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## Midnight in Havana

*Castro, Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Cuban Missile Crisis*

I grew up in the thrall of Hemingway's rugged characters, from bullfighters in Spain to Cuban fishermen and African safari hunters. I loved reading tales of the Battle of San Juan Hill, of the charge of the Buffalo Soldiers and Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, though I've since learned better than to believe in heroic fairy tales. My father was a lawyer and had Cuban-American clients in Miami, and I remember developing a fondness for Cuban sandwiches and key lime pie, for the Spanish language and eventually for latin dance. As a Special Forces soldier I went to Key West for training, and while there visited the Hemingway house, went out on the sea and fished, and thought that one day, when I got out of the military, I'd visit that mythical island just 90 miles away (though I've since learned the real distance is about 103 miles). The Cuba practicum gave me the opportunity to finally go, to experience the country and culture for what they are and not what I wished them to be. As most awakenings are, this one was sobering, at least as much as the free-flowing Cuban pour allows for such sobriety.

Cuba has always been a source of fascination for me, so for my paper topic I chose the Cuban Missile Crisis. For me, the decision was easy. Firstly, the Crisis is a story about people and the decisions they make. The main players are all compelling characters, for good and ill. The second reason was that it allowed me to reinvestigate an episode I thought I already understood, but to explore it from the angle of how people make decisions of consequence under enormous stress. The last reason is that it is the closest that humanity has ever come to bringing about its own destruction. It is incumbent on students of security issues and nonproliferation, and of foreign relations generally, to understand this issue. For those of us trying to solve intractable dilemmas, having a knowledge of the most consequential and dangerous episode in our history is essential to fulfill the fundamental challenge we face: how to avoid another one.

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*"[America] would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you; we'd be doing nothing more than giving them a little of their own medicine."*

-Nikita Khrushchev

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This is a story of three men and the decisions they made. Specifically, it is about the decisions of three world leaders during 13 days of October 1962 which brought us as close to the end of the world as any moment in human history. Foremost in the collective memory is probably US President John F. Kennedy, who is credited with standing up to his military and civilian intelligence advisors, and who in calm and deliberate fashion avoided

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Schwarz, "The Real Cuban Missile Crisis," *The Atlantic*, Jan./Feb., 2013. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/01/the-real-cuban-missile-crisis/309190/>

provoking a thermonuclear war. Next, we think of Soviet Premier and Communist Party First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, who is credited with blinking, with realizing the danger of the Soviet nuclear missile deployments in Cuba, and with backing down. Finally, we think about Cuban Prime Minister and Communist Party First Secretary Fidel Castro, whose staunch advocacy of Cuban nationalism and Marxist-Leninism led inexorably to what is often termed the most dangerous moment in history. The truth we tend to believe is that cooler heads prevailed and that wise men led us out of the crisis through calm and deliberate leadership. Yet the truth we tend to disregard is that these three men, the irresolute Kennedy, the impulsive Khrushchev, and the ideological Castro, fumbled their way through the crisis and almost ended life on Earth as we know it. The story begins, as all stories of nuclear conflict do, with an American political election.

During the Presidential election campaign of 1960, then-Senator Kennedy ran against then-Vice President Nixon on the premise that the Eisenhower administration had allowed the Soviets to establish a large “missile gap” that threatened the US nuclear deterrent.<sup>2</sup> Upon assuming office, President Kennedy ordered a significant increase in the amount of new Minuteman ICBMs and Polaris SLBMs. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev considered the number of missiles to be a significant indicator of a country’s military power,<sup>3</sup> and searched for ways to increase the deterrent effect of the missiles already in Soviet possession. One way to accomplish this was to increase the number of missiles within range of American targets, especially countervalue targets (e.g. cities, thereby maximizing the value of each missile, which is expected in a position of negative asymmetry).

