

CUBAN MISSILES: A WARNING ON THE UNCERTAINTY OF WAR

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Abstract: With the arrival of Spring 2022, war in Europe has again erupted, millions have been displaced, thousands have perished and the President of the United States expresses the worry that, with a false move, the use of nuclear weapons may be engaged to usher in World War III; fears that tortured President Kennedy in the Fall of 1962. Some say that history does not illuminate or, at best, the light cast is like that reflected by the ocean from the stern lantern of a moving ship. But, if we are to know the dangers attending the present, must we not learn from dangers past and draw some solace from how the horrors then in prospect passed? With war, as with crime, the stage is set for serial violations of human rights, but, with war, it is an industry; one apparently justifiable since even at common law to kill in the heat of battle is lawful. And the war, pregnant with dangers, continues with no seeming end.

Hence, this essay concentrates on the objective truth that can be gleaned from situations of conflict only after the passage of decades; on how close the world previously came to catastrophe; and takes as its theme the terrible duality in human nature whereby without decency unravelling the senseless and prevailing over deceitful and egotistical urges, the hands that write these words and the eyes that read them might have passed into oblivion. This concerns history. But historical essays perhaps fit within a law journal because law is there to protect against crisis; but in matters of geo-political advancement international regulation may quickly be sidelined as may its prime guardian institutions, the United Nations and World Court. Besides that, law is a study of human behaviour and its amelioration: hence, this discussion involves the law's subjects as much as the judgment of any court.

An ongoing threat

Since the invention and first use of nuclear weapons in 1945, humanity has lived under multiplying swords of Damocles suspended over the continuation of civilization by, first of all, one, then two and now multiple, powers disposing this apocalyptic threat.¹ Any nation may seek, according to the principle enunciated by von Clausewitz, to pursue politics through war. Hence, in Ukraine in 2022, political demands are now being furthered through horrendous destruction. Violently opposite views of the right and wrong of how two nations should conduct themselves are to be settled through the menace of humanity's destructive instinct. Having started down that path, the aggressor might heed the German philosopher's warning as to the incalculable influences of emotion, chance and disappointed pride which quickly make the calculation of outcome obsolete.² Where the current European conflict will terminate has morphed from what was once a matter of strategy by the initiators into speculation as to the outcome. Once started, as Tolstoy warned, the course of war becomes uncertain where conventional weapons are used,³ but where a nuclear arsenal is brought into play threatens outcomes that will destroy not only the combatants and their innocent

¹ Andrew Roth and others, 'Putin signals escalation as he puts Russia's nuclear force on high alert', *The Guardian* (28 February 2022).

² See generally, Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (1832), and Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (OUP 2008).

³ Tolstoy's example was of Prince Andrei seizing the standard at the battle of Austerlitz and charging forward; Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1867), Part III, xvi.

populations but, potentially, civilization. Even for a small neutral country, like Ireland, no declaration of non-combatant status can insulate against the generational catastrophe that a clash of nuclear arms must entail.

It is the purpose of this article to consider in the light of the principle of the uncertainty of war how events of sixty years ago in Cuba could have proven how the varying factors of personality, morality, prestige and conflict of ideology could then have destroyed much of the world and, it follows, given the wrong conditions, how that threat arising from the human personality continues.

More obviously than in the more occluded belief-systems of our 21st century when, post-World War II, Soviet Russia and the United States of America both espoused and pursued the evangelisation of opposing ideologies, the entire world lived in fear. That threat of nuclear war loomed so large in 1962 that Ireland began to make preparations for potential fallout, taking what limited steps were available to the State to minimise panic among the population.⁴ Every house was issued with a booklet telling the population what to do in the event of war, including pre-storing water by filling up the bathtub, stockpiling canned foods and taking the hinges off doors to use as makeshift shelters.⁵ Of course, these measures were largely symbolic, though a token of the level of fear. Personal recollection is of both fascination at the weird steps expected of every family and a realisation of the improbability of survival.

With Soviet missiles installed by stealth in Cuba in mid-1962,⁶ fear had crystallised into imminent danger for Americans. Those rockets were a mere 90 kilometres from the US landmass,⁷ with major cities now well within reach of the USSR's medium-range ballistic missiles.⁸ This was not mere emotion, as in Ireland's case, but survival. The United States had approximately 75 nuclear-capable B-52s in the air during the brief period during which a DefCon 2 security stance was established by President John FitzGerald Kennedy.⁹ The world then did, in fact, come close to nuclear warfare. In the crisis there were multiple instances that, given other circumstances, or other leaders, or other perhaps chance factors, could have been escalated into all-out atomic warfare between the Soviet Union and the United States. These small factors – a decision to postpone responding with military retribution to a downed US pilot, the coincidental knowledge of Cyrillic Morse code by an educated US naval officer, fighter jets running out of fuel – all contributed to the eventual de-escalation of the conflict: but these starkly demonstrate the precarious nature of what was

⁴ Public fear of nuclear weapons and nuclear technology has always been extremely high, particularly in relation to fear of fallout; Toni Perrine 'The Godzilla Factor: Nuclear Testing and Fear of Fallout' (1997) 16(1) *Grand Valley Review* 19.

⁵ The Civil Defence Services first issued a booklet to its own members in March 1962, entitled *Methods of Protection*, and then a shortened version of it was sent to every household in Ireland the next year after the crisis of October 1962.

⁶ There were 158 Soviet nuclear warheads in place in Cuba by the time the United States imposed the military blockade on 24 October 1962. See Robert Norris and Hans Kristensen, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis: a Nuclear Order of Battle, October and November 1962' (2012) 68(6) *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 85.

⁷ Thomas C Reeves, *A Question of Character* (London: Arrow 1991) 253.

⁸ Soviet MRBMs transported to Cuba were primarily R-14s and R-12s, the latter of which had an operational range of 2,080 kilometres, with the former capable of striking targets up to 3,700 kilometres away. See Serhii Plohky, *Nuclear Folly* (London 2021) 75.

⁹ Stephanie Ritter, 'SAC During the 13 Days of the Cuban Missile Crisis' (*Air Force Global Strike Command AFSTRAT-AIR* 19 October 2012).

then only a threatened war where parties are separated by an iron curtain, or today, by the conflict of world-views which that barrier symbolises.

Our world mid-20th century

The world was then split in two and both sides were armed to the teeth with these ultimate weapons. They faced each other, afraid to fight save in proxy wars, but determined to spread their ideologies. In the Soviet Union, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev had succeeded Stalin, the man who had occupied central Europe, supposedly to protect Russia from another surprise German or French attack across the still strategically important north-European plain. But Khrushchev did not have the almost absolute executive power of President Kennedy of the United States; he was technically the presiding member of the Soviet Presidium, with one vote. In Korea, Laos, Vietnam, Angola, and South America, revolutionary movements were aided by the competing apparatchiks of the Cold War conflict, proffering advice and often both weapons and ‘advisory’ military personnel.¹⁰ Civil wars, or the severing of nations, most obviously North and South Korea, North and South Vietnam, East and West Germany, were the outcome of these proxy confrontations. But the superpowers took care to never directly clash. Explicitly, the terms of NATO membership for West Germany decreed that an attack on Berlin, deep in the heart of East Germany, constituted an attack on the USA and all NATO members.¹¹ While European countries lived under the threat of a potential invasion from Soviet forces, the distances between the Americas and the Soviet Union felt too distant for any immediate threat of war to arise. As President of the United States, John Kennedy was determined to keep it that way.¹² While he had ultimate authority, unlike Khrushchev, he was also a prisoner of history; inheriting the Monroe doctrine,¹³ whereby, like the Soviets in central Europe, the US would have the vast American continent, north and south, within its sphere of influence. Many of the countries of central and south America had corrupt, but capitalist, governments that were pro-US investment but, at the same time lacked liberty and in reality had no interest in developing their economies for their populations for fear of undermining their own rotten house.¹⁴ Fulgencio Batista’s Cuba was a paradigm of such regimes.¹⁵

A provocative miscalculation

US hegemony in the western hemisphere remained unthreatened until 1959, when Fidel and Raul Castro led a non-aligned revolutionary movement that ousted the Batista regime. The government of Fidel Castro was, at first, welcomed by the Americans, but friendship waned

¹⁰ This was primarily based on the movements’ ideological siding with either capitalism or communism; see Richard Saull, ‘Locating the Global South in the Theorisation of the Cold War: Capitalist Development, Social Revolution and Geopolitical Conflict’ (2005) 26(2) *Third World Quarterly* 257.

¹¹ Article 5, *The North Atlantic Treaty* (1949).

¹² Even as close to the crisis as 29 August 1962, Kennedy told the press that he was against invading Cuba due to the ‘serious consequences’ such a step would have for many people. See Thomas C Reeves, *A Question of Character* (London: Arrow 1991) 366.

