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# The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Study of Its Strategic Context\*

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The Cuban missile crisis has been analyzed by a variety of authors and from a variety of viewpoints. This study is based on the assumption that no crisis can be understood without considering also the forces and policies which preceded and which flowed from it. Consequently, in addition to analyzing the role of strategic power during the Cuban missile crisis itself, we shall attempt to show in what way the interaction of United States and Soviet strategic policies in the early 1960s served to precipitate the crisis and how the crisis affected in turn the subsequent strategic policies of both sides and ultimately influenced the current strategic balance.

During the 1960 presidential campaign, much was made of the "missile gap." Kennedy administration officials took office in the genuine belief that the U.S. might soon be placed in an unfavor-

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able strategic position. Even though intelligence estimates had been revised downward steadily during 1960, the new administration found that it could not dismiss the possibility that the Soviet Union had acquired an ICBM force and that it might be in the midst of a substantial missile-production program. This prospect endangered U.S. SAC bombers, then the cornerstone of U.S. strategic power, and, on a political level, threatened to undermine the credibility of the U.S. deterrent.

Thus, President Kennedy immediately acted to rectify the deficiencies as he perceived them of the U.S. deterrent posture. In his initial defense plan, the president accelerated the missile programs—tripling the rate of construction of Polaris submarines and doubling the production capacity of Minuteman rockets. Later, when the missile-gap myth was officially exposed, the administration did not modify its strategic program. Defense Secretary McNamara explained that the U.S. chose to continue its initial plan as a “hedge” against the possibility that the Soviet Union, possessing a significant missile-production capacity, might acquire a large ICBM force in the near future.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Khrushchev’s claims, by the early 1960s, the Soviet Union had deployed only a handful of ICBMs and, as a consequence of the Kennedy administration’s strategic program, faced a sizeable and growing U.S. strategic missile force. Moreover, with the exposure of the missile gap, the Soviets realized that the U.S. was not only able to count but to locate the Soviet small and “soft” missile force as well as their vulnerable bomber bases. Kremlin leaders began to fear that the U.S. was moving, as it had in the mid-1950s, toward a first-strike doctrine or at least was acquiring a substantial counterforce capability which could endanger the Soviet deterrent.

Public pronouncements of U.S. superiority added to Soviet concerns. Defense Minister Malinowski, reacting to Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric’s speech in late 1961, accused the U.S. of threatening the Soviets and “preparing a surprise nuclear attack.”<sup>2</sup> President Kennedy’s statement in early 1962 that “in

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. McNamara, “The Dynamics of Nuclear Strategy,” Address delivered before United Press International editors and publishers, San Francisco, Sept. 18, 1967, published in Dept. of State, *Bulletin*, LVII (Oct. 9, 1967), 445-46.

<sup>2</sup> Defense Minister Malinowski, cited in Arnold L. Horelick and Myron Rush, *Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago, 1966), 93.

some circumstances we must be prepared to use nuclear weapons at the start" was interpreted by Khrushchev and Malinowski as an effort to intimidate the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> When Secretary of Defense McNamara articulated the "no-cities" doctrine in June 1962—which called for attacking only military targets in the event of nuclear war—Soviet fears that the U.S. actually planned to initiate a nuclear strike were further exacerbated.

Aside from real or perceived security risks, the dramatic reversal of the nuclear balance raised serious questions of policy for Moscow. The crisis over Berlin in late 1961 demonstrated to many Soviet officials that it was no longer possible to sustain the myth of Soviet superiority and underscored the futility as well as the danger of attempting to obtain political benefits through "Sputnik diplomacy." Although in the Berlin crisis Kennedy did not play brinkmanship in the style of John Foster Dulles, the stakes in Berlin were apparently thought to be high enough to warrant risking nuclear war. Rather than accede to Khrushchev's demands, President Kennedy did not hesitate to bring the newly found strategic power of the U.S. to bear in an attempt to influence Soviet actions.<sup>4</sup> The Berlin crisis also coincided with official U.S. exposure of the nonexistent missile gap. In fact, one particularly timely and crucial reason for informing the Soviets that we knew their missile claims were false was the unsettled situation in Berlin.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> V. D. Sokolovskii, ed., *Soviet Military Strategy* (Santa Monica, 1963), 166.

<sup>4</sup> The Berlin crisis had brought with it a premature test of the Kennedy administration's defense policy. Although plans had been made to reverse Eisenhower's nuclear-oriented defense posture, U.S. conventional capabilities in 1961 were grossly inadequate. Therefore, President Kennedy had *no choice* but to protect "vital" Western interests by bringing the nuclear dimension into the picture. Although no direct threats were delivered, the president simply reminded Kremlin leaders in his public statement that "an attack upon [Berlin] will be regarded as an attack upon us all"; President Kennedy, Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis, July 25, 1961 in *Public Papers of the President: 1961*. (Washington, D.C., 1962), 534. There was no need to spell out the implications of this remark, for in his first budget message, President Kennedy had implied that the U.S. would be prepared to use nuclear weapons if necessary to defend Western Europe in general and Berlin in particular. Going one step farther, in the midst of his Berlin speech, the president explicitly alluded to the "possibilities of nuclear war" and requested additional funds for civil defense; *ibid.*, 536.

<sup>5</sup> If Khrushchev "were allowed to continue to assume that we still believed in the missile gap," the administration concluded, "he would very probably bring the world dangerously close to war"; Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (Garden

But the new strategic relationship did more than simply blunt Soviet offensive drives. It placed them on the defensive. With the strategic balance shifted against them, Soviet leaders feared that they might be unable to protect their vital interests in diplomatic dealings with the West and unable to maintain their worldwide image as a power comparable to the U.S. and as leader of the Communist bloc. Planned improvements in U.S. nonnuclear capabilities even threatened to deprive the Soviets of their longstanding superiority in conventional weapons which had been viewed as a partial counterweight to the U.S. nuclear advantage in the 1950s.

Khrushchev clearly appreciated the danger posed by nuclear war and the limited utility of nuclear weapons. He had acknowledged the vital importance of avoiding a major thermonuclear war through "peaceful coexistence," and, since the U-2 incident of 1960, had muted his missile claims and had begun to talk about "sufficiency" rather than "superiority." It is possible, therefore, that the Soviets were prepared to settle for parity.

But, by mid-1962, the prospect of overwhelming U.S. military superiority gave the Soviets a strong political as well as military incentive to redress the balance of intercontinental strategic forces. It was not enough to rely on their large medium-range missile and bomber capacity to threaten Western Europe. Long-range strategic missiles had become the most relevant measure of overall strength. Indeed, during the late 1950s, Khrushchev's Sputnik diplomacy had enhanced the value of these systems as political currency.

To attempt to overtake the U.S. in numbers of intercontinental systems, however, would entail a massive Soviet effort, for the U.S. already had a considerable lead in ICBMs and SLBMs, in addition to its lead in long-range bombers. Furthermore, the existing Soviet technology of large "soft" and slow-reacting missiles would make a crash program especially costly, while yielding marginal security benefits. In any event, Khrushchev remained unwilling to commit his nation to an enormously expensive program which would detract from other needs. He was faced, therefore, with a

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City, N.Y., 1967), 163. It also seems reasonable to conjecture that the administration believed that emphasizing U.S. strategic superiority could exert a coercive effect on Moscow, for the October speech by Deputy Defense Secretary Gilpatric went beyond mere exposure of the missile gap to underscore the U.S. massive retaliation advantage.

dilemma: how to increase strategic strength rapidly while holding expenditures in check.

