

The Brink of War: Misconceptions and False Information during the Cuban Missile
Crisis

Graham Baughn

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Dr. Uldricks

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the misconceptions by leaders of the U.S., Cuba, and the Soviet Union, a look at how the President's choice to inform the American public of the missiles placed in Cuba led to increased fear of attack within the country and whether this was necessary, and a theoretical view of how the President could have used the Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy more effectively to possibly end the conflict sooner. The thesis of this paper has multiple parts. First, an overreaction by President Kennedy and his staff, along with the main misconception by the Soviet Union and Cuba of an impending invasion by the U.S. led to an escalation of the conflict when the Soviet Union placed offensive missiles on Cuban soil. Second, President Kennedy's decision to notify the American public caused a fear in the American public that was unnecessary. Third, President Kennedy could have presented the Jupiter missiles in a more forceful manner, possibly with a threat of attack had the Soviet Union threatened attack, to end the missile crisis sooner.

The Cold War was a nuclear disaster waiting to happen, but was averted because of the actions of President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev, neither of whom wanted a nuclear war. However, President Kennedy and his staff may have overreacted to the actions of Premier Khrushchev, which could have escalated the conflict more than was necessary. The missiles in Cuba were offensive missiles, but were placed in more of a defensive nature, just in case the U.S. planned to attack Cuba. President Kennedy misconstrued these actions as the Soviet Union preparing to attack the U.S. This misconception of the intent of the Soviet Union caused the President and his advisors strongly to consider an offensive attack on Cuba which would have inevitably lead to nuclear war. The Soviet Union and Cuba had their misconceptions, too. Khrushchev believed that the Soviet Union would be able to move nuclear missiles into Cuba without any U.S. intervention, despite repeated warnings otherwise. This, along with the widespread belief by both the Soviet Union and Cuba that a U.S. invasion was inevitable, can be understood as the cause for the placement of missiles in Cuba.

It is difficult to say who is to blame for the misconceptions that caused an escalation of the conflict. While the intelligence can be partly to blame, the interpretation of this intelligence can also be blamed, which will be discussed later. Along with this, the information that was given to the American public seemed to cause more of a stir with than was really necessary. Khrushchev knew that a nuclear war against the U.S. would be devastating for the Soviet Union and wanted, by any means, to avoid one.¹ Finally, knowing now what we do about the crisis, the President probably could have used the Jupiter missiles in Turkey differently in order to end the crisis sooner

¹ Aleksander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy 1958-1964* (New York; W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 241.

and with less of a threat of war than there was. Kennedy could have presented the Jupiter missiles as more of an offensive threat to the Soviet Union. It was apparent that the Soviet Union was nervous about these missiles, despite them being quite useless. If Kennedy would have threatened the Soviet Union with the Jupiter missiles, one can believe that the threat of immediate attack from Turkey would have caused the Soviet Union to remove the missiles from Cuba earlier in the conflict.

The events of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which lasted from October 16, 1962 to October 28, 1962, are some of the most written about and researched events in United States history. To discuss the background of this situation, one must begin with the coming of power of Fidel Castro in Cuba. When Castro took power in Cuba, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union knew what to think about him. The United States was hesitant to believe that Castro did not have socialist ties and the Soviet Union was hesitant to offer help, wondering if he was truly a communist supporter. Castro's brother, Raul Castro, had been a self-considered communist since 1957, which gave Fidel communist ties that the U.S. did not like.² Because of this, foreign policy of the U.S. was to halt Castro's ascension to power, and likewise, the Soviet Union wanted to ensure Fidel's socialist beliefs. Because of these fears, the U.S. government supported the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. The U.S. did not necessarily like Batista in power in Cuba, believing that he was, "a leader offensive and corrupt enough to draw the ire of the American people but not powerful enough to stave off disorder in his own country"³ However, Batista was seen as a better fit as leader of Cuba for the U.S. than Castro, who many believed was a communist even before he announced it. After gaining leadership in

² Ibid, 7.

³ Ibid, 6.

Cuba, Castro declared his Marxist beliefs and pro-socialist stance and gained the backing and aid of the Soviet Union.⁴ Eventually, the U.S. would concoct a plan to invade and attempt to overthrow the Castro regime. This invasion, known as the Bay of Pigs invasion, proved to be an, "unmitigated disaster."⁵

A pre-strike air attack by the U.S. left nearly 50% of the Cuban air defense untouched, with many T-33 jet trainers left that would devastate the invasion by American trained Cuban exiles. After the first air strike failed, Kennedy called off the second air strike because of fear that U.S. involvement would become public knowledge.⁶ This catastrophe would prove to be a black mark on Kennedy's presidency for many years. After the Bay of Pigs, it became Kennedy's fervent plan to keep the U.S. at the forefront of the superpower race and Cuba was in the way. The Bay of Pigs and Operation Mongoose, an operation in which the U.S. government attempted again to overthrow Castro and his regime, which caused relations between the U.S. and Cuba to become tenuous.⁷ There are arguments as to the main reason behind Khrushchev placing nuclear missiles in Cuba. Some believe that Khrushchev's main reason was to offset the nuclear superiority that the U.S. had over the Soviet Union, while others maintain that Khrushchev and Castro wanted the missiles there to bolster Cuba's defensive capabilities. While both of these ideas played a role in the decision to place missiles in Cuba, the stronger case is made that Castro and Khrushchev wanted to strengthen the defense of Cuba because of the belief of an impending U.S. invasion. During the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, Andrei Gromyko states that the missiles were

⁴ Ibid, 28

⁵ Mark J. White, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (London; Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996) 35.

