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FLASHBACKS OCTOBER 22, 2008

*Atlantic contributors reflect on the Cuban Missile Crisis*

by Sara Lipka

# A Near Miss

Forty-six years ago this week, the world teetered on the brink of nuclear war. On October 14, 1962, a U.S. reconnaissance mission discovered medium-range ballistic missile sites in Cuba. The thirteen days of brinkmanship that followed have been called the most dangerous episode in recorded history. A selection of articles on the crisis from *The Atlantic's* archive reminds us of how close we came to disaster as well as how controversial—and relevant—the episode continues to be.

The discovery of ballistic missiles in Cuba provoked hawkish proposals such as invading the island and toppling the Castro regime, or launching a pre-emptive air strike to destroy the missile launching pads. Ultimately "ExCom," the ad hoc executive committee convened by President Kennedy to address the crisis, decided against striking first, a policy that, in their view, would have been inconsistent with American values. Robert Kennedy described a potential first strike as a "Pearl Harbor in reverse," a phrase that became famous.

On October 21, President Kennedy opted for a naval quarantine of Cuba and demanded the removal of the missiles. The following day he announced the presence of "offensive missile sites" to the American people, and on October 23, he won unanimous support from the Organization of American States to implement his plan. The quarantine began that afternoon.

Tension mounted on October 27, when a U.S. U2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba. But President Kennedy chose restraint by rescinding an earlier ExCom decision authorizing retaliation if a U.S. plane were shot down. Instead he waited for Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's response to the primary U.S. demand: removal of the missiles. When Khrushchev replied that he would agree to withdraw the missiles if Kennedy would guarantee never to invade Cuba, Kennedy accepted the condition, and Khrushchev announced plans to pull the missiles out of Cuba. The crisis was over. (The deal to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey as a quid pro quo remained classified for several years.)

A few months later, "[Cuba and the Nuclear Risk](#)," the text of an address on the missile crisis given by the Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Walter Lippmann, appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In his address, Lippmann applauded Kennedy's exemplary restraint and skillful diplomacy, labeling the confrontation a national victory.

It would have been an incalculable risk to invade and occupy Cuba at the risk of retaliatory military action against Berlin, action which could have escalated into nuclear war. The President adopted limited objectives which could be achieved by limited means. He demanded the removal of the Soviet strategic missiles. He did not demand the removal of the Castro regime or even of the Cuban defensive missiles.

Though Lippmann boasted that the United States had "the power to reduce Soviet society to a smoldering ruin, leaving the survivors shocked and starving and diseased," he emphasized that a balance of power and maintenance of the status quo were crucial to foreign policy in the nuclear age. "The Cuban affair has much to teach us about the nature of diplomacy," he asserted, citing Kennedy's decision to leave Khrushchev elbow room, and maintaining that the "ultimate catastrophic mistake of nuclear diplomacy" would be to surround the adversary and give him no way to retreat.

There is a line of intolerable provocation and humiliation beyond which popular and governmental reactions are likely to become uncontrollable. It is the business of the governments to find out where that line is, and to stay well back of it.

Those who do not understand the nature of war in the nuclear age, those who think that war today is what war was in the past, regard these careful attempts of statesmen not to carry provocation beyond the tolerable limits as weakness and softness and appeasement.

Lippmann suggested that Kennedy's prudence—his decision to "react sharply, but to react for a limited aim and with limited means"—allowed the confrontation to end "peaceably," as Khrushchev accepted the naval quarantine in a "rather elegant and nonchalant way." Still, Lippmann conceded that it was not only diplomacy that had led to the removal of the weapons.

Soviet nuclear power was neutralized by American nuclear power, and in the Cuban area, the United States also had overwhelming land, sea, and air forces which were quite capable of destroying or capturing the Soviet missiles. The Soviet government had no conventional forces in the Caribbean area, and once its nuclear power was neutralized, it had no other force it could use.

At a time when critical documents about the Cuban missile crisis were still classified, Lippmann, in this speech, deemed the clash a U.S. triumph and hailed Kennedy's "wisdom" as well as the way the "two heads of government kept channels of personal and official communication open."

In 1969, the posthumous publication of Robert Kennedy's memoir *Thirteen Days* revealed new information about the crisis—in particular the negotiations concerning the removal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey—and thus fueled revisionist accounts of the incident. As historians disputed interpretations of the crisis, strategists debated its implications for diplomacy in the nuclear age.

