
ESSENCE OF DECISION
Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis
Second Edition

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ate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) and medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), some analysts argue, exclude an explanation of the action in terms of Cuban defense. But this behavior supports the hypothesis that the Soviet objective was a rapid buildup of missile power, since a nation with this objective would have reasonably chosen to install a large number of both MRBMs and IRBMs. Similarly, the relative weakness in total Soviet strategic nuclear forces invites the conclusion that Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba were meant to rectify the strategic balance and thereby deter the American threat, for example to use nuclear weapons in defense of Berlin.

A full account of the Soviet construction of missiles in Cuba includes many details that do not seem consistent with either of these hypotheses. Careful examination of these puzzling features suggests that specific characteristics of Soviet actions in Cuba in September and October 1962 should not serve as a principal guide to Soviet intentions.

American sources and newly available material from the Soviet Union now permit the construction of a detailed series of snapshots of the Soviet arms buildup that culminated in the conversion of Cuba into a major strategic missile base.¹² The Soviet government decided to give arms to Cuba in the fall of 1959. In early 1962, there was a lull as Soviets and Cubans discussed the next phase of military assistance. The United States observed that Soviet dry-cargo arriving in Cuba averaged only fifteen per month for the first half of 1962, and that the ships carried few weapons.

Though the U.S. did not know it, the Cuban requests for conventional weapons to aid their defense were approved by the governing Soviet Presidium in April 1962. In their path-breaking work, Alexander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali note that the Presidium chose to divert surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) already promised to Egypt to Cuba instead. They identify the separate decision-making process initiated by Khrushchev that six weeks later produced the Presidium's decision to send nuclear missiles to Cuba.¹³ Castro had not asked for the nuclear missiles, but was persuaded to accept the Soviet decision. For the Americans, the two separate decisions produced a single set of organizational outputs that became visible during the summer. In late July, Soviet shipments of arms resumed at a markedly increased pace. Thirty-seven Soviet dry-cargo ships arrived at Cuban ports during August, and some twenty of these carried arms shipments. By September 1, Soviet equipment in Cuba included surface-to-air missiles, coastal defense "Sopka" cruise missiles (similar to unpiloted jet aircraft), patrol boats that could fire

conventional antiship missiles, more than 5,000 Soviet technicians and military personnel, and large quantities of transportation, electronic, and construction equipment.¹⁴

The first Soviet nuclear ballistic missiles reached Cuban soil on September 8. Measuring 59.6 feet in length (without the 13.7-foot nose cone), and 5.4 feet in diameter, the MRBMs were secretly transported to Cuba beneath the decks of Soviet ships that had been designed with extra large hatches for lumber trade. The *Omsk*, which brought the first MRBMs, docked at the port of Mariel and was followed by a second large-hatch ship, the *Poltava*, on September 15. Thereafter, additional MRBMs, missile trailers, fueling trucks, special radar vans, missile erectors, materials for building nuclear warhead storage bunkers, and other equipment related to the strategic missiles arrived and were rushed to construction sites (some of which had been prepared in advance). Similar equipment for IRBMs was also arriving. Nor were the September shipments restricted to nuclear ballistic missiles. Throughout that month, the steady stream of Soviet ships brought IL-28 medium jet bombers, as well as the first of the Soviets' most advanced jet fighters (MiG-21s), and additional SAMs, cruise missiles, and patrol boats. The Soviet Union acknowledged publicly only that it had agreed to help Cuba meet the threat from "aggressive imperialist circles" by delivering technicians for training Cuban servicemen and "armaments and military equipment . . . designed exclusively for defensive purposes." There was no need, Moscow proclaimed, to send its nuclear weapons to other countries.¹⁵

October shipments brought more of the same at an accelerated pace, until October 24—the day on which the American quarantine of Cuba began. Unknown to the U.S., nuclear warheads for the MRBMs arrived on October 4, along with dozens of nuclear warheads for the Sopka coastal defense cruise missiles, 6 nuclear bombs for the IL-28 aircraft, and 12 nuclear warheads for short-range tactical nuclear rockets.¹⁶ Just before the blockade took effect, 24 more nuclear warheads for the IRBMs arrived in Cuba. Indeed, a large number of dry-cargo ships, including those carrying the IRBM missiles themselves, were moving toward Cuba when the blockade was announced.

The original plan required all the ships to be en route for Cuba by October 20, and arrive at the island and deliver their cargo before the American congressional elections.¹⁷ Khrushchev and Gromyko had repeatedly told Kennedy and others that the Soviet government would force a settlement of the Berlin crisis after these elections.

Organizational Intelligence

At 7 p.m. on October 22, 1962, President Kennedy delivered the major foreign policy address of his career. Disclosing the American discovery of the presence of Soviet strategic missiles in Cuba, the president declared a "strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba" and demanded that "Chairman Khrushchev halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace."⁵¹ This decision was reached at the pinnacle of the U.S. government after a week of deliberation. What initiated that crucial week were photographs of Soviet missile sites in Cuba taken on October 14 by a U-2 aircraft piloted by Air Force Major Richard Heyser. Had this information not become available until weeks later, the American reaction would likely have been very different. A blockade aimed at stopping shipments of missiles and warheads that had already arrived would lack a certain plausibility. Indeed, Khrushchev's original plan could have succeeded. He would have unveiled the missiles on his timetable and then, as he had promised, moved onto a climactic confrontation to force the West out of Berlin. The discovery of the missiles on October 14 thus determined the context in which American leaders came to choose the blockade.