Cuba offered a solution. The Soviets had a foothold on this island and had been supplying Castro for some time with arms of all types, including SAMs. Why not use this overseas base to deploy offensive missiles? By installing medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MR/IRBMs) within range of the U.S., the Soviets could gain more quickly and at less cost many of the benefits of a program of ICBM construction. The large-scale deployment of MR/IRBMs against Western Europe suggested that these systems were reliable and could be produced easily. Clearly, the missiles would be vulnerable to nuclear, and even conventional, strikes from the U.S., but their existence would complicate a U.S. attack and thereby strengthen the Soviet deterrent, at least until a survivable intercontinental force became available.

### *The Missile Crisis*

The primary motivation behind Khrushchev's decision to install missiles on Cuba, in our opinion and in the opinion of most other analysts, was the Soviet's desire to rapidly rectify the strategic balance.<sup>6</sup> The Kennedy administration itself, from the initiation of the crisis, perceived this as a possible motive.

From the Soviet standpoint, however, a number of important ancillary objectives would also be served by emplacing missiles in Cuba, and these considerations undoubtedly contributed to Moscow's final decision. For over a decade the Soviet Union had been ringed by U.S. SAC bases and, in the late 1950s, by missiles deployed in Turkey, Italy, and England. The Soviet Union had never before stationed nuclear systems outside its borders. Placing shorter-range nuclear-capable missiles, and bombers, ninety miles from U.S. shores would be a dramatic counter to this threat and would underscore the very real Soviet concern over U.S. bases abroad.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Michel Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin: From Khrushchev to Kosygin* (New York, 1967), 231; Hilsman, 201; Horelick and Rush, 141; Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1966), 28.

<sup>7</sup> The very fact that Khrushchev, at the height of the crisis, sent out "feelers" on an informal level regarding a trade-off between the Turkish and Cuban bases, as well as writing a strong letter of insistence to this effect suggests that the Soviets were indeed concerned about American bases in Turkey and elsewhere.

Kremlin leaders might have believed also that the Cuban action would lay the groundwork for a future move against Berlin. The unfavorable strategic balance had twice before prevented the Soviets from attaining any real degree of success in Berlin. If the Soviets could succeed in Cuba, perhaps they might be able to launch a new and successful offensive against that city. The Kennedy administration itself felt strongly that a weak U.S. response to the Soviet provocation in Cuba would allow the Soviets to move on Berlin. Apparently, President Kennedy felt this to be the most immediate danger raised by the Cuban adventure, if not the dominant reason for Khrushchev's decision to install the missiles. In his speech of October 22, the president made explicit references to possible Soviet moves against Berlin; and during the naval blockade of the island, Kennedy ordered final preparations for the defense of Berlin.

Many analysts argue that the Cuban undertaking can be attributed to politics within the Kremlin.<sup>8</sup> Khrushchev had been severely criticized for his international policies and his overambition in exploiting the missile gap. By emplacing missiles in Cuba, thus degrading American strategic power, Khrushchev perhaps hoped to repair his own prestige.

More specifically, establishing a major Soviet offensive nuclear base in the Western Hemisphere might not only cast doubt on the willingness of the U.S. to defend its interests and demonstrate to the world the strength of Soviet military and foreign policy, but it might give the Soviets a greater foothold in Latin America. Perhaps Khrushchev hoped, by the Cuban gamble, to encourage potential Castros elsewhere in Latin America. Robert McNamara stated at the time that, although the effect on the strategic balance might be small, the "potential effect on Latin America and elsewhere would be large."<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the decision was also consistent with specific Soviet goals in Cuba. Throughout the crisis, Khrushchev stated his desire to protect Cuba from an invasion by the U.S. During the course of the crisis, once the blockade had been initiated, Khrushchev wrote a letter to Kennedy agreeing to withdraw the missiles

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Horelick and Rush, 141; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 796.

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. McNamara, cited in I. F. Stone, *In a Time of Torment* (New York, 1968), 18.

from Cuba if Kennedy promised not to invade Cuba at any future date. The Bay of Pigs attempt to depose Castro also played a role in this objective. In his first letter to the president, Khrushchev claimed that the Bay of Pigs affair had forced him to emplace missiles on the island. Thus, the introduction of IR/MRBMs would contribute to deterring a U.S. attack on Cuba and generally help solidify the Soviet presence. In any event, Castro would permit deployment and Soviet leaders could—and did—claim that the missiles were there for defense purposes, a measure to which the world could not legitimately object.

Whatever specific mixture of motivations lay behind Moscow's decisions, once the secret Soviet missile buildup was discovered, the next move was up to the U.S. A wealth of material has been written about the subsequent thirteen days. For our purposes, three questions are of particular importance: Why was President Kennedy adamant about the removal of Soviet offensive missiles from Cuba? What role did U.S. strategic forces play in the actions taken by the administration to achieve this goal? How did U.S. actions and the nature of the strategic balance influence Moscow's decision to withdraw the missiles?

In his address to the American people on October 22, President Kennedy stated that the "unswerving objective" must be to "secure withdrawal or elimination" of the Soviet missiles in Cuba.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as the crisis progressed, despite differences over tactics, no member of Ex Comm—as the president's advisory group was called—seriously argued that the U.S. should permit the missiles to remain. Why were they so determined to seek removal of the missiles?

U.S. officials were clearly concerned over the strictly strategic implications of Soviet missiles in Cuba. It was difficult to ignore the fact that the Soviets had suddenly doubled their capacity to deliver nuclear warheads against the U.S. via ballistic missiles. This posed an increased threat to the U.S. population as well as to U.S. strategic forces. The fact that the missiles were at close range and could bypass the U.S. warning net presented a particular danger to the survivability of U.S. bombers. And the fact that

<sup>10</sup> John F. Kennedy, Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba, Oct. 22, 1962 in *Public Papers of the President: 1962*. (Washington, D.C., 1963), 807.

the missiles were "soft" suggested to some U.S. officials that they would only be used in a first strike. Finally, the Soviet missiles did pose a new threat to Latin American cities, which had been considered beyond the effective range of Soviet ICBMs.

On the other hand, the president and his advisers knew that the Soviet deployment could not seriously endanger the U.S. deterrent. Polaris submarines and "hardened" ICBMs would remain secure, and countermeasures could be taken to minimize the danger to U.S. bombers. Furthermore, they were aware that the Soviets already had the ability to deliver nuclear weapons against the U.S. with ICBMs, SLBMs, and bombers. If the Soviets had increased their long-range missile force rather than emplaced short-range missiles in Cuba, the effect would have been essentially the same. In his October address, President Kennedy reminded the American people that they "have become adjusted to living daily on the bull's eye of Soviet missiles" and concluded, "in that sense, missiles in Cuba add to an already clear and present danger. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Early in the crisis, McNamara expressed the same thought privately, reportedly saying that "a missile is a missile," whether launched from Cuba or the Soviet Union itself.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever the military significance of the missiles, however, broader foreign-policy considerations apparently dominated the administration's decision to insist that they be removed. Administration officials were reacting to the possible adverse political consequences of the sudden visible increase in Soviet "strategic" power provided by having possibly hundreds of IR/MRBMs based in Cuba. President Kennedy later explained that he did not fear that the Soviets would actually fire these missiles, but that the deployment "would have politically changed the balance of power. . . . It would have appeared to, and appearances contribute to reality."<sup>13</sup> Although he considered that Soviet missiles in Cuba had little strategic significance, Secretary McNamara, as noted earlier, was also very much aware of their potential political consequences. The president and the secretary of defense may have feared that the U.S. would lose some of the strategic advantage it

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> McNamara, cited in Hilsman, 195.