In the early 1980s, as debate swirled over the stalled Strategic Arms Reduction talks, people often cited how the Cuban missile crisis had played out in order to buttress their various arguments. In "[Russian and American Capabilities](#)," published in July 1982, Jerome B. Wiesner, the former special assistant to President Kennedy for science and technology, criticized the way proponents of sustained U.S. nuclear buildup were using the Cuban missile crisis to support their, in his view, flawed reasoning. Some analysts, he explained, feared that unless U.S. weapons development continued to outpace that of the Soviets, the United States could become vulnerable to a first strike. This faction was using the missile crisis to illustrate the importance of a weapons imbalance for achieving U.S. objectives. But Wiesner argued that the kind of weapons imbalance that had existed at the time of the missile crisis would never exist again: by now, each side had the capacity to so completely destroy the other that relative differences in numbers of weapons had ceased to matter.

Theorists defending the first-strike hypothesis often refer to the issues of the Cuban missile crisis.

In 1962, the U.S. had many more nuclear weapons than the Soviet Union, and this superiority, many advocates of the MX now say, forced Nikita Khrushchev to back down. But in the early sixties,

the Soviet Union had so few *deliverable* nuclear weapons that its leaders had legitimate reason to fear that a first strike might take away their ability to threaten destructive retaliation. The imbalance *may* have affected Soviet behavior—although American superiority in conventional naval forces seems to have weighed more heavily in the Soviets' calculations. At the comparatively low levels of nuclear weaponry of twenty years ago, a difference in size between the arsenals could have political significance; indeed, much of the impetus in American policy has been to regain the first-strike potential the U.S. enjoyed for many years. But when each side has a superabundance of weaponry, which is the case today, small differences in size no longer matter.

Wiesner issued a call to reach a disarmament agreement and "halt all testing of nuclear weapons." He warned,

The weapons that create the threat of annihilation cannot be uninvented. The sad fact of this era is that our populations cannot conceivably be protected except through political skill and courage applied to the task of minimizing the chances that nuclear weapons will ever be used.

This grave admonition referred not only to the example of the Cuban missile crisis, but also to the need for disarmament. Wiesner remarked presciently: "The weapons of today are easy to count and monitor, but those of tomorrow won't be."

Politicians and journalists continue to try to draw lessons from the Cuban missile crisis. In the effort to understand it, even seemingly straightforward matters—such as what, exactly, political and military officials said—can become controversial. The primary historical document on record is the collection of so-called Kennedy tapes, which were transcribed and published in *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, edited by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow. In "What JFK Really Said" (May 2000), John F. Kennedy Library historian Sheldon M. Stern sharply criticized the quality of May and Zelikow's work, claiming that their transcript abounded in "errors that significantly undermine its reliability for historians, teachers, and general readers." Stern contended that "details are everything in this kind of microhistory, in which an inaccurate word or phrase can distort our perception of the historical record."

Stern alleged that May and Zelikow's record of conversations about critical issues—such as the anticipated vote by the Organization of American States and the operational status of surface-to-air missiles—either left readers confused, missed the vital point, or changed the meaning of Kennedy's and the other ExCom members' statements. Stern made a number of comparisons between what he had heard first-hand on the tapes and May and Zelikow's transcriptions.

After a lull in the meeting, during which the conversation turns to college football, the President observes, "I imagine the Air Force must be a little mad," referring to the division of responsibility for aerial photography between the Air Force and the Joint Chiefs' photo-reconnaissance office. *The Kennedy Tapes* transcribes this as "I imagine the airports must be looking bad," which must leave many readers scratching their heads: the removal of the missile had nothing to do with Cuban airports. Kennedy ponders why, in the end, the Soviets decided to back down. He notes, "We had decided Saturday night to begin this air strike on Tuesday." No effort was made to conceal the military buildup in southern Florida, and Kennedy wonders if the impending strikes pushed the Russians to withdraw their missiles. *The Kennedy Tapes*, however, has JFK saying "We got the [unclear] signs of life to begin this air strike on Tuesday," making his shrewd speculation unintelligible.

Just as there is lasting debate over exactly what Kennedy said, there is also heated dispute about how Kennedy's example in

the Cuban missile crisis should be invoked and interpreted with respect to the crises facing us today. In his 2006 book *America Back on Track*, Senator Edward Kennedy praised the cool-headed restraint of his brothers and contrasted it with what he saw as a hasty attack on Iraq. "War should always be our last resort," he wrote. "Instead, the Bush administration made preemptive war an option of first resort." Whether or not one agrees with the assessment of JFK's brother, the Cuban missile crisis serves as a sobering reminder of the closest we have come to nuclear annihilation.

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