



The Other Fellow:

The effects of brinkmanship on Soviet perceptions during the Cuban Missile Crisis

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On October 22, 1962, John F. Kennedy told the American public that “It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.”¹ With these words, President Kennedy committed his own credibility and that of the United States to the removal of nuclear weapons from Cuba and brought the world the closest it has ever been to nuclear war. Though the public remained blissfully unaware of the crisis until Kennedy’s address, the President’s political game of chess with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev began on the morning of October 16, when he was informed of the Soviet missile bases under construction in Cuba. Throughout the following thirteen days, the diplomacy that Kennedy exercised was a perfect example of deterrence: the art of forcing another state to act in a certain way by making a clear and credible threat that the other state is unwilling to risk provoking.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy made it clear to Khrushchev that the missile bases on Cuba had to be removed or the United States would take military action. He carefully outmaneuvered Khrushchev until, as Kennedy described it, the ability to “move the world back from the abyss of destruction”² remained the prerogative of the Soviet Premier, forcing the Soviet Union to back down and remove its missiles from Cuba. Dean Rusk unknowingly predicted this eventual conclusion when he told McGeorge Bundy on October 24 that “We’re eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.”³

Khrushchev—a man whose mettle was tested in the fires of the Battle of Stalingrad—“blinked” in the face of a youthful American president because Kennedy exercised perfect deterrence. First, Khrushchev was convinced that Kennedy meant to remove the missiles from Cuba with or without Soviet cooperation. Second, Kennedy took very public steps to portray himself as a president without a choice; he left the possibility of nuclear war entirely in Khrushchev’s hands. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Kennedy was careful to leave Khrushchev a way to back down while still being able to claim some victory.

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the release of previously classified documents relating to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which provided an opportunity to examine the crisis from the Soviet Union’s perspective. Three communiqués between Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and the Soviet Foreign Ministry during the Crisis are particularly enlightening because they are emblematic of the reports that Khrushchev was receiving from Washington and they explain potential motivations for the Premier’s thinking and his later actions. The first, a message sent from Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry on October 25, briefly describes a report that Kennedy had ordered an invasion of Cuba, while the second—another cable that Dobrynin sent to the Foreign Ministry on October 25—discusses the views within the American government regarding the situation. The third cable is a message sent by Dobrynin on October 27 to the Soviet Foreign Ministry describing a meeting that he had with Robert Kennedy. Together, these three documents paint a picture of a desperate situation that was rapidly spinning out of control and help explain why Khrushchev would later be willing to back down in the face of Kennedy’s demands.

Creating a Crisis

The Cuban Missile Crisis actually began on October 16, 1962, but its origins lay many months before that. Soviet Premier Khrushchev began consulting with Cuban President Fidel Castro about the possibility of putting nuclear weapons on Cuba in May 1962; construction began that July. On October 16, President Kennedy was informed of irrefutable evidence that the Soviet Union was building missile bases and that there were Soviet ships en route with missile-shaped cargoes on their decks. On October

22, in an address to the nation, Kennedy announced the presence of Soviet missiles to the public. He also announced that the US navy would be inspecting every ship that approached Cuba; he imposed a quarantine on Cuba that would not end until the missile bases had been removed from the island. Kennedy demanded the removal of the missiles from Cuba, and Khrushchev countered that they were the equivalent of US missiles in Turkey, a charge that Kennedy did not accept. With Soviet ships rapidly approaching the quarantine limits and no progress in negotiations, tensions mounted.

The crisis reached a peak when a U2 reconnaissance plane was shot down over Cuba. Kennedy responded by placing the US military on DEFCON 2 for the first time in history and ordering US planes to be armed with nuclear weapons. Yet just when military confrontation approached absolute certainty, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba. Why he did so would not completely come to light for some time.

“... A decision to invade Cuba today ...”

At 10:25 AM on October 24, President Kennedy received intelligence that the Soviet ships had stopped in the water. His relief was cut short, however, when at 9:24 PM Premier Khrushchev informed Kennedy that he had not instructed the ships to observe the quarantine. Kennedy responded by placing the armed forces at DEFCON 2 while the Commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), General Powers, transmitted an uncoded message—so that Soviets would receive it—to the SAC stating that SAC was well prepared.

That night, at approximately 3:00 AM, a Soviet informant reported a rumor that “the President had supposedly taken a decision to invade Cuba” within the next twenty-four hours.⁴ Dobrynin reported the encounter together with the apparent confirmation of the story on the morning of October 25. He added that US armed forces were readying to repulse a nuclear attack.