<sup>13</sup> President Kennedy, cited in Alexander George, David Hall, and William E. Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boston, 1971), 92.

had recently acquired—as a consequence of its massive missile buildup—and that U.S. prestige and power might suffer a setback. More worrisome may have been the prospect that Khrushchev might again adopt the policy of “rocket rattling” which, as a minimum, could involve the U.S. in crises and weaken the Western alliance.

Nevertheless, as important as it might have been, concern that the strategic balance might shift back toward the Soviet side does not in itself fully account for the administration’s determination to remove the missiles.<sup>14</sup> What appears to have triggered the strong U.S. response, as much as any of the foregoing factors, was the way in which the Soviets went about redressing the balance, combined with the geographic and political uniqueness of Cuba. The administration considered Soviet deployment of offensive missiles in the Western Hemisphere to be a direct challenge to the U.S., running counter to long-established policies and precedents. Equally disturbing, the Soviet government had ignored President Kennedy’s warning not to install offensive missiles in Cuba, while assuring the U.S. that it had every intention of complying, even going to the extreme of denying that missiles were being installed.

In the view of President Kennedy and his advisers, the flagrant defiance of the U.S., together with Soviet secrecy and deceit, made a strong response imperative. If the U.S. acquiesced under these circumstances—and with the issue of security against nuclear attack at stake—administration officials feared that U.S. prestige and credibility would be impaired. If the Soviets were allowed to succeed in this move, the U.S. was likely to face serious problems around the world, in Europe, and, most notably, in Berlin. The president made a special point of warning Khrushchev not to underestimate the American determination and will, as if to avoid projecting an image of weakness. President Kennedy cogently sum-

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the president noted that the Soviets had never before deployed nuclear systems outside its borders and stated that in the nuclear age, “any sudden change” in the deployment of ballistic missiles “may well be regarded as a definite threat to peace”; President Kennedy, Radio and Television Report . . . Cuba, 807. But again, if the Soviets had simply increased their ICBM forces rapidly or even stationed short-range missiles in Eastern Europe as part of a declared policy, the administration would almost surely have been less upset—and, of course, less able to take feasible actions to eliminate the buildup.

med up the administration position in his public announcement: "This secret, swift, and extraordinary buildup of Communist missiles—in violation of Soviet assurances, and in defiance of American hemispheric policy—is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country if our courage and commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe."<sup>15</sup>

For all of these reasons, President Kennedy was reluctant to compromise and seek a purely diplomatic solution. Most notably, the president refused to accept suggestions made early in the crisis that the U.S. offer to "trade" its IRBMs—still based in Turkey and Italy despite an earlier decision to have them removed—as a *quid pro quo* for Soviet withdrawal of missiles from Cuba, and he subsequently rejected Soviet proposals to negotiate such an agreement.<sup>16</sup>

Having rejected purely diplomatic solutions, how did the U.S. go about accomplishing the removal of the missiles? Essentially, the administration applied the principles of "flexible response," starting with a "mounting sequence of threats" short of nuclear war.<sup>17</sup> All of the military options discussed by Ex Comm, for example, were nonnuclear—naval blockade, conventional air strike against the sites, and invasion—as might have been anticipated. Kennedy administration officials advocated this approach as the most effective way to manage crises and had attempted to follow this course in Berlin. Unlike the Berlin situation, however,

<sup>15</sup> President Kennedy, Radio and Television Report . . . Cuba, 807.

<sup>16</sup> Even though it was recognized that U.S. MRBMs were strategically useless and their removal would represent "no loss" to the U.S. or its allies, the president apparently feared that such an arrangement would both legitimize the Soviet action and display weakness on the part of the U.S. The president also believed that attempts to negotiate such a deal—or indeed to rely completely on any negotiated solution—would take time and could lead to a situation in which all Soviet missiles were operational. In such a circumstance, the U.S. would run a greater risk in the event military actions against Cuba were later required, and the Soviets would be in a stronger bargaining position. However, since the proposal was, in Robert Kennedy's words, "not unreasonable," while still rejecting a formal trade and refusing to negotiate under "threat or pressure," the president later informed the Soviets that our missiles would be removed once the Soviets removed their missiles; Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York, 1969), 105-10 and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter, "Controlling the Risks in Cuba," *Adelphi Papers*, no. 17 (London, Institute for Strategic Studies, April 1965), 17.

in Cuba, the preponderance of U.S. conventional capabilities in the area made flexible response a credible, practical, and effective alternative.<sup>18</sup>

It was not only unnecessary and inappropriate to rely on nuclear force to solve the Cuban crisis; it was judged to be dangerous as well. Despite overwhelming U.S. nuclear superiority, President Kennedy knew that nuclear war would be catastrophic. If the Soviets launched first, their relatively small ICBM and SLBM forces combined with their long-range bomber force would have been able to cause tens of millions of U.S. fatalities. To be sure, the U.S. could have launched first and destroyed an appreciable part of Soviet strategic power. But there was no *guarantee* that the entire Soviet force would be destroyed on the ground or that the USSR would not fire some of its missiles on warning. Moreover, an enormous force of Soviet medium-range missiles and bombers held Western Europe hostage. Even a few nuclear weapons landing on U.S. or European cities would be incredibly destructive.

Not surprisingly, the president at once rejected the idea that the U.S. be the first to use nuclear weapons and avoided overt nuclear threats. In his talk on October 22, stressing the seriousness of the situation, President Kennedy warned that the U.S. would launch a "full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union" if nuclear missiles were launched from Cuba "against any nation in the Western Hemisphere," that such an attack would be regarded as an attack on the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Although some commentators claimed that this statement conveyed a nuclear threat, it was undoubtedly designed to deter the USSR from deliberately launching nuclear missiles from Cuba against any nation in the Americas and, at the same time, to put pressure on Moscow to ensure that no missiles were fired accidentally from Cuban bases.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Presi-

<sup>18</sup> As an immediate response to the Cuban crisis, the U.S. had readied massive conventional power in addition to calling for a general strategic alert. These forces could support the blockade and provide for the air strike and invasion contingencies. A large U.S. naval presence was established in the area, tactical aircraft wings were deployed within range of Cuba, and reserve forces were increased.

<sup>19</sup> President Kennedy, Radio and Television Report . . . Cuba, 808.

