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THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, OCT. 16-28 1962

I. BACKGROUND

- A. The US had massive nuclear superiority over the USSR in 1962. Specifically, the US had a clear second-strike countervalue capability (the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on Soviet society after absorbing an all-out Soviet surprise counterforce attack) and **perhaps also had a first-strike counterforce capability** (the capacity to strike first with enough force to leave the Soviets unable to inflict unacceptable damage in retaliation). The US perhaps could have struck the Soviets first and wholly escaped nuclear retaliation.
- B. The US clashed with Castro, plotted his downfall, 1959-1962. US actions: the Bay of Pigs, 1961; Operation Mongoose and its planned Cuban uprising, 1961ff; the Phibriglex exercise, 1962; the ominous McNamara memo of 10/62. Did the US plan to invade Cuba???
- C. America sends IRBMs to Britain, Italy and Turkey, 1957-1962.

II. THE SOVIETS SEND MISSILES TO CUBA: WHY? AND WHY DID THEY DO IT SECRETLY?

- A. To acquire some nuclear strength, escape from the shadow of US nuclear superiority.
- B. To deter the US from a feared invasion of Cuba.
- C. To humiliate JFK.

Historians and Soviet crisis participants interviewed later both favor explanations #1 and #2; in 1962 JFK's policymakers favored explanation #3.

Note: included in the Soviet deployment, but unknown to the U.S.: 9 nuclear-armed short-range tactical missiles, ideal for nuking a US invasion force.

III. The U.S. RESPONSE

- A. JFK warns Khrushchev to deploy no missiles in Cuba, Sept. 4 & Sept. 13, 1962.
- B. The Soviet missiles are discovered, Oct. 16; JFK decides they must go. Why?
 1. Fears for U.S. credibility, NATO unity: "if we cave, NATO will collapse!"
 2. U.S. domestic politics? Did JFK fear attacks from the right if he caved? The White House tapes don't reveal such concerns; and JFK was less hawkish than non-elected officials. But JFK did privately expressed fear of impeachment if the missiles stayed in Cuba.
- C. The ExComm considers three options, Oct. 16-Oct. 22:
 1. Quiet diplomacy. Threaten Khrushchev privately while making no public military moves.
 2. Blockade ("quarantine") Cuba. Exclude only missiles and warheads for now, to freeze the military status quo. Maybe extend the blockade to cover oil and other items later, if necessary, to strangle Cuba.
 3. A surprise US (conventional) air strike against the Soviet missiles, and a US military invasion of Cuba.

Early in the crisis most of JFK's advisors favored option #3, Surprise Attack and Invasion. But JFK chose option #2, Quarantine. US officials didn't come up with the Quarantine idea until Oct. 19, three days into the crisis. Governments think slowly...
- D. JFK's counter-fait accompli: the Quarantine announcement of Oct. 22.

IV. THE SETTLEMENT

- A. Khrushchev's first letter, and its withdrawal.
- B. JFK's ultimatum of Oct. 27--and his hidden sweeteners.

V. HINGES OF THE CRISIS

- A. U.S. officials feared war at three points:
 - At the beginning of the crisis (when the U.S. would have started it).
 - On October 24, when Soviet ships approached the U.S. blockade line.
 - On October 27, when Khrushchev seemed to stiffen his terms and a U.S. U-2 was shot down over Cuba.
- B. Two hawk-dove disputes in the U.S. government:
 - The bomb-vs.-quarantine debate early in the crisis.
 - The later debate over whether to trade U.S. Jupiters to get Soviet missiles out of Cuba.

VI. HOW DANGEROUS WAS THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS?

- A. How accurate were perceptions on both sides? (Not very!)
 1. JFK didn't expect USSR missile deployment to Cuba. That's why he warned publicly against it--he thought his bluff wouldn't be called.
 2. US policymakers didn't see a chief USSR motive for deployment (defend Cuba from invasion); hence they nearly overlooked the no-invasion pledge as a solution to the crisis.
 3. Khrushchev didn't expect U.S. detection of his missile deployment.
 4. US leaders wrongly assumed Khrushchev ordered the Oct. 27 U2 shutdown.
 5. US leaders badly underestimated Soviet and Cuban military capabilities in Cuba
 - a. The US thought the Soviets had 8,000-10,000 troops in Cuba; in fact they had 43,000 troops. Cuba had another 270,000 well-trained troops. The US planned to invade with only 140,000 troops. Sounds like a tough war for the USA!
 - b. More interestingly, the US was unaware that the Soviets had 9 short-range and 36 medium-range missiles in Cuba, already armed with nuclear weapons.
 6. Castro was unaware of US nuclear superiority.
 7. JFK was unaware of symmetry of Soviet & US missile deployments. JFK: "It's just as if we suddenly began to put a major number of MRBMs in Turkey. Now that'd be goddam dangerous, I would think." Bundy and Alexis Johnson then explain "Well, we did, Mr. President."
- B. How tight was central control on military operations? (Not very!)
 1. The Oct. 27 Soviet shutdown of the U.S. U2 was unauthorized by Moscow.
 2. US anti-submarine operations were more aggressive than JFK knew.
 3. A U.S. U2 strayed over Siberia during the crisis. The Soviets could have thought this a precursor to a U.S. first strike.
 4. US test ICBMs were armed with nuclear warheads during the crisis; and a scheduled test from this test-field was still conducted.
 5. A U.S. intelligence ship remained close to Cuba early in the crisis--an inviting target.
 6. The US navy's quarantine line remained far from Cuba--at 500 miles--against presidential orders.
 7. A pre-planned retaliatory strike was nearly conducted after the U2 shutdown--another near-oversight.
- C. False warning problems.
 1. The US jury-rigged south-directed warning system had a hidden common-mode failure: it would see a Cape Canaveral launch as a Cuban launch.
 2. Oleg Penkovskiy, a US spy in Moscow, issued a war warning as he was arrested, Oct. 22/23. Luckily it was not passed to

Washington.

- D. Would JFK have pushed matters to war? (Only in extremis.)
- E. What if someone else had been President? JFK was markedly more dovish than other U.S. policymakers. Had he not been President history probably would have been different & more exciting. The military favored war, Acheson favored war.

VII. RECENT HISTORICAL REVELATIONS: 5 REVISIONS TO RFK'S ACCOUNT

- JFK's hidden plan to pursue a public Jupiter trade.
- The Soviet nukes in Cuba, possible Soviet predelegated authority to use.
- US plans to invade Cuba?
- Penkovskiy's war warning.

VIII. PERSISTING MYSTERIES OF THE CRISIS

Main mystery: why the rush by the US? The US was in a great rush to resolve the crisis, pressing matters at a desperate pace on October 27, when Kennedy told the Soviets that the US would use force unless matters were resolved in a day or two. What motivated JFK's sense of urgency?

IX. WHAT CAUSED THE CRISIS? WHY WAS WAR AVOIDED?

- A. Causes: US nuclear superiority? Lack of clear "rules of the game"? U.S. belligerence toward Cuba? Soviet desire to humiliate JFK and the USA?
- B. Why war was avoided: Lack of Soviet military options? JFK's hidden concessions?