¹³ See Mark T Gilderhus, ‘The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications’ (2006) 36(1) *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 5.

¹⁴ Anne-Marie Angelo and Tom Adam Davies, ‘American business can assist [African] Hands: the Kennedy administration, US Corporations, and the cold war struggle for Africa’ (2015) *The Sixties* 8(2), 1.

¹⁵ Mafia leaders were in fact recruited by the United States to assassinate Castro in 1961, in part for the promise of ‘restoring the extremely lucrative gambling, drug, and prostitution operations they had enjoyed under Batista’. See Thomas C Reeves, *A Question of Character* (London: Arrow 1991) 257.

as the regime moved leftwards into the arms of the Soviets, to ‘widespread surprise’.¹⁶ It is unclear whether the United States actively lost influence over the new government, or if Castro instead elected for his own path by tying his fate to that of the Soviets.¹⁷ Regardless, it was clear that Kennedy, spurred on by his personal and widely-known abhorrence of communism, was growing concerned as to the rising influence of the Soviet Union within Cuba.¹⁸ Castro had to go. One of the CIA plans to oust the Castro regime centred on exiles in the United States invading the island and leading a consequent counter-revolution. This uprising, of course, never materialised, but the provocation initiated different measures that were undertaken to secure the Soviet stronghold close to the United States mainland.

In April 1961, Kennedy inexplicably allowed the Bay of Pigs operation to go ahead, with troops invading from Guatemala and Nicaragua. The initial invasion was a total failure, with Castro’s forces ‘killing or capturing almost the entire brigade’.¹⁹ When given the opportunity to launch an attack by the US Air Force to support the ostensibly independently-acting ground troops, thereby escalating and revealing the true nature of the conflict, he declined. Instead, US air support for the invaders was limited to six unmarked planes with orders never to fire on Cuban forces.²⁰ The attempted invasion was a total failure. As a measure of politics continued through war, the fiasco supported Khrushchev’s belief that Kennedy was a much less formidable leader than supposed.²¹ Even more significantly, the Cuban administration became deeply concerned with domestic security, and saw in Soviet arms protection against future encroachment by the United States.²²

Consequently, Khrushchev began to fixate on the Cuban issue, seeing the island off Miami as a necessary ideological stronghold in the western hemisphere and going so far as to ‘identify his leadership of the communist world and the prestige of the Soviet Union with the health of Cuba and Castro.’²³ On an official visit to socialist Bulgaria, the Soviet leader recalled that ‘one thought kept hammering away at my brain: “what if we lose Cuba?”’²⁴ Nuclear weapons were the ultimate safeguard against another US scheme, so that with the establishment of the Soviet army in Cuba, Russian power would secure the revolution and rebalance the global scales in favour of the Soviets. As Khrushchev himself put it, referring to the placement of nuclear warheads proximate to American territory: ‘why not fling a hedgehog at Uncle Sam’s pants.’²⁵ This scheme was further seen as a method of matching

¹⁶ V A Borodaev, ‘Position of Cuban Leadership During the Cuban Crisis’ (2013) *International Affairs and World Politics* 14.

¹⁷ For an insider’s viewpoint see Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F Kennedy in the White House* (Mariner Books 1963) 198-204.

¹⁸ Thomas C Reeves, *A Question of Character* (London: Arrow 1991) 253.

¹⁹ Lucien S Vandenbroucke, ‘The “Confessions” of Allen Dulles: New Evidence on the Bays of Pigs’ (1984) 8(4) *Diplomatic History* 365.

²⁰ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 96.

²¹ The KGB was so convinced that Kennedy’s opponent in the 1960 election, Richard Nixon, would be a more effective adversary that KGB aides actively met with the Kennedy team in an attempt to help their campaign; Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 20.

²² Fear of a US invasion was the primary reason that Cuba was receptive to the presence of nuclear missiles on its territory; Jim Rasenberger *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro and America’s Doomed Invasion of Cuba’s Bay of Pigs* (New York 2012) 364.

²³ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 73.

²⁴ Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 49.

²⁵ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 171.

the immediate threat of nuclear war created by US missiles installed by stealth under President Eisenhower from 1959 on the Soviet border with Turkey and Italy, assuring the United States first-strike capability in the event that war did break out.²⁶ Seventeen missiles had been discovered by the Soviet secret service on the Turkish border in 1962, in a nearly operational state, thereby raising the time constraints on Khrushchev to counter-tilt the balance of terror in the direction of the USSR.²⁷

Technology gap

A further mutual antagonism was the technology gap between the two great powers, particularly in relation to their nuclear warhead delivery systems. A significant point of Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign was what he wildly claimed was the significantly greater nuclear arsenal of the USSR in relation to the United States. This was entirely unfounded. In fact, by 1962, it was estimated that 'Washington's nuclear superiority was on a ratio of about 16 to 1'.²⁸

The United States had also at this stage developed the 'Minuteman' missile, a new inter-continental ballistic missile that supposedly required only a minute to prepare for launch, as opposed to the number of hours that were required fuel the older missiles in the Soviet arsenal.²⁹ Similarly, the US Navy's Polaris missile, an intermediate range missile capable of being launched from a submarine, was beyond the technical capabilities of the Soviets at this time.³⁰

The Soviet nuclear arsenal was, nonetheless, more than sufficient to utterly devastate any continent within its range, but the United States remained beyond their ballistic scope from occupied Europe, or even from Kamchatka.³¹ By placing missiles in Cuba, the Soviet military would be capable of striking not only major European cities within an hour's preparation, but also Washington, New York and Chicago. By installing the arsenal of atomic missiles sent to Cuba in 1962, the Soviets enabled ballistic systems that covered almost the entire US mainland.³² Estimates of loss in the event of a nuclear strike were of one third of the American population, mirroring the losses from the Civil War, from which, Kennedy remarked, his country had yet to recover.³³

Tilting the strategic balance

The installation of missiles in Cuba altered the strategic balance of weapons of mass destruction, then overwhelmingly in the United States' favour, by tipping it towards the

²⁶ Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1965) 690.

²⁷ The Jupiter missiles that the United States had stationed in Turkey were in fact not only the key concern of Khrushchev in establishing a similarly powerful arsenal near the US border, but were also viewed as potential causes of a future attack, more likely to draw an attack, rather than deter one; Barton J Bernstein, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?' (1980) 95 *Political Science Quarterly* 99.

²⁸ Thomas Reeves, *A Question of Character* (Free Press 1991) 365.

²⁹ Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 50.

³⁰ Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 14.

³¹ Serhii Plokhy *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 136.

³² Raymond Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press 1989) 208, table 1.

³³ Serhii Plokhy *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 29.

Soviet Union.³⁴ In lieu of the ability to keep up with the research speed of the United States nuclear programme, with former space programme founder Sergei Pavlovich Korolev's R-7A rockets requiring 20 hours for fuelling and, despite his brilliant inventiveness, remaining largely unreliable,³⁵ Khrushchev sought to establish short- and medium-range missiles closer to the United States, thereby eliminating any advantage held by Washington. However, a key difficulty arose in transporting physically enormous weaponry to an island off the coast of Florida. The Soviet plan, codenamed Operation Anadyr, envisioned sending 50,874 military personnel to Cuba, all transported by ships also carrying missiles and nuclear warheads.³⁶ But matters of crucial detail were not addressed in the initial proposal – what mattered to Khrushchev and to the Soviet Presidium was the overarching objective, rather than the vital logistical minutiae of implementation.³⁷ Schlesinger comments: 'It was a staggering project – staggering in its recklessness, staggering in its misconception of the American response, staggering in its retention of the ground rules for co-existence among the superpowers which Kennedy had offered in Vienna.'³⁸

General Issa Alexandrovich Pliyev was appointed commander of the Soviet task force. This had been sent ahead to determine locations for missile silos and launch sites, very preferably covered to ensure that they would not be spotted by American U2 spy planes. When pressed on the results of the survey, to the disappointment of the planners, the task force stated that it would be impossible to secretly deploy rockets on the island due to the lack of natural shelter by way of forest, adding that 'there's no place to hide a chicken, let alone a rocket.'³⁹ Still, the Soviets were undeterred, and proceeded to send Soviet merchant ships 'stuffed with soldiers and military equipment.'⁴⁰ A huge degree of secrecy was enforced on board, and the measures implemented to ensure secret transport, included covering portholes between decks with canvas blinds. For the military personnel, this led to temperatures reaching 50° C.⁴¹ KGB officers were also placed on board the ships to prevent defections, and to ensure that secrets were not banded about on ships such as the *Omsk* and the *Nikolai Burdenko*.⁴²

But the increased traffic to Cuba, along with the inevitable construction required to prepare sites appropriately for launching missiles, meant that the American secret service quickly noticed the missile build up, without being certain as to their exact nature. Domestic political pressures forced the US to investigate these findings further, but with little result: only defensive weapons were reported as detected as of August 1962.⁴³ These included surface to air missiles, of use for shooting down invading warplanes, which was tolerable: just about. But putting the United States under threat of aggression was a different matter.⁴⁴ In

³⁴ Donald M Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (Bantam Doubleday Dell 1995) Ch 5 and 510.