<sup>20</sup> Slocombe's analysis supports this conclusion; "The Political Implications of Strategic Parity," *Adelphi Papers*, no. 77 (London, Institute of Strategic Studies, 1971), 32. Clearly, President Kennedy did not have to remind the Soviets that a nuclear attack against the United States—whether launched from Cuba or the USSR—would bring a retaliatory response. But, to avoid possible misunderstanding, the president apparently felt it necessary to emphasize that U.S. de-

dent Kennedy put U.S. strategic forces on alert and ordered SAC bombers to be dispersed, but again, these were plausible, prudent measures designed to safeguard the U.S. retaliatory force.

President Kennedy was concerned that events might go out of control and ultimately lead to nuclear war. Throughout the crisis, he remained highly sensitive to the possibility that a nuclear war could break out through miscalculation or an irreversible series of limited moves with each side constantly raising the ante in the hope that the other side would back down.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the president kept U.S. actions tightly under control and tried to avoid decisions which would be likely to push the crisis past the point of no return.<sup>22</sup>

The president was convinced that the Soviet Union also wanted to avoid nuclear war over Cuba, but was concerned that, if care were not taken, Khrushchev might be forced into an "irrational" nuclear response. Kennedy therefore sought to give Khrushchev room to maneuver and to find a graceful way to withdraw, rejecting actions which might push the Soviets into a corner. While bringing military pressure to bear, through such means as intensifying aerial overflights, direct and early armed confrontations were avoided, and diplomatic avenues were pursued in parallel—in the UN, with the OAS, and directly with the Soviet government.

The president's critical decision to impose a blockade, rather than launch an air strike or an invasion, as the first serious U.S. move was typical of his approach.<sup>23</sup> Once the blockade was inter-

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terrent policy also applied to Soviet nuclear attacks against any nation in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, explicitly placing the U.S. strategic umbrella over all nations in the Western Hemisphere was not a radical departure from overall policies, given the precedent of U.S. commitment to Europe and Japan.

<sup>21</sup> "It isn't the first step that concerns me," the President remarked, "but both sides escalating to the fourth and fifth steps—and we don't go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so"; cited in R. Kennedy, 98.

<sup>22</sup> The president was particularly conscious of the danger of the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons and gave special orders to ensure that U.S. missiles in Turkey and Italy were fully under his command.

<sup>23</sup> President Kennedy agreed with Robert Kennedy and Defense Secretary McNamara that an air strike was not yet essential and would be a hazardous step with the potential to trigger a chain of events which could move the crisis to the brink of nuclear war. Despite the fact that a blockade would not, in itself, prevent the completion of missiles already delivered, it would signal U.S. seriousness, give the Soviets time to deliberate, preserve future U.S. options, and minimize the likelihood and consequences of armed conflict. Even the term *quarantine* was selected in part because it sounded less belligerent than *blockade*.

tuted, President Kennedy sought to decrease its risks by narrowing its limits and avoiding unnecessarily provocative boardings of Soviet ships. Later in the crisis, even after the downing of an American reconnaissance plane over Cuba and the receipt of the "tougher" letter from the Soviet foreign ministry, the president still rejected military recommendations for an air strike, refusing to attack and expressing the desire to find less risky alternatives.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, despite all the cautious behavior to avoid nuclear war, to ensure removal of the missiles, Kennedy seemed prepared to take actions which may well have had this result. As he himself put it in the midst of the crisis, "we will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of world-wide nuclear war—but neither will we shrink from that risk any time it must be faced."<sup>25</sup> Robert Kennedy recalled that the consensus of Ex Comm was "that if the Soviets were ready to go to nuclear war over Cuba . . . we might as well have the showdown [now rather than] six months later."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the best example of U.S. determination was to be found in the air-strike option.<sup>27</sup> All important U.S. officials recognized that an air strike, alone or followed by an invasion, would increase the risk of nuclear war. The Soviets might retaliate from Cuba with surviving missiles, undertake reciprocal action against U.S. missiles in Turkey, or launch a major move against Berlin. If the Soviet response led the president to use nuclear weapons, "all mankind would be threatened."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> R. Kennedy, 98.

<sup>25</sup> President Kennedy, Radio and Television Report . . . Cuba, 807.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Kennedy, cited in Schlesinger, 829-30.

<sup>27</sup> Another instance of this U.S. resolve occurred when Soviet ships were about to challenge the U.S. blockade and a Soviet submarine interposed itself between Soviet and U.S. ships. Secretary McNamara proposed that depth charges be used to force the submarine to surface. President Kennedy saw the danger of an exchange with a Soviet submarine, but agreed that there was no other choice. In the president's judgment, the U.S. had to run the risk of triggering a series of escalating moves and enforce the quarantine. We will never know what the result would have been, for the Soviets did not actually challenge the blockade; R. Kennedy, 69-72.

<sup>28</sup> Secretary McNamara later explained the possible Soviet reaction to a U.S. invasion of Cuba: "Had we invaded Cuba, we would have been confronted with the Soviets. . . . Had we been confronted with the Soviets we would have killed thousands of them. . . . Had we killed thousands of them the Soviets would probably have had to respond. . . . They might have had nuclear delivery weapons there [that] might have been operational and they might have been launched . . ."; McNamara testifying at hearings on Department of Defense

Although some Ex Comm members nevertheless argued for the air strike as an initial move, President Kennedy chose the blockade. Later in the crisis, however, when it became clear that the blockade was not going to prevent the Soviets from completing work on the missiles already present, the president, despite the risks, was willing to consider seriously an air strike and to convey this highly threatening possibility to the Soviets.

On October 27, the difficult decision had been made to respond to Khrushchev's "first" letter and to agree to accept his offer to withdraw the missiles in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba.<sup>29</sup> The crisis was then at a crucial point. U.S. overflights indicated that the missile sites would soon be operational. An immediate and positive answer from Khrushchev was needed.

In transmitting President Kennedy's letter to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, Robert Kennedy explained that "we had to have a commitment by tomorrow that those bases would be removed." Robert Kennedy told Dobrynin, if the Soviets would not comply, "we would remove them."<sup>30</sup> And he reminded Dobrynin that if the U.S. were forced to invade Cuba and the Soviets took retaliatory action, "before that was over, there would not only be dead Americans but dead Russians as well."<sup>31</sup>

This was a serious threat—indeed, an ultimatum—deliberately conveyed on the president's orders to the Soviets. That Robert Kennedy, in the name of the president, also offered to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey once the crisis had ended—in a belated gesture obviously designed to help Khrushchev "save face"—does not alter this fact.<sup>32</sup>

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appropriations for 1964 before the Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations, cited in Horelick and Rush, 153.

<sup>29</sup> Two letters had been received in rapid succession from the Soviet government. The earlier letter, asking for a U.S. promise not to invade Cuba, was clearly from Khrushchev. The later letter was apparently prepared by the Soviet Foreign Ministry; it demanded that the American bases in Turkey be removed as a *quid pro quo* for the Soviet bases in Cuba. It was Robert Kennedy who suggested the "Trollope ploy" of responding to the first letter as though the second had never been written; Hilsman, 223.

<sup>30</sup> R. Kennedy, 108.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> George, Hall, Simons, 125, explain why the Kennedy message to Dobrynin was a true ultimatum while earlier U.S. moves, such as the blockade, were not. They state that the message conveyed to Dobrynin stipulated a time limit—immediately—as well as a threat of punishment for noncompliance—that the United States would remove the missiles if the Soviets did not.

