

## HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

# The Cuban Missile Crisis at 60

## WHERE DO WE STAND?

*By William M. Morgan, PhD*

During the past 60 years, our understanding of the Cuban Missile Crisis has evolved from the initial portrayal of the situation as an American victory achieved by brilliant crisis management by John F. Kennedy and his advisors to a more deeply researched and nuanced description of a dangerous draw reached only after misconceptions, miscalculation, last-minute compromise, and good luck.

Pro-Kennedy insider accounts dominated early writings. Kennedy's confidante and speechwriter, Theodore C. Sorensen, quickly produced a vivid biography of 781 pages a year and a half after the president's assassination. In 1965, renowned historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a special assistant in the White House, used more than 1,100 pages to describe the "Thousand Days" of Kennedy's tenure. The journalist Elie Abel's popular history emerged from background interviews with insiders. The classic insider account was Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*, drafted to boost his presidential bid and heavily edited by Sorensen for publication after Robert Kennedy's 1968 assassination. These early writings portrayed a heroic president and his brother making the aggressive Soviets back down. This image still lives in the public mind, though few living Americans know much about the crisis.<sup>1</sup>

A second wave of "insider" writings appeared from the 1970s, less devoted to polishing the Kennedy legacy but still claiming victory. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, and others produced memoirs. On the Soviet side, Nikita Khrushchev's posthumous memoirs, though self-serving, provided the first glimpse of Soviet internal politics.<sup>2</sup> A 1971 blockbuster by political scientist Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, a blending of factual narrative and analytical theory, dominated the literature of the 1970s and, via a 1999 rewrite with historian Philip Zelikow, remains an important study.<sup>3</sup>

The 1980s saw the emergence of new U.S. and Soviet sources. The discovery of Kennedy's White House taping system initiated the slow but steady release of transcripts through the supposedly final batch, released in 2004. Transcripts of the meetings of the executive committee of the National Security Council, the president's hand-picked secret advisory group, hugely illuminated the administration's debate of options.<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy led to the first documentary releases from Soviet archives. The end of the Cold War accelerated the flow of information from the Russian side. A series of international conferences of crisis participants as well as scholars

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Dr. William M. Morgan has been a professor of strategic studies and director of the Diplomacy and Statecraft course at the Marine Corps War College, Marine Corps University, since 2010. A former Marine, he also spent 31 years in the Foreign Service of the Department of State. <https://doi.org/10.35318/mch.2023090103>

<sup>1</sup> An excellent bibliographical essay (as of 2011) appears in Don Munton and David A. Welch's fine overview, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The first appeared in 1970 with a slightly expanded edition in 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2d ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997).

began in the late 1980s, initially between Russians and Americans, with Cubans, including Fidel Castro, soon joining. Not only did participants provide startling and previously unknown detail, such as the presence of Soviet tactical nuclear weapons on the island, but their accounts were often accompanied by supporting documents.<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1990s, much more information became available. On the U.S. side, the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) volumes for the Kennedy administration appeared, as well as other material declassified by the 1967 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) process initiated by scholars and organizations such as the National Security Archive of George Washington University and the Cold War International History Project of the Wilson Center. Russian archives opened a bit, and former Soviet officials and military officers published memoirs. During the past 10–20 years, scholars digested the new information, which has continued to emerge, albeit slowly.

Recent scholarly writing falls into two categories: overviews and specialized monographs. The earliest overviews of the crisis focused on the famous “Thirteen Days” from Kennedy learning of the missiles in Cuba on 16 October through Khrushchev’s letter on 28 October announcing he would withdraw the missiles. Recent overviews have become increasingly detailed and more nuanced, tending to see the crisis not as an American victory but as, simultaneously, a lucky draw and a near-catastrophe. Two fresh overviews exemplify the trend. The late Martin J. Sherwin’s *Gambling with Armageddon* nested the Cuban Missile Crisis in post–World War II American nuclear policy and included the latest archival discoveries. Harvard professor Serhii Plokhly burrowed into the unit histories and officer memoirs of the Soviet forces sent to Cuba in *Nuclear Folly*. Many of these units had been based in Ukraine and had many Ukrainian soldiers. Because Ukrainian records were more accessible than archives

in Moscow, Plokhly filled in some blank areas in the historical record.<sup>6</sup>

Targeted studies of underexamined aspects of the crisis dove deeper into precrisis events such as the Bay of Pigs (April 1961), the Khrushchev-Kennedy summit in Vienna (June 1961), and the 1961 Berlin Wall confrontation, all of which shaped the subsequent approaches of both Khrushchev and Kennedy during the 1962 crisis. Scholars also surveyed the impact of domestic/internal factors on Khrushchev’s motivations to deploy the missiles and Kennedy’s resolve that the missiles be removed. Lastly, they cast new light on the difficult post-crisis Soviet-American and Soviet-Cuban negotiations over implementing the general commitments of Kennedy and Khrushchev.

## Origins of the Crisis

Recent scholarship has explored—even back to the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration—four shaping factors (political atmospheric) that made the October 1962 crisis so dangerous. One powerful shaping factor was fierce high technology competition with the Soviet Union that increased dramatically with the Sputnik launches in 1957. Americans feared the United States had fallen behind in the high technology field, and disastrous attempts to quickly catch up, such as the Vanguard satellite-carrying missile that exploded on the launch pad in early 1958, enhanced the feeling of inferiority. Consequently, both Eisenhower and Kennedy accelerated satellite and manned mission programs. The Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) programs were already underway but received even more resources. Most importantly, as Philip Nash noted in his outstanding monograph *The Other Missiles of October*, the Sputnik launches triggered the deployment of American intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) to Europe to “restore U.S. strategic credibility in post-Sputnik alliance politics” by restoring Allied confidence in U.S. extended

<sup>5</sup> James A. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littleton, 2002); and James A. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Martin J. Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1945–1962* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020); and Serhii Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021).

deterrence. This deployment proved a crucial causal building block in the eventual 1962 crisis. Sixty Thor missiles went to Britain, 30 Jupiters to Italy, and 15 Jupiters to Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

A second shaping factor was the myth of the nuclear missile gap, a key issue in the 1960 presidential election. According to the myth, the United States lagged the Soviet Union in ICBMs and strategic bombers. Better intelligence in 1961–62, much aided by the first generation of reconnaissance satellites, proved that rather than a gap, the United States had a decisive advantage in strategic weapons. A widely publicized speech in October 1962 by Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric destroyed the myth, but while it lasted, it intensified Soviet-American tensions and contributed to the U.S. deployment of missiles in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

A third shaping factor was more than a century of contentious U.S.-Cuba relations, culminating in the Communist revolution that brought Castro to power in December 1958. Castro's seizure of American oil companies and other corporations in Cuba and his harsh repression of dissent convinced U.S. officials that he was unpredictable and possibly dangerous.<sup>9</sup>

A final shaping factor was the impact of internal politics on the leaders of both countries, and their mutual ignorance of each other's problems. Khrushchev did not understand Kennedy's determination not to look weak, either to Khrushchev or to the American people. Led by Republican New York senator Kenneth B. Keating, domestic critics claimed Kennedy's Cuban policy was timid. They pointed to the Bay of Pigs failure, the lack of progress at the Vienna summit, and the building of the Berlin Wall as signs of weakness. Cuba was Kennedy's domestic Achilles heel. For the first two years of his presidency, Kennedy enjoyed significant Democratic majorities. If he

misplaced Cuban policy, his Democratic party might lose seats, perhaps even its majority, in the November 1962 midterm elections. Khrushchev knew and cared little about Kennedy's political struggles.

For their part, Kennedy and his advisors ignored Khrushchev's domestic troubles. His much-touted agricultural reform program foundered. Despite some successes in space, Russia's ICBM program was grossly inferior in quality and numbers. Soviet missiles were liquid fueled, a process which took several hours. The fueled missiles could only remain launch-ready for a couple of days because the toxic fuel eroded the tanks. The missiles had to be defueled and taken off alert. By contrast, the American Minuteman ICBM and Polaris SLBM used inert solid fuel and were always prepared to launch. Moreover, the Soviets had far fewer ICBMs. Khrushchev implemented a big shakeup in the ICBM program, but even his hand-picked advisors told him it would be years before the Soviets could match U.S. missile technology or ICBM numbers. Lastly, Khrushchev had few diplomatic successes; he needed a win.

#### Four Precrisis Events Worsen Tensions

Besides broad shaping forces, four events worsened tensions and made the 1962 crisis more likely. First was the May 1960 shoot-down over the Soviet Union of an American Lockheed U-2 piloted by Captain Francis Gary Powers. Because the Soviets produced both wreckage and, miraculously, a live pilot, they reaped a huge propaganda windfall. The incident ruined a Geneva meeting between Eisenhower and Khrushchev and scuttled a promised Eisenhower visit to the USSR. Thus, Kennedy took office amid strained bilateral relations.<sup>10</sup>

A second event was the inept Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961. From 1961 to the present, scholars and policymakers alike have judged the Bay of Pigs as a major error by Kennedy, who failed to think through the plan or challenge its faulty assumptions. While all scholars have seen the episode as a failure, pro-Kennedy insiders like Sorensen and Schlesinger

<sup>7</sup> Philip Nash, *The Other Missiles of October: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Jupiters, 1957–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 26–27, 68, 106–7.

<sup>8</sup> Address by Roswell L. Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, before the Business Council at The Homestead, Hot Springs, VA, 21 October 1961, CIA Analysis of the Warsaw Pact Forces, Special Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Irwin F. Gellman, *The President and the Apprentice: Eisenhower and Nixon, 1952–1961* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 543–55.

