The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Examination of the Effort to Avert Catastrophe

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"Going to war is not necessarily a rational process" – Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Delving into the story of the events making up the Cuban Missile crisis it became clear this was a story of people who, while they had antagonized one another into a precarious situation, were nonetheless striving towards the same end: to avoid mutually assured destruction.

On the American side, since the outset of the Cuban revolution there had been efforts to undermine and ultimately overthrow Castro's government. From the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion through the ongoing efforts of Operation Mongoose--one of which we delve into in this thesis as it unfolds during the crisis--this was a priority, especially for the Kennedy administration, which showed no signs of abating. This pervasive effort to undermine the Cuban government was cited by Premier Khrushchev as representing a future existential threat and rationale for how the United States may treat the Soviet Union (USSR) and was part of the reasoning behind the decision to secretly move missiles to the island. Additionally, the presence of American missiles in Turkey became a key point of contestation during the crisis and ultimately a sticking point in the negotiations.

On the Soviet side, it was the decision to covertly establish offensive missile capabilities on the island of Cuba and the fact that the Americans subsequently became aware of the effort prior to its completion that truly sparked the series of events that we know today as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In reading the histories of the events several themes became clear. Reading the communications between all parties involved, many come across as forceful, definitively prescriptive, and accusatory. President John Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev were universally representing situations that behind the scenes were messy and had competing voices. Nobody would know listening to John Kennedy's dramatic, eighteen-minute public address on October 22nd 1962 announcing the quarantine of Cuba that the first and loudest calls from his Executive Committee were to respond with an air strike. This theme of competing voices becomes clearer on the Soviet side when literally conflicting messages were issued during the negotiations, throwing the American response for a loop.

There are also factual realities that only became apparent with time. These realities, in turn, add different texture to the Cuban missile crisis and the way it is narrated and interpreted throughout the years. The best example here is that there is a certain American mythology assigned to the initial supposed interaction between Soviet vessels and the American blockade during the height of the crisis. Robert Kennedy recalls the intensity of the moment in his memoir and cites it as a pivotal moment, however Michael Dobbs explains that this interpretation of events was in fact a fiction and the ships had either stopped or turned around hours prior to the presumed interaction. There are examples of naivete with a more dangerous tinge as well, such as the Americans having estimates of Soviet troop presence and capabilities that were far from accurate and that could easily have influenced events in a different, more tragic direction.

As the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolded in October of 1962, the United States enjoyed a conventional militaristic advantage in the Caribbean, a global nuclear superiority overall. These

realities, moreover, were known to all parties involved. The two principal decision makers, US president John F. Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev were rational actors not interested in launching a mutually suicidal war. However, the path to potential conflict was riddled with traps and misunderstandings that lay outside the realm of intent or calculation. The individuals grasped and appreciated this concept in the moment and it weighed heavily upon them. Both Kennedy with his advisors in ExComm and Khrushchev with his team in the Kremlin had to vie with forces lobbying for the most extreme path forward. Through the lens of history we are able to gain a more holistic view of how justified they were in this concern.

US Awareness of the Missiles and the Question of What to Do

On October 16th, 1962, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) presented information to the United States government that contained photographic evidence of a missile base being constructed in San Cristobal, Cuba. This simultaneously came as a surprise to American leadership and also begged the question of what the U.S. response should be to this revelation. There were several reasons why this development came as a surprise to the Americans. Moreover, the unexpected nature of this information was a complicating factor in determining the next course of action. If the U.S. was ignorant of efforts to put missiles in Cuba, what else could they be missing?

The first reason news of the missiles came as a surprise was by design. Khrushchev and Fidel Castro had entered into an understanding that starting in September of 1962 the missiles would be transported and the sites would be set up in secret. In coming to this determination Khrushchev recalled in his memoir that Castro took some convincing on both the point of

transferring the weapons at all, and then on the point of doing so in secret (Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*). In particular, Castro did not believe Cuba necessarily needed the weapons to ensure their defense. He also worried that transporting them in secret implied a level of acting in bad faith (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 47-48).

The nature of the weapons outlined in the CIA's presentation to President Kennedy ran contrary to was outlined when the issue of weapons in Cuba had been discussed with Soviet leadership immediately prior to the CIA's delivery of the information to the president. Recalling a meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that took place a few weeks prior to the onset of the crisis, Attorny General Robert Kennedy, acting as an envoy for the United States Government, noted he expressed concerns to Dobrynin about what seemed to be the buildup of weapons of an offensive nature, as well as a base for submarines. He recalled Dobrynin assuring him that the only weapons being transported to Cuba would be minimal and of a defensive nature. He explicitly stated there would be no missiles placed there and made an additional reference to the idea that the Soviets would not do anything that could be interpreted as intending to disrupt the status quo during the American election season, as they did not want to embarrass the president (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 21). In spite of these assurances, Robert Kennedy subsequently expressed skepticism about whether Dobrynin's claims about defensive-only weaponry was accurate in a meeting with President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Robert Kennedy then suggested issuing a statement that publicly condemned the idea of surface to surface missiles being transported to Cuba and that the U.S. would not tolerate this action. As a result of these concerns the U.S. issued a bulletin to act as a warning against this concept. The

bulletin, which was issued on September 24, 1962, stated "There is no evidence of any… presence of offensive ground-to-ground missiles; or of other significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance. *Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise*."[1]