³⁵ Serhii Plokhyy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 51.

³⁶ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 188.

³⁷ *ibid* 180.

³⁸ Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1965) 681.

³⁹ Serhii Plokhyy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 72.

⁴⁰ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 193.

⁴¹ Serhii Plokhyy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 90.

⁴² *ibid* 92.

⁴³ During a campaign trip in Indiana, Kennedy was forced to address criticism from Senator Homer E Capehart as to his failure to launch a full-scale invasion of Cuba; Thomas C Reeves, *A Question of Character* (London: Arrow 1991) 369.

⁴⁴ *ibid* 366. John McCone, CIA Director, quickly determined that the surface to air missiles were in place to protect long-range missile installations.

September, President Kennedy told the press that if Cuba should ever become ‘an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union’ that he would order ‘whatever must be done’ to protect the security of the United States and that of its allies.⁴⁵ At the time he spoke, unknown to him, his ideological adversary was well advanced in preparing bases in Cuba for the launch of Soviet intermediate-range and medium-range ballistic missiles. Ultimately, in mid-October 1962, the President of the United States learned, through unarmed U2 photographic reconnaissance flights, that missile bases were being constructed under Soviet tutelage in Cuba.⁴⁶ It was impossible to characterise these weapons as merely defensive. Ground to air missiles would defend Cuba, certainly, but ballistic missiles were designed to travel and deliver nuclear bombs at a 1,000 mile distance. In response to learning this, Kennedy initially favoured immediate bombing of all the sites. But, he was unaware that nuclear warheads had already been installed on the missiles.

Furthermore, fears in Washington centred on the response of the Soviets to any destruction of missiles in Cuba with the obvious issue of the unavoidable loss of life to the military overseers. In particular, concerns were raised regarding the prospect of an invasion of West Berlin, seen by Khrushchev as ‘a rotten tooth which must be pulled out’.⁴⁷ Such a decision would start a war against NATO, per Article 5 of the Treaty, thereby constituting an attack on the United States and prompting retaliation on a much greater scale.⁴⁸

American discovery

Whatever the consequences, Kennedy, facing pressure domestically and from NATO allies, could not allow this alteration in the strategic situation. In his radio and television address,⁴⁹ breaking the news of the crisis on Monday 22nd of October, the President made it non-negotiable that the missiles must be removed.⁵⁰ There was some resistance within the White House to a confrontational response,⁵¹ given the stakes of nuclear war, with some considering this to be too similar an act to Eisenhower’s placement of nuclear missile in Turkey to warrant escalation. However, within the President’s *ad hoc* committee of advisors, ‘ExComm’, consisting of a number of ‘hard-liners who were determined not to give an inch to Khrushchev or Castro’,⁵² it is possible that Kennedy was seen by some as not taking sufficient steps to respond to the perceived Soviet aggression.

⁴⁵ Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 37.

⁴⁶ Serhii Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 131.

⁴⁷ Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge 1997) 168 and 285. For Khrushchev’s attitude, see Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1965) 337.

⁴⁸ Kennedy acknowledged that any such invasion would leave only one option open to the United States – the launch of nuclear weapons; Serhii Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 152.

⁴⁹ John F Kennedy, Oval Office Address on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 22 October 1962 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrPkIYb9iog>> accessed on 2 March 2022.

⁵⁰ The text of the address, and of the Kennedy-Khrushchev communications, is in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press 1992) 1151-1154. See Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 275-282.

⁵¹ The Guardian and a group of intellectuals headed by Bertrand Russell attacked the quarantine as an escalation and considered that the Soviet action merely demonstrated the threat the Russians were under from NATO missiles; Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1965) 698-699.

⁵² Thomas Reeves, *A Question of Character* (Free Press 1991) 370.

The preferred option of the leaders of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was to initiate a surprise strike against the missile bases before they became operational, as they then falsely believed, coupled with a blockade to prevent further offensive weapons being delivered.⁵³ Most military leaders were also in favour of a full scale invasion, taking control of the entire island and ousting the Castro regime.⁵⁴ This was viewed by those who clung to the spirit of the Bay of Pigs invasion as the last moment at which such an invasion could take place, as, with the missiles in place, and upon becoming operational, this would effectively deter any such invasion and secure the Cuban communist regime. Ultimately, this calculation proved correct, with the Castro regime remaining in place long after many other Soviet-allied regimes collapsed.

Destructive power

The total destructive power involved on both sides of the crisis should not be underestimated. On a visit to Washington in 1962, a British delegation told the White House that it would take less than a dozen nuclear bombs to completely destroy their island.⁵⁵ Significantly greater magnitudes of warheads were present in Cuba, and in the arsenal of the United States. There was a total of 99 nuclear bombs in Cuba during the crisis, including 45 1-megaton warheads; 12 2-kiloton warheads; 6 12-kiloton bombs for delivery by aircraft; and 36 12-kiloton warheads for cruise missiles, or the equivalent of 45,500 kilotons of TNT. Another calculation is that the individual bombs equalled 333 kilotons total; while the bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were each ‘only’ 14 kilotons.⁵⁶

The blockade: two letters

On Monday, 22 October, after much agonised debate, Kennedy instituted what was considered the minimal response: a blockade of naval traffic in and out of Cuba, a move ratified by the Organisation of American States.⁵⁷ The following Wednesday, Soviet ships approaching Cuba stopped or turned back. This was viewed in Washington as the Soviets ‘blinking’, losing the game of nuclear brinkmanship that had been taking place throughout October 1962.⁵⁸ This was a crossroads point for the crisis, with Senator Richard Russell highlighting an influential shade of opinion that the US response would determine whether the nation would continue to be viewed as a first-class power.⁵⁹ The following day, the captain of the dry cargo ship *Mednogorsk*, at the time carrying weaponry to Cuba, received orders to turn back towards its home port, with other Soviet ships similarly turning back over the course of the week.⁶⁰

⁵³ Serhii Plokhyy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 174.

⁵⁴ Andrei Kokoshkin, ‘Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Context of Strategic Stability’ (Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs 2012) 16.

⁵⁵ Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1965) 195.

⁵⁶ The calculations are made on the basis of information in Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 217. See also 242–243, 247, 285–286, 299 and 315.

⁵⁷ Robert Kennedy, *13 Days: The Cuban Missiles Crisis* (W. W. Norton & Co 1969) gives the relevant details and documents and see also Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F Kennedy 1917-1963* (London: Penguin 2013) Ch 16.

⁵⁸ Robert Powell, ‘Nuclear Brinkmanship with Two-Sided Incomplete Information’ (1988) 82(1) *American Political Science Review* 155.

⁵⁹ Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 258.

⁶⁰ Serhii Plokhyy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 179.

At 6pm on the subsequent Friday, an emotional letter arrived from Khrushchev, offering to withdraw missiles from Cuba in return for a guarantee that the United States would respect the communist regime's sovereignty.⁶¹ Indicating a clear victory for the Kennedy administration in this conflict, concerns remained that the terms of the offer was 'too vague to constitute the basis for a settlement.'⁶² In addition, many felt that further action would be required in order to remove a pro-Soviet regime so close to America if these demands were met, though this would undoubtedly be an easier prospect in the absence of nuclear missiles. Despite its apparent signalling of American victory, the Joint Chiefs of Staff nonetheless continued to recommend multiple air strikes against the missile sites,⁶³ notwithstanding the fact that this would inevitably have killed hundreds of Soviet soldiers.

Just 12 hours later, a more structured letter arrived from Moscow,⁶⁴ this time with a much less appealing offer, involving the withdrawal of offensive weapons from Cuba in return for the removal of the US missiles from Turkey. Rather than further negotiate with Khrushchev as to the terms of the second proposed agreement, Kennedy chose to ignore the second letter, and accept the proposal in the first one.⁶⁵ Surprisingly, this strategy was successful, and put the wheels in motion for the eventual removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba and the oversight of this process by the United States. In fact such UN oversight did not happen as Castro refused, with the Soviet and US side cobbling a compromise of ships carrying back missiles to Russia leaving their holds open to enable photographic surveillance on the high seas.