<sup>10</sup> "Francis Gary Powers: U-2 Spy Pilot Shot Down by the Soviets," CIA.gov, accessed 9 May 2023.

asserted that Kennedy inherited a flawed invasion plan from the Eisenhower administration, and so the blame for failure should be spread around. Their interpretation persisted until quite recently. In his excellent recent study, Irwin Gellman demonstrated that although Eisenhower approved limited training of exiles as early as March 1960, he never approved or ordered an amphibious assault plan for Cuba. The final, failed plan—chiefly a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) product—emerged during the first months of the Kennedy administration. Kennedy never liked the CIA plan and watered it down a bit (which decreased its already minimal chances for success), but in bad judgment let the invasion proceed to its tragic end.<sup>11</sup>

For Khrushchev and Castro, the Bay of Pigs fiasco strengthened their belief that the United States intended to topple the Castro regime. Khrushchev thought that Kennedy was young, inexperienced, and weak, unable to control all the elements of his government, especially the military and intelligence organizations. For Kennedy, the failed invasion soured his trust in the CIA and to a lesser extent his military advisors. He soon replaced CIA director Allen W. Dulles with John A. McCone and forced the resignation of Air Force lieutenant general Charles P. Cabell, the agency deputy director, and Richard Bissell, the deputy director for plans.

Third, the June 1961 Vienna summit gave the leaders powerful but skewed personal impressions of each other. They committed to the summit soon after Kennedy's inauguration, despite Khrushchev's anger at the Bay of Pigs debacle. In a masterful chapter in his book *Summits: Six Meetings That Shaped the Twentieth Century*, David Reynolds concluded that Khrushchev did not want a crisis over Berlin in the summer of 1961. Rather, he hoped to use Berlin as a lever to

obtain a broader settlement of German issues.<sup>12</sup> Kennedy sought to convince Khrushchev of the reasonableness of the American position. Each man thought if he "played it tough, the other man would come around. Each had fundamental blind spots about his adversary."<sup>13</sup> Kennedy expected Khrushchev to be rational, open to argument. But he encountered a rigid ideologue for whom the Berlin issue was vital. For his part, Khrushchev discovered that Kennedy would not be pushed around at the summit table, but he did not completely rid himself of his presummit impression of Kennedy as young and inexperienced, someone who might flinch under certain circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

For some years, it was thought that Kennedy lost the Vienna summit, partly because of his later lament to journalist Joseph Alsop that Khrushchev had rolled right over him. Unprepared for Khrushchev's rants, Kennedy felt postsummit that he had looked weak. But in reality, he made no concessions, as the State Department summary of the 4 June meeting makes clear.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as Martin J. Sherwin explains, Kennedy revamped American foreign and security policies to demonstrate strength to Khrushchev. The president emphasized support for West Berlin in tough speeches, warning that any attempt to block access to West Berlin would be confronted: "The NATO shield was long ago extended to cover West Berlin—and we have given our word that an attack on that city will be regarded as an attack upon us all."<sup>16</sup> He obtained from Congress blanket authority to mobilize Reserve and National Guard units. Presummit, there had been discussion of pulling the obsolete Jupiters out of Turkey and replacing their deterrent value with a Polaris ballistic missile submarine in the eastern Mediterranean. But

<sup>11</sup> Gellman, *The President and the Apprentice*, 555–62. For a similar analysis based partly on extensive interviews with former officials, see Piero Gleijeses, "Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (February 1995): 1–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X00010154>.

<sup>12</sup> David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings That Shaped the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 198. While Kennedy may have been somewhat overwhelmed by Khrushchev's lecturing during the morning meeting of the Vienna summit, he held his own, giving no ground, in a long discussion of Germany and Berlin. Soviet Union, Doc. 87, Memorandum of Conversation, 4 June 1961, 1015, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 5, eds. Charles S. Sampson and John Michael Joyce (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Reynolds, *Summits*, 199.

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, *Summits*, 219.

<sup>15</sup> Soviet Union, Doc. 87, Memorandum of Conversation; and Reynolds, *Summits*, 216, 219.

<sup>16</sup> Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, 176.

postsummit, Kennedy agreed with the State-NATO-DOD recommendation that withdrawal “might seem a sign of weakness” given Khrushchev’s hard line at Vienna. Kennedy let construction proceed on the launch sites. The first site, manned by Americans, became operational in March 1962. In a peculiar coincidence, after Turkish technicians completed training in the United States, the Turks assumed control of the first launch site on 22 October 1962, the day of Kennedy’s naval quarantine speech.<sup>17</sup>

The contentious Berlin Wall dispute constituted the fourth milestone event. In 1949, Britain, France, and the United States merged their occupation zones into the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany. It became fully sovereign on 5 May 1955 and joined NATO four days later. Khrushchev wanted East Germany, set up in 1949 in response, to have the same control inside its borders as West Germany now had. As revealed in Frederick Kempe’s deeply researched monograph, *Berlin 1961*, and in Hope Harrison’s nuanced article, Khrushchev was under great pressure from Walter Ulbricht, the East German leader. East Germany’s Communist economy steadily lost ground to that of West Germany. Young, talented, and educated East Germans fled to the West by passing through East Berlin into West Berlin and then onward to West Germany via the air and ground corridors permitted to the Western powers. From 1945 to 1961, approximately 2.8–4 million people, perhaps 1 in 6 East Germans, escaped to the West. This immense brain drain hindered the economy and was an embarrassing example of the poor conditions in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. To curb the exodus, Khrushchev allowed the East Germans to build a wall through the city. Harrison concluded that “the Wall, although proposed by Ulbricht, ended up being Khrushchev’s compromise solution for preserving East Germany while not provoking the West.”<sup>18</sup>

Though most scholars have praised Kennedy’s handling of Berlin, Kempe criticizes his actions. Well aware of the brain drain problem, in late July 1961, Kennedy told his advisor, Walt Rostow, that Khrushchev might use “perhaps a wall” to curb the refugee flow, but he did not intend to prevent it. He could get NATO to defend West Berlin, he said, but not the eastern part of the city.<sup>19</sup> Kempe judges Kennedy’s Berlin policy as weak and inept: “As the Cuban Crisis would later show, Kennedy’s inaction in Berlin only encouraged greater Soviet misbehavior.”<sup>20</sup> He criticizes Kennedy for signaling that West Berlin was the main concern, thereby freeing Khrushchev to use the wall to cut off East Berlin and stem the outflow.<sup>21</sup>

His criticism is overdone. He is probably correct that when Democratic Arkansas senator J. William Fulbright said in a July 1961 television interview that the East Germans had a right to close the Berlin border and Kennedy did not repudiate the statement, Khrushchev was reassured that the Americans would not react. That is not quite the same as signaling. It is also likely that this was a rare occasion when Khrushchev read Kennedy—and probable American policy—correctly. More importantly, what was Kennedy’s prudent alternative? Soviet and East German forces heavily outnumbered American forces isolated in the middle of East Germany. Resupplying U.S. forces in combat would have been virtually impossible. The Soviet Army was dominant in conventional forces. U.S.-NATO war plans for Berlin relied on the use of nuclear weapons. Compared to the disaster that would have resulted from a Soviet-American nuclear shooting war over Berlin, accepting the wall was a wise if distasteful course of action.

## Why Did Khrushchev Send Nuclear Weapons to Cuba?

While the roots of the crisis lay in previous years, the famous 13 days began on 16 October, when National Security advisor McGeorge Bundy told Kennedy—in his pajamas and reading the morning papers in his

<sup>17</sup> Nash, *Kennedy and the Jupiters*, 101–3.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (New York: Penguin, 2011); and Hope M. Harrison, *Ulbricht and the Concrete ‘Rose’: New Archival Evidence on the Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958–61*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 5 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1993), 62.

<sup>19</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, 293.

<sup>20</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, 489.

<sup>21</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, 490.

bedroom—that a U-2 flight discovered strategic missiles in Cuba. For decades, a central question has been “Why did Khrushchev send strategic nuclear missiles to Cuba?” As Kennedy wrote to Khrushchev during the crisis, “The step which started the current chain of events was the action of your government secretly furnishing offensive weapons to Cuba.”<sup>22</sup>

Regarding Khrushchev’s motives, several explanations are common in the literature.<sup>23</sup> There were several significant possible motives.

1. **A desire to partially rectify the strategic missile imbalance.** The Soviet Union was grossly inferior to the United States in strategic weaponry, possessing only a few dozen missiles that could reach the United States from Soviet bases, and some of those were unready. However, the western Soviet Union held more than 500 intermediate and medium-range missiles that could reach most European targets. Placing some of those in Cuba would double or triple the number of warheads that could reach the United States, though even that amount paled compared to the 1962 American arsenal. Khrushchev had reorganized his missile development teams and, within 10 years, the Soviets would catch up in the ICBM race; but the impatient premier did not want to wait.
2. **A guarantee of Cuban defense.** Khrushchev believed—more strongly than his KGB analysts—that the United States intended to invade Cuba in the near term. After all, the United States had cut diplomatic relations with Cuba, applied sanctions, and attempted the Bay of Pigs invasion. Though Khrushchev did not know the details of Operation Mongoose (November 1961), the CIA program to topple or kill Castro, there were clear signs of an American clandestine program. And the

United States held large military exercises for a possible invasion, including a 1962 exercise in the Caribbean to remove a dictator called Ortsac (Castro spelled backward). Khrushchev was personally fond of Castro, whose spirit reminded him of his own revolutionary youth.

3. **A risky gamble to secure a badly needed win.** There was grumbling in the top ranks of the Soviet Communist party. Khrushchev’s much-touted agricultural reforms had collapsed. He failed to cow Kennedy over Berlin. His ICBM program was a shambles. After Gilpatrick’s speech destroyed the myth of the missile gap, Khrushchev lost that intimidating diplomatic lever. And inside Cuba, supporters of Beijing’s Communist model seemed on the rise. Castro exiled Anibal Escalante, the pro-Soviet executive secretary of the Cuban revolutionary party. Che Guevara, who urged hemisphere-wide Maoist-style insurgency programs, was on the rise. Khrushchev needed something to rebuild his prestige and influence.
4. **A trade for American Jupiter missiles in Turkey.** To Khrushchev, the Jupiters were much more an emotional issue than a strategic one. Fifteen obsolete and vulnerable rockets hardly contributed to the USSR’s strategic inferiority. Rather, their deployment was an insult to Khrushchev’s sense of self-respect—an insult he frequently mentioned to colleagues during the creation of the nuclear arms package. He sought a tit-for-tat payback, calling it “throwing a hedgehog down Uncle Sam’s pants,” forcing Kennedy to accept a deployment close to home, just as Khrushchev endured. As Philip Nash pointed out in his definitive study of the Jupiter deployments, at the Vienna summit Khrushchev strongly displayed his dislike of hostile missiles on Soviet borders. After Vienna, Khrushchev embraced an analogy: if the Americans could put missiles in Turkey and he had to accept that fact, surely Kennedy would have to accept the fact of Soviet mis-

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy to Khrushchev, 23 October 1962, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 11, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most comprehensive list can be found in Munton and Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 22–26. They discuss seven possible motives.

siles in Cuba.<sup>24</sup> Though understandable, the false analogy led him to ignore Kennedy's fear of appearing weak and his consequent insistence on the removal of the missiles.

