

**THE MIRACLE OF OCTOBER:  
Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis**

by:

*Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight*

How close did the Cuban missile crisis come to nuclear war? *This close* [holding up his thumb and forefinger, until they almost touch].

Fidel Castro, 1993<sup>i</sup>

History offers no parallel to those thirteen days of October 1962, when the United States and the Soviet Union paused on the nuclear precipice ... Given the odds on disaster--which President Kennedy estimated at "between one out of three and even"--our escape seems miraculous.

Graham T. Allison, 1971<sup>ii</sup>

**1. September 11, '01: Deja Vu October '62?**

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have left America and most of the world reeling. For the first time in a long time Americans are fearful of attacks on the U.S. homeland, a fact dramatized by President George W. Bush's decision to establish a new cabinet-level secretary for Homeland Defense. There is shock over the magnitude of the attacks on innocent civilians, on the prospect of future attacks on civilians or even on the U.S. leadership, confusion as to how to proceed in a context of such apparent danger and uncertainty, and the overwhelming feeling, new to this generation of Americans, that the U.S. is *vulnerable* in much the same way that the rest of the world is vulnerable.

Analogies have been drawn by journalists and academics in attempts to establish some continuity with the past. We have been reminded, for example, that the British burned Washington, DC to the ground in 1814; that Union General William T. Sherman burned Atlanta to the ground during the Civil War, then proceeded to burn a forty-mile wide swath from Atlanta to the sea, before turning north and destroying everything in the Carolinas that lay in the path of his army. And of course, many have mentioned Pearl Harbor--the last time the U.S. itself was

attacked by a foreign power.<sup>iii</sup> Most Americans who remember hearing of the attack on Pearl Harbor can recall vividly the precise circumstances in which they heard about it. No doubt we will long remember the circumstances in which we received word of the attacks of September 11, 2001.

While these analogies are useful, we want to invite a comparison with another event, the last time Americans felt totally *vulnerable*, completely surprised and shocked, and fearful that life as they knew it might soon come to an end. This occurred during the thirteen extraordinary days of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. We focus on the missile crisis for several reasons; first, because of the psychological similarity between October 1962 and September 2001; second, because the missile crisis was, we believe, well-managed, and thus contains lessons for leaders who now and in the future seek to extricate themselves from crises in which war and peace hang in the balance; and third, because a remarkable series of meetings between the former chief adversaries--Americans, Russians and Cubans, meeting five times, between 1987 and 1992--has revealed much that was unknown to one or more sides in October 1962.

The conclusion to which we are led by this research is this: while the missile crisis was well-managed, under very trying circumstances, the escape from it without a major war, even a nuclear war, seems nothing short of miraculous. In the end we lucked out. We believe the sobriety and seriousness to which this conclusion leads also contains lessons for all governments, but especially for the U.S. government, as its leaders endeavor to walk in the footsteps of those in the U.S., Russia and Cuba who, in October 1962, faced the unknown, the unimagined, and the unbelievable, and together resolved the crisis peacefully.

## **2. October 15-28, 1962: Thirteen Unbelievable Days.**

At 7:00 PM EDT on October 22, 1962, President John F. Kennedy made a televised speech to the American people. It contained these central points: that the Soviet Union had begun to deploy medium- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba, approximately 90 miles from Florida under the cloak of deceit; that in so doing, the Soviets had demonstrated that they had for many months been lying about their intentions in Cuba; that the U.S. government was

prepared not only to blockade the island but ultimately to do whatever might be necessary to remove the missiles from Cuba; and that a Soviet attack on any target in the United States or Latin America would result in what the president called "a full retaliatory response" on the Soviet Union."<sup>iv</sup>