Tensions between the two powers only increased from thereon. During the frantic period of debate over how to respond to the initial revelation of the missiles, President Kennedy found himself in the awkward situation of having to keep a previously scheduled meeting with the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. At the meeting, Kennedy had the knowledge of the missile's presence, but had not gone public yet with the information so Gromyko remained unaware that Kennedy was aware. Gromyko, unaware of the CIA's briefing, used the meeting as a forum to double down on the Soviet line that the Soviets would never transport anything other than defensive weapons and 'training' to the Cubans. Gromyko reiterated that the Soviet's only interest on the island lay with the maintenance of peace and that the United states should stop 'threatening' Cuba (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days,* 31-33). Understandably this type of deliberate misrepresentation by the Soviets manifested as a lack of trust and presumption of the worst of intentions by the Americans and shaped their deliberations regarding what course of action to pursue in response to the new information.

The next inflection point for the Americans after the reception of the news regarding the missile's presence on the island was the process of deliberating what to do in response to this new information. The group tasked with navigating this decision became known as "Ex

[1] "United States Reaffirms Policy on Prevention of Aggressive Actions by Cuba," U.S. Department of State Bulletin September 24, 1962, https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/statement-on-cuba/.

Comm" or the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. It included the Secretary of State, the Director of the CIA, Secretary of Defense, Robert F. Kennedy, the president, as well as other advisors, ambassadors and secretaries. In addition to making the initial response decision, this was the general group give or take a few individuals that also weighed options as the events of the next two weeks played out. Robert Kennedy later recalled that at the start the gambit of opinions on how to respond ran from "those who felt the missiles did not alter the balance of power and therefore necessitated no action … [to those who] felt an air strike against the missile sites could be the only course" (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 24-25).

As the debates began throughout the day on Tuesday, October 16th, two general camps emerged. The first supported a military strike on Cuba, while a second supported a naval blockade around Cuba. Each approach had its own virtues and drawbacks. Those advocating for a missile strike generally argued that because there were already offensive missiles in Cuba, the main focus and first order of business needed to be removing them in order to secure American safety. Those in favor of a strike critiqued the blockade approach as akin to "closing the door after the horse had left the barn" (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 27). A blockade, they argued, did nothing to satisfy the overarching concern of the missiles' presence in Cuba, so close to the United States. Another critique used by those advocating a strike in favor of a blockade was the idea that a blockade all but assured American confrontation with Soviet ships because they would inevitably be confronting them in the blockade.

This second critique speaks directly to the concept that the path to all-out war was littered with precarious unintended consequences because they Americans did not understand the reality of the strength and nature of the Soviet position they would be attacking. Those

advocating for the military strike understood that there were offensive missiles on the ground in Cuba, however they did not, at the time, have a full picture of what had actually been installed. Arthur Schlesinger later observed that the members of ExComm were under the impression that "the Central Intelligence Agency had estimated 10,000 Soviet troops on the Island … There were, [in fact] 43,000 Soviet troops on the island." Even more menacing, "the Soviet forces were equipped with nuclear warheads. The CIA was never sure whether warheads had arrived. These included warheads for short-range as well as for long-range missiles. No one in Washington dreamed that the Soviet soldiers might be equipped with tactical nukes." Most alarmingly of all, it was later revealed that should Soviet field commanders lose communications with Moscow, authority to use tactical nukes against an American invasion lay with the field commanders themselves. Had there been a strike followed by an invasion, "nuclear war would have begun on the beaches of Cuba and might have ended in a global holocaust." This information was not revealed until a conference on the crisis in Havana in January 1992 when it was offered by Soviet General Anatoly Gribkov who was deployed in Cuba at the time. (Kennedy, *Thirteen days,* 8-9) Given this information, we can see how truly precarious the situation was. Had the Americans had the complete scope of information the proposition of a military strike would have taken on a different context. Instead of a question of whether or not to attempt a strike that could potentially debilitate the Soviet position but could also potentially escalate, it would be a question of whether or not things were so far gone towards escalation that the Americans had no choice but to engage down that path.

A third critique of the blockade was unrelated to the virtue of the military strike. It contended that an American blockade around Cuba invited the Soviet Union to do the same to

American interests abroad. The logic followed that if the Americans demanded Soviet withdrawal of the Cuban missiles as a prerequisite for ending their blockade, the Soviets would simply demand the same in terms of removal of their own missiles surrounding the Soviet Union, specifically in Turkey. Interestingly, the removal of the missiles in Turkey was not a proposition that President Kennedy was averse to, and would become a major negotiating point as the events of the thirteen days unfolded.

The greatest virtue of the case for a blockade was that it accomplished several priorities simultaneously. As described by Secretary of Defense John McNamara, the greatest advocate of the quarantine, a blockade "was dramatic and forceful pressure, which would be understood yet, most importantly still leave us in control of events. It [also] limited pressure, which could be increased as the circumstances warranted." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* 27). That is to say, while an air strike would likely necessitate a subsequent land invasion of Cuba, a blockade would not necessarily compel the Americans to use any such force, while at the same time leaving those options on the table in the short term.