The first solution worked primarily because both leaders were terrified of nuclear war and the devastating loss that would be caused by atomic conflict. Khrushchev's decision to remove the missiles from Cuba was not of benefit to the Soviet Union, but the risks of defying the United States and accepting the potential of an outright conflict between the superpowers made this course of action a 'value-maximising choice'.⁶⁶ Negotiations in this light were significantly higher stakes than those conducted during prior conflicts. So, neither side was willing to push the other beyond what they saw as breaking point. If there was resolve to resort to nuclear weapons, it did not come from the great-power leadership. Khrushchev sold the offer to the Presidium as a victory: Cuba was safe from American invasion, he argued, and so the need for nuclear missiles had dissipated. And, in fact, in many ways it could be argued to have been a success for the Soviet side, with the eventual removal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey in 1963. While the US State Department 'denied any kind of "deal" over the missiles',⁶⁷ the effect of the crisis was these particular missiles were taken from striking range of the Soviet Union; though later replaced with Polaris submarines in the Mediterranean. The world returned to relative peace, but there were nevertheless terrifying

⁶¹ Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press 1992) 185.

⁶² Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 271.

⁶³ Dan Martins, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Joint Chiefs' (2018) 71(4) *Naval College War Review* 101.

⁶⁴ Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press 1992) 197.

⁶⁵ For discussion surrounding the inconsistency between the two letters, see Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 509.

⁶⁶ Mark L Haas, 'Prospect Theory and the Cuban Missile Crisis' (2001) 45 *International Studies Quarterly* 247.

⁶⁷ Mustafa Aydin, 'Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Changing Patterns and Conjunctures during the Cold War' (2000) 36(1) *Middle Eastern Studies* 122.

encounters over the coming days that brought the world ever closer to the very precipice of nuclear war.

Strategically, the threat of nuclear destruction, however, was too great for either side to bear, and the Soviet establishment was aware that US retaliation would have destroyed both the nation and its ideology. But the Soviets did engage in alarming degree of brinkmanship, even after the blockade was imposed, and conflict seemed all but inevitable. While a number of ships did indeed turn around, as seen by the American intelligence, the largest ship, the *Aleksandrovsk*, was raced towards Cuba, accompanied by four diesel-powered Soviet submarines armed with nuclear missiles, as the blockade was announced.⁶⁸ The flotilla passed the quarantine line prior to the blockade being implemented. In spite of what the Americans had assumed, Khrushchev's second letter was not sent after his moderate position was silenced by the Presidium,⁶⁹ but rather the Soviet leader had changed his mind, determining that the United States was in a weak position for further negotiations.⁷⁰

Three cliff-edges

As negotiations were ongoing between the two nations, three incidents took place over the course of the crisis that could have sparked nuclear war, wholly independently of the wills of the leaders. Thus, the course of war became, as von Clausewitz predicted, uncertain.

A status of DefCon 2 had been declared by Kennedy,⁷¹ requiring nuclear weapons to be affixed to fighter jets proximate to Russian territories as B52 bombers circled towards the Iron Curtain before pulling back over the Aegean Sea. This alone was exceedingly dangerous, brinkmanship of an ultimate kind, as the potential for an erroneous flight into enemy territory was always high, with Khrushchev himself remarking that an 'American airplane committing the violation might very well be taken for a nuclear-armed bomber, and that might prompt us to take a fateful step.'⁷² Such an error did in fact occur. A miscalculation of location by a U2 spy plane put the world minutes away from Soviet fighter jets being destroyed by air-to-air US nuclear rockets.

U2 planes were, before the use of satellites, the pinnacle of surveillance technology,⁷³ capable of flying higher and faster than any other jet,⁷⁴ but not immune to ground-to-air rockets. These planes were particularly useful in determining when nuclear weapons were being tested, as western monitoring stations would only note the radioactive fallout slowly,

⁶⁸ Serhii Plokyh *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 169.

⁶⁹ The prevailing thought was that there had either been a coup in Moscow leading to the sending of the second letter, or that he had simply been swayed by the Kremlin's 'hawks'; VI Esin, 'Caribbean Crisis of 1962: Open Questions and the More Significant Lessons' (2013) *International Relations and International Politics* 11.

⁷⁰ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 273-277.

⁷¹ Graham Allison, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: Lessons for US Foreign Policy Today' (2012) 91(4) *Foreign Affairs* 14.

⁷² Serhii Plokyh, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 284.

⁷³ For examples of the aerial photography captured by this spy plane, see Emily Hammer and Jason Ur, 'Near Eastern Landscapes and Declassified U2 Aerial Imagery' (2019) 7(2) *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 107.

⁷⁴ Other aircraft faced the difficulty of fuel boiling off and evaporating at the altitudes flown at by the U2, Gregory W Pedlow and Donald E Walzenbach, *The CIA and the U-2 Program 1956-1974* 61.

consequent on prevailing winds, prior to the introduction of the U2.⁷⁵ In an attempt to more effectively monitor the other side, the United States sent U2 planes right up to the borders of the Soviet Union as part of Project Star Dust,⁷⁶ collecting air samples to test for signs that nuclear tests had been undertaken. This operation was undertaken within a seven hour flight from the United States. These spy sorties were significantly safer than those used for aerial photography, as, unlike photographic missions, there was no requirement for the violation of Soviet airspace. This meant that U2 spy planes were able to chart a course from Alaska towards the north-westwards, skirting the fringes of Siberia in collecting their samples. But this brought another issue. Close to magnetic North, electronic navigation instruments became useless, leaving pilots relying on a sextant, an 18th century navigational tool, to ascertain location by plotting the stars. Where pilots were already close to Soviet borders such primitive tools made flights highly dangerous. Charles Maultsby took off on one such mission on 27 October 1962. He headed north, lost electronic navigation, sought to use a sextant but found this impossible due to the random display of the northern lights making the stars invisible in the night sky.⁷⁷ At 07.59 Alaskan time, Maultsby accidentally breached Soviet airspace. He then began to receive radio communications from an unknown source directing him deeper into Soviet territory.⁷⁸ By then, he had begun to drift over Kamchatka.

From the ground, two Soviet fighter jets were dispatched to engage the U2. In response to this threat, his Alaskan airbase scrambled to prevent his interception.⁷⁹ Because of the DefCon 2 emergency status, the fighter planes sent from the United States were armed with tactical nuclear weapons. On encountering the chasing Soviet aircraft, a probably atomic strike loomed had the opposing pilots engaged. Disaster was averted by a simple lack of fuel. Maultsby having gotten lost, headed back towards Alaska, gliding to conserve power while the vast distances of eastern Siberia meant that striking range of the US spy plane demanded the expenditure of almost all the fuel powering the Soviet pursuit. Nuclear weapons might have been used on the US side had the U2 not managed to conserve fuel by gliding back into US airspace, with the Soviet MiG jets opting to not pursue beyond the cut-off point that would leave them ditching in the sea, having burned up almost all their fuel in pursuit of the much faster spy plane.⁸⁰ Maultsby's bad luck in navigation during a northern lights display had almost caused an international incident, and potentially the first use of nuclear weapons in combat since 1945, but both side's limited fuel capacities allowed for the world to step back from the brink.

Inevitably, the Cuban blockade also proved dangerous for escalation. ExComm meeting transcripts show a clear recognition by Kennedy, a former Navy torpedo boat commander in World War II, of the potential for escalation in intercepting Soviet ships.⁸¹ This threat was particularly significant in relation to the Soviet submarines invigilating the island. No such submarine could not be communicated with by a surface vessel without knowledge of a specific Soviet radio channel. Shrewdly, the President had wished to leave Soviet submarines (like aircraft, similarly difficult to interdict) out of the quarantine zone, but he was persuaded

⁷⁵ Nuclear testing at this time was particularly rampant on both sides of the Cold War conflict, with each nuclear program's 'driving imperative' being the other's success; Vitaly I Khalturin and others, 'A Review of Nuclear Testing by the Soviet Union at Novaya Zemlya' (2005) 13(1-2) *Science and Global Security* 29.

⁷⁶ James P Friend and Herbert W Feely, *Project Star Dust* (1962) Isotopes Inc Westwood NJ.

⁷⁷ Serhii Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 226.

⁷⁸ Patricia Lewis and others, 'Too Close for Comfort' (Chatham House Report, April 2014) 9.

⁷⁹ Serhii Plokhly, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 228.

⁸⁰ *ibid* 228.

⁸¹ Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 353.

by Navy leadership that Soviet vessels would merely be encouraged to distance themselves from Cuba.⁸² Consenting to any such potential interception was a particularly dangerous decision, as, unknown to him, the military in fact planned to use explosive charges underwater to force submarines to the surface.