We will never know whether President Kennedy would have actually approved the air strike and risked nuclear war if the Soviets had not responded appropriately. McNamara acknowledged that the U.S. "faced . . . the possibility of launching nuclear weapons" in the event the Soviets did not comply,<sup>33</sup> and President Kennedy expressed the feeling that it could go "either way."<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, two days after the meeting with Dobrynin, Khrushchev responded to President Kennedy's letter, stating that he was prepared to withdraw the missiles from Cuba.

How important was the strategic balance to molding the administration's course of action? A case can be made that U.S. nuclear superiority played an important role in generally strengthening the administration's resolve and, as the crisis progressed, in its willingness to take actions which ran an appreciable risk of leading to nuclear war. Although the president made no direct threats to use nuclear weapons or specific references to U.S. strategic advantage, he may well have concluded that U.S. nuclear power would have a restraining and possibly a coercive effect on the behavior of Soviet leaders. President Kennedy apparently believed that U.S. strategic superiority would reliably deter the Soviets from initiating a nuclear war. At the same time, President Kennedy seemed to believe that U.S. nuclear superiority, when coupled with U.S. conventional superiority, would compel Khrushchev to withdraw the missiles. Perhaps the president was somewhat more willing to contemplate risking a nuclear exchange because the U.S. would be in a better position than the Soviets to limit damage through counterforce attack.<sup>35</sup>

It is clear that the U.S. acted with determination in forcing the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. But the ultimate outcome of the crisis hinged upon the Soviet Union's perceptions and the motives which influenced Kremlin leaders to eventually agree to U.S. demands. How did the Soviets see the situation and what effect did U.S. strategic power have on Khrushchev's decision to remove the missiles?

<sup>33</sup> Secretary Robert S. McNamara, *Hearings on Department of Defense Appropriations for 1964*, cited in Horelick and Rush, 153.

<sup>34</sup> President Kennedy, cited in Hilsman, 224.

<sup>35</sup> We may question whether the president would have, for example, threatened to "retaliate" against the Soviet homeland in response to a nuclear attack against Latin America if the U.S. were not able to inflict severe damage on Soviet strategic forces.

It should be noted that, initially, the Soviets offered a good deal of resistance to Kennedy's firm stand on the issue.<sup>36</sup> Despite their public stance, however, it seems clear that the Soviets were frightened by the prospect of a nuclear war over Cuba. In the early 1960s, Kremlin leaders were aware that a nuclear conflict would be catastrophic for the Soviet Union and the world. During the crisis, Khrushchev continually pointed to the danger of nuclear war.<sup>37</sup> He called the U.S. blockade "a step toward the unleashing of a nuclear world war" and called for a summit meeting "to do everything to remove the danger of unleashing [such a] war."<sup>38</sup>

Both sides were frightened by the spectre of nuclear war, but Soviet fears were greatly exacerbated by U.S. strategic superiority. As a result, Soviet leaders were extremely wary of pressing their policies to the point that use of nuclear weapons seemed inevitable.<sup>39</sup>

The Soviet strategic position during the crisis was highly unfavorable—as noted, this was perhaps the single most important motive for the decision to put missiles into Cuba. Not only did

<sup>36</sup> During the crisis, for example, in a letter to the president, Khrushchev claimed that the U.S. blockade was pushing mankind "to the abyss of a world missile-nuclear war," but said he would not order his ships' captains to obey U.S. naval officers; cited in R. Kennedy, 79-80. Later, in a personal conversation with a private U.S. citizen, Khrushchev admitted that Soviet missiles were indeed in Cuba and threatened to use them if necessary. He further threatened that if the U.S. Navy attempted to deter Soviet ships, Soviet submarines would sink them "and that would mean a third world war"; Khrushchev, paraphrased in Abel, 132-33. Even after Kennedy's strong speech of October 22, the Soviets continued to take a hard line as they maintained their speedup on completion of the MR/IRBMs. A few days after the speech, an American U-2 was shot down over Cuba. By October 25, the IL-28 bombers had been uncrated and assembled. In point of fact, these bombers were not removed from Cuba until November 20.

<sup>37</sup> Throughout the crisis, the real possibility that any military clash between U.S. and Soviet forces would lead to nuclear war was apparently of overriding concern to Khrushchev. Contrary to U.S. fears, the Soviets did not move against Berlin during the course of the Cuban crisis. More to the point, despite Khrushchev's threat to defy the U.S. blockade at the risk of war, he did not do so when faced with the actual choice. And Khrushchev, too, feared that a U.S. air strike or invasion against Cuba would bring both sides dangerously close to the brink.

<sup>38</sup> Khrushchev, cited in Tatu; 264; Khrushchev, cited in Abel, 125-26.

<sup>39</sup> The danger of nuclear escalation can obviously work in both directions. Khrushchev could have stood firm and refused to remove the missiles on the assumption that the U.S. would back down rather than risk nuclear war. It is interesting to contemplate the outcome of the Cuban crisis if Khrushchev had indeed decided to carry the game of "nuclear chicken" further.

the Soviet Union at that time lack the capability to launch a first strike, but its ability to effectively deter the U.S. was open to question. Even though U.S. calculations demonstrated the difficulty of mounting a successful counterforce attack against the Soviets, from the Kremlin's vantage point, the possibility that the U.S. could do so could not be ruled out. A nuclear exchange would have resulted in considerably greater damage to the Soviet Union than to the U.S., and the Soviets had neither the forces nor the doctrine which would have enabled them to play by the rules of "limited" strategic war.<sup>40</sup>

If not in strictly military terms, the strategic balance seen through Soviet eyes probably placed Kremlin leaders at a psychological disadvantage<sup>41</sup> and lent credence to U.S. threats. Buttressed by a real and acknowledged edge in nuclear weapons, U.S. leaders would be less likely to compromise and more prone to take conventional military action on the assumption that the Soviets would be reluctant to respond with a nuclear strike. President Kennedy's statement of October 22, in which he referred to the U.S. "full retaliatory response" policy was clearly a reminder of U.S. power and may have even been taken as a threat to launch a preemptive attack against the Soviet Union if it did not comply.

U.S. strategic superiority, however, was obviously not the only factor influencing Soviet behavior. The overwhelming U.S. conventional superiority in the area added to Khrushchev's apprehensions and contributed greatly to the Soviet decision to acquiesce.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it was apparently the combination of U.S. con-

<sup>40</sup> If some of the approximately seventy missiles stationed in Cuba had become operational, the Soviet position would have been improved, but the extreme vulnerability of these weapons would have made this contribution marginal. See Horelick and Rush, 128, 133, and Wohlstetter, 10-12.

<sup>41</sup> Slocombe, 32, posits the "psychological edge" thesis. He states that it is logical to assume that since the Soviets so clearly felt the strategic balance to be a factor when they put the missiles in Cuba, they were very aware of U.S. superiority during the crisis and, in turn, very cautious in taking them out of Cuba. Although he feels the U.S. did not have sufficient numerical and vulnerability advantages over the Soviet Union to prevent real damage from being done to the U.S., from the Soviet viewpoint, their own forces were too limited.