⁶ Ibid, 36.

⁷ Ibid, 54-56.

placed in Cuba, "to strengthen the defensive capability of Cuba. To avert the threats against it....That is all."⁸ These words by the former Foreign Minister of the U.S.S.R. must be taken as the true intentions behind the placement of the missiles in Cuba, considering there is no evidence to convince anyone otherwise. Had these missiles been placed for offensive purposes, it can be believed that the Soviet Union would have fired them as soon as they were all ready for use.

The discovery of missile sites in Cuba by an American U-2 spy plane on October 16, 1962 sparked the most intense period in U.S. history. The United States was furious that Khrushchev would place missiles in Cuba after repeated threats by the U.S. that such an action would not be tolerated. Reports of these warnings are documented as early as September of 1962, when Kennedy told the nation that the U.S. would not tolerate any threats of aggression in the Western Hemisphere by Cuba, the Soviet Union, or any other entity.⁹ President Kennedy got together his closest advisors for meetings to decide what action the U.S. would take against the Soviet Union. This group, called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), was created to come up with a line of action that would be a firm reaction to the Soviet Union's actions, without bringing the two powers to nuclear war.¹⁰ The committee deliberated at their meetings and discussed the options that the U.S. had for a reaction.

⁸ Bruce J. Allen, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, eds., *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27-28, 1989* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1992), 7.

⁹ "Statement by President Kennedy" in *The "Cuban Crisis" of 1962: Selected Documents and Chronology*, ed. David L. Larson (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), 3-4.

¹⁰ Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* 2nd edition (New York: Longman, 1999), 110.

Their options ranged from doing nothing, to an all-out invasion, to a surgical air strike, to a naval blockade that they eventually went with.¹¹ Many of the ExComm members supported some type of military action for many days. Robert Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara were two of a very few that supported the idea of a naval blockade.¹² Of the two military actions, the surgical strike was much more popular within the ExComm members than the full invasion. The main argument for a surgical air strike on Cuba was that if the U.S. were to wait, more missiles would be placed in Cuba and would become operational and the Soviet Union would move onto other areas of the world seeing the U.S. as impotent, thus making an attack on Cuba no longer a feasible option. As the members of ExComm discussed the positives and negatives of each of their options, the President realized that the final decision was ultimately his to make.

He came to the conclusion that while a naval blockade may not get the missiles removed, neither would an offensive strike, but the blockade would not give the Soviet Union sufficient reason to react with any offensive military action. The blockade was enforced on any Soviet ship thought to be carrying weaponry of any kind. Any other ships carrying any other supplies would be allowed to pass. This decision was come to in an extremely careful process that consisted of 6 days and nights of deliberations between 13 or more of the most important men in the country. The members of ExComm figured that whatever they did, the Soviet Union would retaliate on Berlin, but only in a similar fashion. By imposing a blockade on the ships carrying weapons into Cuba, the ExComm members knew that the Soviet Union could not blockade Berlin in a similar way because

¹ Ibid, 111-120.

² Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 37.

³ Ibid, 49.

the U.S. was not supplying weapons to Berlin.¹⁴ Kennedy gave his address to the nation about the situation in Cuba on October 22, 1962 announcing that a blockade would be placed on Cuba. In conclusion, the U.S. reaction to the Soviet placing nuclear missiles in Cuba was the imposition of a blockade on Cuba and a demand that the weapons already in Cuba be dismantled and removed or else the U.S. would be forced to take the next step, which Kennedy stated would be whatever action is necessary, though one can infer that this meant an offensive strike of some nature.¹⁵

Khrushchev's immediate reaction to this demand was to ignore the blockade. This was not long-lived though. Khrushchev issued the order to ignore the blockade on October 24, 1962.¹⁶ After giving this declaration, Khrushchev wanted to meet with Kennedy to negotiate a way to avoid war.¹⁷ During these negotiations, Khrushchev decided to add the missiles that America had placed in Turkey in the discussion. The original negotiation said that the missiles would be removed and Castro would promise never to accept offensive missiles and in exchange the U.S. would give a no-invasion pledge to the U.S.S.R.¹⁸ The re-negotiated deal added that the U.S. would dismantle the Jupiter missiles in Turkey in exchange for the Soviet Union dismantling and removing the missiles in Cuba. The U.S. agreed to remove the Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the removal of the missiles in Cuba, along with giving a no-invasion pledge regarding Cuba; this was on October 27, 1962. The element of the Jupiter missiles was kept out of public knowledge for diplomatic reasons which will be discussed later. Because of the consistent, firm message from the U.S. concerning the removal of missiles and threat of

¹⁴ Ibid, 118-129.