By Thursday night October 18th, after going back and forth a number of times attempting to reach a consensus, ExComm had reached an impasse and agreed to split off into two groups that would outline what each approach would look like. For those advocating the blockade, they outlined the "legal basis for action, an agenda for a meeting of the Organization of American States, recommendations for the role of the United Nations, the military procedures for stopping ships, and, finally, the circumstances under which military force might be used." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 36) For those advocating military action, they outlined "areas to be attacked, a defense of our position in the United Nations, suggestions as to how to

obtain support from Latin American countries, and a proposed communication to Khrushchev to convince him of the inadvisability of moving militarily against us in the Caribbean, Berlin, or elsewhere in the world." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 36)

After each group had readied their proposal they presented on Saturday to a formal meeting of the National Security Council, which was a larger group than the ExComm group that had been deliberating up to that point. In addition to the points laid out previously and the cases laid out in each of the two plans, two more issues ultimately led President Kennedy to make the final decision in favor of pursuing a blockade. First, Kennedy asked General Walter C. Sweeney Jr., the Commander in Chief of the Tactical Air Command about the level of assurance that a major surprise air attack could wipe out all missile sites and nuclear weapons in Cuba, to which the latter conceded it was not a certainty. So while a blockade would not necessarily remove the missiles, it could not be said definitively that an attack would complete that effort either.

Additionally, President Kennedy was said to be considerably moved by the argument that if America was drawn into an all-out military attack, it would erode if not destroy their moral position throughout the world. (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 39)

A Blockade Is Announced

A plan was put in place to announce the blockade on American television on the evening of Monday, October 22nd. Prior to the announcement there was a series of stakeholders that needed to be made aware of the situation before it was revealed to the public. These stakeholders included congressional leadership, European allies, and members of the

Organization of American states. In addition to alerting these stakeholders and explaining the administration's rationale for pursuing a blockade, this moment also served as occasion for ExComm's formal constitution as The Executive Committee of the National Security Council with President Kennedy serving as the chairman. Previous to this it was a more fluctuating group, but hereon after and until further notice the committee would convene every morning at 10 am.[2]

The process of notifying congressional leadership, gaining the support of European allies and members of the Organization of American states, and ultimately giving the Soviets advance notice of the plan ran the gambit from smooth sailing all the way through some parties attempting to relitigate the idea of a blockade versus military action being the most sound course of action. There was a concern by the administration related to how the American's case should be laid out in such a way that it would garner the support of allies in North and South America, as well as Europe. President Kennedy felt it was important that the US be supported by its allies in enacting a blockade. The Organization of American States (OAS) was the body with which they appealed to in the Western hemisphere. The OAS was a collection of 21 nations in the Western Hemisphere that was created in following World War II with the goal of collective security and which resolved to remain neutral in the event of a conflict between two members. A legal case was made as to how the Cubans and Soviets were in violation of the OAS charter. Following some debate, this led to unanimous support from Canada and the Latin American countries. Similarly, French President Charles de Gaulle and West German Chancellor

[2] National Security Council Action Memorandum Number 196, 1962. https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfknsf-339-006#?image_identifier=JFKNSF-339-006-p0001.

Konrad Adenauer voiced their support for the execution of the blockade. De Gualle went as far as to say, “It is exactly what I would have done, a great government such as yours does not act without evidence.” (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 41)

Outlining the situation to congressional leadership, a body in which Kennedy had recently served as a junior senator from Massachusetts, became heated when Kennedy revealed there were missiles ready to fire and that the blockade rather than direct military intervention was the chosen course. Senator Richard B. Russel, the Senate Armed Services Committee chairman was especially vocal in articulating his opinion that the blockade gave the Soviets time to think. Russel instead favored an air strike followed by an invasion. For Russel, war was inevitable. With this in mind, he argued that “we’re either a world class power or we’re not” and should take the fight to the Soviets. Senator William Fulbright was another vocal critic of the plan, favoring an all-out invasion as quickly as possible. This briefing took place two hours prior to a planned television announcement in which the Kennedy administration was to announce the blockade and left Kennedy in a rage. It was later reported that Kennedy kept yelling “if they want this job, fuck ‘em, they can have it. It’s no great joy to me” (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 41) Interestingly, Robert F. Kennedy remembers John F. Kennedy reflecting on the meeting afterwards and recalling that the members of ExComm, including both Kennedys, had similar initial reactions upon hearing the news of the missiles, and it was only after time to weigh the facts and reflect that they were able to arrive at a different conclusion than immediate military intervention.

The plan for a Blockade was also revealed to the Soviets just minutes prior to the television announcement. In Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador to the

United States was summoned to the State Department. He was handed a copy of the speech the president was about to deliver as well as a warning for Khrushchev not to "underestimate American will and determination." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 39) Dobrynin was unaware of the missiles presence in Cuba as he was being kept in the dark by his own government and was visibly overwhelmed by the unfolding of this briefing. Simultaneously in Moscow, the same documents given to Dobrynin were given to the Soviet Foreign Ministry and made their way to Krushchev.