Soviet submarine B-59, diesel-powered but nuclear-torpedo armed, was first detected by US destroyers that Thursday close to Cuba. It was tracked for four hours, but contact was lost in the surface submarine cat-and-mouse manoeuvring until Saturday. The B-59 then had to surface to replenish its air tanks for diesel propulsion. Nuclear submarines had no such need but, unlike the US Navy, the Soviet side had experienced tragic failures in developing such craft. It was forced to the surface by the *USS Cony*, with practice depth charges and hand grenades.⁸³ Though the depth charges were unarmed, they exploded with such violence that the Soviet commander, Valentine Savitsky, could not tell the difference and thought his vessel was under attack: 'it was as if you were sitting in an iron barrel that was being beaten with a sledgehammer'.⁸⁴ Interpreting the depth charge explosions as destructive, Savitsky ordered nuclear torpedoes loaded into the firing tubes. He proposed immediate retaliation on the US navy ships, but, in a heated discussion, was temporarily dissuaded from this course of action by Vasily Arkhipov, the submarine's second in command.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Savitsky knew his duty was to defend the Soviet submarine. On surfacing, a US plane flew low over the conning tower and fired flares while surrounding US Navy ships shone spotlights on the Soviet vessel. He became determined to fire the torpedo; one only slightly less powerful than the nuclear bombs used in 1945 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sensitive to the discourtesy shown to a fellow mariner, the US commander of *USS Cony* ordered an apology to be flashed out via Morse code to the Soviet submarine.

Executing the order was Gary Slaughter, a 23-year old US Navy ensign.⁸⁶ He could have had no idea that he was not only clearing up a misunderstanding, in that the initial charges had never been intended to damage the submarine, but he was also preventing the imminent outbreak of nuclear war. A mix of the Cyrillic Transliteration Table, the International Signals Book and the Morse Code was used by Slaughter and his lead signalman to offer the apology. This might not have been enough. Again, it seems a mere stroke of luck that the apology was seen at all. Savitsky, at this stage, had descended from the bridge to give his attack order.⁸⁷ But, as they were descending from the sail, a signals officer randomly had delayed the party by getting 'stuck with his searchlight in the shaft of the upper hatch of the conning tower',⁸⁸ enabling Arkhipov to see the apology just in time. The apology was received, the message was relayed, and the submarine was ordered to disarm the nuclear missiles.

Largely thanks to serendipity, no shots had been fired at this stage of the crisis. But an even worse trial was to come and this time it was not military men on deck or in the air but President Kennedy who had to decide whether to strike back or not. The third key event of the month came about with the first missile firing of the whole crisis, killing Major Rudolf Anderson USAF. He piloted a U2 spy plane, taking the daily photographic film of the island

⁸² Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 266.

⁸³ *ibid* 267.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 267.

⁸⁵ Karen Saradzhyan and Simon Saradzhyan, 'Was the Cuban Missile Crisis the Most Dangerous Episode of the Cold War?' (2017) 1(2) 21st Century 103.

⁸⁶ Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 257.

⁸⁷ *ibid* 271.

⁸⁸ *ibid*.

for interpretation as to the state of readiness of the missile bases. He was expected and with multiple US air incursions over Cuba, the Cuban military determined to use their new Soviet weaponry. As the U2 did a second pass over the island, it was shot down by a Soviet rocket on Saturday, 27 October, at 10.22 am.⁸⁹ This was a crazy action, one particularly perilous as the standing policy of the United States was immediate retaliation against any aggressive action; presenting an opportunity to plunge the world into mass conflict.⁹⁰

The President's advisors pressed him that because an American plane had been destroyed, the Soviet side had escalated the conflict.⁹¹ Aircraft were standing on alert for the purpose of a retaliatory strike.⁹² Perhaps wary of the potential impact of a decision to retaliate, the President insisted that the information on the loss of a surveillance plane be ultra clear that the downing was not accidental, such as by a bird strike, but inescapably due to military action.⁹³ At 3.30 pm that afternoon, the Pentagon had released a press statement which indicated that any interference with surveillance over Cuba would be met with counter-action. The statement reflected, in part, uncertainty as to whether a plane had been lost. The military establishment was, that same afternoon, determined to recommend to the President that the Soviet-Cuba missiles problem be dealt with by a series of air strikes. This was to be followed by an invasion seven days later. They would only back away from that plan if there was irrefutable evidence, by the next day, Monday, that the missiles on Cuba were being dismantled and rendered inoperable.⁹⁴ During the afternoon meeting between the President and his close advisers, it was confirmed that a plane had been shot down and that the pilot was dead. With the prospect of an immediate and unpredictable escalation should he respond, Kennedy required more than absolute certainty that the loss was due to military fire. He did this by asking if the Cubans had announced that they had destroyed the plane. No announcement had yet been made.⁹⁵ In fact, it was made later, but that did not change the President's mind.

Secretary of Defence McNamara's reaction to the shooting down and the killing of the USAF pilot seemed, on the transcripts of the meetings, to vary with the prevailing mood. His indecisiveness and lack of a clear line of thought contrasts with what we know of Kennedy's thoughts. In response to the President pointing out that it was not yet known if the plane had been shot down, he emerges as less concerned than Kennedy as to this key detail. He was, perhaps, more concerned that an opportunity for action had been presented by the situation. He commented: 'I think - certainly I'd say - it was shot down. Because the probabilities are that it was shot down, and we want an excuse to go in tomorrow and shoot up that SAM site and send in our -'⁹⁶ The President's attitude was to postpone the decision until there was more information.⁹⁷ In the result, there was no resort to the 'first plausible excuse' justification that characterises acts of aggression. Further, the moment of high emotion was allowed to fade.

⁸⁹ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 278.

⁹⁰ *ibid* 280.

⁹¹ Unidentified voices at a meeting on Thursday, 18 October 1962, quoted in Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 164.

⁹² *ibid* 298.

⁹³ *ibid* 299. Meeting of Tuesday, 23 October 1962.

⁹⁴ *ibid* 563. Transcript of the Meeting on Saturday, 27 October.

⁹⁵ *ibid* 575

⁹⁶ *ibid*.

⁹⁷ *ibid* 601, 610.

Using and abusing ‘the high moral ground’

But when you see the high moral ground unpopulated – why not occupy it? Major Anderson’s death was used to pressure the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, into realising the seriousness of the situation.⁹⁸ They had caused the crisis, they had killed a serving US officer. Dobrynin was called in to the Justice Department and told in no uncertain terms by the Attorney General, the President’s brother Robert Kennedy, that the sides were on the brink of bringing about a ‘chain reaction’.⁹⁹ Perhaps in preparation for a later invasion, or perhaps to show the seriousness of his purpose, the President called up twenty four reserve air-squadrons.¹⁰⁰ The President’s first suggested response to this escalation in the crisis was to call a NATO meeting before any decision was taken.¹⁰¹ His response enabled more time for the diplomatic efforts that were already in hand to possibly yield a result. In one way, the military loss might be used to positive effect, especially as the situation might be regarded as critical in the light of what had happened. The Secretary General of the United Nations was told: ‘if they fire on us, tell them we will take them all out’.¹⁰² If there was no satisfaction from this approach by ‘tomorrow night figure that Monday we are going to do something about the SAM sights’.¹⁰³

When President Kennedy was told, later on Saturday evening, that the Cubans had announced that they had shot down a U2, he was again asked by the military to authorise the destruction of enemy fighter aircraft if there were further attacks on surveillance planes when they returned, the next day, to Cuba to take more photographs. His response was to require a further deferral of retaliatory action, to the disbelief of the military establishment, until Tuesday 30 October.¹⁰⁴ The President reasoned: ‘Under the schedule, we could not do it until Monday morning, because we will have to go back to NATO again on Monday in which we say the situation is getting worse and so on and so forth. Give them that last chance.’¹⁰⁵

President Kennedy’s response presents as the opposite extreme of a reaction based on demonising the opponent, acting out of considerations of vanity based on national prestige, or deceptively using an incident as an excuse for aggressive reaction. Vice-President Johnson, in the absence of the President from the room in which the discussion was taking place on the afternoon of Saturday, October, 27th, 1962, seemed deeply disturbed that America might withdraw nuclear missiles from Turkey; by then, Kennedy’s preferred option for seeking a way out of the crisis. He voiced the thought that the Soviets might use any concession as a sign of weakness and seize West Berlin: ‘Look, the whole thing is they shot down one plane, and they gave up Turkey. Then they shoot down another and they give up Berlin. You know, like a mad dog - he tastes a little blood and he...’¹⁰⁶ Despite the attractiveness of the folksy language, it is chilling to think how matters might have developed under another leader.

⁹⁸ *ibid* 607, quoting a memo prepared by Robert Kennedy.

⁹⁹ Fursenko and Naftali (n 20) 282.

¹⁰⁰ Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 613.

¹⁰¹ *ibid* 576.

¹⁰² *ibid* 612. Transcript of the meeting on Saturday, 27 October 1962.

¹⁰³ *ibid* 612. Saturday, 27 October 1962.

¹⁰⁴ Donald M Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (Bantam Doubleday Dell 1995) 537.

