

II. Lesson from History

The Real Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis

by Harley Schlanger

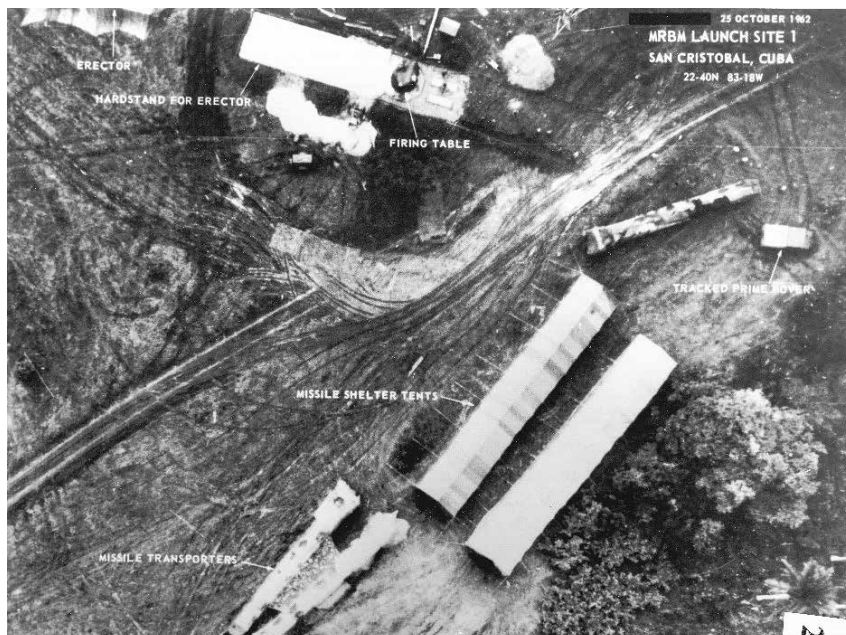
Oct. 28—A headline in *Newsweek's* Oct. 20 issue should have triggered profound anxiety among those who remember events of 60 years ago, when many feared that the United States and the Soviet Union were headed toward a nuclear war over Soviet missiles placed in Cuba. The headline read “Russian Envoy to U.S.: Channel That Stopped Nuclear War 60 Years Ago Is Dead.” It referred to comments made by Anatoly Antonov, Russia’s current Ambassador to the United States.

As loose talk of a possible nuclear war is heard daily, especially from NATO officials and their media mouthpieces who endlessly repeat the false charge that Russia’s President Vladimir Putin threatened to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Antonov warned that “the infrastructure of our communication with America has been demolished.” To highlight the heightened danger resulting from this, the article referred to comments made by the Russian Ambassador to the United States at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Anatoly Dobrynin, who said:

The Cuban missile crisis revealed the mortal danger of a direct armed confrontation of the two great powers, a confrontation headed off on the brink of war thanks to both sides’ timely and agonizing realization of the disastrous consequences.

Dobrynin had played a decisive role in defusing the crisis in October 1962, through backchannel discussions with President Kennedy’s special envoy, his

brother Robert (RFK). This channel enabled John Kennedy (JFK) to communicate with Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev through a trusted intermediary, and ultimately led to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The direct message being sent by Antonov to U.S. officials is that one of the main lessons—which should



Low-level U-2 photograph of Medium Range Ballistic Missile Launch Site #1, San Cristobal, Cuba, Oct. 25, 1962, showing extensive tracking from surging construction and possible missile readiness drills.

have been internalized by officials today—is that the absence of such infrastructure today increases the danger of miscalculation, or an accident, which could trigger an all-out nuclear war.

1962—Prelude to Dialogue

When JFK was first briefed by his National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy on October 16, 1962

that the CIA believed that the Soviets were installing medium- and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba, he set up an Executive Committee (ExComm) to formulate a response. Made up of civilian members of the National Security Council, intelligence officials, and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, its initial recommendations were to hit the missile sites and/or to invade Cuba.