This was another sliding doors moment as there were a number of ways Krushchev could have reacted to this information. It was the Soviet reaction at the crux of the issue of whether the blockade would be successful. What would they do with the missiles? Moreover, what about Soviet boats then en route to Cuba that could conceivably reach the newly formed blockade before any decision or action was made regarding the missiles? Krushchev could opt to take the formation of the Blockade as an act of unacceptable escalation and aim to challenge it directly, or perhaps view it as a sign that his effort to establish the missile sites had been discovered prematurely and therefore destined to be unsuccessful and back down.

Khrushchev's reaction to information provided by the Americans was that the news was "not as bad as he had feared. The President was demanding the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba, but had not set a deadline. This [was] not a war against Cuba, but some kind of ultimatum." (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 42) Khrushchev then had to take immediate stock of the most important of the military devices still traveling to Cuba, what had arrived on the island, and what was still in transit and would not arrive before the blockade. Three R-12 medium range missile regiments had reached the island along with most of their gear. Of two

R-14 regiments consisting of fourteen ships transporting bigger intermediate range missiles capable of hitting targets throughout the U.S. only one convoy of ships had arrived already. Most importantly, a ship named the Aleksandrovsk, which was crammed with nuclear warheads, the combined explosive power of which exceeded all bombs dropped in the history of warfare by three, was still in international waters approaching Cuba. The Aleksandrovsk was accompanied for part of the journey by nuclear submarines but was at that moment mostly defenseless. A disaster scenario existed wherein she approached the blockade in which Americans might try to board prompting a firefight and the whole thing would blow up the ship. (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 43)

Khrushchev made a series of decisions in reaction to this and set them into play rapidly. He ordered a heightening of alert levels for Soviet Military units. He dictated letters to Kennedy and Castro. He drafted a statement denouncing the blockade and accusing the United States of pushing the world to the edge of a thermonuclear war. He also, most importantly and unbeknownst to the Americans, recalled ships with military cargo while allowing for ships with nonmilitary cargos to proceed to Cuba. The Aleksandrovsk was instructed to head for the nearest port. (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 44)

At 7pm on October 22nd Kennedy went live on American television and explained the situation that had arisen and the decision to quarantine Cuba with a naval blockade. The president outlined that the blockade was potentially just an initial step and that the Pentagon was simultaneously making preparations for potential further military action. These preparations for military action included 250,00 men being mobilized, 2,000 ‘air sorties’ against various Cuban targets, and a 90,000 marine invasion force, should this be necessary. The

announcement included an estimate of US casualties associated with a possible military invasion of over 25,000. In the address the president outlined the American aversion to war, but that the ultimate goal was to never see the missiles in Cuba used against them or anyone else and that they must be removed, saying "This nation is opposed to war. We are also truthful to our word. Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere."[3]

The Cubans were not given advance notice and found out officially via President Kennedy's address. Being another variable in this mix, Castro's reaction was immediately more excited and combative than Khrushchev's. Prior to the announcement, Castro had heard information from spies in the Guantanamo Bay base that there was a crisis imminent and had received information related to elevated levels of reinforcements arriving, while woman and children were evacuating. Twenty minutes before the televised address, Castro issued the 'alarma de combate,' implementing Operational Directive No. 1. This called up the Cuban reserves, enlarging their army from 105,000 to triple that size and split the country into three defensive zones.

Within two hours of the address Castro had entered the offices of the newspaper *Revolucion* and used the front page for the next day to convey his enthusiasm for the prospect of military escalation. "The nation has woken up on a war footing, ready to repulse any attack. Every weapon is in its place, and beside each weapon are the heroic defenders of the

[3] Radio and television address to the American people on the Soviet arms build-up in Cuba, 22 October 1962. https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfkwha-142-001.

Revolution and the Motherland…The revolutionary leaders, the entire government, are ready to die next to the people." Independent of the newspaper message, Castro told his entourage who had accompanied him to the *Revolucion* office "We shouldn't worry about the Yankees, they're the ones who should be worried about us." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 54)

Blockade in Place – Several Balls in the Air

We have arrived now at the point in events where most of the cards are on the table: the blockade is in place and all three nations are in the process of moving to heightened military readiness. This is the juncture at which any mistake, be it a miscalculation or a misinterpretation could easily have triggered an all-out war even though that was clearly not the preference of either the Soviets or Americans, though the Cubans seem less averse, raising yet another complicating factor.

We will begin now to detail some of the scenarios playing out simultaneously that had the capacity to result in exactly this sort of misstep. American reconnaissance planes were still flying over Cuba even after the Cubans mobilized their defenses and warned the Americans that the practice must stop. Ultimately a pilot was shot down. At the same time, a research flight to Alaska accidently flew off course and inadvertently invaded Soviet airspace while being unable to make radio contact. 'Operation Mongoose', an ongoing effort unrelated specifically to the events of surrounding the missiles, but with the goal of wreaking havoc and bringing down the Cuban revolutionary government had operatives deployed within the island of Cuba on a mission that predated the start of this crisis. The operatives were on a mission to blow up a Cuban mine and were not contactable or able to be recalled. Their success, the Americans

feared, could logically be interpreted as part of a broader effort to dislodge the missiles and would likely be interpreted as part of a larger invasion afoot. A series of public and private contradictory communications likewise unfolded between the Soviets and Americans leaving the Americans confused as to what was being asked of them and unsure how to respond. A fiery interaction played out at the United Nations between US ambassador Adlai Stevenson and Soviet ambassador V. A. Zorin. And finally, possibly the most famous and misunderstood inflection point of the entire crisis, the question of what the Soviets would do with their boats en route to Cuba and what would happen at a potential 'first contact' moment with the blockade.