¹⁰⁵ May and Zelikow (n 30) 627. Saturday, 27 October 1962.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid* 592 and 595.

Take advice: reject advice

President Kennedy had to consult the Joint Chiefs but he was aware in talking to them, as an ex-Navy man himself, that military leadership could have a tendency to make promises beyond their capabilities. General Earle Wheeler's contribution to the debate perhaps may illustrate the dynamic behind what was driving the Joint Chiefs:

The announcement of a Soviet base in Cuba would immediately have a profound effect on all of Latin America at least and probably world-wide because the question would arise: Is the United States incapable of doing something about it or perhaps unwilling to do something about it? In other words, it would attack our prestige...Increasingly, they can achieve a sizeable increase in offensive Soviet strike capabilities against the United States, which they do not now have...This short-range missile course gives them a sort of quantum leap in their capability to inflict damage on the United States. And so I say, from a military point of view, I feel the lowest-risk course of action is the full gamut of military action by us...¹⁰⁷

Before addressing the American people, and revealing the crisis to the public for the first time, on Monday, October 22nd, 1962, President Kennedy invited a cross-party group of senators and congressmen to the White House for a briefing. While there was some sympathy for his predicament, the isolation of ultimate decision is shown not to be alleviated by trying to get people to agree with you. Senator Richard Russell, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, warned that the United States was at a crossroads: 'We're either a first-class power or we're not'; that the Soviet Union, 'those people' as he characterised them, had 'all the warning they could expect',¹⁰⁸ and that 'we've got to take a chance somewhere, sometime, if we are going to retain our position as a great world power...'¹⁰⁹ Military action would be, according to Senator Russell, an act of "self-defence."¹¹⁰

Stress and decisions

Stress skews decisions. But worse than stress is the temptation to resort to unreal thinking. One can lead to the other. Imagining that what has clearly been unsuccessful in the past may somehow succeed when conditions have not changed is evidence of unreal thinking. There are occasions when the mental process of a slide into unreality appears to be in evidence in the tape recordings of the debates about the crisis between Kennedy and his advisers over its 13 most intense days.

On the first day of the debates, when the only clear principle is the objective that the nuclear missiles should be removed from Cuba, there was uncertainty as to what action to take. The participants were unsure as to how the American public and the international community would react to measures such as air strikes against, or an invasion of, Cuba.¹¹¹ Anything that would make a bombing or invasion strategy more acceptable was therefore to be welcomed.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid* 180. Statement recorded on tape at a meeting between the President, his advisers and the representatives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Friday, 19 October 1962.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid* 260. Recorded on tape at a meeting between the President and his advisers and political leaders on Monday, 22 October 1962.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid* 265.

¹¹⁰ *ibid* 270.

¹¹¹ *ibid* 47–116. Debate on Tuesday, 16 October, 1962.

The Soviets had not yet been discovered in misinforming the United States about the nature of the missiles in Cuba.¹¹² The strategy of an apparently legal partial blockade of Cuba, or quarantine which was the nicer word chosen, and one which did not constitute an act of war, had yet to evolve. An immediate surprise air strike seemed a possible solution, but one that would be difficult to justify in the court of international opinion. Secretary of Defence McNamara suggested orchestrating an uprising against Castro in Cuba. This was the foundational idea for the Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles; once an anti-Castro force was established on the island the people were supposed to immediately rise up against the communists. But such a scheme had recently entirely failed, prompting an entirely new series of plans for subversion of the Cuban regime named Operation Mongoose.¹¹³ Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defence, nonetheless, clung to this idea: 'There's a real possibility you'd have to invade. If you carried out an air strike, this might lead to an uprising, such that in order to prevent the slaughter of free Cubans, we would have to invade to re-introduce order into the country and we would be prepared to do that.'¹¹⁴

A self-constructed cathedral of justification somehow arose out of the mists of confusion and uncertainty. The deceptive idea was that America would re-introduce order into another country by an invasion and would plunge into war to save democratic opponents of Castro from being slaughtered. The strong ideological colour to this pronouncement, and its far-fetched illusion that an uprising would result from American bombing, suggests a process at remove from reality.¹¹⁵

Deceit

McNamara's attitude also raises the issue of deceit. In multiple situations of aggression, lies falsely justify a first strike. This may not be merely a stratagem; not just a handy method of overcoming a hated enemy. The evidence demonstrates that resort to this tactic characterises naked aggression and mass murder.¹¹⁶ Robert Kennedy was explicit in articulating a similar idea to McNamara that takes hold of his mind on the first day of the crisis. On Tuesday, 16 October, the President's advisors searched for a justifiable way to respond. Particularly significant to the United States was the military base at Guantánamo Bay, established by way of the treaty of 1903.¹¹⁷ A mere line of barbed wire therefore separated the territory of the potentially hostile parties. Robert Kennedy brought up an incident that initiated the Spanish-American War of 1898, one that resulted in the United States invading Cuba and detaching it from Spain. A ship, the USS Maine, was blown up in Havana harbour in circumstances

¹¹² *ibid* 106–107. See also Kennedy speech exploiting the denial of Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko that there were no offensive weapons on Cuba at 277.

¹¹³ Raúl Rodríguez Rodríguez, 'Canada and the Cuban Revolution: Defining the Rules of Engagement 1959-1962' (2010) 16(1) *Canadian Foreign Policy* 74.

¹¹⁴ Transcript of the 16 October 1962: Quoted in Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 67–68.

¹¹⁵ Comments later the same day at Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 87 and 96-98.

¹¹⁶ See generally, Peter Charleton, *Lies in a Mirror: An Essay on Evil and Deceit* (Dublin: Blackhall Publishing Ltd 2006).

¹¹⁷ For further information regarding the international leasehold of the United States over this area, see Joseph Lazar, 'Cession in Lease of the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station and Cuba's Ultimate Sovereignty' (1969) 63(1) *American Journal of International Law* 116.

believed to be the creation of a plausible excuse for action.¹¹⁸ Robert Kennedy stated: 'Let me say, of course, one other thing is whether we should also think of whether there is some other way we can get involved in this, through Guantanamo Bay or something. Or whether there's some ship at...you know, sink the Maine again or something.'¹¹⁹

This dangerous outburst had a background. Through whatever trait of character, the Attorney General seems to have been attracted to such a tactic. He suggested faking a Cuban attack on Guantánamo, using anti-Castro activists; an idea which would bring Latin American countries into supporting an invasion.¹²⁰ Other ideas the CIA and he shared included assassinating Castro, downing a US passenger plane and blaming it on the Cubans, or, similarly to the Maine, sinking a US warship, or, a boatload of Cuban refugees fleeing Castro, or, developing 'a Cuban Communist terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities and even in Washington...'¹²¹

A mind to which the engineering of a deliberate deception to justify a war remains a human mind, a part of our collective inheritance. As Solzhenitsyn writes: 'линия, разделяющая добро и зло, пересекает сердце каждого человека': 'The line separating good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being'.¹²² At this stage in the debate, ideas were spoken as they occurred. As matters progressed, Robert Kennedy's pretext for invading Cuba was not received in the collective embrace of the either the President or the other participants in the debate. It would seem, rather than the seduction of deceit, that they were open to seeking a solution based on the reality before them. Moreover, they were open to arguments based on an ethical approach to the problem. It is fair to credit an argument of Robert Kennedy's, two days later, as influencing the decision away from an immediate military strike, in fact away from world catastrophe:¹²³

I think it is the whole question of, you know, assuming that we do survive all this, the fact that we are not...what kind of a country are we...we did this against Cuba. We've fought for fifteen years with Russia to prevent a first strike against us...now, in the interest of time, we do that to a small country. I think it is a hell of a burden to carry.¹²⁴

The participants in the debate were not closed to a consideration of real moral argument. That matters. A fair-minded consideration of the right and wrong of a situation is to be distinguished from the deceptive justifications for violent action which the collective shadow

¹¹⁸ This theory, however, is somewhat contested. In Tom Miller, 'Remember the Maine' (1998) 28(11) *Smithsonian* at 5, it is suggested that, far from being caused by any of the Cuban, American or Spanish forces involved in the region at the time, it was possibly simply an internal accident which arose at an opportune moment.

¹¹⁹ May and Zelikow (n 30) 100. Transcript of Tuesday, 16 October 1962.

¹²⁰ Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 96-97 and 137.

¹²¹ 'Possible Actions to Provoke, Harass or Disrupt Cuba' a memorandum by the US Army special group quoted in the *Guardian* 20 November 1997. They also had more innocent plans for leaflets and photo faking Castro eating the "most delectable Cuban food" to stir up internal unrest.

¹²² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1974) 168.

¹²³ Donald M Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (Bantam Doubleday Dell 1995) 518.

