

Why was so much at stake in Cuba in 1962?

Written by Nicola-Ann Hardwick

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NICOLA-ANN HARDWICK, MAR 9 2011

The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 constituted a classic foreign policy dilemma between the United States and the Soviet Union and was one of the most dangerous confrontations of the two superpowers of the Cold War. From October 14th to October 28th 1962, there was a greater chance of more sudden deaths than ever before in history (Allison, 1969: 689). In the worst case scenario, the lives of over 100 million Americans, over 100 million Soviet citizens, and millions of Europeans could have ended abruptly, overshadowing all previous human disasters (ibid.). The following aims to give an overview of the complexity of the thirteen-day crisis and shows that not only the balance of power, the credibility of the two superpowers and the future of Berlin were at stake, but how close it actually came to a nuclear showdown.

In May 1962, Khrushchev decided to secretly deploy forty-eight SS-4s (medium-range ballistic missiles), as well as thirty-two SS-5s (intermediate-range ballistic missiles) to Cuba, only 90 miles off the US coastline (Hunt, 1996: 235). The latter had the potential to reach any part of the continental United States, whereas the SS-4s could threaten cities as far north as Dallas and Washington (ibid.). Moreover, forty-two light IL-28 bombers, as well as surface-to-air missiles (SAMS), coastal defence missiles, and forty-two MIG-21 interceptors to protect the missiles and to withstand invaders were placed on the Caribbean island (ibid: 236). Interestingly enough, Khrushchev was assured that the missiles would be hidden from sight by palm trees (ibid.). While he insisted his desire was to protect a besieged Cuba, a psychological explanation suggests it was a gamble that he recognized the opportunity to gain a strong hand and test Kennedy's courage. (ibid: 242; Ausland, 1996: 71). Another interpretation emphasizes the contest for the leadership of the Socialist-bloc with regard to the Sino-Soviet split (Hunt, 1996: 243). A strategic analysis implies that Khrushchev intended to close the missile gap that favoured the US by shifting Soviet shorter-range missiles to Cuba with first-strike potential (ibid.). By investing all this military aid in Cuba, he was certainly putting Soviet credibility at risk.

After a US surveillance flight had taken photos of the missile installations, the NSC Executive Committee established to deal with Cuba found itself in a major crisis (Ausland, 1996: 70). The missiles only 90 miles off the US meant a shift in hemispheric stability, potentially changing the balance of power with a formidable first-strike capability in favour of the USSR, undermining US strength in its own region and putting its credibility at stake. Kennedy could not afford to show weakness in view of his previous Cuban setback at the Bay of Pigs and what was seen as a violation of the Monroe Doctrine by Fidel Castro (Time Magazine, 1962). Furthermore, the situation in Cuba put pressure on the US presence in West Berlin (Ausland, 1996: 70). On 22 October, Kennedy's dramatic television speech to the nation announced a quarantine around Cuba to prevent further military deliveries (Leffler, 2007: 151). "I have directed the armed forces to prepare for any eventualities" he warned (Nationalarchives.gov.uk). Indeed, 140,000 troops were placed in Florida and America's intercontinental and submarine-based ballistic missiles were prepared (Leffler, 2007: 152; Hunt, 1996: 239). One may argue that Kennedy deepened the crisis by drawing the line at Cuba. On the 23rd and the 24th Khrushchev condemned the quarantine as a violation of international law that "pushes mankind toward the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war" (Sampson, 1996: 170). The world was at stake (The Observer, 1962).

On the 24th, some Soviet ships heading to Cuba turned around (Hunt, 1996: 239). "We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked", Secretary of State Dean Rusk is supposed to have commented (Divine, 1988: 61). By the next day, Khrushchev suggested to trade his missiles in Cuba for the American missiles in Turkey (Leffler,

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2007: 153f.). His letter of the 26th, however, proposed that Soviet ships would carry no armaments if the US declared it would not invade Cuba but on the 27th, Khrushchev reiterated his initial deal concerning the removal of the missiles in Turkey (ibid.). An American U-2 flight was shot down on the same day and an Alaska-based U-2 flight wandered into Soviet territory, increasing the tensions (Hunt, 1996: 240). According to Defense Secretary McNamara, this meant “war with the Soviet Union” (Chang, Kornbluh, 1998: 376) and the military plan was “basically invasion” (Leffler, 2007: 155). The Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared for all-out nuclear war (ibid.). Kennedy was against any military action, though he saw the missiles as intolerable and thus decided to embrace the offer of the no-invasion pledge (Hunt, 1996: 240). The next day, Kennedy’s proposed settlement based on Khrushchev’s first letter was accepted by the Soviet leader to the great annoyance of Castro, who had not been consulted by his ally (ibid: 241). Again, the crisis was complicated by Castro’s resistance and Kennedy’s insistence that the IL-28 bombers also be removed (ibid: 242). A concluding resolution was only made on 19-20 November when Castro finally gave in, Khrushchev confirmed he would remove the bombers within 30 days and Kennedy lifted the blockade (ibid.).

In conclusion, the Cuban missile crisis constituted the brink of a nuclear fallout. A US invasion of Cuba would have meant a direct US-USSR armed conflict most probably also bringing about war over West Berlin, thus involving European countries and triggering a Third World War of unimaginable extent: The two superpowers’ weapons were capable of virtually ending all life on earth (Gaddis, 1987: 216). Both Kennedy and Khrushchev were unwilling to show weakness by blinking first but likewise, neither wanted to take the step towards a full-blown nuclear confrontation. Several of Kennedy’s advisors advocated an invasion or airstrikes, yet he chose a middle way of quarantine (Hunt, 1996: 245). Things could have happened differently but fortunately, they did not. The whole world was at stake and it might just have been “plain dumb luck” that saved it (Acheson, 1969: 76).

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*Written by: Nicola-Ann Hardwick
Written at: Royal Holloway, University of London
Written for: Dr Evelyn Goh
Date written: December 2010*

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