Many people in the television audience understood the president to be threatening the Soviets with nuclear war if they tried to respond to American efforts to remove the missiles by striking at the United States. During the days that followed, many bomb shelters were stocked, and Americans stayed close to their TV sets while newsmen described the movement of Soviet ships toward a line of American naval vessels that had been assigned to blockade, or "quarantine," Cuba. The administration's intention was to squeeze the Soviets in Cuba until they relinquished their offensive nuclear missiles and shipped them back to the Soviet Union. On the morning of October 24, several of the Soviet ships bound for Cuba reached the quarantine line and turned back; others continued on. Later in the week, on October 27, the superpowers once again seemed poised on the brink of war as the Soviet missile sites reached completion, an American reconnaissance pilot was shot down and killed over Cuba, and the president ordered 180,000 combat-ready troops deployed in the southeastern United States to prepare to attack Cuba. The next morning, however, just before 9:00 AM EST, Soviet chairman Nikita Khrushchev announced in a broadcast over Radio Moscow that he would accept President Kennedy's pledge not to invade Cuba in return for a Soviet pledge to remove their missiles from the island. Thus the most intense phase of the crisis was over. What seemed like a roller coaster flirtation with nuclear oblivion had ended.<sup>v</sup>

Let us place ourselves vicariously in the shoes of President Kennedy's Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM) during the thirteen unbelievable days of the crisis. What we find is that from the beginning of the crisis to its conclusion, we are faced with anomalies--with failed predictions, misjudgments and miscalculations--with a reality that is increasingly confusing and dangerous--at least as confusing and dangerous as that imagined by

ordinary citizens. Here are five "shocks to the system" received by the president and his advisers during those thirteen days.

- *October 16: Soviet offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba.*

No one in EXCOMM predicted this.<sup>vi</sup> As Robert Kennedy recalled the first EXCOMM meeting on October 16, "the dominant feeling at the meeting was one of stunned surprise."<sup>vii</sup> They had, they believed, been absolutely clear in their public pronouncements that such weapons would never be permitted. As a result, they believed the Soviets would never do such a thing. The crisis was launched when the president and his advisers examined the anomalous but incontrovertible data on the morning of October 16.

- 2. *October 23: No Soviet counter-move to the U.S. quarantine.*

After the president's speech on October 22, almost everyone--whether leaders or ordinary citizens--had gone to bed expecting a significant Soviet escalation of the crisis. Perhaps the Soviets would block the autobahn between West Germany and West Berlin; perhaps they would bomb NATO missile sites in Turkey; perhaps they would begin to move troops through the Dardenelles. But they did nothing. On the morning of October 23, Secretary of State Dean Rusk found his deputy, George Ball, asleep on the couch in his office at the State Department. In waking him Rusk said: "We have won a considerable victory. You and I are still alive."<sup>viii</sup> All in EXCOMM were relieved, but very perplexed by the absence of a Soviet counter-move.

- *October 24: Soviet ships stop and reverse course.*

At 10:00 AM EDT on October 24, the quarantine went into effect. Soviet ships were sailing with a submarine escort toward U.S. Navy warships, several hundred miles north and east of Cuba. Fears escalated rapidly in EXCOMM that some sort of untoward incident at sea would inadvertently spark the war all wanted to avoid. Or perhaps the Soviet ships would actually try to "run the blockade"--to break through in an act of defiance, supported by their escort of attack submarines. (Nearly forty years later we learned that the four Soviet submarines escorting the fleet heading toward the quarantine line, including one forced to the surface, each carried a nuclear-tipped torpedo, and that the commanders were authorized to use them if they saw fit.)<sup>ix</sup>

Robert Kennedy recalled that in those moments he wondered: "Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? Was it our error? A mistake?"<sup>x</sup> In an October 28 special report, CBS television news commentator Charles Collingwood said that "this was the day we expected World War III to begin."<sup>xi</sup> Again, anomaly prevailed. Nothing happened. Most of the Soviet ships reversed course and headed back to the Soviet Union.

- *October 27: "Black Saturday," the darkest hour.*

No one in EXCOMM expected the events of this day: the U-2 shootdown over Cuba, a confusing letter from Khrushchev that seemed to put impossible conditions on any plausible settlement of the crisis, and a clear indication from Cuban leader Fidel Castro that his forces would try to shoot down every American plane within their range. No one expected at the beginning of this fateful day that by evening they would have given the Soviets what some have called an ultimatum to agree to American terms "or else." No one expected in the morning that by late in the evening they would believe themselves to be, as White House aide Theodore Sorensen later wrote, closer to nuclear war than at any other moment in the nuclear age.<sup>xii</sup>

