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President John F. Kennedy's Response to Evidence of Soviet Missiles in Cuba

On October 14, 1962 a United States U-2 plane on a reconnaissance mission over Cuba discovered evidence that suggested the Soviet Union was constructing multiple missile bases on the island. Only a month prior to the discovery of the bases, the Soviet Union had assured the United States that offensive missiles would not be deployed to the island of Cuba, stating that there was “no need to search for sites for [the missiles] beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union” (Allison 79). News of the Soviet Union's aggressive steps stunned President John F. Kennedy and his administration, and President Kennedy expressed his shock at the Soviet deployment of offensive missiles by saying, “We certainly have been wrong about what [Chairman Krushchev's] trying to do in Cuba,” adding, “it's a goddamn mystery to me” (Allison 81). Following the initial shock, President Kennedy and a handful of advisers began deliberating on the U.S. response to the Soviet deployment of missiles. In examining President Kennedy's response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, we must first look at the options he had, the assumptions he had about U.S. strategic interests and militaristic capacity, the assumptions he had about Soviet interests and militaristic capacity, how much he weighed domestic policy and opinion in his decision making process, and to what extent did various advisers influenced his final decision.

President Kennedy was presented with multiple options to choose from in the initial days of the missile crisis. Some of them were considered more than others, but

ultimately he decided in favor of a mix between two: an ultimatum and a blockade. The ultimatum response was originally suggested by former ambassador to the Soviet Union Charles Bohlen and Ambassador at Large Llewellyn Thompson. The idea suggested a secret ultimatum be sent to Khrushchev warning that if the missiles were not removed from Cuba, the U.S. would respond with either public confrontation or military action, or both (Allison 114). The main issue is that would have likely lead to negotiations with the Soviets forcing the United States to concede either West Berlin or the Jupiter missiles in Turkey, which Kennedy had no intention to do. The blockade option was originally suggested by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and outlined an embargo on military shipments to Cuba enforced by a naval blockade. Again, this option faced challenges. First, the U.S. would face legal issues calling it a “blockade” because that may be considered a hostile action and possibly seen as a declaration of war (this was solved by simply calling it a “quarantine”). Second, the U.S. would also be forced to respond to ships that failed to halt at the quarantine line which could lead to a Soviet retaliatory response against a U.S. vessel or Berlin. Finally, it wasn’t clear how a blockade would address the missiles already there (Allison 119).

The idea of an ultimatum blockade was first suggested by Thompson, who suggested the U.S. set up a quarantine of Cuba and then demand the missiles be dismantled and removed under U.S. surveillance (Allison 119). This suggestion answered most of the concerns of the United States, though left the door open for negotiations with the Soviets over the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. First, it was the middle road option, in that it was more than just diplomatic pressure but less than an all-out

invasion. Second, it commanded that Khrushchev make the next move, and both Kennedy and Khrushchev were frightened by the idea of nuclear war. Finally, it lessened the threat of a nuclear fallout (Allison 120). This proposal was chosen on October 20, just six days after the initial discovery of Soviet offensive missiles on the island of Cuba, and satisfied most of the interests Kennedy wanted to protect.

Other options were also considered by the advisers, though ultimately shot down by the President. Those options include doing nothing, an air strike, and an invasion. Doing nothing was not considered by Kennedy for very long, because, as he said, it would “question [the United State’s] willingness to respond over Berlin” and “would divide our allies and our country” (Allison 112). Additionally, Kennedy had to weigh what the public would think about not reacting to aggressive steps taken by the Soviet Union in Cuba. It was clear that public opinion had a major impact on Kennedy’s decision when he expressed his belief that if he didn’t respond he “would have been impeached ... on the grounds that I said they wouldn’t [put missiles in Cuba]” (Allison 114). One of the few arguments in favor of doing nothing was offered by Secretary of Defense McNamara who said that Soviet missiles in Cuba had little effect on the United States in the larger picture of the world, so the United States shouldn’t respond to make the situation worse than it is. But President Kennedy quickly shot down that argument because he realized the Republicans would be able to use it against him in the upcoming presidential election. Kennedy’s hand was being forced not only by the missiles in Cuba, but the Republicans in Congress; he understood that if the United States failed to respond to the Soviets posturing, then he would likely lose the election

in 1964 (Allison 113).