With regard to the ships making their way toward the blockade, in his memoir, Robert F. Kennedy recalled a version of the events that mirror the publicly accepted version of how things occurred. This version of what happened relates to the way the members of ExComm were perceiving the unfolding of events based on the best information afforded to them in the moment. Referring to the Wednesday morning ExComm meeting, Kennedy later stated, "that Wednesday morning meeting, along with that of the following Saturday, October 27, seemed the most trying, the most difficult, and the most filled with tension. The Russian ships were proceeding … and we either had to intercept them or announce we were withdrawing. I sat across the table from the President. This was the moment we had prepared for, which we hoped would never come. The danger and concern that we all felt hung like a cloud over us all." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 52)

The understanding the Americans had of what was transpiring was that two Russian ships, the Gagarin and the Kimovsk were seemingly going to be the first two to potentially make

contact with the blockade. They would likely be stopped and boarded between 10:30 and 11:00am on Wednesday October 24th. While ExComm was waiting for first contact they had received a Navy report that the ships were now being accompanied by a Soviet submarine. This complicated matters, as in addition to stopping and boarding the ships they would also need the submarine to surface. Because of this new development an aircraft carrier, the Essex, was deployed to the anticipated point of contact and was outfitted with antisubmarine equipment and support helicopters. The plan was for the Essex to use sonar in order to signal the Soviet submarine to surface. However, in the case that it did not comply, the next step would be to fire depth charges with small explosives into the ocean until it surfaced. (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 53)

This was a more complicated version of the blockade than was originally conceptualized and not ideal. The preference would have been for the first ship to approach the blockade to have been a lower stakes' "merchant ship." (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 87) In the run up to the moment of contact President Kennedy asked Secretary of Defense McNamara, "isn't there some way we can avoid having our first exchange with a Russian submarine-almost anything but that?" to which McNamara responded, "No, there's too much danger to our ships. There is no alternative. Our commanders have been instructed to avoid hostilities if at all possible, but this is what we must be prepared for, and this is what we must expect." Robert Kennedy describes the helplessness felt in the room in describing the reality of what was about to unfold, as far as the ExComm members understood it. "One thousand miles away in the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean the final decisions were going to be made in the next few

minutes. President Kennedy had initiated the course of events, but he no longer had control over them. We would have to wait." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 54)

At 10:25am, just prior to the window of anticipated contact with the ships, ExComm received word that the boats, not just the Gagarinand the Kimovsk, but twenty Soviet ships that were closest to the blockade had all stopped dead in the water or had turned around. This was the best possible version of events as interpreted by the members of ExComm. It signaled not only that the blockade was potentially working, in so much as Khrushchev was not directly challenging it, but, importantly to the Americans, it meant disaster had been averted for the moment. Robert Kennedy recalled the general sentiment of ExComm upon hearing the news, stating, "The meeting droned on. But everyone looked like a different person. For a moment the world had stood still, and now it was going around again." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 55)

This tightrope walking telling of events has come to be known as the 'eyeball to eyeball' version of the story and emerged because it was what was thought to be true to the CIA and ExComm at the time. It was romantic in that it told the story of a "battle of wills between Khrushchev and Kennedy" and it was politically beneficial to the Kennedys, as it emphasized their "courage and coolness at a decisive moment in history." Even after a more precise recounting of the timeline became known to the Navy intelligence analysts, "the White House failed to correct the historical record. Bobby Kennedy and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., would describe a standoff on the edge of the quarantine line with Soviet and American ships only a few miles apart." (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 88)

The truth of the matter was that Khrushchev "had blinked on the first night of the crisis, but it took nearly thirty hours for the blink to become visible to decision makers in

Washington," historian Michael Dobbs explains. He also breaks down logically how such a misunderstanding of events could happen. Knowing the precise whereabouts of the vessels was "an inexact science at best, involving a considerable amount of guesswork. Occasionally, they were sighted by American warships or reconnaissance planes, but usually they were located by a World War II technique known as direct finding." This involved intercepting radio transmissions using them to triangulate the location. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 89)

Looking back on the movement of the Kimovsk, it was known that at 3am on Tuesday night, after the television broadcast announcing the blockade, the ship was 300 miles east of the quarantine line. By 10am Wednesday the ship was "450 miles to the east, clearly on her way home." The 10:30-11am intercept approximation was made on the assumption that it was continuing forward towards the blockade. The problem was that in addition to taking hours (essentially most of the night Tuesday) to interpret intelligence, communication circuits were overloaded. Emergency message traffic, that is messaging transmitted with the utmost urgency was delayed four hours and immediate message traffic, messaging that was also meant to be transmitted with the next most level of urgency, was backed up five to seven hours. It seems like a wild proposition to a modern reader that this sort of delay would be possible, and in fact after this specific incident the NSA was instructed urgently to "pipe its data directly into the White House Situation Room. [As] the politicians were determined not to be left in the dark again." (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 91) It is because of these complicating factors that the moment was artificially inflated in terms of the potential for imminent peril and why it is often remembered conflictingly.