Dobrynin’s cable was very alarming to the Soviet government because, as is natural in the midst of a situation like the Cuban Missile Crisis, both sides feared that one side would see conflict as inevitable and seek a strategic advantage by launching a preemptive attack. Compounding

Khrushchev's fears of a US first strike was the fact that Dobrynin's warning arrived within a day of the Soviet Premier's communication to President Kennedy that he had not ordered Soviet ships to observe the quarantine; Khrushchev may have feared that he had indeed pushed President Kennedy into invading Cuba. The fact that SAC was quite openly at DEFCON 2 and that the US military was preparing to repel a nuclear attack could have signaled merely defensive steps—or it could have meant that the US was prepared for retaliation from its imminent invasion. Khrushchev knew that the US would expect a counter-attack if it did indeed invade Cuba; thus defensive preparations could be interpreted as a prelude to war. While all of this news could have been mere rumor—rumors of impending invasion abounded during the Crisis—Khrushchev had to take it very seriously. What made the rumors so frightening from the Soviet perspective was that President Kennedy had committed his own credibility to the removal of the missiles. Preparations to repel a nuclear attack might not have been precautionary but a signal that Kennedy was going to try to save face by ordering an attack.

“... A hot-tempered gambler ...”

Later in the day on October 25, Ambassador Dobrynin sent a brief but comprehensive analysis of American thinking on the Crisis to the Soviet Foreign Ministry. The conclusions that he drew emphasized the likelihood of war and thus demonstrate the success of Kennedy's attempt to credibly establish that he would use force if necessary. Dobrynin communicated early in the cable that Kennedy had backed himself into a corner by demanding the removal of the missiles from Cuba. Kennedy made clear that his plan—“in case of not achieving that aim by other means—[was] to destroy the missile launchers in Cuba.”⁵ Dobrynin reported that Kennedy would rather accept the risks implicit in attacking Cuba than accept Soviet missiles on Cuba; he described Kennedy as “a hot-tempered gambler.”⁶ This assessment was crucial because it revealed that Soviet deterrence was ineffective; the Soviets realized that the consequences of an attack on Cuba were not sufficiently frightening to be unacceptable to Kennedy.

While Kennedy's apparent willingness to accept Soviet retaliation might have seemed irrational, Dobrynin thought that he was certainly more reasonable than his advisors. The ambassador reported that Attorney Gen-

eral Robert Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, and the Joint Chiefs were all advocating the immediate destruction of the missile bases, even to the point of invasion. Furthermore, Dobrynin reported that they had almost convinced the President to absolutely reject an appeal from the Secretary General of the United Nations to suspend the quarantine. At the last moment, however, Kennedy changed his mind and sent a message with a softer tone. Dobrynin, however, did not think that this attitude would last: “The President is vacillating right now,” he reported, but “he is heeding the first group, particularly his brother.”⁷

Dobrynin’s analysis was that as of October 25, Kennedy was still reasonable but that time was running out. The president had managed to quiet the objections of many of his chief advisors once, leading the Soviets to believe he was still in control. Yet as time passed it seemed to Dobrynin that Kennedy was slipping more and more under the influence of the hawkish group that was urging an attack. The Soviets were concerned about the increasing sway of the hawks because Kennedy was already in a dangerous position; he had committed his own credibility to the missiles’ removal during a time when thoughts were already turning to the 1964 election and the need to save face. If the crisis continued for too long, it seemed that Kennedy could rapidly lose control and order a credibility-saving attack that would surely bring war.

Dobrynin concluded his analysis by warning Khrushchev not to make any moves that could be interpreted as provocative. With the Kennedy administration—increasingly under the influence of hawks, from the Soviet perspective—looking for a “plausible” excuse to “justify” an attack, the Soviet Premier had to tread carefully.⁸ Dobrynin emphasized that it was the “self-possessed and constructive position of the Soviet government, which is . . . restraining the hottest heads in Washington.”⁹ Dobrynin communicated to Khrushchev that the only thing preventing war was Soviet restraint. Dobrynin’s cable said exactly what Kennedy wanted to communicate to Khrushchev: Kennedy was backed into a corner and getting aggressively defensive, ready to lash out.