¹⁵ "Address by President Kennedy, October 22, 1962," Larson ed., 41-46.

¹⁶ Fursenko and Naftali, 255-256.

¹⁷ Ibid, 256.

¹⁸ Ibid, 265.

an attack if their demands were not met, on October 28, 1962, Premier Khrushchev made a public radio broadcast that the Soviets made the decision to remove any arms that were described as offensive.¹⁹ This public radio address brought the Cuban Missile Crisis and an extremely uneasy period in history to a close.

Many of the historical writings about the Cuban Missile Crisis have either focused on the events of the conflict, the decision-making process by Kennedy and his advisors after the missiles were discovered in Cuba, or on key characters of the event. Few experts focus on the misconceptions by the different sides of the conflict, though they may mention them, and as a result this factor goes rather unnoticed in the analysis of this important event in history. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali make many references to the lapses in intelligence throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis in their book *One Hell of a Gamble*, but they do not directly discuss the ramifications of these lapses. Their book is written in more of a narrative of the events instead of an analysis of what occurred so while they do mention the faulty intelligence on the Soviet and U.S. sides of the conflict, there is no analysis of how these misconceptions directly relate to the events of the crisis. Other books written on the events of October 1962 have tended to focus on the decision-making process behind the ExComm meetings and the President's choice of a reaction to the Soviet's placement of missiles in Cuba. These books tend to completely ignore the misconceptions that each side of the conflict had. They focus on the thought processes of the important decision makers during the events of the crisis. By highlighting the effect that the misconceptions had on the decisions made by each side, some new insights can be brought into these events that have not been seen much before. The Jupiter missiles also could have played a much larger role in this conflict than they

¹⁹ Ibid, 125-129.

really did. While the final outcome of the removal of the missiles probably would not have been much different, the idea of using them more forcefully could have sped up the process of getting the missiles in Cuba removed. As it happened, the Jupiter missiles became more of an afterthought in the negotiation process, not being a large bargaining position that they could have been. Very few have looked into the impact that the Jupiter missiles could have carried in this conflict if presented in a different way by the U.S. While the missile crisis luckily ended peacefully, the fact that the world came so close to a war that could have been avoided causes one to examine the event further to see the mistakes in perception that brought the world so close to nuclear holocaust.

Was there a way that this crisis could have been less tense, or maybe even avoided? On September 11, 1962, Robert Kennedy, who served as the Attorney General under his brother's administration, was given a personal message from Nikita Khrushchev to President Kennedy that the Soviets would not place offensive missiles in Cuba.²⁰ However, after the U-2 flight over Cuba, the President and his advisors realized that Khrushchev had been lying to them the entire time. Not only had Khrushchev and the Soviet Union deceived the U.S., they also acted in a way that was in direct opposition to repeated U.S. warnings that such an act would not be tolerated. This is where the U.S.'s first misconception of the Soviet intentions occurred. Despite repeated reports of nuclear missiles in Cuba by agents within Cuba, most of which were false but some came out to be true, members in lower levels of the U.S. government felt no need to pass these accusations to anyone high up in the government.²¹ The U.S. took Khrushchev at his word that there would be no offensive missiles placed on Cuban soil. While the U.S. was

²⁰ Kennedy, 27.

²¹ Ibid, 28. Kennedy does not specify what government entity reviewed these accounts and decided not to pass them up to higher levels.

lucky and the U-2 flight was able to find these missiles before they became operational, seemingly to throw away these accusations so casually could have been a catastrophic mistake.

It was known for a few months that the Soviet Union had been sending arms to Cuba before the missiles were found; documents from as early as April of 1961 stated that the Soviet Union had sent 30,000 tons of arms to Cuba, nearly nineteen months before the U-2 flight.²² The fact that the U.S. government did not do much to stop this is surprising, considering how adamant the U.S. was about stopping the spread of Communism outside of Eastern Europe. One would think that any evidence of support from the Soviet Union toward any country in the Western Hemisphere would bring about some reaction, whether that reaction was an embargo of goods, invasion, or quarantine, from the U.S. But since they did nothing to stop the Soviet deployment of arms to Cuba, the Soviet Union was able to send nuclear missiles to Cuba for months without the U.S. knowing. A document from September 19, 1962 states that the U.S.S.R. could gain a significant military advantage over the U.S. if they were to place offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba.²³ Despite this warning, the Kennedy administration continued to neglect the reports that missiles were being placed in Cuba.

After the U-2 flight that discovered the nuclear missile sites, the President and his staff decided what their reaction would be, but they also discussed the intentions behind the decision by the Soviet Union to place missiles in Cuba, despite repeated warnings by the U.S. not to. The President and his advisors believed that the main reason behind the Soviet Union placing missiles in Cuba was to gain an advantage in the Berlin situation.

²² "Statement by Representative Charles A. Halleck," Jarson, ed., 5-6.