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*“Last month I said we weren’t going to [permit Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba] and last month I should have said ... we don’t care. But when we said we’re **not** going to, and [the Soviets] go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then ... I would think that our ... risks **increase**.” [emphasis added]*

-John F. Kennedy

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#### *Glossary of missile terms:*

SLBM: submarine-launched ballistic missile

MRBM: medium-range ballistic missile (range of 1,000-3,000km)

IRBM: intermediate-range ballistic missile (3,000-5,500km)

ICBM: intercontinental ballistic missile (5,500km and over)

SAM: surface-to-air missile

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> William Curti Woolforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 157-166.

*The relative disposition of nuclear and nuclear-related armaments during the crisis:*<sup>4</sup>

The <i>real</i> missile gap, Oct. 1962	USA	USSR
ICBMs	180 <sup>5</sup> -203	20 <sup>6</sup> -36
Long-range bombers	1,306	138
Air-dropped nuclear warheads	3,104	392
SLBMs	144	72
TOTAL nuclear warheads	<b>3,428-3,451</b>	<b>484-500</b>

The history clearly indicates that the disposition, accuracy, and reliability of American weapons was superior in every regard. The intelligence and political failures of the time led all sides to fear each other beyond all reason. The American military superiority led both the powerful Soviet military and the tiny island of Cuba, just 103 miles from the United States, to believe themselves in dire straits. Emplacing Soviet missiles in Cuba was an understandable, if reckless, decision. Another dimension to their insecurity is the series of nuclear tests conducted by the US after the failed nuclear test ban negotiations in the spring of 1962.<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the negotiations would result in the signing of the 1963 Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water [*sic*].<sup>8</sup>

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*"Moscow is our brain and our great leader, and we must pay attention to its voice."*<sup>9</sup>

-Fidel Castro

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The story continues in the realm of international socialist politics. The international Socialist movement found little traction in the Western hemisphere, but the USSR found a convenient ally in Cuba. Fidel Castro approached Soviet leadership about the creation of friendly diplomatic relations, which until 20 April, 1960 included no military assistance or

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<sup>4</sup> Schwarz, "The Real Cuban Missile Crisis."

<sup>5</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, (Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc., 1999), p. 92 (1962 estimate).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the National Security Council, 28 March, 1962, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 7, *Arms Control and Disarmament* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995), p. 411. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v07>

<sup>8</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/t/isn/4797.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, (London & New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 70.

arms sales.<sup>10</sup> Political leadership in Cuba felt that US efforts to undermine the Castro regime were “likely and imminent”<sup>11</sup> due to several CIA programs, among which was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Soviet and Cuban intelligence also caught wind of the rebel training program in Guatemala<sup>12</sup>, a program aimed at fomenting internal revolution in Cuba called Operation Mongoose, and several efforts to assassinate Castro.<sup>13</sup> According to declassified statements both by Khrushchev and the CIA, the USSR wanted to augment its nuclear deterrent and bolster the precarious defensive position of its only major ally in the western hemisphere.<sup>14</sup> By the summer of 1961, as part of the CORONA program, the US had deployed in space the world’s first spy satellite.<sup>15</sup> That, in addition to the continued U-2 spy plane overflights and the human intelligence garnered from Soviet Colonel Oleg Penkovsky,<sup>16</sup> demonstrated the growing but still minimal arsenal of ICBMs. Then Director of Central Intelligence John McCone believed on a “hunch” that a Soviet MRBM deployment to Cuba was likely in the near future, given the recent increase in Soviet SAM sites on the Caribbean island.<sup>17</sup> His opinion was not shared by most analysts. Among their reasons was that Castro had “stated repeatedly that [Cuba] has no intention to offer any part of its territory to any state for the establishment of military bases.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, McCone’s hunch turned out to be true. The Soviets were, indeed, deploying nuclear-capable missiles that could threaten most of the American east coast.