5. **A trump card to trade for a Western withdrawal from Berlin.** At the beginning of the 13 days, Kennedy and others initially thought the Berlin issue lay behind the missile deployment. Graham Allison's original book suggested this was likely Khrushchev's chief motivation. However, during the crisis Khrushchev never raised the Berlin issue. In his mind, it was not connected to the missile deployment.

How to rank the motivations for deployment? Would any one of the motivations mentioned have been sufficient to trigger deployment? In the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, no motivation appears strong enough to have caused deployment on its own, but Cuban defense and rejiggering the strategic balance are the two strongest. Probably the best we can do, barring new archival discoveries, is declare those two motivations as the chief drivers of the crisis, followed by the other three. Multicausal events are common in history. And as Sergey Radchenko notes, Khrushchev likely had multiple motivations that to his mind may have been inseparable. For example, the strategic missiles might have made it riskier for the United States to attack Cuba, and they simultaneously improved Russian strategic inferiority.<sup>25</sup>

Over the years, the Berlin trump card explanation (no. 5) has all but disappeared, simply because no one has been able to make a persuasive case for it. Partial rectification of the strategic missile imbalance has remained at the top, recently joined by the Cuban defense argument. The third and fourth motivations—a gamble for a win and an emotion-driven trade for the Jupiters, have gained supporters. Both are intertwined with Khrushchev's emotional personality, ideological beliefs, political vulnerabilities, and

cognitive practices. As Robert Jervis put it, "To separate power-political from ideological-identity motives is probably impossible . . . but the latter have gained [the] most currency over the years."<sup>26</sup> (This trend will be discussed below.)

That Khrushchev personally invented the missile deployment plan now seems beyond question. April and early May 1962 were bad times for the premier. Part of Khrushchev's calculations involved the possible weakening of pro-Moscow elements in the Cuban government. Castro had soured on Escalante, an ambitious man well-liked in Moscow because he was cautious about supporting revolutionary movements throughout Latin America, but whose loyalty to Castro appeared weak. Escalante fled to Moscow. He claimed that Chinese influence was growing in the Castro regime. Alarmed, the Kremlin pondered how to retain Castro's confidence. In early April, the Central Committee publicly supported Castro's criticisms of Escalante. The Kremlin's desire to retain Castro's good will peaked during consideration of military aid options.<sup>27</sup>

Khrushchev decided to beef up Cuban defense. Besides the obvious military benefits, this step might also solidify Castro's trust in the Soviet Union. On 12 April 1962, the State Council Presidium approved an initial draft plan of sending over a hundred V-75 anti-aircraft missiles, a battery of Sopka shore-to-ship cruise missiles, and a 650-troop Soviet military training mission. Moreover, Cuba would jump ahead of Egypt in the V-75 delivery queue, receiving the missiles in the next few months.<sup>28</sup>

In May, Khrushchev made an official visit to Bulgaria where, he claimed in his memoirs, he got the

<sup>24</sup> Nash, *Kennedy and the Jupiters*, 100.

<sup>25</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Assessment of New, and Old, Russian Sources," *International Relations* 26, no. 3 (September 2012): 327–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178124519>.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cuban Missile Crisis," in *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal*, eds. Len Scott and R. Gerald Hughes (London: Routledge, 2015), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble": *The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 160–70.

<sup>28</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," 170.

idea of sending strategic nuclear missiles to Cuba.<sup>29</sup> This would further defend Cuba, he reasoned, please Castro, strengthen pro-Soviet elements in Cuba, and help rectify the strategic imbalance with the United States. His assistant, Oleg Troyanovsky, later recalled that “Khrushchev had a rich imagination, and when some idea took hold of him, he was inclined to see in its implementation an easy solution to a particular problem, a sort of cure-all. . . . He could stretch even a sound idea to the point of absurdity.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in his definitive biography of Khrushchev, William Taubman titled the chapter on the missile crisis “The Cuban Cure-all.” The son of a diplomat, Troyanovsky grew up in the United States and graduated from Swarthmore College, but Khrushchev did not ask his opinion about the probable American reaction to the plan, which Troyanovsky believed would be hostile. Nor did the premier consult his KGB/GRU intelligence analysts. He did run the idea by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who told him that deploying nuclear missiles to Cuba would create a political explosion in the United States.<sup>31</sup> Miscalculating, Khrushchev did not change his mind.

Returning from Bulgaria on 21 May 1962, Khrushchev pitched his nuclear deployment idea to the State Council Presidium, meeting only open opposition from his deputy in the Council of Ministers, the practical and cautious Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan. The presidium approved the plan. Defense Minister Malinovsky assigned the planning to a small cadre, including Major General Anatoli Gribkov, whose book, *Operation Anadyr*, is the best account of the Soviet deployment.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Khrushchev apparently thought of the Jupiters as near the Soviet Union's borders or “just over the horizon” on the other side of the Black Sea. Yet, the Jupiters were based at Turkey's Cigli Air Base near Izmir, which fronts the Aegean. Khrushchev's dacha on the Black Sea was at Pitsunda in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia, now in the Russian-occupied province of Abkhazia in the independent nation of Georgia. Pitsunda is roughly 1,600 kilometers from Cigli Air Base. The placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba was far closer to the United States.

<sup>30</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 541.

<sup>31</sup> Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Gen Anatoli I. Gribkov and Gen William Y. Smith, *Operation Anadyr: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago: Edition Q, 1994). Gen Smith's half of the book covers the American military's reaction.

Gribkov and colleagues greatly expanded the April draft plan. As Khrushchev ordered, the strategic missiles now composed the vital heart of the new arms package: 36 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) with a 1,770-kilometer range and 24 IRBMs with a 4,025-kilometer range. Though construction started on the launch facilities for both types in early September, the IRBMs did not make it to Cuba. The missiles were still on the water when the U.S. blockade went into effect, so Khrushchev sent them back home.<sup>33</sup> The Soviets also sent shorter-range, dual-use (conventional or nuclear-capable) systems: 36 Luna surface-to-surface missiles and, for coastal defense against invasion, 80 front cruise (FKR) missiles and 32 Sopka cruise missiles. The Soviets included six nuclear-capable Ilyushin IL-28 light bombers.<sup>34</sup> A final, significant step was adding four mechanized infantry regiments. Soviet personnel totaled about 43,000 by mid-October.

From July to October 1962, the Soviets sent a torrent of ships to Cuba, all monitored by U.S. planes and naval vessels. But the Russians had carefully masked the cargoes, loading the missiles into deep-hulled cargo ships with nothing on the decks to betray their presence. The thousands of troops aboard were kept below deck in the daytime. The first shipments were chiefly the V-75 surface-to-air missile systems and the technicians and construction workers needed to install them. V-75 installation began in August; a U-2 mission of 29 August photographed some of them. The strategic (and other) missiles arrived later; the first MRBMs arrived on 9 September. They were unloaded at night and then, during two to three days, trucked to their launch sites. They were not photographed until 14 October.

For the various missiles, the Soviets sent 164 nuclear warheads to Cuba aboard two ships, one arriving on 4 October and the second on 25 October, just before the blockade went into effect. The war-

<sup>33</sup> The 24 nuclear warheads for the IRBMs did make it to Cuba aboard the *Aleksandrovsk* on 25 October. Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, 200.

<sup>34</sup> Munton and Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 34–38; and Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, 198–201.



heads were hidden in the cargo holds. There were 36 1-megaton warheads for the MRBMs, 24 for the IRBMs, 80 2-to-20-kiloton warheads for the FKR cruise missiles, 12 2-kiloton warheads for the Luna surface-to-surface missiles (added by Khrushchev in early September), 6 warheads for Sopka shore defense missiles, and 6 gravity bombs for the IL-28 bombers.<sup>35</sup>

When American reconnaissance flights finally spotted the strategic missiles on 14 October, analysts and decisionmakers properly assumed that warheads for the strategic missiles were nearby, as MRBMs and IRBMs were useless in a conventional role. But the dispatch of the additional 104 tactical warheads was unknown. These warheads had not been photographed, and more importantly, U.S. civilian and military officials did not presume that tactical warheads had been sent for the FKR, Luna, and Sopka dual-use missiles. After the crisis ended, the Soviets removed their missiles and the U.S. Navy took pictures of them on board the ships. But the Soviets never told the United States that tactical warheads had been on the island. They removed the warheads secretly, and U.S. intelligence did not spot the warheads on their way back to the Soviet Union. American policymakers were therefore unaware of the presence of the tactical warheads for 30 years. In 1992, at a U.S.-Russia-Cuba conference in Havana, General Gribkov revealed their presence, stunning McNamara and other American participants.

Khrushchev's public diplomacy for the deployments was ill-considered, indeed counterproductive. Several aides and Cuban officials urged him to announce simply a conventional (nonnuclear) arms package and the signing of a Soviet-Cuban defense pact. Their thinking was that the presence of more than 40,000 Soviet military with modern weapons—including surface-to-air missiles (SAMs)—would deter a U.S. invasion. Or Khrushchev could have announced the conventional arms and troops, the defense pact, and even the supply of the tactical nukes,

whose shorter range could not endanger the American homeland but could deter an invasion force.

Khrushchev rejected both suggestions, but if Cuban defense was his main goal, he should have accepted them. The United States might have been deterred from any action. But even if the Americans did react, it would surely be less confrontational than the discovery of secretly shipped strategic nuclear weapons that would reach most of the United States. That discovery might well trigger a massive air strike and possibly an invasion. In sum, adding strategic nuclear missiles to the arms package was counterproductive. Instead of making Cuba safer from American intrusion, Khrushchev endangered it.