After the missile crisis, there was considerable debate over alleged American intelligence failures. But what both critics and defenders in that debate mostly miss is how extraordinary it was that the Soviet missiles were discovered at all. Their discovery was possible only because of the special organizational capacities, routines, and procedures of the U.S. intelligence community. The capabilities had not been developed for a Cuban scenario. Had they not been created earlier, however, no discovery would have occurred.

The job of intelligence requires incredibly complex organizations, coordinating large numbers of actors, processing endless piles of information. That these organizations must function according to established routines and standard procedures is a simple fact. The organizational routines and standard operating procedures by which Cuba were neither more nor less successful than they had been the previous month or were to be in the months to follow.⁵²

The available record permits a fairly reliable reconstruction of the major features of the organizational behavior that resulted in discovery of the Soviet missiles. Intelligence on activities within Cuba came from four primary sources: shipping intelligence, refugees, agents within Cuba, and U-2 overflights. Intelligence on all ships going to Cuba pro-

siles had been discovered.⁷⁷ The president had several less precise but equally determined notions about what should be done and when and how. For the Navy, the issue was one of effective implementation of a military mission—with minimal meddling and interference from political leaders. For the president, the problem was to pace and manage events in such a way that the Soviet leaders would have time to see, think, and blink.

Observers of such conflicts naturally side with the responsible political leaders against the parochial organizations. But the tendency should be restrained in this case, for implementation of the proclaimed quarantine was no small order. First, the quarantine area included nearly one million square miles of water. The Navy launched a large effort: some 180 ships. Ships from the mid-Atlantic had to approach Cuba by one of five navigable channels. Naval reconnaissance planes spotted all Soviet ships and plotted their position, speed, and direction. Operation of the quarantine qualifies as a virtuoso organizational performance by the Navy's Atlantic Fleet, a tribute to the quality of its prior planning, training, and design of routines.⁷⁸

This operation was complicated, however, by a second factor—new to naval history and modern relations between American political leaders and military organizations. Advances in the technology of communications made it possible for political leaders in the basement of the White House to talk directly with commanders of destroyers stationed along the quarantine line. Advances in the technology of mass destruction created the possibility that acts by men on a single destroyer in that quarantine line could rapidly escalate to bring death to millions of Americans. Thus the governmental leaders had both the capability and the incentive to reach out beyond the traditional limits of their control. Maps in the Situation Room in the basement of the White House tracked the movement of all Soviet ships.⁷⁹ Kennedy and his advisers eventually knew each of the ships by name and argued extensively about which should be stopped first, at what point, and how. Sorensen records "the President's personal direction of the quarantine's operation . . . his determination not to let needless incidents or reckless subordinates escalate so dangerous and delicate a crisis beyond control."⁸⁰

A surface chronology establishes a context within which questions arise. The president first heard a discussion of how the blockade would actually operate at a meeting of the National Security Council on Sunday, October 21. Admiral George Anderson, chief of naval operations, explained that 40 ships were already in position. He

secrecy eliminated, interceptor aircraft crowded into Florida and lessened the concern about vulnerability to retaliation from the MiG aircraft based in Cuba. Continued American low-level reconnaissance missions, which had begun after Kennedy's televised speech and flew unarmed aircraft over missile sites at altitudes of only a few hundred feet, made clear how vulnerable the missiles were. Civilian experts reviewed plans for an airstrike, reexamining assumptions made in the prior week's estimates. MRBMs classified by the Defense Intelligence Agency manuals as "mobile" could be moved in perhaps 48 hours, but movement of such large items on trucks with trailers could be effectively tracked. Missiles that Kennedy had hesitated to attack, fearing that under attack some might fire first, were shown to be "eight hours from launch." Thus, McNamara reported to the president on October 25 that "we're moving to a position now, where we can attack those missiles and have a fair chance of destroying them with very few aircraft."⁷⁵

The JCS still preferred the larger strike, of at least Variant III scale. Kennedy also thought in these terms. After the American U-2 was shot down over Cuba on October 27, Kennedy discarded plans that would have retaliated by attacking the one offending SAM site. He explained that, "I don't think we do any good to begin to sort of *half* do it. . . . If they still fire [on our surveillance aircraft] and we haven't got a satisfactory answer back from the Russians, I think that we ought to put a statement out tomorrow that we are fired upon. We are therefore considering the island of Cuba as an open territory, and then take out all the SAM sites. . . . Otherwise. . . our reply will be so limited that we'll find ourselves with all the disadvantages."⁷⁶

Organizational Implementation

The U.S. government opened the public phase of the crisis by ordering a blockade of Cuba, which for legal and political reasons the U.S. termed a quarantine. A political decision was made to blockade all armaments going into Cuba, but not to try to interrupt life-sustaining flows of food or of fuel (usually referred to by the acronym POL, standing for "petroleum, oil, and lubricants") for fear that a reciprocal blockade might be placed on supplies flowing into West Berlin.