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*“Why does he put these in there, though? ... It’s just as if we suddenly began to put a major number of MRBMs in Turkey. Now that’d be goddamned dangerous, I would think.”<sup>19</sup>*

-John F. Kennedy

*“Well we did it, Mr. President.”<sup>20</sup>*

-McGeorge Bundy

*Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs*

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Closer to the Soviet border, a parallel situation had been developing for several years. President Kennedy had already decided to remove the US Jupiter MRBMs from Turkey, because they offered no strategic advantage and served only to provoke the

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<sup>10</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *Gamble*, p. 46-47.

<sup>11</sup> CIA, “Probable Soviet MRBM Sites in Cuba,” 16 October, 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, 1992), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *Gamble*, p. 57, 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 10, especially p. 807-808. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10>

<sup>14</sup> CIA, “Probable Soviet MRBM Sites in Cuba,” 16 October, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> Allison and Zelikow, *Essence*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Pravda*, 26 February, 1962.

<sup>19</sup> Schwarz, “The Real Cuban Missile Crisis.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Soviets.<sup>21</sup> The range of these missiles threatened Moscow and St. Petersburg (then, Leningrad), and offered no deterrence value because they were slow to erect, liquid-fueled, immobile, and stored above ground. The Soviets reasoned that these missiles would only be used in a first strike against Soviet missile installations and control bunkers in order to eliminate their second-strike capabilities. American Senators Albert Gore Sr. (father of the future Vice President) and Claiborne Pell (of Pell Grant fame) reasoned that the Jupiter missiles served no purpose other than to provoke the USSR.<sup>22</sup> In the midst of the crisis, Kennedy did not want to reach out to Khrushchev and tell him of the plan to remove the Jupiter missiles because he did not want a press leak to make it seem like he cowered to or appeased the Soviets. Not knowing of Kennedy's intentions, Khrushchev remarked in his memoirs that he believed "it was high time America learned what it feels like to have her own land and her own people threatened."<sup>23</sup> For this and other reasons, it is clear that the American President and his predecessors bear much of the responsibility for the advent of the crisis.

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*"A missile is a missile... It makes no great difference whether you are killed by a missile from the Soviet Union or Cuba."*<sup>24</sup>

-Robert Strange McNamara  
*US Secretary of Defense*

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The Kennedy administration was faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, the missile deployments were entirely legal.<sup>25</sup> Cuba had accepted the Soviet deployments and had every right to defend its sovereignty. The Castro regime listened to the bellicose rhetoric coming from the American President and others in both major political parties, and rightly feared its ouster. Placing missiles in Cuba allowed for Cuba and the Soviet Union to solve their primary security challenge of the coming years until the Soviets could build enough ICBMs to guarantee a viable nuclear deterrent. The American strategic position had not been altered. Europeans, the Soviets, the Cubans, the whole world really, had been living under threat of such intermediate-range missiles for years. The Kennedy administration was raising the possibility of going to war in order to maintain the credibility necessary to avoid war. The Soviet Union was willing to provoke the same war that deploying such weapons would deter. For the two great powers, the tail was chasing the dog, and the man in the middle of it all was a 36 year-old Cuban revolutionary willing to risk it all.

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<sup>21</sup> Allison and Zelikow, *Essence*, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> Schwarz, "The Real Cuban Missile Crisis."

<sup>23</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, translated and edited by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 494.

<sup>24</sup> Schwarz, "The Real Cuban Missile Crisis."

<sup>25</sup> Schwarz, "The Real Cuban Missile Crisis."