²³ Central Intelligence Agency, *The Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Documents* (New York: Brassey's (US), 1994), 92-93.

There were others who believed that the Soviets were readying themselves for an attack on the U.S., but this belief was not held very widely by the President's staff.²⁴ The reaction of many of President Kennedy's advisors was a tactical strike of the weapon sites in Cuba.²⁵ This reaction came out of two beliefs that the U.S. leaders had about why the Soviet Union would place missile with nuclear capabilities in Cuba. One was that they wanted to gain some sort of militaristic advantage by having close range nuclear strike abilities. The more interesting belief dealt with the Berlin situation. After World War II, the European Advisory Committee split up Berlin into three militarized zones, occupied by Great Britain, the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Great Britain controlled the northwestern zone of Greater Berlin, the U.S. controlled the southern zone of Greater Berlin and the Soviet Union controlled northeastern zone of Great Berlin.²⁶ Khrushchev had promised the Soviet people that he would remove the western influence from Berlin. Some U.S. leaders believed that Khrushchev may have put the missiles in Cuba in order to gain power with what was going on in Berlin.

This being the case, it was logical for the U.S. government to believe that Khrushchev was attempting to gain an advantage in the Berlin situation, but it is now known that he was only trying to provide protection to Cuba from another invasion by the U.S. and he wanted to narrow the lead that the U.S. had in the development and deployment of strategic missiles.²⁷ It was well known throughout the world that after World War II and before October of 1962, the U.S. had a significant advantage in the

²⁴ White, 50.

"Kennedy, 31.

²⁶"Protocol on Zones of Occupation of Germany and Administration of the 'Greater Berlin' Area," in *The Cold War: A Book of Documents*, ed. H.L. Trefousse (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 14-15.

²⁷"Cold War: Cuban Missile Crisis," *Revelations from Russian Archives*, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/colc.html>.

number of nuclear missiles over the Soviets; in 1962 the U.S. had 27,297 warheads to the U.S.S.R/s 3,332, or just over 8 times as many.²⁸ Combine this with the fact that the U.S. had much better means of delivery of these missiles and the advantage was strongly on the side of the U.S. In this conflict, as in most, perception plays a large role in how opposing countries will react. It was widely believed that the U.S. had superior numbers than anyone else but after the launching of Sputnik, the first satellite launched by humans in the world, in 1957 by the Soviets the U.S. did not know how far the Soviets' research and development had advanced.²⁹ For a period of about 4 years, from 1957 to 1961, it was unknown as to the true nuclear capabilities of the Soviet Union by anyone in the U.S. government, but that would soon change. In the summer and fall of 1961, U.S. intelligence was able to figure out just how much of an advantage they still had over the Soviet Union in the arms race.³⁰ The Soviet Union would find out that the U.S. knew about their advantage in November of 1961, and for the Soviets, this news was devastating.³¹

For the Soviet Union, this information meant that their first-strike capability was weakened, though still capable, but their second-strike ability was completely lost. The U.S. had complete mapping of the missile sites around the Soviet Union, which made them easy targets for attacks. It is now easier to see the advantage of placing nuclear missiles closer to the U.S. for the Soviet Union. Although the U.S. still had vastly superior first and second strike capabilities, the fact that missiles with nuclear capabilities could be fired on any major city in the U.S. was a fear that America had never had to live with. Khrushchev was successful in his desire to place this fear in the

²⁸ "Archive of Nuclear Data," National Resource Defense Council, <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datainx.asp>.

²⁹ "Sputnik," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sputnik>

³⁰ Robert Divine, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Markus Weiner Publishing, 1988), 114.

minds of Americans and by strengthening the Soviet Union's first strike capabilities by placing nuclear missiles 90 miles from U.S. soil he was able to narrow the missile gap between the superpowers. However, he had no desire to provoke a war with the U.S. by inserting the missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev said himself, to the members of his Presidium the day of Kennedy's address to the nation, "The thing is we were not going to unleash war. We just wanted to intimidate them, to deter the anti-Cuban forces."

The Bay of Pigs invasion played a large role in the missile crisis. After Fidel Castro's ascent to power in Cuba, President Kennedy made it his goal to get rid of him and his regime, and the Bay of Pigs was his first military attempt to do so. The U.S. government trained former Cuban nationals and used them for the attack. Along with an air strike, the attack force would land at the Bay of Pigs and surprise the Cuban national army. The initial air strike eliminated less than 60% of the Castro's air force. Kennedy called off the second air strike because questions about earlier U.S. bombings had caused U.S. ambassador Adlai Stevenson to lie at a debate at a United Nations meeting about the U.S.'s involvement in those bombings. President Kennedy did not want the U.S.'s international reputation to deteriorate.³³ But by cancelling the second air strike the invasion would fail miserably, and attention would be brought to the Soviet Union about possible future U.S. invasions of Cuba. Word of the invasion reached Khrushchev quickly and he issued a message to President Kennedy stating that the U.S.S.R. would, "extend to the Cuban people and its Government all the necessary aid for the repulse of the armed attack on Cuba."³⁴ Kennedy would respond with a denial of U.S. involvement

³² Fursenko and Naftali, 241.