Operation Mongoose – Attempt to blow up Copper Mine in Mattahambre, Cuba

Keeping with the theme of multiple balls in the air representing variables which the primary decision makers had differing degrees of actual control over, there was a series of events playing out on the ground in Cuba that had been set in motion prior to and unrelated to the missile situation. Operation Mongoose was an ongoing covert effort orchestrated by the US government taking place in Cuba with the goal of employing Cuban nationals to subvert and ultimately overthrow Fidel Castro. It involved government infiltration, infrastructure sabotage and general espionage ramping up in 1961 after the failure of the Bay of Pigs and winding down after the conclusion of the missile crisis.[4]

One initiative that was ongoing for Operation Mongoose was the intention of blowing up a copper mine in Matahambre, Cuba. Prior to the events currently taking place in October, there had been three separate attempts on the copper mine that had failed for various reasons. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 21)The reason this confluence of events is so interesting is that independent of the missile crisis, this represented a painstakingly researched and orchestrated operation, the success of which was desirable to the architects. However, once the crisis was set in motion, if the sabotage were to have been successful it undoubtedly would not have been differentiated from the negotiations and strategy surrounding navigating the missile crisis and would have been seen as a provocation which likely would have sparked all-out war.

[4] NSA Briefing Book #687. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/cuba/2019-10-03/kennedy-cuba-operation-mongoose.

On the night of Friday, October 19th Miguel Orozco and Pedro Vera, two veterans of Batista's army who had been recruited by Operation Mongoose as saboteurs had set out on an attempt to blow up the mine. They had a small rubber dinghy to navigate the coastline, maps of the mine supplied by American companies that had formerly operated the mine and photographs of the topography ahead of them provided by U-2 spy planes. They dressed in clothes that had been manufactured in Cuba and supplied completely through Cuban refugees to the United States and issued false Cuban identity cards. There was a plan in place to evade discovery and execute the sabotage. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 91)

After five days of traversing thick forest and mangrove swamps Orozco and Vera arrived at the tower and tram system that serviced the mines. They had practiced placing their explosives on a mock setup of the mine at a CIA training camp. One set of explosives was placed at the base of the tower and then two sets were placed in separate trams. One tram would end up at the actual copper purification plant and the other at a storage facility. The idea was that the explosives at the base of the tower were linked to a timing device that was slowly set off by acid eating away at a metal barrier around the explosive, and then the two sets of explosives in the tramway would explode on impact once the trams started operating. It would all go off the next morning, destroying power to the plant and trapping hundreds of miners underground. Orozco and Vera had successfully placed their explosives and began making their way back to an agreed upon extraction point. They had no way of knowing that if successful, the plan they had just executed would jeopardize any hope of a peaceful resolution to the missile crisis. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 114-116)

As fate would have it, early the next morning a supervisor of the mine named Felipe Iglesias who had been operating the mine's conveyor system for over twenty years spotted one of the bombs attached to the tram system. He did not immediately know it was a bomb, but had it investigated before starting the system up that day. Almost immediately they were able to find the second bomb planted on the tram system and began a search for possible other explosives around the site. Shortly before the bomb at the base of the tower's acid timer trigger went off the final bomb was also located by the mine's security team, effectively thwarting the fourth and final attempt by Operation Mongoose to blow up the Mattahambre copper mine. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 118-119)

As they were travelling towards their extraction point, Orozco and Vera heard what they had no way of knowing were controlled explosions and assumed their mission had been a success. In a cruel twist of fate, they also had no way of knowing that Robert Kennedy had ordered a halt to all infiltration and exfiltration of operations of Cuban agents, and that there would be no extraction. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 214) They would go on to try sailing their catamaran back to the US but quickly capsized and ultimately were apprehended by Cuban Militiamen on the night of November 2. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 331-332)

U-2 Reconnaissance plane shot down over Cuba

The hour of the crisis was getting late and the negotiations and planning were getting more confusing and heated. The Cubans had mobilized their own troops and relevant reporting showed that the Soviets had also accelerated their buildup on the Island. As we approach the next inflection point of possible chaos, it is important to remember the impetus for how we

arrived at this version of events playing out. Assumptions around diplomatic relations between the Soviets and Americans leading up to the crisis, as detailed earlier in this paper, were such that the Americans believed some sort of buildup was occurring in Cuba as it related to potentially offensive weaponry. The Soviet side was more muddled, as the representatives meeting with the Americans consistently represented this not to be the case and sometimes did in fact have plausible deniability, as was the case with the meetings between Robert Kennedy and Anatoly Dobrynin. (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 21) It was not until U-2 reconnaissance planes successfully returned from finishing a photographic mission that "the Intelligence Community had become convinced that Russia was placing missiles and atomic weapons in Cuba." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 19) It was these U-2 plane reconnaissance missions that bring us our next sliding door moment

The photographic missions that revealed the missile buildup were executed prior to Cuban mobilization which resulted from the announcement of the American blockade, at which point warnings were issued that subsequent reconnaissance missions would be considered violations of Cuban airspace. However, that was a gamble the Americans felt the need to take, and continued to fly the U-2 planes over Cuba as it was their primary method for tracking changes in the missile sites on the ground.