“. . . The current alarming situation the way the President sees it”

On October 27, five days after John F. Kennedy’s televised address

to the United States, ambassador Dobrynin met with an agitated Robert Kennedy in his office at the Justice Department. Over the course of their meeting, Kennedy appeared to Dobrynin like a completely different man.¹⁰ Although he warned the Soviets that the US would have to respond with force if another U2 was fired upon, and that the American generals were advocating military action, his words lacked “any edge . . . He didn’t even try to get into fights on various subjects, as he usually [did].”¹¹ Before Dobrynin stood a man that the ambassador felt was almost resigned to conflict. Indeed, John F. Kennedy would later write the “expectation was a military confrontation by Tuesday and possibly tomorrow [Sunday].”¹² The atmosphere during the meeting proved to be decisive in the course of events.

The impression of the Attorney General’s resigned obstinacy was very important in the President’s policy of deterrence. Rather than threatening that the United States would return fire if the U2 planes were attacked, Kennedy stated as a fact that “The USA government will have to do this.”¹³ The Attorney General informed Dobrynin that the US would respond to Soviet fire but that the US could not stop the flights; he made it seem the fault of the American military and the circumstances that the President had no choice but to continue with the U2 flights and to respond with force if they were attacked.¹⁴ By pointing out that such a response would in turn elicit retribution from the Soviet Union, Kennedy placed the responsibility on the Soviets for any conflict that arose as a result of the U2 flights, making it seem that the United States no longer had a say in the matter. In effect, by making US actions automatic, Kennedy forced Khrushchev to choose between world war and allowing the flights to continue.

Once the logic of automatic reactions had been established in regard to the U2 flights, Kennedy proceeded to apply it to the missile bases. He acted as if the US really had no choice but to remove the missile bases—either through cooperation with the Soviet Union or through force.¹⁵ This claim was supported by Dobrynin’s earlier cable in which he noted that President Kennedy’s reputation was now reliant on the removal of the missile bases from Cuba.¹⁶ The Attorney General again presented Dobrynin with a stark choice: either the Soviet Union could remove the missiles or the United States would remove them, inevitably beginning a world war.

The Ambassador reported that the inevitability of war appeared

even more certain when Robert Kennedy mentioned that there were many “unreasonable heads” that were “itching for a fight.”¹⁷ While Dobrynin’s message—sent only hours after the meeting—recorded this statement, Kennedy neglected it in his memoirs. Dobrynin did write that it was said “as if in passing,” but its effect was far greater than Kennedy could have imagined.¹⁸ Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs that Dobrynin’s cable described how the President did not want war but was “not sure that the military [would] not [have] overthrow[n] him.”¹⁹ Kennedy’s apparent agitation led Dobrynin to report a statement which Khrushchev interpreted as Kennedy’s fears of a military coup. This interpretation was only possible, however, because of the emphasis that Kennedy placed on the President’s lack of choice. Kennedy was careful to paint the President as the only reasonable man in the American government with whom the Russians could deal; his fall from power would allow the American military to begin a war that it had been planning for twenty years.

Although he feared the possibility of a military coup in the US, Khrushchev seemed to lack viable means of stabilizing the situation. If he refused to back down, Kennedy would order a military confrontation and the world might have quickly spiraled into war. If he did back down, Khrushchev could have been almost assured of the end of his career and possibly his own demise. It was an extremely difficult situation for the Soviet Premier.

In the midst of these dire warnings and foreboding predictions, President Kennedy held out a potential compromise that would save both leaders. He realized that he could not back Khrushchev into a corner; it was to the American president’s diplomatic advantage to be the one without a choice. Therefore, he had to present Khrushchev with at least one real option—a choice that the Premier could select and gain from, rather than forcing him to select from among equally bad options. Through his brother, President Kennedy told Khrushchev that he was willing to accept his offer and would remove the Jupiter missiles from Turkey in return for the removal of missiles from Cuba.²⁰ US missiles in Turkey were one of the primary Soviet arguments for having missiles in Cuba. Both countries were right on the borders of the superpowers and offered a perfect place from which to launch a first strike. Khrushchev’s initial demand that the US remove its missiles from Turkey met with immediate refusal. Kennedy

could not afford to make such an offer publicly because it would seem like he was bowing to Soviet pressure. Privately, however, Kennedy had ordered their removal months before, though his orders had not yet been carried out. While he could not remove the missiles publicly, a quiet removal that he had already commanded would help resolve the Crisis.