## The Tardy Timing of Discovery

We now know much more about why the missiles were discovered on 14 October rather than earlier or later. The tardy timing of discovery was critical as it severely limited the menu of options considered by the president and the executive committee. Earlier discovery would have allowed more time for diplomacy, as missile construction would have been in the earliest stages. A later discovery date might have meant dealing with many installed, operational nuclear-tipped missiles. The facts are these: the first MRBMs arrived in a Cuban port on 9 September 1962.<sup>36</sup> After being unloaded at night, they were transported to the first launch site in San Cristobal, where installation began as early as 15 September.<sup>37</sup> A U-2 mission over San Cristobal might have detected the initial MRBM shipload on 15 September.

Thanks to an excellent article by Max Holland followed by a book cowritten with David Barrett, we know that infighting between cautious White House and State Department officials and more proactive CIA and DIA analysts derailed the twice-monthly U-2 flights over the middle of Cuba, a schedule and route that had been followed for months. On 30 August

<sup>36</sup> Plochy, *Nuclear Folly*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> Mary McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis—1962* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), 7. Construction had apparently started a week earlier (before 5 September) on an IRBM site in Guanajay, but the IRBMs themselves were en route to Cuba and in fact never made it to the island, though their warheads did.

<sup>35</sup> Munton and Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 34–38; and Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, 198–201.

1962, an American U-2 strayed over Soviet airspace for more than an hour, as Soviet fighters scrambled to intercept it. On 8 September, the Chinese shot down a Taiwanese U-2 using the Soviet V-75 missile that brought down Gary Powers's U-2 over the USSR in 1960 and which was being emplaced all over Cuba. A small, very senior group headed by Bundy met on 10 September and decided that, at least for the moment, the regular flights over the center of the island were too risky. Crucially, this led to a five-week pause in such flights just when the missiles arrived. Instead of direct overflights, the overly cautious Bundy group authorized only flights on the edge of Cuban territory, with cameras taking less-accurate distant photographs from an oblique angle. Four of these restricted missions were flown: 26 and 29 September and 5 and 7 October. They saw nothing. Meanwhile, the internal pressure from the CIA and DIA for direct overflights grew stronger as reliable human intelligence reports worked their way through the system. The Bundy group finally blessed a direct overflight that, delayed several days by cloudy weather, discovered MRBMs in San Cristobal on 14 October.<sup>38</sup>

Fresh studies have given us a clearer picture of the super-charged reconnaissance efforts undertaken after discovery. William B. Ecker and Kenneth V. Jack ably recount the extensive low-level reconnaissance mission, called Blue Moon, flown by the U.S. Air Force McDonnell RF-101 Voodoos and U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Vought RF-8 Crusaders.<sup>39</sup> During the crisis, the U-2s flew constantly, as well. In his heavily detailed series of books, the latest in 2015, British pilot and U-2 expert Chris Pocock has covered virtually all aspects of that remarkable aircraft.<sup>40</sup> Though an in-

teresting read, another book about the U-2 missions, *Above and Beyond: John F. Kennedy and America's Most Dangerous Cold War Spy Mission*, contains factual errors as well as an unproven claim that the Soviets fired V-75 missiles at a U-2 on 25 October, two days before they did shoot down a U-2 over eastern Cuba, killing the pilot, Major Rudolph Anderson Jr.<sup>41</sup> Besides U-2s and low-level reconnaissance flights, the United States had early October photographs from the new Corona spy satellite, but as Joseph Caddell's recent article explains, the resolution of the early Corona equipment did not allow image interpreters to identify the missile sites. In 1962, the Corona could only resolve objects about 13 feet in diameter, good enough to image airfields and bases. The U-2 was roughly five times better, with resolution of targets as small as two to three feet, permitting analysts to "see" missiles and launchers.<sup>42</sup>

## How Was the Crisis Settled?

Recent writing has not substantially changed the standard interpretation of the Kennedy administration's internal deliberations of options. An airstrike was initially considered, but led by the president, opinion slowly coalesced around a naval blockade. An airstrike would not destroy all the missiles, would kill plenty of Russians, and would leave no room for diplomacy. As a final check, on 21 October, Kennedy spoke personally with Tactical Air Command chief General Walter C. Sweeney, who confirmed that even a large air strike would destroy only 90–95 percent of the strategic missiles. Kennedy announced the blockade in a national television address on 22 October.<sup>43</sup> He thought of the blockade as an intermediate step to pressure Khrushchev to stop missile installation. If that did not work,

<sup>38</sup> David Barrett and Max Holland, *Blind Over Cuba: The Photo Gap and the Missile Crisis* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 8–9. See also Max Holland, "The 'Photo Gap' that Delayed Discovery of Missiles," *Studies in Intelligence* 49, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>39</sup> William B. Ecker and Kenneth V. Jack, *Blue Moon Over Cuba: Aerial Reconnaissance During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Bantam Books, 2012). The Navy squadron was Light Photographic Squadron 62 (VFP-62), and the Marine squadron was Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron 2 (VMCJ-2).

<sup>40</sup> Chris Pocock, *The Dragon Lady Today: The Continuing Story of the U-2 Spyplane* (self-published, 2015). See also Pocock's encyclopedic *50 Years of the U-2: The Complete Illustrated History of the "Dragon Lady"* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Casey Sherman and Michael J. Tougias, *Above and Beyond: John F. Kennedy and America's Most Dangerous Cold War Spy Mission* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018). See Col H. Wayne Whitten, review of *Above and Beyond: John F. Kennedy and America's most Dangerous Cold War Spy Mission*, by Sherman and Tougias, *Air and Space Power Journal*, 22 October 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Caddell, "Corona over Cuba: The Missile Crisis and the Early Limitations of Satellite Imagery Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 31, no. 3 (April 2016): 416–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2015.1005495>.

<sup>43</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Public Address" (speech, Oval Office, White House, Washington, DC, 22 October 1962).

the president would bless air strikes alone or coupled with an invasion.

On Saturday morning 27 October, the executive committee considered a rambling, stream-of-consciousness letter from Khrushchev that ended with a proposal to withdraw the missiles if the United States promised never to invade Cuba. As the Americans pondered, a more businesslike second letter arrived, adding the condition that the United States withdraw the Jupiters from Turkey. For years, it was thought that a worried Khrushchev, alone in his office on Friday night, and perhaps sipping vodka, wrote the first rambling letter. The second letter was thought to come from other members of the State Council Presidium who wanted to extract an additional concession—the Jupiters—from the United States. Scholars are now sure that Khrushchev wrote both letters.

The president and his advisors debated that Saturday whether to answer only the first letter by making the noninvasion pledge—this was the majority executive committee view—or by giving up the Jupiters as well, as the second letter requested. The president clearly favored adding the Jupiters, knowing they were obsolete and thinking the crisis would be more quickly resolved if Khrushchev could portray the Jupiter withdrawal as a win. Repeatedly during the debate, he kept returning to the Jupiter trade. Interrupting the discussion, the Air Force reported that a U-2 on a routine air-sampling mission had strayed into Soviet airspace. It was soon learned that the Soviets had shot down Major Anderson's U-2 over Cuba. Kennedy had previously declared that a U-2 shoot-down would trigger an attack against the offending V-75 site, and possibly other V-75 sites. But now he decided against a strike that would kill Soviets and escalate the crisis just as Khrushchev offered a deal. No one could explain, however, why the Soviets destroyed the U-2 just as they reached out; the two actions seemed contradictory.

In fact, the U-2 shoot-down was not ordered by Moscow. Khrushchev had forbidden his forces to shoot down a U-2, thinking such a move would escalate the crisis. But the crew of a V-75 battery in eastern Cuba tracked Major Anderson's U-2. Worried that

the photographs would be used in the invasion everybody thought imminent, the crew called headquarters. General Issa A. Pliyev was out, but his deputy, Lieutenant General Andrei Grechko, authorized the shoot-down. Defense Minister Malinovsky later told Pliyev that the action had been “too hasty,” but no officer received punishment.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, the executive committee agreed that Kennedy's reply to Khrushchev should be only a non-invasion offer, with no mention of the Jupiters. That formal letter was sent, and the president adjourned the committee at 1945. Kennedy asked Robert Kennedy and a few of his innermost circle to remain, telling them he intended to offer the Jupiter withdrawal as a secret pledge to be carried out in four or five months. He swore them to secrecy.<sup>45</sup> Kennedy sent his brother to pass the offer to Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and stress the need for an answer within one day. Khrushchev and the State Council Presidium, meeting Sunday morning 28 October in Moscow, accepted the deal. The main crisis was over, though touchy issues between Cuba and the Soviet Union, and between them and the United States, took several months to work out.<sup>46</sup>

While the overall picture of events during 16–28 October has not changed much, historians have provided more granularity about several key aspects. An example is a well-known but inaccurate scene in the 2000 movie *Thirteen Days*, when McNamara and Admiral George W. Anderson, chief of naval operations, angrily clashed over how the Navy would execute the tracking and “hold down” of Soviet submarines. When blockade emerged as a likely option, Kennedy asked questions about implementation methods. Following up, McNamara and his deputy, Gilpatric, fretted over the Navy's procedures for signaling Soviet submarines to surface. To be sure the Soviets would understand

<sup>44</sup> Munton and Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, 442. Besides his brother Robert, the president asked seven others to remain: Bundy, Sorenson, McNamara, Rusk, Gilpatric, Ball, and Thompson. In direct questioning, occasionally before Congress, several advisors—McNamara and Rusk among them—lied for years that there had been no secret deal to end the crisis.

<sup>46</sup> For a fresh look at the resolution of what might be called the post-crisis stage, see David G. Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

the signals, he ordered the Navy to prepare a signaling system, called Submarine Surfacing and Identification Procedures. Passed to the Kremlin during the crisis, there is no evidence that it reached the captains of the four nuclear-armed, diesel-powered *Foxtrot*-class submarines already in Cuban waters. As Svetlana Savranskaya explained, signaling American warships would drop harmless explosive devices along with a specified underwater sound to advise the subs to surface.<sup>47</sup> Until they did, the warships would hover above the subs, dropping the signaling charges and pinging with sonar. The subs attempted to evade until they were forced to surface to recharge batteries and ventilate the putrid internal air.