- *October 28: The peaceful resolution of the crisis.*

When president Kennedy and his advisers went to bed in the early morning hours of Sunday, October 28, few retained much hope, that the crisis could still be resolved peacefully. After leaving the final meeting that evening, some began immediately to draw up contingency plans short of nuclear war. This was in response to whatever the next Soviet move would be following Khrushchev's expected refusal of U.S. terms, which were: a Soviet pledge to remove the missiles immediately, under United Nations supervision, for an American pledge not to invade Cuba (which prior to the discovery of the missiles, the U.S. had no intention of doing). Then the message came through on the radio: Khrushchev accepted the deal. We learned later that Khrushchev was so fearful of events spinning out of control--and that a U.S. invasion was imminent--that he sent his message to Kennedy over the public radio in Moscow rather than take the time to send it through diplomatic channels. That is how the U.S. learned that the Soviets had accepted the deal. The crisis was over. Most could scarcely believe it.

In the course of the crisis, both sides made critical misjudgments and both sides feared losing control of the situation. Neither was able to empathize with the other. The president and his advisers had expected no missile crisis, had expected the Soviets to respond belligerently once the crisis had begun, had expected inadvertent war on the high seas, had not expected events to careen out of control, and had not, finally, expected their "final" offer to the Soviets to be accepted. Every one of their most critical predictions had been refuted.

### **3. "Damned Dangerous": The U-2 Shootdown, October 27 1962.**

Of all the secret audio tapes made by President Kennedy during his tenure in office, none are as dramatic nor as pivotal as the tapes of the EXCOMM discussions of October 27, 1962, the penultimate day of the crisis, and unquestionably the most dangerous. Especially dramatic was the arrival of the news that a U-2 reconnaissance plane has been shot down over Cuba and the pilot killed. Had the war begun? Was it too late for diplomacy to work? If war began, could a nuclear holocaust be avoided? The following excerpt from the transcript of those discussions reveals the extremity of stress, tension and confusion under which the members of EXCOMM were operating, and the dawning awareness that they had entered a new zone of danger.

*It is late afternoon, October 27, 1962, the White House. EXCOMM has spent much of the day discussing Khrushchev's latest offer, which involves trading NATO missiles in Turkey for Soviet missiles in Cuba, a deal that, as EXCOMM member Paul Nitze has said during the course of the day, is "absolutely anathema" to the Turks and to NATO in general.<sup>xiii</sup> On Tuesday, October 23, the president had authorized the U-2 missions over Cuba, raising the possibility that a U-2 might be shot down. Kennedy's EXCOMM agreed that a U-2 shootdown would be a deliberate escalation of the crisis by the Soviets. They agreed, therefore, that in the event of a shootdown, there would be no need to meet. Rather, U.S. forces would attack immediately. The discussion of the Turkish missiles is now interrupted by General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.*

**Robert McNamara:** I think the rush is what do we do--

**Voice:** The U-2.

**McNamara:** The U-2 is shot down--the fire against our low-altitude surveillance-

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**Robert Kennedy** [Attorney General]: U-2 shot down?

**McNamara:** Yes ... it was found shot down.

**RFK:** Pilot killed?

**Gen. Maxwell Taylor:** It was shot down near Banes which is right near a U-2 [sic] site in eastern Cuba.

**Voice:** A SAM [surface-to-air missile] -site.

**Taylor:** The pilot's body is in the plane. Apparently this was a SAM-site that had actually had the energy ... It all ties in in a very plausible way.

**President John F. Kennedy:** This is much of an escalation by them, isn't it?

**McNamara:** Yes, exactly ... How do we interpret this? I know--I don't know how to interpret--

**Taylor:** We feel we must respond now. The whole world knows where we're flying. That raises the question of retaliation against the SAM-sites. We think we ... we have various other reasons to believe that we know the SAM-sites. A few days ago--

**McNamara:** That's just exactly--in fact, I don't think we can.

**Taylor:** ... it's on the ground--the wreckage is on the ground. The pilot's dead.

**McNamara:** In the water, isn't it?

**Taylor:** I didn't get the water part.

**McGeorge Bundy** [National Security Adviser]: If we know it, it must either be on friendly land or water.

**Voice:** It is on Cuban land. [Words unclear.]

**John McCone** [CIA Director]: I wonder if this shouldn't cause a most violent protest ... a letter right to Khrushchev. Here's, here's an action they've taken against--against us, a new order in defiance of--of public statements he made. I think that--