By the morning of Saturday, October 27th there was a confusing reality playing out on the ground in Cuba. Castro had "ordered Cuban anti-aircraft batteries to open fire on low-level [reconnaissance] planes." Similarly but with a key distinction, the Soviets were under orders to "shoot down American planes if an attack seemed imminent. … It was getting difficult to

distinguish between reconnaissance flights and the start of an American bombing raid." (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 237)

The Soviets had begun tracking a U-2 plane that Saturday morning and watched it fly all down the southeastern coast of Cuba and along the northern foothills toward Guantanamo bay. They referred to it as Target Number 33. In the opinion of the officers on duty that morning, a "devastating U.S. attack was expected at any moment … and [the plane] has been up there for over an hour." They elected to give the order to shoot down the plane, as it was discovering the positions of the Soviets in depth, and "the standing rules of engagement appeared to authorize the use of any weapons short of nuclear missiles to defend Soviet troops on Cuba." (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 236-237)

At 10:19am the order to Destroy Target Number 33 using two missiles was given. "The Major saw the dots of the missiles on the radar merging and honing in on a larger dot; after a few seconds, the dots merged into one and disintegrated.". The wreckage fell to ground and landed in a village called Veguitas. The Pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr., from South Carolina, one of the two Air Force pilots who carried out the original U-2 reconnaissance trips that uncovered the presence of missiles in Cuba, had been killed. (Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 241-242)

Later that evening the word of the plane being fired down reached ExComm in Washington and a new slew of questions emerged. First and foremost was: what would the response be and when? There were more flights planned for the next morning. Could these take place without taking out the threat of the site which took out Major Anderson's plane? Would a military response jeopardize the planned response to Khruschev's public ultimatums?

What would an attack mean for NATO allies? Robert Kennedy remembers there was "almost unanimous agreement that we had to attack early the next morning with bombers and fighters and destroy the SAM sites' but then President Kennedy offered a pause for concern, stating "It isn't the first step that concerns me, but both sides escalating to the fourth and fifth step – and we don't go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 74-75) He knew that the destruction of the SAM sites assured a path towards conflict that would escalate to an extent that nobody involved would necessarily be able to stop until all involved were decimated.

All this was complicated by the fact that a series of public and private communications had been taking place over the course of the crisis in which it was impossible for each side to interpret with precision and certainty the veracity of the other's threats and what their reaction might be to any given response. This high wire act is the final one in the series of potential turning points that we will delve into.

Khrushchev Issues Similar but Different Communications in Response to the Blockade Regarding the Missiles

When President Kennedy had elected to deliver his message of a quarantine on national television he forwarded the information along to Khrushchev along with a message for the Soviet leader, the general sentiment of which was that he was trying to talk Khrushchev down. He explained that the Americans simply wanted this crisis to end. His communication included language about how irresponsible it was that the two parties had arrived at this point, and generally cautioned Khrushchev against pursuing a tact that would lead to nuclear warfare. The most famous line from the letter sums this up with Kennedy saying, "The one thing that has

most concerned me has been the possibility that your government would not correctly understand the will and determination of the United States in any given situation, since I have not assumed that you or any other sane man would, in this nuclear age, deliberately plunge the world into war which it is crystal clear no country could win and which could only result in catastrophic consequences to the whole world, including the aggressor."[5]

There is a subsequent, not particularly productive, back and forth of letter writing between Khrushchev and Kennedy wherein each accused the other of being to blame for the crises that was then unfolding. On October 24th Khrushchev sent Kennedy a response following the quarantine announcement in which he accused Kennedy of "no longer appealing to reason, but wish(ing) to intimidate us." [6]

It is on October 26th that a communication believed to be penned directly by Khrushchev himself arrived and offered potential hope. In it, Khrushchev emotionally, but coherently, appealed to the notion that war must be avoided at all costs. He included that "if indeed war should break out, then it would not be in our power to stop it, for such is the logic of war…we want not to destroy your country, but despite our ideological differences, to compete peacefully, not by military means." [7] The key line in the communication came when Khrushchev seemed to offer a deal: "If assurances were given that the President of the United States would not participate in an attack on Cuba and the blockade lifted, then the question of the removal or the destruction of the missile sites in Cuba would then be an entirely different

[5] Letter from Kennedy to Khrushchev, JFK Library: 10/22/62. https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct22/doc4.html.
[6] Letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy, JFK Library 10/24/62. https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct24/doc2.html.
[7] Dept of State Telegram Transmitting letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy 10/26/62, JFK Library. https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct26/doc4.html.

question. No more weapons to Cuba and those within Cuba withdrawn or destroyed, and you reciprocate by withdrawing your blockade and also agree not to invade Cuba." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 68)