³³ Ibid, 93.

³⁴ "Exchange of Messages Between Premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy Concerning the Invasion at the Bay of Pigs," ed. Trefousse, 253.

in the invasion.³⁵ After the Bay of Pigs invasion Castro and Khrushchev agreed that nuclear weaponry was needed to protect Cuban soil from another invasion, which both believed was inevitable. The Bay of Pigs and Kennedy's infatuation with ridding Cuba of Castro may have caused the Cuban Missile Crisis to occur. Cuba was a communist state, and the U.S. had vowed to protect the Western Hemisphere from any and all outside threats against its safety with the creation of the Monroe Doctrine, but this misguided obsession with Castro by President Kennedy and the U.S. government nearly sent the world into nuclear devastation. The threat caused by a Soviet influenced Cuba was serious. The nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union would become much more real to Americans with a communist influence in the Western Hemisphere. This threat caused much heartache within the American government, considering the Monroe Doctrine held the U.S. responsible for getting rid of any threat of security in the Western Hemisphere.

This is where the Soviet and Cuban misguided belief of an ensuing American invasion escalated the conflict to nuclear heights. The two leaders of these countries believed whole-heartedly that the Americans would invade Cuba again after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Castro feared that his troops would be beaten by a superior American military, and felt that Cuba needed some extra support. So Castro and Khrushchev agreed to send nuclear missiles and thousands of troops from the Soviet Union to Cuba. At the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis in January of 1989, Robert McNamara, who was Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy administration, took partial blame on behalf of the U.S. for this misconception by the Soviet Union and Cuba. He stated, "... it *was* a misperception on the part of the Cubans

Ibid, 254-255.

and Soviets that the U.S. intended to invade Cuba. I can state unequivocally that we had *absolutely no intention* of invading Cuba." ' McNamara went on to state that there were indeed contingency plans for an invasion of Cuba, but he reiterated that there was no intention by the U.S. government to invade Cuba. This misperception, as McNamara described it, led the Soviet and Cuban leaders to agree on sending nuclear missiles to Cuba from the Soviet Union. This is where a second misconception by the Soviet Union comes into play. Khrushchev believed that the Soviet Union would be able to transfer nuclear missiles secretly and without the interference of the U.S. In July of 1962, Soviet ships begin moving out of the Black Sea carrying nuclear missiles on board, heading for Cuba, "with false declarations of their destinations and reporting tonnages well below their capacities."³⁷ The Soviet Union began their deceit of the U.S. at this time, as they began sending offensive nuclear missiles to the island of Cuba, despite their statements otherwise, and despite President Kennedy's strong words of U.S. repercussions if the Soviet Union did so.

Misperceptions about the missiles in Cuba by the U.S. continued to ignite the flames of war as October progressed. When news of the missiles sites being constructed in Cuba reached Kennedy, he was informed of what types of missiles were being brought in. Kennedy's advisors informed him of the range capabilities of the missiles by the length of them. Though the pictures were unclear, Sidney Graybeal, a CIA expert, informed Kennedy of the types of missiles the U.S. were dealing with, "If the nose of the cone is not on that missile and it measures 67 feet—the nose cone would be 4 to 5 feet longer, sir—and with this extra length we could have a missile that'd have a range of

³⁶ Allyn, Blight, and Welch, 9.

³⁷ Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 352.

1,100 miles, sir."³⁸ The missiles were believed to be between 68 feet and 73 feet long. The 68 feet long missiles would have had a range of 630-700 miles and the missiles that were 73 feet long would have a range upwards of 1,100 miles.³⁹ When the President and his advisors were shown the U-2 photos that found the missile sites, they were also informed that the sites were being aimed toward certain U.S. cities. It is not known what cities were specifically being targeted, but with 16-32 missiles with a range of 1,100 miles it is safe to assume that Washington, D.C., New York, and other large cities, along with important military bases, would have been prime candidates for targeting.⁴⁰ This news sparked an intense debate between the members of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, which included many of the President's top advisors,⁴¹ over what course of action to take. Ultimately a naval blockade won out over a military invasion that would have undoubtedly brought a counterattack by the Soviet Union of launching whatever nuclear missiles and sending all of the troops they had active and stationed in Cuba, on the U.S. The U.S. government's first reaction to the missiles in Cuba was that they were to be used for an offensive strike on U.S. soil but after constant communication between Kennedy and Khrushchev throughout the days from October 16 through October 28 both assured each other that neither wanted to spark a nuclear war and that every necessary step would be taken to avert disaster.

The U.S. also misconceived Fidel Castro's part in the missiles being placed in Cuba. U.S. leaders seemed convinced that Castro did not want these missiles in Cuba and

³⁸ Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 49.

³⁹ Ibid, 49.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, 35. It did not say what cities the missiles were pointed at. One can infer that because of the relative direction of the sites being constructed, those interpreting the photos knew which cities were being aimed at.