**Voice:** I think we ought--

**Voice:** They've fired the first shot.

**JFK:** They say--uh--that's why I'd like to find out whether Havana says they did shoot it down.

**Voice:** We don't have anything from Havana yet, do we?

**Voice:** We assume these SAM-sites are manned by Soviets.

**Voice:** That's the significant part, if it *is* the SAM-site.

**McNamara:** This is a change of pattern, now why it is a change of pattern we don't know.

**RFK:** Yeah.

**Alexis Johnson** [Undersecretary of State]: It's a very different thing. You could have an undisciplined anti-aircraft--Cuban anti-aircraft outfit fire, but to have a SAM-site and a Russian crew fire is not any accident.<sup>xiv</sup>

**JFK:** I think we ought to--why don't we send an instruction to [U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Raymond] Hare to have a conversation, but also have the NATO meeting? And say to them what's happening over here. Otherwise we're going to be carrying a hell of a bag.

**Douglas Dillon** [Secretary of the Treasury]: I think we're going to have such pressure internally in the United States, too, to act quickly ...

**JFK:** ... That's I think we'd better have a NATO meeting tomorrow ... Explain the thing, where we are--uh--I'm, afraid of what's going to happen in NATO, to Europe, when we get into this thing more and more, and I think they ought to feel that they're a part of it. Even if we don't do anything about the Turks, they ought to feel that they know.

*President Kennedy momentarily leaves the room. McNamara now addresses the connection, as he sees it, between the shootdown of the U-2 over Cuba and the NATO missiles in Turkey.*

**McNamara:** ... Now the minimum military response by NATO to a Soviet attack on the Turkish Jupiter missiles would be a response with conventional weapons by NATO forces in Turkey, that is to say Turkish and U.S. aircraft, against Soviet warships and/or naval bases in the Black Sea area. Now that to me is the absolute minimum, and I would have to say that it is *damned dangerous* to--to have had a Soviet attack on Turkey and a NATO response on the Soviet Union. That is extremely dangerous. Now I'm not sure we can avoid anything like that if we attack Cuba, but I think we should make every effort to avoid it, and one way to avoid it is to defuse the Turkish missiles *before* we attack Cuba. Now this ... is the sequence of thought.<sup>xv</sup>

While a transcript never provides enough context to be certain of how to interpret it, some things seem clear about the thinking going on during this pivotal meeting. An unarmed reconnaissance plane has been shot down and the pilot killed. Who shot it down? Only the Soviets, who controlled the SAM-sites, which were the only possible points of origin for a missile with sufficient range to hit a high-flying U-2. What does this imply? Hard to tell, but possibly that the Soviets were now willing to escalate the crisis significantly. What must be done? Pilots must and will be protected. Probably a massive air strike on all SAM-sites and anti-aircraft-sites in Cuba will be required. What follows? First, according to the president, the Turks must be contacted. Why? Because, although they deeply resent having their missiles used as pawns in the crisis, and have in fact refused even to consider the Khrushchev trade proposal, Kennedy wants them to understand that if war commences in Cuba in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, they may lose a good deal more than their precious missiles. They may in fact be Target Number One for Soviet retaliation in response to an American attack on Cuba, especially if they don't defuse those missiles. And then what? McNamara shows where he thinks all this will lead, which is to a NATO response against the Soviet Union, required by treaty in response to an attack by the Soviets on any member state.

No one knows what will happen. Only a fool would be optimistic, because each side is becoming locked into a situation in which degrees of freedom are approaching absolute zero.

And in his phrase "*damned dangerous*," by which he means the situation resulting from a NATO retaliatory strike against the Soviet Union, McNamara comes closer than anyone to naming the calamity they are all trying desperately to avoid: a major nuclear war.

#### **4. "This Close": What We Now Know About the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>xvi</sup>**

But how great was the danger? And why was the crisis resolved as it was, peacefully, the only American fatality being the U-2 pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson, who was shot down on October 27? Answers would become available only decades later, as a result of a joint U.S.-Russian-Cuban research project, which sponsored five international conferences between 1987 and 1992. The conferences were held in Hawk's Cay, Florida (1987), Cambridge, Massachusetts (1987), Moscow (1989), Antigua (1991) and Havana (1992). Cuban President Fidel Castro hosted and chaired the Havana conference.<sup>xvii</sup> How dangerous was it? Very dangerous, far more dangerous than leaders in Washington and the American people believed at the time.