In the real meeting, McNamara did not berate the admiral, but there was indeed a confrontation. According to Gilpatric, he and McNamara “weren’t being told anything; we were just being assured that this overall type of action was being implemented, and the navy would take care of everything.” They went to the admiral’s office and found

a phalanx of fifteen or twenty, at least, navy brass all lined up around him. We were the two civilians. And Anderson was very high in color and obviously very, very angry about the whole [sic], what he regarded as intrusion. And he listened to a whole series of questions from McNamara that he hadn’t got answers to. And then Anderson just sort of exploded. And I don’t know whether he said goddamn it, but he used some very strong expletives to the effect that, “This is none of your goddamn business- This is what we’re here to do. We know how to do this. We’ve been doing this ever since the days of John Paul Jones, and if you’ll just go back to your quarters, Mr. Secretary, we’ll take care of this.” And

during this tirade I could see the color rising in McNamara’s countenance.<sup>48</sup>

Visibly angry, McNamara controlled his temper, and as he and Gilpatric walked back to their offices, the secretary of defense muttered, “That’s the end of Anderson. I’ll never. . . . He won’t be reappointed, and we’ve got to find a replacement for him. As far as I’m concerned, he’s lost my confidence.” But in the short run, McNamara got what he wanted. After the clash, every half hour the chief of naval operations sent an officer to the secretary’s office to brief any details he wanted.<sup>49</sup>

Most writers once considered executive committee deliberations a highly rational process of evaluating options under Kennedy’s purposeful guidance. With the recordings released, most scholars now agree that, at a minimum, the process had nonrational elements. Sociologist David R. Gibson’s fascinating “conversational analysis” of the deliberations examines how the way participants talked to each other influenced decisions. He analyzes what people said overall and in individual sentences. Did they interrupt or talk over each other? Did they coalesce around certain participants or band together against others? In particular, Gibson explores how blockade became the option of choice even though no one could make a case that it alone would force Khrushchev to withdraw the missiles. Gibson argues that the dynamics of the meetings and the need to reach consensus at each stage required the [executive committee] to avoid, or cease, consideration of some of the risks: the risk of hav-

<sup>47</sup> Svetlana V Savranskaya, “New Sources on the Role of Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (2005): 249–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500088312>.

<sup>48</sup> Roswell L. Gilpatric oral history interview, JFK#2, 27 May 1970, JFKOH-RLG-02, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (JFKPLM), 59–61. Note that p. 60 in the source is mistakenly placed after p. 50; the transcript reads 50, 60, 51–59, 61. McNamara’s later account jibes with Gilpatric’s. Adm Anderson remembered the incident differently.

<sup>49</sup> George W. Anderson Jr. oral history interview, JFK#1, 25 April 1967, JFKOH-GWA-01, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, JFKPLM. Anderson was not reappointed as chief of naval operations, but Kennedy appointed him as ambassador to Portugal. For a third and quite different account based on the 1989 recollections of Adm Isaac Kidd Jr., then a captain and one of Anderson’s senior aides, see Robert M. Beer, “The U.S. Navy in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *U.S. Naval Academy Trident Scholar Report*, 1990, 161–66.

ing to bomb operational missiles if the blockade failed; the risk that letting the *Bucharest* pass [the blockade] would leave Khrushchev with the impression that Kennedy was weak; and the risk that by accepting Khrushchev's first offer and ignoring his second, the first real path out of the crisis (like-for-like missile withdrawal) would be sacrificed.<sup>50</sup>

Though Kennedy initially favored an air strike, he came to favor a blockade because it would minimize loss of life, allow Khrushchev time to reflect, and still allow an air strike or invasion if Khrushchev would not remove the missiles. Gibson concludes that, aware of the president's leanings, the executive committee debate adjusted to them.

Scholars have clarified three important aspects of the worst day of the crisis—Saturday 27 October—when Kennedy and Khrushchev were jolted by unplanned events into the realization that they were sliding over the brink. First, as mentioned, there is now scholarly consensus that Khrushchev wrote both letters the executive committee assessed. After proposing missile withdrawal in exchange for a noninvasion pledge, Khrushchev reflected for several hours and decided he could obtain the Jupiter withdrawal as well. Why the delay? Why did Khrushchev not simply make both demands in a single letter? Just after sending the first letter, Khrushchev read a translation of Walter Lippman's 25 October column in the *New York Herald-Tribune* suggesting "a face-saving agreement" that would swap the Jupiters for the Soviet missiles in Cuba.<sup>51</sup> Khrushchev promptly wrote the second letter and directed it be announced by Radio Moscow, so Washington would receive it around the time that

the first cabled letter arrived. It is possible, though unproven, that with Kennedy's blessing, an administration official informed Lippman that the missile swap was a feasible option, hoping that the columnist would give Khrushchev a hint.<sup>52</sup>

Erratic and unpredictable behavior by Soviet officers and Castro made Khrushchev feel events were slipping out of his control, forcing him to consider how to end the crisis. Soviet troops built and staffed the V-75 missile batteries. Falsely overconfident in the degree of camouflaging done at the MRBM and IRBM sites, Khrushchev forbade the V-75 units from shooting at the U-2 flights, which might trigger American counterstrikes. Yet, Soviet generals, convinced that an invasion was imminent, destroyed Major Anderson's midday flight on 27 October.

Likewise convinced of impending American landings, Castro stormed over to the Soviet embassy and, using Soviet ambassador Alexander Ivanovich Alekseyev as notetaker, dictated a letter intended to stiffen Khrushchev's spine. Castro asserted that any invasion would end up with a massive exchange of nuclear missiles. Therefore, the Soviets should launch a full-scale nuclear strike should America invade, eliminating the American danger forever "through a legitimate act of self-defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be." Taken aback, Alekseyev asked if Castro wanted him to write that "we should be first to launch"? Castro replied that he did not want to say that directly, but that is definitely the meaning that Khrushchev correctly took away from the missive.

Coupled with the unordered U-2 shootdown, Castro's emotional, irrational letter contributed to Khrushchev's growing sense of unease and to his ultimate compromise. Khrushchev later wrote to Alekseyev that "aside from other factors, your telegram also

<sup>50</sup> David R. Gibson, "Decisions at the Brink," *Nature* 487, no. 7405 (5 July 2012): 27–29, <https://doi.org/10.1038/487027a>. Gibson's full study is *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). See also Gibson, "Avoiding Catastrophe: The Interactional Production of Possibility during the Cuban Missile Crisis," *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 2 (September 2011): 361–419, <https://doi.org/10.1086/661761>.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Lippmann, "Blockade Proclaimed," *New York Herald-Tribune*, 25 October 1962.

<sup>52</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 485–88; Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, 384–85; and Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 199. Sherwin notes that during an executive committee meeting Ball mentioned that he often talked with Lippman. However, Ball's opposition to the Jupiter trade—calling it "simply a fishing expedition in Moscow"—makes it unlikely that he carried a message to Lippmann. See Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 164.

played a role in our being forced to accept Kennedy's conditions. . . . So we made this decision [to remove our missiles from Cuba] literally a day later."<sup>53</sup> In fact, Alekseyev's "head's up" telegram reached Moscow at 1400 on 27 October, and the completed letter arrived at 1300 the following day.

Though even before the U-2 shutdown and the Castro letter, the premier had sent his two crucial messages to Kennedy, the deal had not been closed. The frightening sequence of the U-2 shutdown and the apocalyptic letter made him even more determined to cement the agreement with Kennedy, which he did on Sunday by accepting the public noninvasion pledge and Kennedy's secret promise to remove the Jupiters.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding nuclear weapons in Cuba, American civilian policymakers, senior military leaders, and intelligence specialists failed in three respects. First, they overlooked evidence—which they had already collected and assessed—that the Soviet Union had secretly deployed nuclear-tipped weapons outside its borders once before. In 1959, the Soviets deployed medium-range ballistic missiles in East Germany, north of Berlin, for six months, apparently to bring the United Kingdom within range. Though unknown to American intelligence at the time, CIA analysts later connected the dots and in January 1961 published a report that strangely never surfaced during the Cuban crisis. The CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate of 19 September 1962 claimed that deployment of strategic missiles would be unique, an aberration in Soviet policy, and that there were no signs of such a policy change. The writers had, for some reason, not seen the January 1961 memo. Similarly, in the executive committee and other deliberations, no one mentioned the previous deployment to East Germany. If that episode had resurfaced in September, as it should have, analysts might well have wondered if the Soviets were doing it again, this time in Cuba. They would

have increased, not decreased, direct U-2 overflights, probably leading to earlier discovery of the missiles.<sup>55</sup>

A second failure was blindness to the implications of the deployment of short-range nuclear-capable missiles, such as the FKR's and Lunas. When reconnaissance discovered the construction of the MRBM and IRBM sites, leaders and advisors assumed that nuclear warheads for those missiles had also been sent, though the United States could not yet identify the warhead storage sites. Hence, nuclear capability of the strategic missiles was factored into American consideration of options such as air strike, blockade, or diplomacy. But in the case of the FKR's, Sopkas, and Lunas, though they were discovered by air reconnaissance, U.S. officials failed to evaluate the impact on an American invasion if these missiles carried nuclear warheads. Not until after Khrushchev's 28 October concession on missile withdrawal was the topic discussed, and then not very carefully. Why?

Motivated thinking was an important reason, skewing the analysis of contingencies—things that might happen. When pushing for invasion, Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis E. LeMay, Army Chief of Staff Earle G. Wheeler, and others did not imagine that there might be dangerous unknowns. *Known unknowns* exist in poorly understood situations. An adept planner or analyst knows a knowledge gap exists, but for various reasons, usually a lack of information, cannot close the gap, leading decisionmakers—correctly—to hedge. By contrast, *unknown unknowns* emerge from completely unpredictable directions that are not pos-

<sup>53</sup> Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, 439; and Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 203–5.