¹²⁴ May and Zelikow (n 30) 149. Thursday, 18 October 1962. George Ball, Under Secretary of State, had earlier written a memo arguing against a surprise strike by comparing such an action to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour: The document is reproduced in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press 1992) 121-2.

throws up as part of its dynamic.¹²⁵ Khrushchev, too, had a moral compass, or the conflict would have likely escalated. By contrast, Castro was emotion-driven and more volatile – the sort of figure that the diplomat and academic Gary Sick was likely referencing when stating that, on occasion, an international actor could stun the world stage by choosing not to move a piece calculatingly as in a game of chess but to seize the board and fling all the carefully plotted pieces into the ceiling, leaving ruin, with others scrambling in a possibly futile effort to re-establish the game.¹²⁶

What else is peculiar to this conflict is also peculiar to the personalities involved. Over the course of the tape-recorded White House debates, President Kennedy emerges as having some sneaking regard for Khrushchev, rather than holding a deep hatred for his global competitor. People are often marked by their first job or jobs. Kennedy was a military man, he understood strategy and he understood how things go wrong if you do not watch unfolding events like a hawk – von Clausewitz’ second rule of war – and that once begun, war follows its own course.¹²⁷ He was also a politician, so he saw manoeuvres by his opponent not as a personal attack but, more neutrally, as a means of gaining the advantage. The President assessed the Soviet action as ‘a rather useful ploy’; if the US attacks Cuba, the USSR has a cloak of justification for invading West Berlin, he said.¹²⁸ In fact, he admired the strategy of his opponents,¹²⁹ and had open regard for the toughness of Khrushchev.¹³⁰ As the crisis went on, some of his advisers stressed that in order to negotiate their way out of this problem, they should be prepared to negotiate the presence of US nuclear missiles elsewhere in the world. This would undoubtedly be a loss for the United States, but the President refused to rule the strategy out. He was not ensnared by the trap of national and personal prestige.¹³¹ McNamara, ultimately coming around to sense, even argued that even the US base at Guantánamo was negotiable.¹³² As we know, over the early days of the crisis, the less dangerous idea of a blockade of Cuba gained ascendancy, from which President Kennedy explicitly excluded aircraft; ‘the only way to stop a plane is to shoot it down ... at least at the first stage we ought to just confine it to ships.’¹³³ The world might have regretted his inclusion of submarines, as how are they to be brought to the surface?

Love your enemy?

Crucially, where there is less hatred, negotiators can be disposed to allow opponents a way out, and opponents will not inflexibly and mutually seek humiliation.

Even the blockade was flexible in how it was to be operated by the Americans. The President shortened the line of quarantine to allow the Russians more time to think through their response as their ships approached Cuba.¹³⁴ Even enforcement was discretionary. A Soviet tanker on the quarantine line was hailed and, after identifying itself, was allowed to proceed

¹²⁵ Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: The New Press 1992) 119-120.

¹²⁶ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down* (SAGE 1985).

¹²⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War* (The Military Service Publishing Company 1942).

¹²⁸ May and Zelikow (n 30) 175.

¹²⁹ *ibid.* Meeting with the British Ambassador on Friday, 22 October 1962.

¹³⁰ *ibid.* 412.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 118–9. Memo of Adlai Stevenson, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., to the President, 18 October 1962.

¹³² *ibid.* 193.

¹³³ *ibid.* 373. Wednesday, 24 October 1962.

¹³⁴ *ibid.* 343.

without boarding.¹³⁵ An East German passenger and cargo ship, unlikely to stop, was allowed to pass without challenge,¹³⁶ and a Swedish vessel which refused to stop was allowed to pass unhindered.¹³⁷ Understanding that things can easily go wrong, especially under stress, Kennedy expressly ordered the Russian ships be given the space to stop or turn around. He instituted a direct line to the Navy so that there would be no firing save on his express instructions.

Fundamentally, Kennedy, as well as being prepared to fight, if necessary, was also prepared to pay some price for a negotiated end to the presence of offensive Soviet missiles in Cuba. The President stressed to his advisers that some price was going to be exacted.¹³⁸ Kennedy, however, rejected an argument that Soviet planes and technicians would still remain in Cuba if the missiles there were traded out by removing the U.S. missiles in Turkey. For him, it was not the emotion of the moment but the objective judgment of history that mattered:

Yeah, but our technicians and planes and guarantees would still exist for Turkey. I am just thinking about what we are going to have to do in a day or so, which is 500 sorties, and seven days, and possibly an invasion, all because we would not take the missiles out of Turkey. We all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow, and that's what is going to happen to NATO. When we start these things and they grab Berlin, everybody is going to say: "Well, that was a pretty good proposition". Let's not kid ourselves that we've got...That's the difficulty. Today it sounds great to reject it, but it is not going to, after we do something.¹³⁹

How was the crisis solved?

The horrific and civilization-ending prospect of nuclear war undoubtedly played on the minds of Kennedy and Khrushchev in pushing them towards resolving the crisis, but, it may not be a descent into saccharine unreality to detect that some aspect of human goodness was allowed rein. One would imagine there were other unacknowledged factors as well. What role was played by the families of the protagonists, by the people who could speak fearlessly to powerful leaders? What about Nina Petrovna Khrushcheva, or Jackie Kennedy? Both were dignified people, and private, too – neither left a memoir. We may never know, but it is likely that they had a role.

When it came down to it, had Khrushchev been a vicious fool, there would have been no drawing back. But throughout the crisis, he undoubtedly retained unshakeable limits as to how far matters would be allowed to go. In his letter to Kennedy he, while simultaneously blaming the US leader, with almost artistic sensibility, wrote: 'we and you ought not to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war ... because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose.'¹⁴⁰ There was only one person capable of making the decisions to draw back from the crisis in Cuba and the way he announced it to the Presidium of the Communist Party of Russia shows humanity:

¹³⁵ *ibid* 394. Thursday, 25 October 1962

¹³⁶ *ibid* 436.

¹³⁷ *ibid* 493.

¹³⁸ *ibid* 458. Friday, 26 October 1962,

¹³⁹ *ibid* 548. Saturday, 27 October 1962

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Serhii Plokhyy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 201.

Where was a time, when we advanced, like in October 1917; but in March 1918 we had to retreat, having signed the Brest-Litovsk agreement with the Germans. Our interests dictated this decision – we had to save Soviet power. Now we found ourselves face to face with the danger of war and of nuclear catastrophe, with the possible result of destroying the human race. In order to save the world, we must retreat. I called you together to consult and debate whether you are in agreement with this kind of decision.¹⁴¹

In truth, however, there was very little debate in Moscow about any of these decisions. Kennedy was shocked at the US-Soviet summit in Vienna, six months earlier, to have met someone with whom he just could not reason.¹⁴² There are only notes of the Presidium debates because Khrushchev did not install recording equipment in the Kremlin, unlike Kennedy in the White House. But it was certainly a near-impossible undertaking to put rocket-sized missiles into open areas of Cuba and hope that the Americans would not notice; after all the Russians knew about U2 spy planes and could hardly have forgotten the ‘U2 incident’ of April 1960.¹⁴³ The atmosphere in such summit meetings did not appear conducive to real debate. And yet Khrushchev ultimately drew back.

Castro, on the other hand, did not want the confrontation to end in anything other than total victory. He viewed the crisis as an opportunity to end American interference in Cuba: ‘the moment to eliminate such danger forever.’¹⁴⁴ Khrushchev interpreted ‘forever’ as an invitation to launch nuclear missiles, which was a step he was not prepared to take. Explicitly, Castro wrote that an invasion by the USA of Cuba was expected imminently and that the only solution was for Khrushchev and the Soviet Union to launch a first strike, killing millions. In his memoirs the Soviet leader wrote: ‘When this was read to us, we, sitting in silence, looked at one another for a long time.’¹⁴⁵

Holding back

As for Kennedy, it is possible that, no matter what the crisis, debate could be had with him. He had a curious thoughtfulness, not always shared by statesmen. There is a passage towards the end of the memoir of Pablo Casals, the great musician and peace-advocate. Engaged by Jackie Kennedy to give a concert at the White House, Casals was relaxing after rehearsing. Unannounced, President Kennedy walked in and engaged him on topics that Casals does not reveal. They talked in private, and at length, with the President asking him questions and focusing intently on what he had to say.¹⁴⁶ Only an interruption by an aide for a meeting shortened what was for Kennedy a listening-session.

And this same character comes across in the transcripts of the crisis meetings at the White House; the President is not offended when people contradict him or issue advice which they

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 284.

¹⁴² Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F Kennedy in the White House* (Mariner Books 1963) 331.

