

# Diplomacy at the edge of war

By William C. Kashatus

**F**ifty years ago today, President John F. Kennedy appeared on national television to deliver the stunning news that the Soviet Union was placing offensive missiles in Cuba and that he had ordered an air and naval quarantine to prevent further shipments. If the Soviets refused to remove the missiles, he added, the United States would not shrink from nuclear war.

Over the next six days, as Soviet ships steamed toward the U.S. quarantine, the two nations stood at the brink. It was a defining moment of the Cold War, bringing the world closer than ever before — or since — to a nuclear apocalypse.

While some historians argue that Kennedy acted hastily in emphasizing military options over diplomacy, JFK actually showed rational, effective leadership, resolving the crisis through conciliation with the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev.

Kennedy believed that the United States had to find more flexible ways to counter communist aggression than the atomic weapons favored by the U.S. defense establishment. He was especially concerned about meeting the communist threat in Cuba, where a U.S.-supported invasion of nationalist exiles had failed to topple Fidel Castro in 1961.

Castro sought Soviet military support to prevent another American-backed invasion. In September 1962, Khrushchev ordered the installation of launching pads in Cuba for short- (1,100 miles) and intermediate-range (2,200 miles) nuclear missiles. Putting such missiles in Cuba, just 90 miles from the U.S. coast, would teach Americans “just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you,” Khrushchev told his advisers, referring to the U.S. Jupiter missiles deployed in Turkey and aimed at the Soviet Union.

But Kennedy insisted that the Soviet missiles in Cuba threatened to reduce the strategic advantage America held with its larger, long-range (4,000 to 5,000 miles) nuclear arsenal. He also knew he had to act quickly: The Cuban missile sites would be operational in two weeks, doubling the Soviets’ ability to launch a devastating strike against the United States.

Bypassing the Pentagon and State



**An empty Soviet missile** on exhibit at a military complex in Havana. The Cuban missile crisis took place 50 years ago. ISMAEL FRANCISCO / Cubadebate

Department, Kennedy opted for a select group of advisers to resolve the crisis. Known as “ExComm” (for Executive Committee of the National Security Council), the committee debated four options:

- Use air and ground forces to destroy the Cuban missile sites.
- Undertake a full-fledged invasion to depose Castro.
- Negotiate with the Soviet Union and Cuba.
- Use a naval quarantine to prevent Soviet missiles from reaching Cuba.

Kennedy opted for a quarantine 500 miles from Cuba because it would allow the Soviets to retreat without a war, while giving the United States room to escalate to an attack if the Soviets refused to remove their missiles.

On the evening of Oct. 26, Kennedy received a message from Khrushchev implying that the Soviet Union would remove the missile bases in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba. JFK agreed, ignoring a second, tougher Soviet demand that the Jupiter missiles be removed from Turkey. And so Kennedy averted nuclear war. Some critics charge that Kennedy actually created the crisis by forgoing private diplomacy in favor of a public ultimatum and blockade. Given that the United States had already planned to remove its obsolete Jupiter missiles from Turkey, the argument goes, JFK should have immediately proposed a trade-off instead of rushing into a confrontation whose outcome couldn’t be controlled.

However, the critics overlook the fact that the removal of the Jupiter missiles would have undermined U.S. credibility with NATO and given the Soviets a strategic nuclear advantage in Europe.

In fact, recently declassified ExComm conversations reveal that Kennedy went to great lengths to secure a peaceful resolution to the crisis. He secretly prepared a fall-back plan to have U.N. Secretary-General U Thant propose a mutual dismantling of missiles in Cuba and Turkey. This would have allowed Kennedy to appear to be complying with a U.N. request rather than a Soviet demand, preserving U.S. credibility with NATO.

In addition, Kennedy employed his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, in a back-channel effort to end the crisis. In a secret meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, RFK explicitly agreed to withdraw the Jupiter missiles from Turkey “sometime in the future,” but he refused to draw up any formal exchange of letters lest the agreement be publicized as a quid pro quo.

President Kennedy effectively used the threat of an American nuclear attack, traditional naval tactics, and old-fashioned diplomacy to end the Cuban missile crisis. In so doing, he also de-escalated Cold War tensions and paved the way for the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963.

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