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*"If they attack Cuba, we should wipe them off the face of the earth!"*<sup>26</sup>

-Fidel Castro

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The story picks up in Havana on October 27, 1962, now known as Black Saturday. It began with a message from Castro to Khrushchev stating that an imminent American invasion was "almost inevitable."<sup>27</sup> In the afternoon, McNamara announced the calling up of reserve air squadrons in preparation for an invasion of Cuba<sup>28</sup>. Fidel ordered air defense forces to begin shooting at American reconnaissance aircraft,<sup>29</sup> a measure which until then had been advocated by Fidel Castro but not supported by Soviet leadership.<sup>30</sup> [MAJ Rudolf Anderson, Jr. of Greenville, North Carolina was piloting a U-2 when Soviet SAMs under Cuban operation shot him down. He would be the only casualty of the crisis. His body was later returned to the United States and interred in his hometown. Part of the engine air intake is still on display at the Museo Girón in Girón Village at the entrance to the Bay of Pigs, the same museum the Cuba practicum visited on our penultimate day.] At 2am, Castro decided to write a letter to Khrushchev calling for action, then drove to the Soviet embassy. At 3am, he arrived at the embassy and spoke to Soviet Ambassador and former intelligence agent<sup>31</sup> Aleksander Alekseev (*ed.: various spellings*), urging him to descend to the bunker and tell Khrushchev to begin the war because an American attack was imminent. Ambassador Alekseev, though feeling "schizophrenic" and "almost 100% Cuban" in how perilous their situation was, nevertheless represented the careful position adopted by Soviet leadership.<sup>32</sup> Alekseev related to Khrushchev two days earlier that Fidel Castro called for a nuclear first strike on the United States. According to Alekseev, Castro said, "However difficult and horrible this decision may be, there is, I believe, no other recourse."<sup>33</sup> Khrushchev responded, "You proposed that we be the first to carry out a nuclear first strike against the enemy's territory... Naturally, you understand where that would lead us. It would not be a simple strike, but the start of a thermonuclear war."<sup>34</sup>

To alleviate tensions, Premier Khrushchev offered a missile swap, removing the missiles from Cuba in exchange for the removal of US Jupiter missiles from Turkey. In a morning public statement and also a private letter to Khrushchev, the White House

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<sup>26</sup> James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, "How Castro Held the World Hostage," *The New York Times Opinion Pages*, p. A33, 25 Oct., 2012. Available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/opinion/how-castro-held-the-world-hostage.html>

<sup>27</sup> Allison and Zelikow, *Essence*, p. 127.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *Gamble*, p. 271.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Blight and Lang, "Hostage."

<sup>33</sup> Alekseev to Foreign Ministry, 25 October, 1962, *Cold War International History Project*, translated by the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard.

<sup>34</sup> Khrushchev to Castro, 30 October, 1962, released correspondence at the *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library*.

rejected the Soviet offer, even though the US already planned on removing the missiles from Turkey. According to declassified Soviet records, the two sides did indeed make such a deal, but the American administration publicly denied it. US Attorney General Robert Kennedy met with Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin and hinted that the Jupiter missiles would be removed “within four or five months,” but the swap could not be acknowledged in public. Robert Kennedy believed his political career would be in jeopardy if the public knew about it.<sup>35</sup> The political situation in Cuba, the USSR, and perhaps most of all, the US, had pushed civilization to its very brink.

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*“This is insane; Fidel wants to drag us into the grave with him!”<sup>36</sup>*

-Nikita Khrushchev

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The United States had created the conditions under which the Crisis could happen. The Soviets instigated it by deploying nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles barely 100 miles from the American mainland. Yet without Fidel Castro’s request for the deployment of Soviet nuclear weapons to Cuba, and his volatile behavior through those 13 days, the Crisis never would have occurred. Whereas President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev deserve some credit for the dissolution of the conflict, Kennedy for disregarding his military advisors’ suggestion to invade Cuba and Khrushchev for removing the missiles, Fidel Castro is worthy only of castigation. Castro’s concern for a principled defense of the Cuban nation is understandable, but pressing for a nuclear first strike on the United States did not serve his country at all. In the end, he and his country were saved by the calmer decisions of other flawed men. In a thermonuclear war, no country is safe.

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p. 309.

<sup>36</sup> Blight and Lang, “Hostage.”