<sup>54</sup> Alekseyev statement in Blight, Allyn, and Walch, *Cuba on the Brink*, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 194–95; and Matthias Uhl and Vladimir Ivkin, " 'Operation Atom' The Soviet Union's Stationing of Nuclear Missiles in the German Democratic Republic, 1959," *CWIHP Bulletin*, no. 12/13 (Winter–Spring 2001), 299–307. Deployed by the beginning of 1959, the missiles were repositioned to Kaliningrad, Russia, in August 1959. Uhl and Ivkin believe U.S. intelligence detected the initial deployment, but the evidence is murky. Amy Zegart notes that a January 1961 report from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the State Department assessed that the Soviets had deployed medium range ballistic missiles in East Germany between 1958 and 1960, but this report was not integrated into the 19 September 1962 CIA report. Zegart notes that Kennedy asserted in an executive committee meeting that the Cuban deployment was the first time the Soviets had deployed nuclear weapons outside the Soviet Union. Amy B. Zegart, "The Cuban Missile Crisis as Intelligence Failure," *Policy Review*, no. 175 (October–November 2012): 23–39, FN2.

sible to discern in advance. Sometimes called “black swans,” they seemingly emerge from nowhere.

The presence of tactical nukes was not a black swan but a known unknown. LeMay and others should have evaluated the probable presence of tactical nukes when creating their best military advice, to use the common term. But because of their motivated thinking—a conviction and strong desire to invade to completely eliminate the Communist threat—the Joint Chiefs of Staff failed to temper its pro-invasion advice with an assessment of tactical nukes on the island. Their failure could have been catastrophic if the Soviets used tactical nukes against the landing force.

Civilian analysts did no better. On 26 October, two days before the crisis ended, John McCone showed the president a photograph of a Luna and noted that such weapons were dual use, indicating the possible presence of “tactical nuclear weapons for fighting troops in the field.”<sup>56</sup> This significant statement disappeared into the mist. Nobody pushed for a follow-up, certainly not the invasion advocates.

More understandable was a third failure—a lack of imagination by all analysts. The CIA team that created the 19 September Special National Intelligence Estimate could have been more imaginative in trying to assess Khrushchev’s feeling of Soviet weakness (a feeling he had for many months), which might have led them to look for signs of a risky gamble to try to rebalance relative nuclear power. Admittedly, this was a difficult task. Even Khrushchev’s colleagues in the Presidium found him unpredictable, often surfacing—and pushing—strange new ideas. Moreover, as Amy Zegart persuasively recounts, the CIA’s process for separating the wheat from the chaff of human field reports was slow, though Sherman Kent, the legendary director of analysis, defended it as careful and professional.<sup>57</sup> The CIA had field agents in Cuba who sent

reports; CIA analysts also debriefed Cuban refugees at a special facility in Opa-locka, Florida. It must be remembered that the strategic weapons did not arrive until mid-September; Serhii Plokhly concludes the first batch arrived 9 September. Of the roughly 1,000 human reports and debriefs received after that date, perhaps only a dozen or so were significant. But in the three to four weeks after the missiles arrived in Cuba, the CIA processed and circulated a few reliable human intelligence reports that suggested unusual activity near San Cristobal in western Cuba. These reports helped proactive officers in the intelligence community lobby successfully for the resumption of direct overflights, which promptly discovered the missiles.

## Could the Crisis Have Led to Nuclear Exchanges?

The crisis could easily have led to nuclear exchanges. Yet, even with the discovery more than 30 years after the crisis that there were at least 104 tactical nukes plus 60 warheads for the MRBMs and IRBMs on the island and that the four *Foxtrots* being harassed by the U.S. Navy had nuclear-tipped torpedoes, some observers are reluctant to accept that we came close to nuclear exchanges. They say the obvious: “Nobody knows what would have happened.” This is a dodge, a cop-out, for whenever we assess alternatives or counterfactuals of any event, we never know what would have happened. But counterfactual analysis allows deeper understanding of events. The relevant task is to examine the forces at play and assess probabilities. Admittedly, counterfactuals must be handled carefully. Some are much more realistic, relevant, and useful than others.

In the Cuban crisis, relevant and realistic counterfactuals suggest a likely nuclear exchange. Had Kennedy and Khrushchev not settled the crisis on 28 October, Kennedy intended to order air strikes and an invasion to remove the strategic missiles. He warned the military to be ready to implement that plan on

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Blanton, “The Cuban Missile Crisis Just Isn’t What It Used to Be,” *CWHP Bulletin*, no. 17/18 (Fall 2012): 18, FN33. See also Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 145 and endnote on 381.

<sup>57</sup> Zegart, “Intelligence Failure,” 23–39; and Sherman Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Re-lived,” *Studies in Intelligence* 8, no. 4 (Spring 1964). Declassified in 2013. Possibly because relevant documents are still classified, no scholar has yet explained how U.S. intelligence missed the assembly of strategic missile units in the USSR and their transport to Cuba.

29 or 30 October. How do we assess the most likely counterfactuals had invasion occurred?<sup>58</sup>

First and most dangerous was a Russian intent to use tactical nukes to destroy the 5,000-person Marine garrison and facilities in Guantánamo. As Michael Dobbs revealed in his ground-breaking account, the Russians deployed a detachment of three FKR missiles armed with 14-kiloton nuclear warheads (Hiroshima-size weapons) near Guantánamo to await launch orders. As Dobbs makes clear, it is probable that an American invasion meant nuclear destruction of Guantánamo and thousands of Americans dead.<sup>59</sup> Very likely, the U.S. response would have been use of nuclear weapons, probably against several Russian missile sites or, if identified, against storage areas for Russian nuclear warheads. Whether a tactical nuclear exchange inside Cuba would have escalated to a strategic weapons exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States is less likely, but certainly possible, as emotional and muddled thinking (both had already appeared in earlier stages of the crisis) distorted a more rational response.

Second, should an invasion have occurred, it is quite likely that the Soviets would have used tactical nukes to defend their units. Why else had the tactical weapons been sent to the island? In addition to strategic missile forces and anti-air missile units, the Soviets had four infantry regiments, which, more capable than the Cuban forces, would have been the main targets of U.S. landing forces. Initially the Soviet commander, General Issa Pliyev, had authority to use the tactical nukes for defense against landing forces, which is why shore-to-ship missiles with warheads had been sent to Cuba. Kennedy warned on 7 September that if offensive missiles were found to be in Cuba, “the gravest consequences” would occur. Deterrence theory suggests that deterrence increases if defenders clearly communicate red lines as well as the consequences that would result if the red lines were

violated. But instead of making Khrushchev cautious, the warning made him more committed to giving his conventional forces powerful weapons to defend against an American attack. He ordered additional tactical nuclear weapons delivered to Cuba; they were immediately loaded on the *Indigirka* and sent speedily to the island. Although Moscow retained authority for their use, Khrushchev would have been under great pressure to permit tactical nukes to defend against an invasion force killing thousands of Soviet soldiers. Again, why send tactical nukes to the island if they were never to be used under any circumstances? And why increase the number of tactical warheads after Kennedy’s warning? If the tactical warheads, both the first and second batches, were intended to deter an invasion, why did Khrushchev not announce their deployment? Rather, the warheads were intended for use depending on circumstances.

Third, there was the possible, even probable use of the weapons on the initiative of local commanders. By 10 October, most warheads had arrived in Cuba and were stored near the launchers. General Nikolai Beloborodov, who managed the warheads, “took partial measures to move the warheads closer to very remote combat units to reduce the amount of time required for their transfer once we received the special orders [to use them].”<sup>60</sup> Once the invasion began, while under attack—the Russians expected an invasion plan to include air strikes on missile sites followed by ground assault—local Soviet commanders would have mated warheads and missiles. It seems logical that they would defend themselves with the most powerful weapons they had. As Beloborodov later wrote, “It was clear that in the conditions of the existing balance of forces in conventional arms, which was ten to one against us, there was only one way we could repel a massive assault—by using tactical nuclear weapons against the invaders.”<sup>61</sup> A good test case

<sup>58</sup> A variation would have been air strikes on 29 or 30 October as stand-alone actions rather than as part of the invasion. With this scenario, Khrushchev would have had to accept the air strikes and certain loss of Russian lives and promptly agree to withdraw the surviving missiles, or the United States would invade.

<sup>59</sup> Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 178–81, 205–6.

<sup>60</sup> Nikolai Beloborodov, “The War Was Averted (Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba, 1962): Memoir of Lieutenant General Nikolai Beloborodov, head of the Soviet nuclear arsenal in Cuba,” 1998, trans. Anna Melyakova and Svetlana Savranskaya, National Security Archive, George Washington University, 6, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Beloborodov, “The War Was Averted (Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba, 1962),” 10.



was the shutdown of the U-2 on 27 October, an act forbidden by Moscow. But stressed local commanders, believing the U-2 was gathering data on the latest Soviet positions for the imminent invasion, approved the shutdown. This kind of decision under intense stress would have occurred repeatedly across Soviet forces if the U.S. invaded. It is quite likely at least a few of those local decisions would have brought tactical nukes into play. The warheads for the FKR missiles had no security devices and could be launched by a lieutenant and a couple of technicians.<sup>62</sup>

Nor would have American airstrikes been able to take out the Russian tactical warheads before the invasion began. As Beloborodov noted, “When I met with the Americans 30 years later, they were very interested to find out about the places where the nuclear warheads were actually located in Cuba in 1962. It is obvious that they did not have accurate information, which in the event of a U.S. military action would have excluded [the possibility] of impact on the warheads.”<sup>63</sup>

Finally, regarding a fourth dicey scenario, recent analysis has lowered the probability of a submarine destroying an American warship with a nuclear-tipped torpedo. The USSR sent four *Foxtrot* submarines to Cuban waters. Each carried a single nuclear-tipped torpedo (range 19 km) for defensive purposes, along with 21 conventional torpedoes. As noted above, the U.S. Navy tracked and pressured these subs using so-called practice depth charges—similar to a hand grenade—to signal that the subs should surface. Commanders would use Morse code sonar signals to transmit “IDKCA,” which meant “rise to surface.” To be considered as nonthreatening under the new U.S. Navy procedures, the subs had to surface and sail an easterly course. Unaware of this new American guidance and unsure if U.S.-Soviet combat had started, the submarine captains attempted to evade the pursu-

ers and remained submerged as long as possible. The temperature inside the subs rose beyond 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Officers and crew were fainting from the heat and bad air. On one destroyer at least, U.S. sailors encased practice depth charges in cardboard, which kept the trigger from popping until the cardboard disintegrated deeper than normal. Detonating beside the subs rather than far above them, the magnified sound was like being in an oil drum struck with a sledgehammer.<sup>64</sup>

It now appears that Soviet submarine *B-59*—the *Foxtrot* often associated with use of a nuclear torpedo—was not quite as close to firing as previously thought. Forced to surface with exhausted batteries, noxious air, and the concussions of the practice depth charges, a frazzled Captain Valentin Savitsky climbed into the conning tower to face blinding searchlights, a Lockheed P2 Neptune firing .50-caliber warning shots on each side of the bow, and loudspeaker demands from hovering American destroyers. It is unclear whether these procedures were the ones described to McNamara. Believing he was about to be attacked, Savitsky ordered his watch officers below and yelled that he was going down to launch his nuclear torpedo. Fortunately, one officer, loaded with signaling equipment, briefly blocked the narrow ladder down into the submarine. This delayed Savitsky long enough for the submarine flotilla’s chief of staff, Captain Vasili Arkhipov, on board *B-59* and still in the conning tower, to calm Savitsky by pointing out that the American actions were not an attack but aggressive signaling. *B-59* quickly signaled the American units to stop their harassment. Monitored by the Navy, *B-59* remained on the surface, recharging batteries and cooling the submarine’s interior for more than a day.<sup>65</sup>

In the first three scenarios above, tactical nuclear use by the Soviets was likely and so was an Ameri-

<sup>62</sup> Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, 206.

