Lastly, the Soviet desire to see a withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey suggests intelligence shortcomings on their part as well. They were obviously unaware of the President's decision before the crisis to withdraw the "outdated" missiles. Having just made the missiles operational, the Turkish government wanted to maintain them for a short period in order to justify their initial placement. At the conference, Dobrynin recalled his conversation with Robert Kennedy and remembered the Attorney General's refusal to trade the Jupiter missiles for the Cuban missiles. Yet, Dobrynin said he left his meeting with Kennedy with the understanding that the missiles would be withdrawn.

Based on evidence released at the conference and recent declassified government documents, a number of logical conclusions can be reached. The U.S. government seriously considered the invasion of Cuba before and during the crisis. The Soviet Union, particularly Khrushchev, saw an opportunity to demonstrate its resolve to defend Cuba while bridging its own missile gap. President Kennedy did not covertly plan the entire scenario to meet his personal ends, but once the crisis presented itself, he did orchestrate his policy to maximize his own and his party's political position. Finally, when Robert Kennedy presented the administration's position on the Jupiter missiles in Turkey, Khrushchev viewed it as a concession he could live with, even if it was not publicized to the world. This would suggest that since Khrushchev did not make the Jupiter missiles withdrawal public, he was indeed involved in some sort of struggle with his own Politburo. He could present Turkey as a successful result of his Cuban policy. That the Premier was ousted from power two years later does not necessarily imply it was the result of a "Cuban" policy. Other failures suggest more relevance to his removal.

The consensus at the Moscow conference was that the conference came too close to a military solution and that the alleviation of future conflicts should rest on diplomacy and communication, though some delegates expressed no alternative to the handling of events in 1962. Vitaly V. Zhurin, head of a new Soviet institute studying Europe, said the "Cuban missile crisis was unavoidable because of the superpowers approach to resolving conflicts at the time." 27 Cold War policy and rhetoric limited the options and elevated a political problem to a crisis situation. As the conference closed thirteen months ago, McNamara commented, "It would require a leap of imagination for us to conceive of our national roles in a world not dominated by the struggle between East and West." 28 The present climate in Europe and within the Soviet Union would seem to suggest that the imagination need not leap so far.