<sup>42</sup> One high U.S. military official was completely convinced that conventional, as opposed to nuclear, superiority was the decisive factor in the Soviet withdrawal; General Earl Wheeler, as cited in W. W. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy* (New York, 1964), 273. It might be pointed out, however, that the conventional option chosen—the blockade—appeared to be of greater salience in terms of prohibiting the Soviets from further supplying Cuba, rather than in

ventional and nuclear strength which forced the Soviets to withdraw their missiles.<sup>43</sup> U.S. nuclear and conventional forces served to complement each other. While American nuclear power neutralized Soviet nuclear power, U.S. conventional superiority discouraged the Soviets from a conventional confrontation. The Soviets could not, without the use of nuclear weapons, prevent the U.S. from invading Cuba or destroying the missile sites with conventional air attacks. At the same time, U.S. strategic power more than negated Soviet strategic capabilities, making the use of nuclear weapons on the part of the Soviets irrational and heightening the risks of a U.S.-Soviet military conflict over Cuba.

Consequently, as it had in the earlier Berlin crisis, the burden of avoiding nuclear war again fell upon Khrushchev; the USSR was placed in the untenable position of choosing between "holocaust and surrender." In the end, he was not prepared to run a serious risk of nuclear war over the missiles in Cuba.<sup>44</sup> The U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba and the eleventh-hour offer to remove U.S. missiles in Turkey did give Khrushchev the opportunity to make some policy gains and avoid further embarrassment. But the prime influence behind Khrushchev's decision was U.S. military power. As McNamara put it, "Khrushchev knew . . . that he faced the full military power of the U.S., including its nuclear weapons . . . that is the reason, and the only reason, why he withdrew those weapons."<sup>45</sup>

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terms of their total withdrawal. To "remove" the missiles without Soviet agreement would have required a U.S. air strike which could have had nuclear repercussions.

<sup>43</sup> Hilsman supports this view: "it is not possible to say that it was a nuclear threat, as such, that caused the Soviets to back down. . . . On the other hand, it is also not possible to say that the Soviets backed down solely in the face of a threat to invade Cuba with conventional, nonnuclear forces. . . . On balance, in other words, the best judgment seems to be that the Soviets backed down in the face of a threat that combined both conventional and nuclear power"; Hilsman, 226-27.

<sup>44</sup> Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, 1971), 64-65, notes that the Soviets attached great significance to the threat of an air strike. Khrushchev, in reporting to the Supreme Soviet on the crisis, conveys the seriousness with which the Soviets received the threat: "We received information from Cuban comrades and from other sources on the morning of October 27 *directly stating* that this attack would be carried out in the next two or three days. We interpreted these cables as an *extremely alarming warning signal*." Khrushchev insisted that the threat was not simply a matter of Soviet perceptions; he asserted that the threat was "explicitly stated."

<sup>45</sup> Secretary McNamara, *Hearings on Dept. of Defense Appropriations for*

*Evaluation of the Crisis*

From one point of view, U.S. actions during the Cuban crisis seemed justifiable and sensible and to have successfully reversed a provocative Soviet move. From another point of view, however, it can be argued that Moscow's missile gambit pressed this nation to the point where, rightly or wrongly, the next steps were liable to lead inevitably to global war. In this sense, despite his irresponsible and misguided decision to install missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev<sup>46</sup> should be thanked for his decision not to "doom the world" by "tightening the knot."<sup>47</sup>

From these different perspectives, President Kennedy's behavior during the Cuban crisis has been both highly praised and severely criticized. Many observers—and almost all the participants in the U.S. government's decisions—argue that the president exhibited great restraint in his efforts to obtain removal of the missiles. They emphasize his use of "graduated responses" and his display of sensitivity to the danger of nuclear war as well as the masterful way in which, in order to avoid military clashes, he gave Khrushchev room to maneuver. Others claim that the president acted irresponsibly by bringing the world too close to nuclear war.

Much of this controversy centers around the basic security question: how important was the goal of getting the missiles withdrawn, and, given the stakes involved, to what degree should the U.S. have risked nuclear war?<sup>48</sup> The debate over Kennedy's behavior also raises the issue of whether there were mo-

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1964, cited in Horelick and Rush, 153.

<sup>46</sup> Khrushchev letter, cited in R. Kennedy, 89-90.

<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that all Soviet MRBMs were operational by October 28 and ground forces were equipped with tactical nuclear weapons. Therefore, had the U.S. decided to invade, the consequences would have indeed been serious. Hilsman credits the Soviets with courage in their decision to withdraw: "although putting the missiles into Cuba was threatening and irresponsible, the Soviets handled the ensuing crisis with wisdom and restraint"; Hilsman, 227. Khrushchev himself, on Dec. 12, 1962, after the crisis was past, spoke of the necessity for restraint: "If it is now a 'paper tiger' [imperialism], those who say this know that this 'paper tiger' has atomic teeth. It can use them and it must not be treated lightly"; Khrushchev, cited in Abel, 191-92.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Kennedy later raised an even more basic question regarding the authority by which any president has the right to lead a nation close to nuclear war; note by Theodore Sorenson, cited in R. Kennedy, 128.

tives other than concern for national security which caused him to take a firm stance.

Some commentators have claimed that the president was strongly influenced by domestic politics. The Republicans had already begun to use the buildup of Soviet arms in Cuba as an election issue, and the president finally took a strong public position warning the USSR that he would not tolerate the introduction of "offensive" weapons because of the political risk at home.<sup>49</sup> Other critics feel that, because of the Berlin situation and the abortive Bay of Pigs incident, the president personally felt the need to adopt a strong position against Khrushchev—at all costs.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> A great debate ensued some years after the crisis between Steel and Hilsman regarding the "political" motivations of the president. Steel intimated that the administration was in greater jeopardy than U.S. security; Ronald Steel, "The Kennedys and the Missile Crisis," *The New York Review of Books*, XII (March 13, 1969), 15-22 and *passim*. He contended that Kennedy made a grandstand play by delivering his ultimatum to Khrushchev on television rather than privately to Gromyko and that Kennedy's motives were at least partly political. He claimed that Kennedy needed a "foreign policy victory" due to Republican charges and the upcoming elections and that the stakes were not as high as we were then led to believe; Steel in Roger Hilsman and Ronald Steel, "An Exchange on the Missile Crisis," *The New York Review of Books*, XII (May 9, 1969), 38. However, in fairness, he added, "Did we, then, nearly go up in radioactive dust to shore up the Kennedy Administration's fading image before the November 1962 elections? Not necessarily . . . considerations of high strategy and party politics reinforced one another and convinced Kennedy that the Russian withdrawal had to be complete, unilateral, and secured by the end of October"; Steel, "The Kennedys and the Missile Crisis," 15-16. To these charges, Hilsman rebutted that Kennedy was being pressured by hardliners from the military, the State Department, and the CIA, as well as both Republicans and Democrats in Congress. He states categorically: "It was political trouble, all right, but the upcoming elections were the least of it . . . it was the missiles themselves that made Kennedy adopt a tight deadline, not the upcoming elections"; Hilsman in "An Exchange on the Missile Crisis," 37-38. Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *The American Political Science Review*, LXIII (1969), 712, commented that Cuba was the Kennedy administration's "political Achilles heel." The president was being forced to take a stand on Cuba due to three major domestic factors: (1) the upcoming congressional elections, (2) the Republican announcements that Cuba would be the dominant issue of the 1962 campaign, and (3) their accusation that the president adhered to a do-nothing policy toward Cuba. He states, "These attacks drew blood. Prudence demanded a vigorous reaction."