The shock and incomprehension in the White House over the shutdown of the U-2 on October 27 was only the tip of a very large iceberg of misperception, misunderstanding and basic ignorance in Washington regarding what was really happening on and near the island of Cuba, and how that was affecting the course of the crisis. At the time, the fear was that the U-2 shutdown had been ordered by Moscow, which implied that the Russians were prepared, unbelievable as it seemed, to go all the way to war with the U.S., even risk escalation to nuclear war, rather than remove their missiles from Cuba.

We now know the following about the shutdown. Although Fidel Castro had given an order on October 26 to Cuban anti-aircraft batteries to fire at low-level U.S. overflights. The Soviets manning the SAM-sites, however, had standing orders not to shoot at U.S. planes, due to the fear in Moscow (under-appreciated in Washington) of uncontrolled escalation once the shooting began. Beginning on October 26, the Cubans challenged their Soviet counterparts controlling the SAM-sites to join them in the defense of the island. So on October, 27, at 10:21 AM, Col. Georgy Voronkov, commander of the SAM-site near Banes, in eastern Cuba, requested permission from the field commander of Soviet forces in Cuba, Gen. Issa Pliyev, to fire. Pliyev

was unavailable, and so the request was handled by Pliyev's deputy, Gen. Stepan N. Grechko, who granted the request. Cubans and Soviet personnel on the island celebrated following the shootdown, but Khrushchev and his colleagues in Moscow were horrified, because they realized that Washington would believe it had been ordered by Khrushchev himself. After the crisis, Voronkov was disciplined by the Soviet military leadership in Moscow, but given a medal by the Cuban government.<sup>xviii</sup>

The U-2 incident contains in microcosm all the mutual misperception and misunderstanding between Washington, Moscow and Havana that nearly led to war. For example, the Soviets believed they must deploy the missiles to Cuba because they believed (incorrectly, but understandably) that a U.S. invasion of the island was imminent. The U.S., on the other hand, dismissed growing signs of the possibility of a Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba because the Soviets had never before deployed such weapons outside the Soviet Union, and because it was so obvious (to the Americans, though not to the Soviets) that such a deployment would be totally unacceptable in Washington. And the Soviets believed (though the Cubans tried several times to persuade them that they were wrong) that the missiles could be introduced into Cuba secretly, via a clandestine operation supplemented by a systematic attempt to deceive the U.S. government--a strategy which only inflamed the crisis, once U.S. leaders understood the scale of the program of lies and deceit.

But by far the most shocking and sobering aspect of what we now know about the Cuban missile crisis involves its closeness to nuclear war by the climactic weekend of the crisis, October 26-28, 1962. The principal revelations are these:

First, any U.S. attack on Cuba would have also been an attack on more than 40,000 Soviet citizens who were deployed chiefly around the missile sites which would have been the primary targets. At the time, the CIA estimated less than 10,000 Soviets had arrived on the island. Given the scale of Russian carnage likely from a U.S. strike, therefore, a devastating Soviet response was likely, perhaps a nuclear response.

Second, by the last weekend of October, 1962, Fidel Castro had concluded that an American air strike and invasion of the island was virtually inevitable. This led him to request of Khrushchev, in a cable sent at approximately 7:00 AM EDT on October 27, that in the event of an invasion, Khrushchev should launch an all-out nuclear strike against the U.S. "That would be the moment," Castro wrote to Khrushchev, "to eliminate such danger forever through an act of legitimate self-defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there would be no other."<sup>xix</sup> Or as the translator of the cable, Soviet Ambassador Aleksander Alekseev, put it in his own cable to the Soviet leader, Castro said: *"If they attack Cuba, we should wipe them off the face of the earth."*<sup>xx</sup> At the same time, Castro's colleague Ernesto "Che" Guevara declared his willingness "to walk by the path of liberation even when it may cost millions of atomic victims."<sup>xxi</sup> If the temple had to fall and Cuba was destroyed, the Cuban leadership came to believe, the Soviets should take the Americans down with them.