<sup>63</sup> Beloborodov, “The War Was Averted (Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba, 1962),” 6. Beloborodov said “the warheads for the R-12 medium-range missiles were located in the Bejucal region (Romanov), the warheads for the operational-tactical ‘FROG’ were in the region of Managua (Vasyukov), the warheads for the front cruise missile (FKR) in the region of Santiago de Cuba (Trifonov); there were nuclear warheads in other places as well.”

<sup>64</sup> Blanton, “The Cuban Missile Crisis Just Isn’t What It Used to Be,” 14.  
<sup>65</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya, “The Underwater Cuban Missile Crisis at 60,” Briefing Book #808, National Security Archive, George Washington University, 3 October 2022, 1. This briefing digital book contains Arkhipov’s 1997 account of the incident. See also an article by the captain of another *Foxtrot*: Capt Ryurik A. Ketov, “The Cuban Missile Crisis as Seen Through a Periscope,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2005): 217–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500088304>.

can nuclear response. If the United States invaded, all three scenarios would have occurred simultaneously, increasing the probability that at least one of them would have triggered nuclear use. There is ample reason to regard the Cuban Missile Crisis as a nuclear near miss.

## The Role of Cognition in Leader Motivation

The nature of the cognitive processes used by the participants played a key but still only partly understood role in the crisis. Scholars increasingly find the concept of strategic empathy useful. Strategic empathy is not sympathy but an understanding of the personality and circumstances of the adversary and how those factors motivate or constrain adversary actions. The lack of strategic empathy by both leaders helped cause the Cuban crisis by preventing them from properly assessing their opponent's political pressures and circumstances.<sup>66</sup> Instead they "mirror-imaged," using their own experience and beliefs to explain their adversary's motives.<sup>67</sup> Until the final days of the crisis, for example, Khrushchev wrongly believed Kennedy would accept the strategic missiles in Cuba just as he had been forced to accept the Jupiters in Turkey. Khrushchev gave little thought to the possibility that Kennedy might see the missile deployment as a disastrous internal political blow and react strongly. Kennedy did a bit better, particularly as the crisis wore on. The executive committee transcripts reveal Kennedy often asked questions about Khrushchev's motivations.

<sup>66</sup> Strategic empathy is not sympathy but rather the ability to understand someone's underlying drivers and constraints. An excellent introduction is Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Munton and Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 30–31, 100. Mirror-imaging is a heuristic, a mental shortcut. When analysts confront the challenge of building a mental model of an adversary but have little real information, they sometimes attribute to the adversary the same tendencies and pressures they would have. Observing an adversary action, they conclude that the motivations and drivers for that action would be the same—a mirror image—of what American decisionmakers would do if placed in the same circumstances. Mirror-imaging can be useful if the adversary thinks and plans the same way as the analyst but is misleading when the adversary is operating under different and unknown pressures and operating principles. Mirror-imaging rests on the fundamental assumption that the adversaries being analyzed think like the analysts themselves.

A powerful reason for Soviet misbehavior in Cuba was not because Khrushchev thought Kennedy was weak on Cuba. More important were Khrushchev's fears of Soviet strategic and political weakness, as well as his own psychological and political need to strengthen his position in the State Council Presidium. Kennedy's strong stance on Berlin, his signaling via the Gilpatric speech that the United States had nuclear superiority, and his military and clandestine efforts to demonstrate an ability—if not a clear intent—to topple Cuba increased Khrushchev's worries.<sup>68</sup>

In early 1962, no longer able to play the missile gap card and fearing American invasion of Cuba, Khrushchev tilted toward a policy of extreme brinkmanship, his only remaining tool to influence events. He developed the idea of the meniscus as a model for his dangerous brinkmanship. When a glass is very slowly filled with water, the surface tension of the water might allow a meniscus, or small ring of water, to protrude very slightly above the lip of the glass. Khrushchev's idea of a meniscus was not scientifically sound, but it explained his intention to practice brinkmanship so extreme that it approached but did not quite "spill over" into conflict. In short, he would accept a lot of risk.<sup>69</sup> It is important to note again that the meniscus strategy emerged from weakness. Alas, akin to touching the meniscus slightly above the rim of a glass of water, his brinkmanship soon spilled over the edge in the Cuban crisis. Kennedy and his advisors did not sense Khrushchev's weakness; they saw only his bullying and provocations.

Recent progress in political psychology provides new approaches to explain Khrushchev's risky nuclear deployment. Though Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky developed prospect theory in 1979, in recent

<sup>68</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, "Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated," *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 4 (October 1990): 471–92, 480, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1990.tb00103.x>.

<sup>69</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 414–15.

years international relations scholars have used it.<sup>70</sup> Simply stated, prospect theory says that humans worry much more about great potential loss than about significant potential gains. Therefore, they adopt riskier actions to prevent major loss than to achieve gains. Khrushchev was operating in the domain of potential loss, though of course he was unaware of his internal cognitive processing. To prevent loss of influence and control he took a risky step—the conventional arms buildup—then doubled down with an even riskier step by adding strategic nuclear arms to the package, partly to slightly remedy the strategic imbalance and partly to prevent the potential loss of Cuba and with it, Soviet prestige and his own prestige. One might assume that Khrushchev's feeling of weakness would spur caution and curb risk-taking. Instead, his fears led to increasingly risky behavior to avoid the further loss of influence and prestige.

In their insightful article “The Pitsunda Decision,” Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali make this point clearly.<sup>71</sup> In response to the charge by Senator Kenneth Keating and other Republicans that his Cuban policy was timid, Kennedy released the statement on 4 September 1962 declaring that “the gravest issues would arise” if the Soviets placed offensive weapons in Cuba.<sup>72</sup> Kennedy hoped to deter Khrushchev from sending such armaments to Cuba, but as Fursenko and Naftali show, his statement had the opposite effect. Learning of Kennedy's warning while vacationing at his Black Sea dacha at Pitsunda in Georgia on 7 September, Khrushchev doubled down, adding tactical nuclear warheads for the short-range missiles. As noted above, this decision greatly increased the risk of nuclear weapons use.

## The Influence of Emotion in Decision-making

In the past 10 years, political psychologists have made great progress in illuminating the hidden role of emotion in foreign policy decision-making. For years many foreign policy analysts have used a Rational Actor Model (RAM) as their default approach.<sup>73</sup> RAM assumes that states and the leaders of states assess options by rationally weighing the pros and cons and choosing the option that provides the most advantage. In other words, states or the leaders of states use *expected utility theory*—another concept from economics—to compare options and choose the one with the most benefit. RAM is a deliberative, logical approach.

What role might emotion or biases play? In his recent book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman describes cognition as having two systems, or tracks. System One is unconscious heuristics, prizing speed, gut feelings, hunches, emotions, and the like. System Two is consciously slow, deliberative measurement of pros and cons. System One allows a big role for emotion and biases; System Two is akin to RAM.

But some of the latest writing in political psychology claims that emotion plays a role in every decision or perception, even in the supposedly factual deliberation of Kahneman's System Two. Emotion unconsciously influences what one accepts as evidence, how one interprets that evidence, and what action one chooses. In short, emotion is everywhere, skewing factual assessment, minimizing or maximizing threat perception, fostering emotions such as fear and anger.<sup>74</sup>

Khrushchev and Kennedy were both influenced by emotion. Khrushchev's decision to send strategic

<sup>70</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (1979): 263–91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>. A classic article is Jonathan Mercer, “Prospect Theory and Political Science,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8, no. 1 (15 June 2005): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.8.082103.104911>.

<sup>71</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “The Pitsunda Decision,” *CWIHP Bulletin*, no. 10 (March 1998): 223–27.

<sup>72</sup> Document 411 Editorial Note, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 10, *Cuba, January 1961–September 1962*, ed. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997).

<sup>73</sup> For an extensive explanation of the Rational Actor Model, see Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 13–47.