<sup>50</sup> Two writers on the crisis feel that Kennedy felt his mettle was being tested by Khrushchev and for this reason he resolved to meet the tests at all costs. George, Hall, and Simons, 98-99, interpret Kennedy's earlier comments to a writer from the *New York Post*: in 1961, Kennedy was seriously concerned that

Nevertheless, the administration's substantive reasons for demanding removal of the missiles were sound. The foreign policy consequences of a rapid increase in Soviet nuclear power and of the way in which the USSR ignored previous warnings and acted with deceit could have raised serious security problems for the West and ultimately led to other crises with nuclear risks—in Berlin, for example. Moreover, it could also be argued that the presence of a large number of "soft" Soviet missiles in Cuba would have introduced serious instabilities in the strategic balance. In a time of tension, the high vulnerability of these systems to a U.S. counterforce attack would have greatly increased the "reciprocal fear of surprise attack" and possibly resulted in an unwarranted launch by the USSR of a preemptive strike upon this nation.

Against these risks must be weighed the danger that U.S. actions to remove the missiles might have led to nuclear war. Since the predictions of the potential nuclear risk were quite uncertain, the U.S. did not have to overreact. Perhaps President Kennedy could be faulted for his refusal to seek negotiated settlement early in the crisis and, in particular, for not immediately offering to trade U.S. missiles in Turkey.<sup>51</sup> Chances are, agreement could have been reached before the missiles were fully operational; but even if this were not the case, the U.S. would still have been in a position to force them to be withdrawn. In any event, if successful, whatever loss that might have been associated with this U.S. "concession" would have been far outweighed by never having

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Khrushchev had perceived Kennedy's reluctance to wage war over Berlin as a loss of nerve. He felt some day he might have to run the "supreme risk" in order to convince Khrushchev of his strength; when Cuba occurred, Kennedy felt that the time had arrived. I.F. Stone, 19-20, is still less charitable toward the president. He believes that Kennedy felt personally inferior because of Berlin and the Bay of Pigs. Therefore, Kennedy was determined, on a purely personal level, to stand "eyeball to eyeball" with Khrushchev.

<sup>51</sup> Again, both Steel and I. F. Stone feel that politics was a dominant motive in Kennedy's refusal to "trade" the Turkish missiles for the Cuban. Stone feels that the U.S. risked World War Three, which could have been avoided by negotiations. He attributes Kennedy's refusal to the fall elections. On the Turkish issue, he faults Kennedy's refusal of the *quid pro quo*, since Kennedy had known for some time that our missiles in Turkey were obsolete; Stone, 21-22. Steel claims the White House was disturbed by the Turkish issue because of its fairness. He quotes RFK as saying: "The proposal the Russians made was not unreasonable and did not amount to a loss to the U.S. or to our NATO allies." However, if the administration accepted the trade, they feared accusations of weakness from the Republicans; Steel, "The Kennedys and the Missile Crisis," 17.

had to go to the extreme of presenting Khrushchev with an ultimatum and being prepared to activate an air strike.

The Cuban episode has been the source of speculation on the general problem of the relationship of the strategic balance to the management and outcome of crises. As described earlier, in the dynamics of the Cuban crisis, the real and recognized *strategic* preponderance of the U.S. tended to shift the military and political advantage toward the U.S. and away from the USSR. But U.S. decisions throughout the crisis were strongly influenced by the overwhelming U.S. *conventional* superiority. Moreover, other characteristics unique to the Cuban crisis gave momentum to the U.S. while undermining the Soviet position. U.S. interests, for example, were apparently more dominant than Soviet interests and the U.S. was in a strong diplomatic position as a result of the USSR's deceitful and clandestine behavior. With all these factors at work, it is almost impossible to isolate the importance of the "strategic variable."

We might hypothetically ask whether the management or outcome of the crisis would have been different if the strategic balance had been "reversed" to favor the USSR, or, more plausibly, had reflected a situation of nuclear parity. In this circumstance, U.S. nuclear power would still have been sufficient to cancel Soviet nuclear capabilities. U.S. conventional superiority would have given the U.S. an advantage. Thus, it is doubtful that the U.S. would have acquiesced and permitted the USSR to station missiles in Cuba or that the Soviets would have run a nuclear risk and refused to comply. But it is plausible that President Kennedy would have been less likely to contemplate and threaten actions which ran a nuclear risk, such as the air strike, and more prone to seek a negotiated solution, simply because he might have concluded that his bluff might be called.

We may also question the outcome of a situation in which the U.S. lacked conventional superiority. As Kennedy did in the Berlin crisis of 1961, the U.S. might then have looked to its strategic forces as the prime security tool. In that case, U.S. nuclear advantage would have seemed important. Perhaps all we can conclude from the episode is that reliance on strategic forces rises as non-nuclear alternatives diminish and that in a crisis the stronger nuclear power gains some form of advantage—whether psychologi-

cal or physical.

With reference to Cuba, President Kennedy later showed a clear appreciation of the danger that "misjudgments" and "mistakes" in the nuclear area "can make this whole thing blow up."<sup>52</sup> Whether or not implying regret over his course of action in Cuba, President Kennedy reportedly remarked that a world "in which nations threaten each other with nuclear weapons [was] not quite an irrational but an intolerable and impossible world."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Khrushchev later remarked that "both sides displayed a sober approach" in avoiding steps which could have led to World War III.<sup>54</sup>

As a result of the Cuban crisis, Khrushchev and Kennedy gained a clearer appreciation of the dangers inherent in U.S.-Soviet confrontations. This led to a period of *détente* and rapid progress in reaching agreement on the limited test ban and other arms control measures. Even more significantly, since that time, both nations have tended to avoid engaging each other in serious situations which might risk nuclear war.

#### *Impact of the Crisis on Later U.S. and Soviet Strategic Policies*

In its impact on the U.S.-Soviet strategic arms race, however, the results of the Cuban crisis were not altogether desirable. Although the failure in Cuba demonstrated once more the futility of Khrushchev's policy of attempting to intimidate the U.S. with strategic threats and dramatized for Kremlin leaders the dangers associated with nuclear-related crises, the basic problem of U.S. superiority still remained. Indeed, the Cuban setback not only confirmed but reinforced Soviet interest in redressing the strategic balance. Soviet leaders believed that nuclear superiority enabled the U.S. to practice "coercive diplomacy" in Cuba and to force Khrushchev to retreat. Ironically, this U.S. "victory" vindicated Moscow's view that strategic power conferred political importance. Moscow apparently felt it did not have sufficient nuclear power to deal diplomatically with the West and maintain its position as a world power. For these reasons, the Soviet Union

<sup>52</sup> President Kennedy, cited in Abel, 193.

<sup>53</sup> President Kennedy, cited in Stone, 26-27.

<sup>54</sup> Khrushchev, cited in Abel, 191-92.

came away from Cuba with an even greater desire to achieve parity in nuclear weapons.