An air strike was seriously considered by the administration for some time and presumed to be the step that would follow the blockade if the blockade were to fail. The idea of an air strike was accompanied by persuasive arguments as to why it'd be more effective than the alternative options; not only would it would immediately neutralize the risk the missiles posed to the United States, but it would also have the tactical advantage of surprise. However, once the idea was seriously considered by Kennedy and his advisers the flaws became apparent. First, it couldn't be guaranteed that a limited air strike would be successful in destroying all of the bases because missile technology in that period was generally a hit and miss. Thus the U.S. would be required to use more force than apparently necessary in order to assure all of the bases were destroyed. What's more, the U.S. had to consider that it hadn't located all of the bases or it would miss one of it's targets during the air strike. If an air strike was launched and even one of the missile bases were spared, the Soviets or Cubans could potentially launch a nuclear attack on the South Eastern coast of the United States (Allison 116). Second, an attack on Soviet forces in Cuba would likely cause at the very least a response in Berlin or Turkey, and run the risk of a nuclear attack being launched towards the United States or it's allies. Finally, the United States didn't want to attack Cuba without warning. Given it's then-recent history with the Pearl Harbor attacks, the advisers concluded it wasn't the policy of the United States to attack a country without warning (Allison 118). The final option, an invasion of Cuba, was considered a last resort for the United States. The U.S. didn't want to be pulled into a war over largely

irrelevant posturing by the Soviet Union and figured that there were multiple other options that could be exhausted before full-fledged war was waged.

When considering these options, one of the main concerns President Kennedy had was the security and future of Berlin. As he considered all the options, Kennedy repeatedly brought up the issue of Berlin, specifically how the U.S. response in Cuba may play into Soviet retaliation in Berlin. Kennedy worried about this on multiple occasions, saying, "... whatever we do in regard to Cuba, it gives [Khrushchev] the chance to do the same with regard to Berlin" (Allison 104). The President was particularly angered by the Soviet's actions in Cuba because he believed it was a strategic move by Khrushchev to force the issue of Berlin sooner than he had previously agreed to. In a letter sent to Kennedy on September 28, 1962, Chairman Khrushchev told Kennedy that "[the Soviets] will do nothing with regard to West Berlin until the elections in the U.S." (Allison 102). It now appeared to Kennedy that Khrushchev was making a power move in an attempt to win bragging rights on the global stage. To Kennedy, every option in response to the Cuban missiles could have bad implications for Berlin: If the U.S. responded with a blockade or attack, the Soviets could respond with a blockade or attack on Berlin, and a diplomatic trade of Cuba for Berlin - or even the Cuban missiles for the Jupiter missiles in Turkey - would be considered a huge win for the Soviet Union (Allison 104). Had Kennedy conceded the Jupiter missiles publicly it would've made him look weak and signaled to U.S. allies that the United States is only interested in their own security and not world security (Allison 114). Kennedy summed up the issue of Berlin on October 19, 1962 by saying, "Our problem is not merely Cuba,

it is also Berlin.” Adding, “[Berlin is] what has made this thing be a dilemma for three days. Otherwise, our answer would be quite easy.” Although Kennedy clearly worried about a possible Soviet response in Berlin to U.S. actions in Cuba, he understood that the issue of Berlin had to be addressed sooner rather than later because the U.S. appeared to be in a situation which getting worse by the day. The main issue Kennedy examined in the first few days of the missile crisis was how to avoid a nuclear war. One of the concerns he had was that the U.S. would respond in Cuba, then the Soviets would respond in Berlin, followed by a U.S. responds to that, and so on until nuclear war breaks out between the two super powers. As Kennedy put it himself, “the question really is to what action we take which lessens the chances of a nuclear exchange ... and at the same time maintain some degree of solidarity with our allies” (Allison 118). The issue of Berlin is a large part of Kennedy’s final decision on an ultimatum blockade over an air strike, as it posed less of a threat to the security of Berlin in the long run.