⁴¹ For a list of members; Kennedy, 30.

that Castro needed to see that, "Cuba is being victimized... and that the Soviets are preparing Cuba for destruction, or betrayal."⁴² The Assistant Secretary of State Edward Martin reiterated this point to the President saying, "the actions by the Soviets have threatened him with attack by the United States, and therefore the overthrow of his regime—used his territory to put him in this jeopardy."⁴³ These beliefs turned out to be wrong, as it is known that Castro himself agreed to, and possibly even asked for, the missiles to be placed in Cuba.⁴⁴ What the American government did not know was that, although this was their first invasion of Cuba, it was the fourth invasion scare in less than a year for Cuba.⁴⁵ After previous invasion scares, Cuba was well prepared for an invasion, even though they had not yet received all of the shipments that they were expecting to get. Castro and Khrushchev had been anticipating attacks from the U.S. months before the Bay of Pigs invasion, and expected another attack from the U.S. after the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion, so placing the missiles on Cuban soil did not introduce the threat of an attack, considering they already figured one was coming.

As the President and his staff discussed and decided what to do in reaction to missiles in Cuba, they agreed that it would be best to let the American public know about the situation in Cuba. When talking with Kennedy about the missiles in Cuba, Secretary of State Dean Rusk mentioned that Khrushchev, "...knows that we don't really live under fear of his nuclear weapons..."⁴⁶ This statement brings up an interesting idea of whether it was better for the American public to know or not. The President made the decision to broadcast the news of the missiles in Cuba to the nation on the night of October 22, 1962,

⁴² May and Zelikow, 55.

⁴³ Ibid, 83.

⁴⁴ Fursenko and Naftali, 139.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 99.

⁴⁶ May and Zelikow, eds., 60.

and as he addressed the country to notify them of the aggressive step that the Soviet Union had taken, millions of Americans watched on in sure terror of what might become of this development. However, this news was delivered 6 days after the government found the missiles in the first place. The country was worried about the nuclear situation between the Soviet Union and the U.S. before, but after hearing that nuclear missiles were now less than 90 miles away from American soil even more fear was put into American hearts nationwide. The question is, was it necessary for the President to let the American people know about the missiles in Cuba? Was it necessary for the safety of the American people?

The U.S. government has always been picky about what the American public needs to know about world conflicts. There is no need to set off a panic if it is unnecessary. After World War II and the fall of Nazi Germany, the city of Berlin was separated into three different zones, each controlled by an allied force. Berlin was no longer a part of what was then known as East Germany, "but a separate territory under the control of the allied powers."⁴⁷ This is an excerpt from President Kennedy's address to the nation on July 25, 1961. The address discussed the threat that the Soviet Union was making toward removing all Western influences out of Berlin and having it completely controlled by the Soviet Union. The situation with Berlin was different than that with Cuba, considering Berlin is across the Atlantic Ocean and Cuba is merely 90 miles away, but similar too in many ways. Once again the Soviet Union was presenting a threat to the U.S., and once again, Kennedy decided to inform the nation of what was occurring. In his address to the nation about the missiles in Cuba on October 22, 1962, the President was truthful about the situation at hand. While the Kennedy administration

⁴⁷

"Report to the Nation on the Berlin Crisis by President Kennedy," ed. Trefousse, 258.

had tried to keep the conflict secret, leaks were starting to reach the newspapers, where reports of mobilizations of troops and ships in Cuba were occurring.⁴⁸ In his address, the President stated that his administration had waited on informing the citizens of the U.S. on these events until after they made a decision on what their reaction would be.⁴⁹ The argument here is not whether or not Kennedy should have told the nation about the missiles in Cuba, but more about his timing and delivery of the message. The U.S. was much closer to war when Kennedy and his staff were strongly considering a surgical strike and invasion of Cuba than after the decision to blockade the island nation. Once the decision of the blockade was made Khrushchev had to make the next move, yet Kennedy placed an unnecessary fear of war in the American people by stating that missiles in Cuba, "add to an already clear and present danger." The factors that constituted Kennedy's choice to present his message to the nation are numerous, but a couple can be highlighted. One major factor in Kennedy's decision to inform the American public of the missiles in Cuba was pressure from the Republican Party on Kennedy's stance Communism and the situation in Cuba.

Politics often play a large role in diplomatic affairs. Kennedy won the election of 1960 by a narrow margin, by .2% in the popular vote, and in an earlier television debate between Kennedy and Republican nominee Richard Nixon, Nixon had seemingly "won" the debate even though the actual "win" was given to Kennedy.⁵¹ Despite this victory, when Kennedy took office, he received harsh criticism about his policy on Communism, even though he based his campaign in 1960 on the idea that Republicans had been too

⁴⁸ May and Zelikow, 204.

⁴⁹ "President Kennedy's Radio-Television Address," ed. Trefousse, 276.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 278.