¹⁴³ Quincy Wright, ‘Legal Aspects of the U-2 Incident’ (1960) 54 *American Journal of International Law* 836.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Timothy Fursenko and Aleksandr Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1958-1964* (London: W.W. Norton & Co 1997) 286.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2021) 286.

¹⁴⁶ Pablo Casals, *Joys and Sorrows* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1970) 153.

know to be the opposite of his own views.¹⁴⁷ Views critical of his own stance from both the military and political interest groups are not regarded by him as an affront to his own position or prestige. People call him only occasionally by his title "Mr. President". More often, they simply refer to him in his presence as "you" or, most frequently, people simply give their opinion without addressing him in any way, formal or informal. Even at moments of crisis, there is humour and laughter. He is also obsessively careful over detail; have the Navy got the message, is the letter to Chairman Khrushchev drafted right?

All of the Cuban crisis debates in the White House take place on a basis where the participants are communicating with each other on a human level and where there is little or no attempt, and this is also a grave danger in the build-up to war, to feed the leader with information he is judged to want to hear or with views of which he is known to approve. He is told: 'You are in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President'; which he treats as a joke.¹⁴⁸ He is treated to a tirade from General LeMay, the belligerent Air Force chief of staff who wanted to bomb Cuba even after a solution to the crisis had been found, to which he merely replies: 'Thank you, General'.¹⁴⁹ The arguments of the political leaders opposed to his view point are listened to with patience and responded to by the quiet statement of his own argument. When it is necessary for him to reach a decision he announces it, only after real debate, by simply saying 'I think that...' and giving his reasons.

Perhaps in private President Kennedy was not as articulate as in his public utterances, but also in private there is no attempt to hide behind a persona of high intelligence or to phrase his utterances in such a way as to occlude woolly content with rhetoric. He was clearly clever and owed nothing to no one. All of his statements are simple. He is not embarrassed into concentrating on the form of what he is saying in detraction from its expression. Sentences are left unfinished or are phrased with grammatical errors. There is a genuine interest in what other people are saying and, above all, in why they hold the views which they propound. He is willing to enter debate – and regards it as his function to do so. Kennedy is by no means a dominant presence in the transcripts of the debates. He is not, apparently, in the habit of interrupting his officials. In terms of the space his statements occupy, and the character of what he says, his contributions are modest. He never utters monologues and in general speaks only to respond to what others have said or to make executive decisions.¹⁵⁰

At the height of the crisis, when the Americans did not know if the Soviet ships would stop or if a submarines would attempt to cross the interdiction line, the President, normally drawing strength from pressure had too much to bear. His brother describes it:

I think these few minutes were the time of gravest concern for the President. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? Was it our error? A mistake? Was there something further that should have been done? Or not done? His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth. He opened and closed his fist. His face seemed drawn, his eyes pained, almost grey. We stared at each other across the table. For a few fleeting seconds it was almost as though no else

¹⁴⁷ May and Zelikow (n 30) 174–188: the meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Friday, 19 October 1962. See also the meeting with his own advisers on Saturday, 27 October 1962 at 565 and his meeting with political leaders on Monday, 22 October 1962 at 245-275.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid* 182: meeting on Friday, 19 October 1962.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid* 180.

¹⁵⁰ For contrast, see Albert Speer on Hitler and his way of conducting meetings; Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (Avon Books 1971).

was there and he was no longer the President. Inexplicably, I thought of when he was ill and almost died; when he lost his child; when he learned that our oldest brother had been killed; of personal times of strain and hurt.¹⁵¹

Perhaps these were qualities that Kennedy developed in coming from a large family. Then there was his independence of mind; it is hard to know if he subscribed to any definite ideology, despite observing outwardly the strictures of worship of the Catholic Church. Certainly, no notion of the position of the United States as the supreme power in the world surfaces as propelling him on towards protecting the vanity of his group. Everything was questioned. This was simply a part of his character from childhood, interrupting the lectures on Christianity of his mother, Countess Rose Kennedy, with questions like: 'What happened to the donkey that carried Our Lord into Jerusalem?'¹⁵² His orientation was popular; people write that his Bay of Pigs saying 'victory has a hundred fathers; but defeat is an orphan' came from a 1952 movie on Rommel in North Africa, but this was simply yet another example of his strong sense of self. It is possible that the Kennedy brothers were influenced by 'The Guns of August,' Barbara Tuchman's 1962 book on the origin of the Great War,¹⁵³ but Neville Shute's 'A Town Like Alice',¹⁵⁴ and especially the 1956 movie, possibly had a greater impact as maybe did 'Fail Safe', the 1962 novel by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler.¹⁵⁵ It shows, perhaps, that whatever you do for the good, no matter in the artistic sphere or elsewhere, is worthwhile and may have some influence for the better somewhere. None of this is to be dismissed.

Conclusion

It was not just on the three narrated occasions that the world came to the brink of catastrophe but during every single minute of this confrontation: one that pitted annihilating power against both chance occurrence and human decency. On this occasion, the deep historical trends establishing socialism in the former Russian empire as a utopian solution for humanity that was to be spread throughout the globe intersected with overthrown American ideals within an equally vast sphere of influence which railed against their opposing principles. As a factor of time, in 1962 neither side could predict that their technologies of early nuclear and rocket propulsion and the advent of computerised technology would lead to the undermining of both their immediate fears with solutions. But, it is arguable that these technical solutions have made the world an even more dangerous place in our 21st century. While in the early 1960s, Soviet submarines could not match the destructive power and nuclear propulsion of American Polaris technology, whether missiles were stationed on Cuba or not, sufficient damage could still be wreaked by that side on Western power so as to set off a global nuclear winter. Neither could the Soviet side, at that stage, match the guidance systems that enabled the huge distance range of American nuclear ballistic missiles, but with the retaliatory power the Soviet side possessed, how could that matter?

Physical photographs needed to be taken at that time for each side to spy out what the other was doing but, within a decade, pilots such as Gary Powers and Rudolf Anderson did not need to risk their lives as satellite imagery came from outer space. Similarly, as the Soviet side caught

¹⁵¹ Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (W.W. Norton & Co 1969) 71-72.

¹⁵² Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (London: Penguin 2013), Ch 2.

¹⁵³ Barbara W Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Penguin 1962).

¹⁵⁴ Nevil Shute, *A Town Like Alice* (House of Stratus 1950).

¹⁵⁵ Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, *Fail-Safe* (New York: Harper Collins 1999).

up with nuclear propulsion under the sea and the unleashing of nuclear missiles from undetectable locations on the seabed, the entire notion of who had missiles and where these were became robbed of primary strategic significance. But, then again, it has not just been superpowers but also small states which have developed destructive nuclear capability, holding these weapons up to the world as an ultimate threat and also as symbol of inviolability. At least, that is what is said in defence of sheer madness. It is foolish to think that the danger has passed as the worst dangers come from the human mind, from our indecision, or failure to act and from our vanity and deceptiveness.

As John Stoessinger emphasises in his study *Why Nations Go to War*,¹⁵⁶ the role of leaders, their belief-systems, and the random threat of miscalculation will remain in our age of climate chaos and rising seas, stressed resources and nuclear proliferation. These are primary engines which may or may not drive us into ultimate conflict. Certainly, in any close study of the Cuban crisis, both emerge as prime determinants: Khrushchev with his miscalculations of such simple matters as tree cover and the strength of the American spy network and such major principles as the Americas as the US sphere of influence; Kennedy stunned by the lengths to which Soviet power would go to preserve its influence and badly assessing the mood of the Cuban people through enabling of a failed invasion. Personalities, as in the danger of individuals in everyday life and in the opposite of the enhancing virtue of friendship, when gifted with ultimate power, or on seizing it, magnify the puny strength of a human being into the titanic powers of nations.

Out of principle, Kennedy pushed the world to the brink, but was intent on giving peace every possible chance: Khrushchev threw over the chess board; but realised that while playing a strategic game was diverting, any ultimate principle he held would have vaporised in the destruction of the very humanity his ideology purported to serve. The pieces needed to be gathered back onto the board so that the game might continue.

What remains?

So, what remains, in reflecting on the hideous twists and turns of nuclear-armed wrestlers at the edge of the historical precipice? Is it the terrible sense of how much power people give to their leaders and how, as a result, our lives are in the hands of others; of characters as diverse in personality as Castro, Khrushchev and Kennedy?

And even they were largely powerless at times; global security in October 1962 hinged also on a few chance encounters – Charles Maultsby gliding safely out of Soviet airspace towards Alaska and a Morse code apology flashed in the orthography of Saints Cyril and Methodious at a second to atomic midnight by a smart signals officer the *USS Cony*.

Was nuclear war only averted by a mix of chance and also by some salutary, but sane, wish of two of the three leaders involved to avoid a truly disastrous outcome?

¹⁵⁶ *Why Nations Go to War* (1972, 11th edition, New York) passim.