Khrushchev could not avoid drawing the conclusion that the balance must be corrected in a legitimate and straightforward way. Cuba had proved that there were no quick or inexpensive alternatives. Consequently, after the crisis, he increased the rate of deployment of the early-generation SS-7 ICBM and pressed ahead with research and development of the advanced SS-9 and SS-11 "hardened" ICBMs, a Polaris-type missile-launching submarine, and the Galosh ABM. But Khrushchev still refused to undertake the massive and expensive missile deployment program being advocated by many leaders in the Kremlin.

Khrushchev may have hoped that this modest stimulation of the Soviet missile program would be sufficient to cope temporarily with the "U.S. threat." In the long run, he saw a gradual buildup of Soviet strategic strength aiming toward parity or perhaps even superiority. For the immediate future, Khrushchev turned once again to diplomacy to provide a substitute for weaponry—only this time, the course was one of restraint, not rocket-rattling. Although Khrushchev was genuinely interested in finding ways to reduce the risk of war and to control nuclear arms, the Soviet leader's post-Cuban policy of *détente* was also designed to buy time for Soviet missile deployments while slowing down U.S. programs, minimizing the possibility of another nuclear-related confrontation and generally blunting the embarrassing effect of the Cuban experience.

After Khrushchev's departure, however, the Soviets finally launched a major effort to redress the balance. The new Kremlin leaders were more motivated than Khrushchev to accomplish this objective and were willing to allocate the resources necessary for this purpose and to improve Soviet defenses. They wanted capabilities, not claims. Indeed, it is well known that Khrushchev's decision to postpone major missile construction and his general unwillingness to increase military spending—along with his Cuban misadventure—were among the key factors which contributed to his downfall.<sup>55</sup>

In early 1965, Brezhnev and Kosygin, drawing upon the R & D programs initiated under Khrushchev, decided to upgrade sub-

<sup>55</sup> Among the writers who corroborate this theory are Horelick and Rush, 155.

stantially the quantity and quality of the Soviet Union's strategic force. At that time, the decision was made to deploy the SS-9 and SS-11 ICBMs and to acquire a Polaris-type missile-launching submarine system. Construction of the Moscow ABM system was continued, but this defensive program was only partially completed as increased priority was placed on offensive missiles.<sup>56</sup> As a result, from a force of approximately 200 "soft" ICBMs in late 1964—four-to-one inferiority in this category alone—the Soviet force increased to 340 in 1966 and 730 in 1967. By 1968, the Soviets were approaching parity in numbers of "hardened" ICBMs and had begun to deploy Polaris-type submarines.

As the USSR began to close the gap, however, the U.S. took counteractions to maintain its position of strength. In 1965, decisions were made to procure the advanced Minuteman III and Poseidon missiles which carried multiple warheads or MIRVs. These programs were pursued primarily as a means of maintaining the U.S. deterrent capability in the event the Soviets mounted a massive ABM effort, but MIRVs were also considered a means of ensuring that U.S. superiority in numbers of nuclear warheads and damage-inflicting potential would remain unchallenged. On the defensive side, in 1967, the U.S. decided to deploy the "thin" Sentinel ABM system as a counter to the potential Chinese ICBM threat. But this system also had anti-Soviet capabilities and provided a base for expansion to a large ABM network.

As it turned out, the Soviets built a substantially larger strategic force during the years 1966 to 1969 than "worst case" U.S. estimates had predicted. To be sure, Soviet decisions to sustain their offensive program past parity in ICBMs and to develop multiple warheads stemmed from a variety of internal bureaucratic factors and may well have been influenced by a desire to seek a counterforce first-strike capacity. An equally plausible explanation centers around the perceived Soviet need to maintain a credible deterrent. From the Soviet perspective, there was a continuing and legitimate need to improve the retaliatory capacity of the USSR. Projecting ahead to the early seventies, Soviet analysts saw that

<sup>56</sup> It is difficult to reconstruct the details of Soviet decisionmaking during this period, and, in particular, to assign responsibility for specific strategic-arms-program decisions to either Khrushchev or his successors. The discussion in this study draws upon Thomas W. Wolfe's analyses in *Soviet Power and Europe: 1945-1970* (Baltimore, 1970), chaps. VIII and XVI.

the combination of U.S. ABMs and accurate MIRVs could endanger the Soviets' deterrent. And, as they had in the early 1960s, U.S. claims of superiority in warheads added political pressure to the Soviets.

The increasing risks and costs of the strategic arms competition in the late 1960s gave the U.S. incentive to attempt to initiate strategic arms limitation talks. But the Soviet Union refused to enter into negotiations until it had attained a position of parity—not merely in terms of military capabilities but also in terms of the more political indices of numbers of missiles. Thus, progress in other arms control areas during the 1960s was not matched by progress in curtailing the strategic arms race. And, by the time the so called SALT talks began in November 1969, many possibilities for effective strategic arms control had been foreclosed, and the Moscow agreements signed in May 1972, while imposing stringent restrictions on ABM systems, placed only minimal constraints on offensive weapons.<sup>57</sup>

### *Policy Implications*

The Kennedy administration's early emphasis on superiority can be said to have helped cause the Cuban crisis by tilting the nuclear balance so far against the Soviets that they were "forced" to emplace missiles in Cuba in order to rectify the strategic relationship. Had the U.S. been more sensitive to the Soviet need—both political and military—for equality, it might have not pressed its advantage as far as it did, and, consequently, might have avoided the risks of the Cuban confrontation.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, as we have seen, the Soviet setback in Cuba heightened Moscow's interest in redressing the balance and ulti-

<sup>57</sup> The interim agreement limits the number of ICBMs and SLBMs to those currently operational and under construction, but does not control multiple warheads (MIRVs), bombers, or medium-range nuclear delivery systems. For a complete description of the offensive and defensive accords, see *The ABM Treaty and the Interim Agreement*, Message from the President of the United States, 92nd Cong., 2nd Sess., June 1972.

<sup>58</sup> A CIA estimate in early 1962 discussed but dismissed the possibility of the USSR installing missiles in Cuba; Ronald Steel, "The Kennedys and the Missile Crisis," 19, describes the situation, in Hilsman's words as, "a failure . . . not of rationalization, but of imagination. . . ." This perhaps indicates U.S. insensitivity to the Soviet dilemma which, as indicated, the U.S. helped to precipitate.

mately led to the massive Soviet missile buildup of the late 1960s, which has stimulated the nuclear arms race and restricted progress in strategic arms control. Thus, while the Cuban crisis underscored the danger of nuclear confrontations, the U.S. should also have learned that mutual stability, rather than a stress on unilateral superiority, should be the primary strategic policy objective of the United States.

Although the U.S. can no longer boast of strategic superiority, a situation of parity—in the light of other political and psychological factors—may not prove to be stabilizing in itself. With the potential of new weapons technologies, it will take a deliberate effort on the part of both sides to maintain a situation of actual and perceived mutual stability. Similarly, the presence of parity will not automatically prohibit nations from turning once again to nuclear threats to obtain foreign policy objectives. Therefore, if there is one overall lesson to be learned from the Cuban crisis, it is that U.S. policy makers must take into account not only the effect of their policies on the other side at any given time, but the overall and long-term consequences for global stability.