⁵¹ "United States presidential election, 1960," Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1960.

soft on Cuba, allowing it to become a Communist satellite.⁵² Republicans saw him as weak and gave Communism too much room for growth in Eastern Europe and the third-world. Republicans alleged Kennedy of ignoring the "offensive" missiles that were being placed in Cuba before the U-2 photos on October 16. Kennedy was seen by many in the political sphere in the U.S. as too inexperienced and soft on Communism in his first year of Presidency. Many believe his inexperience was shown with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion.⁵⁴ Kennedy could not follow through with a planned attack because he was fearful of it becoming known that the U.S. had something to do with it. This worried many people when the Soviets decided to place nuclear missiles in Cuba. Many people wondered whether Kennedy would let politics make his decisions for him, or whether he would make the decisions needed to keep American out of a nuclear war. Transcripts of the secret Kennedy tapes and the meetings of the ExComm members show little discussion of the political impact of the decision of what to do about the missiles in Cuba, however it is believed that they did have some sort of impact.

The idea that Kennedy needed the missile crisis to show his strength on Communism and the situation in Cuba has been put out by some historians, but to believe that the President would bring the country so close to nuclear war to disprove his opposing party is a difficult thing to do. One can believe though that the President's address to the nation on the 22nd of October was a political move. One that would rally the American people around the Democratic Party and show that his administration was indeed strong on Communism. President Kennedy said that American citizens had already adjusted to living with the threat of attack by missiles from Soviet soil, but by

⁵² Divine, 290

⁵³ Ibid, 283.

⁵⁴ Allison and Zelikow, 329.

placing missiles less than 90 miles away, the Soviet Union had increased the fear that Americans now have to live under.⁵⁵ Whether the President's address was made because of the misconception by the American government that these missiles were placed for a possible offensive attack, or because the President and his staff wanted the American people to back any action that the U.S. would make towards Cuba and the Soviet Union by placing added fear into their lives, which is more than likely the reasoning, the President's statement caused an unnecessary fright in the American people. Even after the Kennedy administration realized that Khrushchev did not want nuclear war, and it was evident that both he and the President did not want this, the fear of the American people was not subsided until the public radio address on October 28, 1962 that the Soviet Union would dismantle the missiles in Cuba and return them and the nuclear warheads to the U.S.S.R.⁵⁶

Another factor that played a role in how the President delivered his speech is the fact that the Soviet Union would find out what Kennedy said in his speech. It can be argued that if the President downplayed the threat of war to the American people, the U.S. may have lost its edge that it had over the Soviet Union. It is widely believed that the two superpowers were able to avert war because of the steadfastness that the U.S. exhibited in its continued threat of military action if the missiles in Cuba were not removed, and once the blockade was imposed, the threat of attack if a Soviet ship were to try to break the blockade. The Soviets received the transcript of Kennedy's address to the nation, so had the President deemphasized the threat of war to the nation then America's stance of power and leverage in the negotiations might have been lost. If

⁵⁵ Ibid, 278.

⁵⁶ Fursenko and Naftali, 287.

Kennedy told the American people that they should not fear any type of attack from either side, the plausibility of the threat of an American attack on the missile sites in Cuba or on any Soviet vessels that attempt to break the blockade would have subsided. Would it have been better for the American people if they had not known at all about the missiles in Cuba? As stated earlier, American citizens had grown accustomed to living under the threat of a missile attack from Russia. Why increase the fear and angst by informing them of the missiles that were now in Cuba? The President and his staff always try to do what they believe is best for the country, and this time they believed that telling the American people what was really going on was best. Luckily, this conflict was settled rather quickly, so the American people only had to live with this news for less than a week.

American citizens may have never had to live life knowing that nuclear missiles were not too far away, but the Soviets had grown accustomed to it. The United States had deployed Jupiter missiles to Turkey in 1957, during the Eisenhower administration. These missiles were sent to avert the Soviet Union from invading the countries and to give the U.S. allies some firepower in case it was needed. Kennedy never took advantage of these missiles. The Jupiter missiles were liquid filled intermediate-range ballistics missiles that took very long to fire, and were quite inaccurate. Along with this, the shell of the missile was so thin that a sniper rifle could pierce it and render the missile useless. A once-secret Congressional report stated that the U.S.S.R. could actually take these missile sites out before the missiles would be ready to fire. This meant that the Jupiter missile sites would actually draw first-strike attacks toward them in order to take away

their capabilities.⁵⁷ They could be fired on Russian soil faster than any inter-continental ballistic missiles from the U.S. The missiles were placed in Turkey in 1959, during the Eisenhower administrations, but were ordered to be phased out slowly by President Kennedy before the crisis of October 1962. The plan was to replace the Jupiter missiles with Polaris submarines.⁵⁸ Polaris submarines have a capacity of 16 nuclear missiles, maneuverability, and would give Turkey more protection than the Jupiter missiles could. But Turkey refused to the removal of the Jupiter missiles. On two separate occasions, the Turkish government denied the State Department's request to remove the missiles and replace them with the Polaris submarines.⁵⁹ The President was shocked and dismayed when he found out that the missiles had not been removed.⁶⁰ Could the President have used the Jupiter missiles in Turkey in more of an offensive manner? The President knew that those missiles were not operational, but the Soviets did not. The Soviets were worried about the missiles' proximity to their country and Kennedy could have used this to his advantage. By presenting the Jupiter missiles as a trump card over the missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev may have reconsidered the effectiveness of the missiles in Cuba and decided to remove them earlier.

