

How JFK Beat Khrushchev in Cuban Missile Crisis

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The Cuban missile crisis of 50 years ago is often cited as the closest the world came to a nuclear conflagration during the Cold War. In the U.S., it is generally perceived as the time the two sides went, in the often-quoted words of U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "eyeball to eyeball and the other fellow blinked." It is worth reflecting, however, why the crisis occurred and whether the results should be reconsidered.

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was a volatile and unpredictable personality who by 1962 had already encountered serious domestic opposition to his reforms in agriculture and the Soviet bureaucracy. In March 1962, during a visit to Bulgaria, he decided to install nuclear missiles on Cuba, together with launch pads and almost obsolete IL-28 bombers. Washington had some evidence of the missiles as early as Aug. 31, 1962. By Oct. 14, a U2 flight over Cuba confirmed U.S. suspicions.

From Khrushchev's perspective, little had gone right during the three years leading up to the

Cuban missile crisis. Khrushchev had failed to remove the Americans and their allies from the divided city of Berlin in 1959 and 1961, finally giving in to the request of his East German allies to build a wall to prevent a further exodus to the West. He had tried to browbeat the young U.S. president at a summit in Vienna in June 1961.

From Khrushchev's perspective, the Americans were behaving brazenly. They had never suffered occupation by a foreign power. U.S. territory was not under threat from Soviet weapons, whereas U.S. missiles could reach Soviet cities from Turkey, Italy and West Germany. U2 planes had violated Soviet airspace and carried out spying missions until a Soviet missile downed the plane of Gary Powers on May 1, 1960, over Sverdlovsk. Even then—U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower had refused to issue an apology.

For Khrushchev, an opportunity to exact some revenge occurred after Fidel Castro led rebels in overthrowing the pro-U.S. regime of Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Although Castro's political affiliations were not immediately evident, the Soviets knew that his brother Raul was a Communist, as was the Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara, who had played a prominent role in the Cuban revolution. The abortive Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles in April 1961, backed by the CIA, was perhaps the turning point for Castro, who adopted the Communist cause.

From his own account, Khrushchev alone made the decision to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba for two reasons: to give the Americans a taste of their own medicine and to prevent another U.S. invasion of Cuba. He believed that if the Soviets could present the U.S. with a fait accompli, then there could be little reaction. Although the U.S. discovered the nuclear weapons before shipments had been completed, the Soviets had assembled 100 mainly tactical weapons and some eight warheads on medium-range missiles, which would have been enough to destroy most of New York and potentially put Chicago and other cities within reach.

The crisis unfolded as the Americans raised military alerts on Oct. 24. Two days later, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles. Seemingly, the Soviet side had succumbed to pressure once it was clear that the Americans intended to respond. How then can Khrushchev claim that the crisis was a Soviet victory?

First, he said Kennedy was desperate, claiming that he may well have been overthrown by the U.S. military if the crisis was not overcome. We know that General Maxwell Taylor advocated countering any Soviet nuclear response with U.S. nuclear attacks on Cuban military targets. Kennedy's option of quarantine was the mildest form of response.

Second, the two leaders acted coolly, while the president's younger brother Robert, the attorney general, averted the crisis through talks with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. Their discussions ignored the warmongering official rhetoric and exchanges of notes.

Third, the Soviet side made a collective decision to remove the missiles only with a public guarantee that there would be no U.S. invasion of Cuba.

Lastly, the Soviet leader believed that the Americans understood that if Soviet blood were shed in Cuba, retaliatory steps would be taken in Berlin. In this way, Khrushchev "saved" Cuba, scoring a significant foreign policy victory for the Soviet Union.

The international community, as well as the Soviet Presidium, however, saw the crisis somewhat differently. The threat had come from the Soviet Union, which had turned back its ships once the U.S. imposed the quarantine. Cuba, as even Khrushchev acknowledges, was outraged by the Soviets' implicit cowardice. If Khrushchev had saved Cuba, the news had not reached Havana. What's more, neither Cuba nor the world made any links between the Soviet ships' turnaround and the removal of U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the simple reason that Kennedy — and, surprisingly, Khrushchev as well — did not make this link public.

Within two years, Khrushchev was removed from office in a KGB-led coup. The Soviet leadership wanted to end the dangerous adventurism of a reckless, irresponsible leader. In 1964, Khrushchev was replaced by the bland party leader Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin as head of government.

Perhaps, then, we should simply dismiss Khrushchev's version of the Cuban missile crisis as wishful thinking. Yet 60 years on, the Castros still rule Cuba (Raul replaced the ailing Fidel in 2006), and the tiny island's communist leadership has already outlasted the Soviet Union by more than 20 years.

Still, Khrushchev might have learned another lesson from his quest for quick triumphs: Perceptions of an event are often more significant than reality. Because of the success of low-level diplomacy and the terms of the agreement, it was not possible to publicize Soviet gains.

Communism would make significant progress in coming years, partly through decolonization and partly through the U.S. quagmire in Vietnam. But the Chinese were the main beneficiaries, not the Soviets.

In the end, Soviet prestige and that of its leader, had suffered the most. The prevailing image was of a young U.S. president standing up to a crude bully. It was far from the truth, but the image of a Soviet moral defeat has prevailed and will always be equated with the ill-fated Khrushchev.

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