Although the removal of US missiles from Turkey had to be done quietly, it improved Khrushchev's position vis-à-vis his American counterpart. Rather than facing the options of either war or disgrace, Khrushchev was presented with the choice of war or political gain. As a result of Kennedy's offer, he could keep the Politburo satisfied without having to begin a war with the United States. Kennedy made a politically dangerous offer because it allowed Khrushchev to back down without losing credibility. Kennedy's use of deterrence forced Khrushchev into a situation from which it seemed there was no easy escape, and then Kennedy showed him the way out.

Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis

When he learned that Khrushchev had agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba, President Kennedy made a reference to Abraham Lincoln when he said, "This is the night I should go to the theater."²¹ Like President Lincoln, John F. Kennedy was assassinated shortly after he defended the United States from peril. Yet the mark he left on the period in which he lived was indelible. The Cuban Missile Crisis made both sides pause and consider how to avoid a similar situation in the future. A special phone line—the "hotline"—was established between Moscow and Washington. In the long run, however, President Kennedy's most important legacy would be the lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which would become one of the most studied episodes of American foreign policy. Perhaps most importantly, Kennedy demonstrated the viability of credible deterrence to diffusing a potentially explosive scenario.

It would be easy to fall prey to the trap of assuming that the reason Kennedy was successful in the Cuban Missile Crisis was that he immediately threatened the highest level of escalation and then hoped that the other side would back down; history offers many examples of escalation failing. Saddam Hussein in Iraq is an obvious example of a dictator who chose to

fight rather than surrender. Other states like North Korea fear that disarming would simply allow the United States to attack. In contrast, Khrushchev could be relatively sure that removing the missile bases from Cuba would not clear the way for an American attack because he was supported by the Soviet nuclear arsenal; the United States was still deterred by the weapons at his command.

Thus, rather than immediate and maximum escalation, a more important aspect of President Kennedy's brinkmanship was credibility. Throughout the crisis, Khrushchev was continually faced with the unchanging message that Kennedy was going to remove the missiles. He knew precisely what conditions would satisfy Kennedy and how the United States would respond if Kennedy felt that Khrushchev failed to meet his conditions. Khrushchev felt that the threats implicit in the conditions were credible because Kennedy staked his reputation on them during his October 22 speech. Kennedy then used the Attorney General as a go-between with Dobrynin because, as his brother, Robert Kennedy was obviously a very trusted advisor; Robert Kennedy's presence communicated how seriously Kennedy was taking the situation. Furthermore, Kennedy never even hinted that he would settle for anything less than complete dismantlement of the missile bases; his message was clear and consistent. Finally, the actions the American president took in placing the armed forces on alert communicated to Khrushchev that he was preparing to carry out his threat. He continued to appear as a rational, predictable voice but showed Khrushchev that even he had a time limit because of the pressure to attack that he faced even within his own cabinet.

Despite mounting pressures to forcefully preempt the completion of the Cuban missile bases, Kennedy was unblinking in his efforts to deter their construction and seek a diplomatic resolution to the crisis. He had taken great pains to ensure that he was backed in a corner and to make it seem that the Soviet Union had left him with conflict as his only option, a theme that Robert Kennedy reemphasized during his meeting with Dobrynin. All of this maneuvering would have been for naught, however, had Kennedy not found a way to present Khrushchev with a choice that was more attractive than war. Had he not done so, Khrushchev would have felt similarly backed into a corner and may have felt compelled to seek a resolution through conflict to avoid humiliation. The United States' removal of

the missiles from Turkey turned backing down into a partial victory for Khrushchev. Perhaps more importantly, however, the removal comforted the Russian ego, as it seemed like a political blow to the charismatic, young President who had otherwise performed so brilliantly.

Notes

¹ Kennedy, Robert. "Address by President Kennedy." *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969, pp. 168.

² Ibid. 169.

³ "A Halloween To Remember." <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aa103197.htm>> Oct. 31, 1997

⁴ "Cable from Soviet Ambassador to the USA A. Dobrynin to USSR Foreign Ministry, 25 October 1962." *Cold War International History Project*. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. May 22, 2005.<http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=243>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Dobrynin's Cable to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, 27 October 1962." *Cold War International History Project*. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. May 22, 2005. <http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=243>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kennedy, 109.

¹³ "Dobrynin's Cable to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, 27 October 1962."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Khrushchev's Description." *Cold War International History Project*. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. May 22, 2005.

<http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=243>

²⁰ Kennedy. 108.

²¹ Kennedy. 110.

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