Utilizing the Jupiter missiles in this way would have been a bluff by the U.S., but may have been enough of a scare to get the Soviet Union to remove the missiles from Cuba with less at stake for the U.S. Instead, the President allowed Premier Khrushchev to take the initiative by demanding the missiles in Turkey be removed in exchange for the

⁵⁷ Barton J. Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?," *Political Science Quarterly* 95 (1980): 97-125. www.istor.org/ (accessed September 25, 2006).

⁵⁸ Kennedy, 94

⁵⁹ Kennedy, 94-95.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 95.

missiles in Cuba to be removed.⁶¹ The President was angry with this offer; he did not want to remove the missiles from Turkey under threat from the Soviet Union. This is why he should have presented the Jupiters in a more aggressive, offensive manner to the Soviet Union. It is apparent that the Soviet Union was worried about these missiles because they were asking for their removal in exchange for the removal of the missiles in Cuba. By presenting the missiles as a strong offensive weapon, the President could have created a sense of inferiority in the Soviet Union, by letting them know that if they tried an attack of any kind, those missiles would be touching down on Soviet soil in a very short time. While this would not be true, Khrushchev would still have to worry about that fact, because he did not know the capabilities of the Jupiter missiles. He did not know that they were out of date and not operational. The Jupiter missiles were important to Khrushchev; they symbolized America's threat to the Soviet Union inside Europe. Khrushchev wanted the missiles out of Turkey very badly. The President played his hand too conservatively. Had he known the degree to which the Jupiter missiles presented a danger to the Soviet Union, Kennedy could have used them better in the negotiations with Khrushchev. Instead, Khrushchev brought up the idea first and Kennedy was forced to relegate the leverage on that subject to Khrushchev.

Either way one looks at it, the missiles in Turkey were removed in exchange for the missiles in Cuba, though for domestic reasons, this agreement was kept private.⁶³ Kennedy did not want to act too early the Jupiter missiles. It was known throughout the White House that the Jupiters would eventually need to be traded for the missiles in

⁶¹ Chang and Kornbluh, eds. 197-199.

⁶² Kennedy, 95.

⁶³ Kennedy 109. Not directly stated, but implied that the missiles would be removed after the crisis was over, which implies secrecy in their removal.

Cuba, but by offering them too early the President was worried that the action would be seen as the U.S. conceding the missiles instead of using them to bargain.⁶⁴ The perception of the U.S. toward the rest of the world was important to Kennedy, as was his how the country perceived him. He wanted to show that he was confident and strong regarding Communism, Castro and Cuba. Add to the fact that the Turkish government would not agree to a public removal of the Jupiter missiles, the deal had to be kept secret. Turkey was extremely hesitant to allow for the gradual removal and replacement of the missiles because they feared the lack of protection would leave them open for invasion.⁶⁵ However, without the agreement by the U.S. to exchange the removal of the Jupiter missiles for the removal of the missiles in Cuba, the conflict would have continued and the crisis may have escalated to nuclear levels again.

When re-examining historical events, hindsight is usually 20/20. It is easy to see the mistakes made, the bad judgments, miscalculations and misconceptions on both sides when you have all of the knowledge in front of you. President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev did not have the luxury of knowing each other's intentions behind their actions. They managed to avert the world from a nuclear holocaust by inferring what the other was thinking. President Kennedy has been criticized both positively and negatively for his role and responsibility during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and maybe he is due both types of criticism, but it is hard to ignore the fact that when nearly all of his advisors and the rest of the U.S. government were calling for him to fight back and fire on Cuba, the President did not blink and he was able to play a major role in keeping the world from nuclear holocaust. For Premier Khrushchev, positive criticism has not come to a great

⁶⁴ Divine, 252.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 94.

extent. His colleagues in the Soviet government refused to believe that an American non-invasion promise towards Cuba was worth the money, heartache, and despair he put them through.⁶⁶ Khrushchev had taken an ultimate gamble in order to spread the wealth of Communism throughout the world. He nearly sent the world into a third world war, one that would have had the gravest consequences. However, he retracted from his original sturdiness and fell back, playing his part to save mankind from a disaster that is difficult for many, outside of science fiction writers, to fathom. When President Kennedy was assassinated, the Soviet Union and Cuba held their breath. While the relations between the three were on thin ice, they had all been able to make it work. But with the possibility of a new President with different ideals and without the strain that this event had put on both Castro and Khrushchev, along with President Kennedy, those relationships could make a turn for the worse. Lynden B. Johnson, the successor to President Kennedy, did not strain these relationships anymore than they already were. The non-invasion pledge was not broken, and although Castro's presence in Cuba was still worrisome, which it still is to this day, American-Soviet relations continued down a path of peace.

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