Beyond that judgment, the task of specifying the *details* of the option named "blockade" belonged to the Navy. Before the president announced the blockade on Monday evening, the first stage of the Navy's blueprint was in motion. The Navy had a detailed plan for the blockade, drawn up with McNamara's encouragement before the mis-

described the method for making an interception, following accepted international rules. The ship would be asked to stop. If it refused, shots would be fired to disable the ship, then it would be boarded and towed, if necessary, back to a U.S. port. Anderson suggested giving the Russians a grace period after the blockade was announced so Moscow would have time to instruct merchant ship captains on what they should do.⁸¹

Anderson then turned to his rules of engagement. If any Soviet warship or aircraft in Cuba took "hostile action" against an American ship, the offending vessel or plane could be destroyed. If a Soviet submarine tried to evade the blockade and make its way underwater to Havana, Anderson said he would ask for permission to destroy it. McNamara concurred, supporting rules of engagement allowing violent responses to hostile action.⁸²

On October 23, the implementation of the blockade was discussed in greater detail. Kennedy agreed it would not take effect until the morning of the next day, October 24. At first, the White House resisted setting a fixed radius from Cuba for the blockade, preferring to stop any ship that still seemed to be moving toward the island—especially one that might be carrying arms. Then McNamara suggested an interception radius of about 800 miles from Cuba, a convenient distance because this would keep U.S. ships beyond the range of IL-28 bombers based in Cuba and well beyond the range of the MiG-21 aircraft based there.⁸³ The first Soviet ships carrying weapons, especially the *Kimovsk*, would pass that line during the night of October 23–24 and, under this plan, they would be intercepted at dawn so the Navy could conduct operations in daylight.

Thus in the early evening of October 23, just after he signed the formal executive order to establish the quarantine, Kennedy turned to his advisers: "Now, what do we do tomorrow morning when these eight [Soviet] vessels continue to sail on?"⁸⁴ They agreed that U.S. ships would stop and, if necessary, board Soviet ships even if they were carrying "baby food." But Kennedy pressed to understand, step by step, just what might happen. "These fellows need as detailed instructions as possible," he emphasized, "from those who are knowledgeable about the sea [as Kennedy was] and know just how to proceed on this." Kennedy was anxious to avoid a bloody battle on board a Russian ship, and suggested the possibility of simply allowing a disabled ship to drift rather than "try to board it and have them reopen machine guns and have 30 to 40 people killed on each side."⁸⁵

Yet the alternative of shadowing a disabled ship created another problem, since U.S. ships were reluctant to linger in a single place because of danger from Soviet submarines. Several Soviet attack submarines had been accurately identified cruising toward Cuba near the leading group of ships. The situation was too complex. McNamara urged, "I think we have to allow the commander on the scene a certain amount of latitude . . ." Kennedy agreed, but told McNamara to "make sure that you have reviewed these instructions that go out to him."⁸⁶

Later that night of October 23, Kennedy reviewed the plans further with the British ambassador, David Ormsby-Gore. Ormsby-Gore suggested giving the Russians a bit more time. Instead of intercepting their ship at dawn (after it had crossed the 800-mile line during the night), he proposed waiting until it was only 500 miles from Cuba. This would put the interception within range of IL-28s, but just beyond the range of the MiG-21s. Kennedy agreed and called McNamara. McNamara resisted. Kennedy overruled him, and presumably the Navy too. From then on, the blockade line became increasingly formalized at a radius of 500 miles.⁸⁷

The first Soviet ships approached the quarantine line on Wednesday, October 24, but halted and turned around just before challenging it. Information that this had occurred arrived at the White House in the late morning. Had the original plan not been altered, the U.S. Navy probably would have attempted to stop the lead Soviet ship, the *Kimovsk*, shortly after dawn. The *Kimovsk* was well past the original arc for interception. The Navy was just waiting for daylight. We cannot know what would have happened if the U.S. had in fact stopped and attempted to board the *Kimovsk*, which was carrying missiles, some of the most sensitive equipment in the Soviet armed forces. The *Kimovsk* and other ships were contacted by radio from the Soviet Union at about 2:30 A.M.⁸⁸

Fortunately, because Kennedy had contracted the quarantine line there was no attempted interception of a Soviet ship at dawn. The *Kimovsk* would have reached the new 500-mile point and was scheduled for an intercept at the very time news was confirmed that it had turned around—between 10:30 and 11:00 A.M., Washington time. The instant the good news was confirmed, Kennedy ordered that the *Kimovsk* be left alone and given the chance to retreat.⁸⁹ A Soviet attack submarine was shadowing it, about 20 to 30 miles away.

As Dean Rusk put it at the time, the Soviets had blinked. Yet earlier in the morning, before that news could be confirmed, Kennedy