The communication from Khrushchev on the 26th was seen as a glimmer of hope for the Americans and a not unreasonable suggestion as to how to wind down the crisis amicably. Robert Kennedy recalled, "I had a slight feeling of optimism as I drove home from the State Department that night. I was…more optimistic because when I left the President that night, he too was for the first time hopeful that our efforts might possibly be successful." (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 69)

The idea was that ExComm would reconvene the next morning and discuss how to proceed with the offer. However on the morning of Saturday, October 27th, they arrived to a subsequent letter from Khrushchev to President Kennedy (though clearly not written by Khrushchev, but rather by the Office of the Kremlin) with a slightly revised proposal. It was essentially a quid pro quo wherein "We will remove our missiles from Cuba, you will remove yours from Turkey…The Soviet Union will pledge not to invade or interfere with the internal affairs of Turkey; the U.S. to make the same pledge regarding Cuba."[8] This complicated matters greatly for the Americans. In a vacuum it was a trade they would be willing to make, and in fact Kennedy favored the idea of removing the missiles from Turkey independent of the ultimatum. The problem was he did not want to appear as though "the withdrawal of the missiles from Turkey (was) under threat from the Soviet Union," on top of the fact that NATO had already

[8] Letter from Khrushchev to President Kennedy 10/27/62, JFK Library https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct27/doc4.html.

supported the concept of the blockade in Cuba and they would need to be involved in any future defense of Turkey. (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 72-73)

The fact that the October 27th communication arrived around the same timeframe as the downing of Major Anderson's spy plane created a dynamic where all options were now on the table more than ever before. The October 27th communication seemed to douse the hope that had been ignited by the letter on the 26th and the plane being downed opened the door to a logical basis for attack and possibly invasion. It was their turn to respond to the latest Soviet offer, and the path forward chosen by the Americans seems like a stroke of genius in hindsight. Robert Kennedy and White House Advisor Ted Sorensen were permitted to draft a letter that did not address the ultimatum from the communication on the 27th and accepted the terms suggested in the letter from the 26th. They outlined that "1. You would agree to remove these weapons systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision…2. We…would agree-upon the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations to ensure the carrying out and continuation of these commitments – (a)to remove promptly the quarantine measures now in effect, and (b) to give assurances against an invasion of Cuba."[9]

With that offer on the table there was still the matter of the missiles in Turkey to be addressed. This would be handled behind the scenes in a meeting between Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin. Kennedy explained the reality of the American's situation, which was that for a variety of reasons they had wanted to remove the missiles from Turkey for

[9] JFK Library, Letter from President Kennedy to Premier Khrushchev 10/27; https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct27/doc4.html.

some amount of time already and that they would do so shortly. He explained though, that this process could not appear as a quid pro quo. This was the message and offer that was taken back privately by Dobrynin and meant to be received in tandem with the public letter accepting the terms proposed in Krushchev's 10/26 letter. (Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 81-83)

The negotiations paid off, and on the morning of October 28th Khrushchev accepted the proposal from Kennedy's letter outlining the supervised withdrawal of missiles in exchange for assurances the Americans would no longer interfere in the affairs of the Cuban government.

Conclusion

From the moment of the outset of the Crisis the question at hand became less 'Who might win a conflict?' and more 'Is it possible to find a way to not have this conflict?' It is often noted in histories of these events that many of the actors on the American side, including both Kennedys, had read the recently published World War I classic *The Guns of August* by Barbara Tuchman. That story of the inevitability of war plotted by a series of decisions that were not necessarily made with the intention of driving towards war but ultimately did so were informative and influential to them. It is a universal theme that could be applied to our contemporary world. One could imagine a scenario in which an otherwise rational actor in the Taiwan Strait, Gaza Strip, or Kyiv carries out what seems to be something reasonable to them, but is interpreted otherwise and the situation devolves from there. Robert Kennedy remembers someone once saying to him that while "World War Three would be fought with atomic weapons, the next war [will be fought] with sticks and stones" and it is with that ultimate recognition that those in power had to and must continue to acknowledge when navigating complicated and potentially escalatory

situations of provocation. By this he meant to say that it was acknowledged an atomic war would in all likelihood lead to large scale destruction of vast swathes of modern humanity.

In approaching this project, I entered with only a basic understanding of the events surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is commonly accepted that this moment in 1961 was the closest the world came to nuclear conflict during the Cold War and I was interested in unpacking how that could have been. What struck me most throughout reading these histories was how the severity of the moment was not lost on anyone involved. Through the lens of history, neither Premier Khrushchev nor President Kennedy came across as belligerent. President Kennedy has to contend with the voices in ExComm and Congress who would prefer escalatory action. His public comments were colored with having to contend with that reality, but his actions spoke to a deeper understanding of the importance of caution. Khrushchev similarly has to contend with escalatory voices on the Soviet side, as well as Fidel Castro who was not averse to the conflict turning hot. Khrushchev comes across as reasonable in his rationale behind wanting to put the missiles in Cuba, and the moment they are discovered it is clear his main goal is to wind the situation down in a way that would avoid conflict. It was through this approach that valued a level headed approach and de-escalation along with some fortunate accidents of history that the Crisis was able to be wound down without spiraling out of control.

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