<sup>74</sup> Janice Gross Stein's masterful overview is a good place to start: “Threat Perception in International Relations,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2d. ed., ed. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 364–88. Kahneman's two systems may well operate simultaneously, meaning both emotion and rationality would somehow blend. This suggests that complicated decisions have both emotional and rational elements. An excellent case study is Jonathan Mercer, “Emotion and Strategy in the Korean War,” *International Organization* 67, no. 2 (April 2013): 221–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000015>. See also Jonathan Mercer, “Human Nature and the First Image: Emotion in International Politics,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9 (2006): 288–303, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800091>.

nuclear weapons to Cuba was partly an emotional payback for the U.S. deployment of Jupiters to Turkey. Kennedy's anger at Khrushchev when the missiles were discovered was partly emotional, reflected in his purported first reaction: "He can't do this to me." Castro's mid-crisis letter to Khrushchev urging use of the nuclear weapons was clearly emotional. Emotion underlay the motivated thinking of LeMay and other hard-core invasion advocates. When one views the details of the Cuban crisis through this "emotion is everywhere" lens, one finds plenty of examples. Richard Ned Lebow, who along with Janice Gross Stein was one of the first to explore emotional aspects of the Cuban crisis, argues that "Khrushchev acted out of a sense of desperation. He made a high-risk gamble in the belief that inaction would further erode Soviet strategic and foreign policy interests." Lebow asserts that "Khrushchev also acted out of anger. His emotional arousal clouded his judgment and made empathy with President Kennedy and the constraints under which he [Kennedy] operated all but impossible. It also ruled out a thorough and dispassionate evaluation of the likely repercussions of a Cuban missile deployment."<sup>75</sup>

While Kennedy did not understand Khrushchev's motives before the crisis, during the crisis he sought to understand the Soviet leader's reasoning. He sometimes escaped the mirror-imaging problem that afflicted Khrushchev. The executive committee transcripts often reveal Kennedy raised the question of Khrushchev's motivation and asked others for their assessment.<sup>76</sup> He knew that if he could correctly understand Khrushchev's real motives, he could devise a more effective policy to counter them. By the end of the crisis, Kennedy was the leading peacenik in the room, convinced that a settlement was best reached by giving Khrushchev a way out that allowed him to portray the settlement as a win.

Among several excellent, recent studies of the role of emotion in threat perception and decision-

making, Robin Markwica's remarkable book *Emotional Choices* stands out because it examines the Cuban crisis as one of his two case studies (the other is the 1990–91 Gulf War). Markwica asserts that an emotional model operates simultaneously in the decision-maker's mind with two other approaches, a rationalist model (RAM) and a social constructivist or identity model. The rationalist model uses expected utility, advantages and disadvantages, and cost-benefit calculations to formulate decisions. An identity or social constructivist model privileges the ideas, accepted norms and standards, and practices of the decision-maker's society or nation. Markwica's emotional model postulates that five emotions—fear, anger, hope, pride, and humiliation—influence decision-making. He assesses the importance of emotions in eight major Khrushchev decisions in the missile crisis. He finds that fear influenced Khrushchev in half of his decisions. Markwica wisely resists the temptation to claim fear as the most important determinant in those decisions. Rather, he persuasively explains why the decisions cannot be fully understood without including emotional aspects.<sup>77</sup>

Markwica correctly observes that difficulty of use is a disadvantage of an emotional model. A RAM analysis uses factual evidence, mainly material factors, to weigh expected utility. A RAM analyst examines such known or collectable material factors as the size, location, and capability of troop deployments, the location of missile installations, and weapon ranges and destructive power. From those factors, the RAM analyst makes rational inferences to uncover motives and drivers. But an emotional model requires much more information about a leader or leadership group's patterns of thought, fears, hopes, and other emotions.

<sup>75</sup> Lebow, "Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis," 490.

<sup>76</sup> Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997).

<sup>77</sup> Robin Markwica, *Emotional Choices: How the Logic of Affect Shapes Coercive Diplomacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018). See also Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Robert Jervis, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler, "Redefining the Debate Over Reputation and Credibility in International Security," *World Politics* 73, no. 1 (January 2021): 167–203, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887120000246>; and Janice Gross Stein, "The Micro-Foundations of International Relations Theory: Psychology and Behavioral Economics," *International Organization* 71, S1 (2017): 249–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000436>.

Much of that information is unknown when a crisis arises and is not immediately collectable by intelligence operations. Only later, as recordings, letters, oral histories, and archival documents emerge is it possible to more accurately assess the impact of emotion, hence Markwica's justifiable caution about claiming too much for an emotional model.<sup>78</sup> That said, despite unsatisfactory access to Russian and some American archival material, enough is known about the Cuban missile crisis to demonstrate that emotion played an important role.

### **The Inseparable Nature of Military Advice and Political, Cognitive, and Emotional Factors**

This event demonstrates the crucial relationship between military force and diplomacy. It mattered that the crisis occurred just off American shores, so that immense military power could be assembled quickly. Moreover, that military capability had been well-exercised in the preceding year, most prominently in the spring 1962 Caribbean exercises. And from Army general Maxwell D. Taylor, his senior military advisor, and General Walter Sweeney, commander of the Tactical Air Command, Kennedy got accurate, as opposed to overly optimistic, estimates of the percentage of strategic missiles that airstrikes might destroy. Kennedy ultimately chose blockade while pursuing a diplomatic solution and simultaneously readying airstrikes and an invasion. American conventional military dominance subtly but powerfully shaped the decisions made by both sides during the crisis.

It also shows the failure of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to provide high-quality military advice. Already mentioned was the failure of the Joint Chiefs as well as civilian analysts to imagine that an invasion might encounter tactical nuclear weapons, which would hugely escalate the crisis. Military advice in a sudden international crisis may need to be different from military advice in a theater campaign.

In the Cuban missile crisis, best military advice and diplomatic and political advice were inseparable.

Airstrike, invasion, blockade, diplomatic bargaining, or simply accepting the Soviet missile deployment (inaction) each required assessment of a broad range of nonmilitary as well as purely military factors. Assessing Soviet motivation for missile deployment was crucial to finding a suitable give-and-take. A strongly motivated Soviet Union would require a major American compromise in a deal, or perhaps the Soviets would not deal at all. Best military advice had to consider the mindset and motivations of Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders. How would they react? Would pressure on Cuba cause the Soviets to attack Berlin or some other vulnerable point? Would an airstrike trigger a broader nuclear exchange? Could the missiles be removed by negotiation rather than by force? And so forth.

What Kennedy got from the Joint Chiefs was advice derived from predisposition toward—or a belief in—certain kinds of actions regardless of circumstances and context. An example was the Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting with the president and McNamara in the cabinet room of the White House on Friday, 19 October. At this stage, Kennedy was considering the air strike and blockade options. Stating that an American response to the missile deployment was necessary, he said, “The question is, what kind of response?” General LeMay said he did not share the view that an invasion of Cuba would trigger a Soviet invasion of Berlin. The Soviets would not move if Kennedy simply told Khrushchev that invading Berlin meant war. “This blockade and political action I see [as] leading to war. . . . This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich. . . . I just don't see any other solution except direct military intervention, right now!” Admiral Anderson said the Navy could execute a blockade but that he did not think “there is any solution to the Cuban problem except a military solution. . . . It's the same thing as Korea all over again, only on a grander scale.” General Earle Wheeler insisted that airstrikes, blockade, and an invasion were needed: “I feel that the lowest risk is the full gamut of military action by us.” LeMay asserted: “I think that a blockade and political talk would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as a pretty weak response to this.

<sup>78</sup> Markwica, *Emotional Choices*.

And I'm sure a lot of our citizens would feel that way too." The president observed that a limited airstrike would be less of an escalation than a major airstrike coupled with invasion and made the key point that "we have to assume that the Soviet response to each of these would have to be different." After Kennedy and McNamara left the room, and the Joint Chiefs were alone—and unaware that Kennedy's taping system was still running—they vented their displeasure about the president's reluctance to commit to a full-scale military action. Marine Commandant David M. Shoup praised LeMay for pulling the rug from under Kennedy's arguments: "When he says 'escalation,' that's it. If somebody could keep them from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal . . . that's our problem. You go in there and friggin' around with the missiles. You're screwed." "That's right," LeMay growled, "You're screwed, screwed, screwed." Kennedy later told his aides Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers that LeMay was dead wrong in his certainty that Khrushchev would do nothing if the United States bombed the missiles and killed many Russians. "These brass hats have one great advantage in their favor," the president remarked. "If we listen to them and do what they want us to do, none of us will be alive later to tell them they were wrong."<sup>79</sup>

General officers creating the best military advice during the Cuban missile crisis needed the same range of skills as policymakers and civilian analysts. The Joint Chiefs of Staff should have seen that the military options on the table had potentially significant political and diplomatic consequences that in turn would affect future military options, but their advice showed no signs of such reflection. Senior civilians had the converse requirement of making policy with a sensitive assessment of military factors. The intertwining of all essential factors—military, political, cognitive/emotional, etc.—in strategic level decision-making is the essence of true "Jointness."

Other senior commanders understood this imperative. Vice Admiral Alfred G. Ward, who ran the Navy's blockade forces, noted that although in war-

time blockades local commanders decided which enemy ships would be boarded and searched, in the Cuban crisis "we asked instructions on whether or not we should stop a Soviet ship." Ward agreed with making the decision "at a political level because it was a political decision rather than a military one."<sup>80</sup>

## Where Are We Headed?

The Cuban missile crisis will always be worth studying because we know more about it than we do almost any other crisis, so we have greater insight into the challenges faced by the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba. This is not to say that we know everything that we need to know. As more documents are unsealed, especially in Russia and Cuba, many aspects of the crisis can be further fleshed out. For example, both deterrence failure and success marked the crisis. Khrushchev was not deterred by Kennedy's warnings of "the gravest consequences" of sending offensive weapons; indeed, the premier doubled his gamble, sending more tactical nuclear warheads. Kennedy was not deterred by the possibility that U.S. action in Cuba would provoke a Soviet assault on Berlin. Both men were deterred from stepping over the brink by their justified fear of the existential threat of global nuclear war. Further scrutiny of the Cuban crisis may sharpen our understanding of deterrence theory.

In addition, continued work by political psychologists in the hopefully larger pool of primary sources may give us greater insights into the most basic level of analysis: the cognitive processes of leaders and leadership groups, and the role of emotions in their decision-making.

Last, analyzing the crisis with a broader range of analytical tools, some derived from the intelligence community, will surely bring rewards. For example, premortem analysis is an excellent technique for stimulating imagination and fresh thinking by analysts. The technique of placement described by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May in their classic *Thinking in Time*, coupled with greater use of strategic empathy,

<sup>79</sup> Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 67–71.

<sup>80</sup> Alfred G. Ward oral history, U.S. Naval Academy, as quoted in Robert M. Beer, *The U.S. Navy in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Trident Scholar Project Report no. 165 (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Academy, 1990), 159.

could prove useful in assessing when, in the future, leaders might be making an atypical, out of the norm move, such as when Khrushchev decided to send strategic nuclear weapons to Cuba.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Freedom Press, 1986), 157–95.

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