For Kennedy, the discovery of the missiles represented not just a military crisis, but a political one. He had campaigned for the presidency demanding a tough stance toward Cuba, and had agreed to go ahead with the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, just three months after his inauguration—though it had been organized by the previous administration, and he feared it had little hope of succeeding. When it failed, he was criticized for being “weak” for not backing up the bungled effort with a military invasion. The fiasco of the Bay of Pigs was quickly followed by a Berlin crisis, culminating in the division of the city by the construction of a wall in August.

According to tapes made of the ExComm sessions, JFK’s immediate reaction to the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba was to state that it was “politically unacceptable” to allow them to remain. Virtually every member of ExComm advocated a harsh military response. Among the hard-liners were Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Bundy, elder statesman Dean Acheson, and the military brass. Numerous accounts, based on documents and tapes declassified in the late 1980s, report that it was the nearly unanimous view of his advisers that they must respond forcefully to



LBJ Library/Yoichi Okamoto

The back-channel dialogue between Robert Kennedy, the President’s brother, and Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. (shown), ultimately led, in less than a week, to a peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis.

demonstrate that Washington would honor its commitments; that is, that America would not adopt an “appeasement strategy” to avoid nuclear war with the USSR.

Instead of striking the bases in Cuba, JFK chose to enact a blockade, or “quarantine” of Cuba, to prevent more missiles and weapons from reaching the island nation. He announced this in a national televised address on October 22, despite intense pressure to go to war. One member of the committee, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis LeMay, spoke for the war hawks, saying the blockade is “almost as bad as the appeasement [of Hitler] at Munich.” LeMay and his allies were prepared to risk a nuclear war to show that Khrushchev could not push the United States around.

The Backchannel

Though stopping Soviet ships at sea was risky, JFK saw it as a way to buy time for diplomacy. According to RFK’s memoirs, JFK chose to allow the first tanker encountered by the U.S. naval blockade, the *Bucharest*, to pass through, saying,

We don’t want to push him (Khrushchev) into a precipitous action—give



LoC/Warren K. Leffler

Robert F. Kennedy, U.S. Attorney General.



USAF

Gen. Curtis LeMay, U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff.

him more time to consider. I don't want to push him into a corner from which he cannot escape.

It was at this point that RFK entered into a dialogue with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin.

On Oct. 27, after five days of excruciating tension, Khrushchev made a proposal that ultimately led to a peaceful resolution: He offered to withdraw the missiles in return for a pledge that the United States would not invade Cuba or overthrow Castro, and would remove Jupiter nuclear missiles then stationed in Turkey. While the American hardliners opposed the trade, ridiculing it as "appeasement," JFK agreed to it, but insisted that the withdrawal of U.S. missiles not be made public. What was said publicly, was that Kennedy refused the offer to withdraw the missiles from Turkey, spinning the deal as a unilateral retreat by Khrushchev. On Oct. 28, the Soviets began to dismantle the missile bases in Cuba.

Thus was born the narrative that it was Kennedy's resoluteness in the face of war that caused Khrushchev to blink—a narrative still believed today despite contrary documentary evidence.

JFK and Khrushchev

The truth about the *quid pro quo* on the missiles in Turkey was suspected by many, but was kept out of the public eye until files were declassified after 1989. The release of these files, along with publication of memoirs, show that ultimately both Kennedy and Khrushchev acted responsibly, aware of the threat to human existence were a nuclear war to erupt.

The records show that both leaders were aware of the pressure the other was under. Khrushchev's son Sergei wrote that after Dobrynin met with RFK, he told Khrushchev that RFK had told him the military "is putting great pressure on him (JFK), insisting on military action against Castro." He said the President "is asking for help to solve this problem."

In his memoirs, Khrushchev wrote that he told his



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On Oct. 27, 1962, First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev made a proposal to JFK that ultimately led to a peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis 5 days later. Here Khrushchev (left) and Kennedy are meeting at the U.S. Embassy residence in Vienna. June 3, 1961.

Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko,

We (Khrushchev and JFK) have a common cause, to save the world from those pushing us toward war.

Historian Sheldon Stern, who worked at the JFK Presidential Library and listened to the hours of tapes of ExComm meetings, wrote that he was convinced that, among the Americans, JFK

was the only person ... who genuinely understood that nuclear war could never be a viable or rational choice.

According to Norman Cousins, who later became a channel to Khrushchev in negotiating what became the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, Kennedy told him he recognized that Khrushchev faced similar pressure from within his government.

He would like to prevent a nuclear war, but is under severe pressure from his hard-line crowd, which interprets every move in that direction as

appeasement. I've got similar problems.

Lessons for Today

The warning issued by today's Russian Ambassador Antonov about the need to open channels of communication, is obvious from this brief review. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, U.S. foreign policy has been directed increasingly by the arrogant belief that America is the "sole superpower" in the world, and that its willingness to use its military in conjunction with NATO allies to defend the "rules-based order," is the sole guarantor of peace—despite the numerous destructive and genocidal wars it has launched. Unfortunately, this is reinforced in the mainstream media and think-tanks, and is backed by a bipartisan consensus in Congress.

Given the supercharged environment in the United States and Russia during the Cold War, shaped by distrust each of the other, it was largely through dialogue that a catastrophe was avoided—a dialogue that allowed, under pressure, a recognition of the legitimate concerns of the other nation.

In the current danger over Ukraine, the danger of an escalation to nuclear war comes from the refusal of the NATO side to recognize the legitimate security concerns of the Russians. It is a profound irony that the driving concern which led JFK to take the world to the brink of war—his unwillingness to allow the Soviets to deploy nuclear weapons within ninety miles of the United States—is one of the central security concerns raised by Putin, regarding Ukraine becoming part of NATO with the deployment of advanced weapons on the border of Russia.

But the other part of the prevailing narrative about the Cuban Missile Crisis which must be overcome, is the idea that negotiations which produce a compromise are a sign of weakness, of appeasement. In an article written for *The Atlantic* magazine in 2013, incorporating much of the material which had remained classified for decades, Benjamin Schwartz wrote that Washington felt compelled to show it would "honor its



LoC/Warren K. Leffler

Adlai Stevenson, U.S. Ambassador to the UN, was the first to propose the trade of removing U.S. missiles in Turkey for the removal of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

commitments" by taking a hard line.

[This put America] in the curious position of having to go to war to uphold the very credibility that is supposed to obviate war in the first place.

This view of the irony was held by one of the few officials who stood by JFK in opposition to the hardliners, and backed his decision to accept Khrushchev's offer: Adlai Stevenson, his UN Ambassador. It was Stevenson who first proposed the trade of removing U.S. missiles in Turkey for the removal of Soviet missiles in Cuba. For this, he was dismissed by the war hawks of ExComm as a "weakling," an appeaser. In a

handwritten memo to JFK Oct. 17, Stevenson wrote, to counter the hardliners, "Blackmail and intimidation never, Negotiation and sanity always." He was later quoted in *Time* magazine stating something still relevant today to address the mindless bravado of the neocons:

We seem to be living in an era when anyone who is for war is a hero and anyone who is for peace is a bum.

There is no doubt that Kennedy faced this crisis with courage and a steely resolve. Yet fortunately, his "resolve" was not to prove to the world that he would resort to nuclear war to prove he could be trusted. Instead, the true test of courage was his willingness to stand up to the war hawks surrounding him, and his comprehension that Khrushchev faced the same pressure from his own war hawks, who saw the NATO alliance as a nuclear-armed threat surrounding Russia and its Warsaw Pact allies.

And that is the real lesson, hopefully to be learned, from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Much of the documentary material used in preparing this article is available at the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., and can be found at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/>.