Beyond the issue of Berlin, President Kennedy examined various other reasons as to why the Soviet Union would deploy offensive missiles in Cuba in the first place. The first reason Kennedy considered was simply Cold War politics; in his mind, he had drawn a line and the Soviets had crossed it (Allison 89). Some intelligence experts argued that the Soviet Union deployed the missiles in order to show that the balance of power in the world was shifting in favor of the Soviet Union, so much so that the United States couldn’t even keep nuclear weapons from being placed in their own back yard (Allison 89). Not only would it be a political blow to America, it would be considered a huge victory for the communist set of ideals, and possible persuade the world that

communism — not democracy — was the political theory that was going to succeed in the emerging global world.

Additionally, Kennedy considered that the deployment of offensive missiles on the island of Cuba was a way for the Soviet Union to balance the missile powers of the two super powers. The United States had a clear advantage over the Soviet Union in both the placement of nuclear missiles and the geological location of the country. Not only did the United States have nuclear missiles in Turkey, but multiple allies of the United States in Europe also possessed nuclear weapons. While the Soviet Union did possess the power to strike the United States with nuclear warheads, it wouldn't have been in their best interest to do so. Most analysts concluded that the Soviets would not likely launch a very successful "first strike" against the United States with the missiles they had in their homeland, and it was questioned whether or not they would be able to launch a successful "second strike" in the event the United States attacked them first (Allison 93). Even ignoring the feasibility of Soviet action with nuclear missiles, the symbolic importance of Soviet missile power in the Western Hemisphere would be unmatched by the largely irrelevant U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey (Allison 94).

Finally, President Kennedy considered the possibility that that the Soviet Union was actually acting in the defense of Cuba. During the negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union after the ultimatum blockade was implemented, Khrushchev originally only requested that the U.S. to agree to not attack Cuba in exchange for the removal of the nuclear missiles on the island (Allison 349). In only examining that aspect of the missile crisis, it may appear that the Soviets were actually

acting in the interest of Cuban defense. But ultimately Kennedy took this possibility much less seriously because it doesn't seem to explain why the Soviets would be deploying offensive missiles instead of the defensive missiles that Kennedy had previously conceded to Cuba (Allison 86).

President Kennedy also had to take into account the multiple organizations and their political motives or shortcomings. Under the Kennedy administration the CIA headed a secret program called Operation Mongoose was established to end Fidel Castro's rule in Cuba. Those involved in this operation generally accepted aggressive actions against Castro in order to end his reign, including the head of the CIA John McCone. For this reason, McCone's analysis of the situation of Cuba was often seen as an attempt to launch another Bay of Pigs-style operation against Castro and Cuba. This is why when McCone expressed concerns about the Soviets moving offensive missiles into Cuba, almost an entire month before they were discovered, he was largely ignored (Allison 332). Had McCone's concerns been taken seriously the missiles in Cuba would've been discovered weeks earlier than they were. Likewise, Kennedy made sure he had complete control over the blockade once it was in place fearing that the military may escalate the situation due to a lack of control over the individuals commanding different aspects of the blockade. Using improved technology, President Kennedy was able to remain in constant communication with ship captains, so much so that every order that included an attack on another ship had to be directly approved by the President (Allison 231). Beyond that, Kennedy regularly checked with the heads of different organizations to make sure his orders were being followed through. One such

event occurred on October 27, 1962 when Kennedy asked whether the State Department had started discussions with the Turkish Government about removing the Jupiter missiles. Secretary of State Dean Rusk answered no, and George Ball explained that it would be “extremely unsettling business” to discuss that with the Turkish government (Allsion 242). In most cases, Kennedy had a watchful eye over the different organizations and made sure they didn’t step over the line.

In examining the various options, influences, and explanations the President had to consider during the missile crisis it’s surprising that his final decision was able to, for the most part, satisfy the multiple variables the United States had to consider. In hindsight, the ultimatum blockade was able to avoid the issue of Berlin, avoid the issue of the Jupiter missiles in Cuba (at least publicly), score a victory for the United States on the global stage, and most importantly, avoid nuclear war. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a huge victory for the President Kennedy and his administration, in addition to being a victory for democracy as a whole.