Third, by October 27, when the majority of President Kennedy's military and civilian advisers were favoring an attack on Cuba, the Soviets had already delivered 162 nuclear warheads to Cuba and had them in a secure storage depot at Bejucal, southwest of Havana (a fact revealed by Russian military authorities nearly thirty years later). The CIA believed at the time that there were *zero* warheads on the island. In fact, the warheads were divided almost equally between those for the strategic missiles capable of threatening the U.S. directly, and those for cruise missiles (which would be used to attack U.S. ships involved in any invasion), and for short-range tactical weapons (which would be used to attack the invading U.S. forces as they arrived at the island). In fact, on the last weekend of the crisis, Pliyev ordered the warheads for the tactical weapons out of their storage site and had them moved closer to their launchers, as the invasion seemed imminent.<sup>xxii</sup> Gen. Anatoly Gribkov, a mastermind of the Soviet deployment to Cuba (and the last chief of Warsaw Pact forces), first revealed much of this at the January 1992 conference in Havana. After being informed by the U.S. side that an invasion may well have been imminent, Gribkov replied: "Allow me to say that ... the world was on the brink of a nuclear holocaust."<sup>xxiii</sup>

The following exchange took place at the conclusion of the session of January 1992 Havana conference in which Gribkov made his revelations:

**Robert McNamara:** [to Fidel Castro] (a) were you aware of it [the Soviet deployment of tactical nuclear warheads, and plans for their use]; and (b) What was your interpretation or expectation of the possible effect on Cuba? How did you think the U.S. would respond, and what might be the consequences for your nation and the world?<sup>xxiv</sup>

**Fidel Castro:** Now we started from the assumption that if there was an invasion of Cuba, nuclear war would erupt. We were certain of that ... We would be forced to pay the price, that we would disappear ... Would I have been ready to use nuclear weapons? Yes, I would have agreed, in the event of the invasion you are talking about, with the use of tactical nuclear weapons ... If Mr. McNamara or Mr. Kennedy had been in our place, and had their country been invaded, or their country was going to be occupied ... I believe they would have used nuclear weapons.<sup>xxv</sup>

So by the last weekend of October 1962, all the pieces were in place for Armageddon to occur. A quarter of a million Cuban troops and more than 40,000 Soviet troops, armed with dozens of tactical nuclear weapons, would have met a U.S. invasion force (which would not have been equipped with nuclear weapons), initiating nuclear war, in the (mistaken) assumption that the U.S. forces would have attacked with nuclear weapons.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Soviet troops, the Cuban leaders and the Cuban people would have paid the ultimate price for this misperception. Yet so would the Soviet people, the American people and indeed the entire world. For the initiation of nuclear war under the conditions of late October 1962 would certainly have gotten a U.S. nuclear response from U.S. aircraft based on southeast U.S. airfield. Where would it have ended? In nuclear catastrophe. We agree with Fidel Castro's answer to a question put to him by American journalist Diane Sawyer in March 1993. Castro asked rhetorically: "How close did the Cuban missile crisis come to nuclear war? *This close.*" [holding up his thumb and forefinger, until they almost touch].<sup>xxvii</sup> We now know this, for certain.

#### **4. The Lessons of October, 1962.**

While the world of 1962 is some ways increasingly remote, and the U.S.-Soviet Cold War in which it occurred has disappeared, many of the lessons of October 1962 are surprisingly relevant just now. Some may even be more relevant now than at any time since the crisis. We have identified four such lessons that we believe are distressingly pertinent to the world at the outset of the 21st century, especially the world of post-September 11, 2001.

First, *recognize that their will be unintended consequences of our actions*. Outcomes which may appear highly unlikely at the outset of a confrontation or conflict may become probable by its conclusion. It is essential, therefore, that policymakers take time to fully analyze, evaluate and debate all alternative courses of action. Differences of view among the president's advisers must be forced to the surface and fully explored.

Second, *try to empathize with the mindset of your adversaries*. Recognize that decisions to initiate action leading to highly undesirable outcomes is entirely possible by our opponents, especially when they misunderstand our objectives. Fidel Castro, and his Cuban and Soviet colleagues on the island of Cuba, believed they were acting rationally when in October 1962 they prepared for, and even sought the initiation of, nuclear war. They had concluded, wrongly but with some reason, that an American invasion was inevitable and that they were helpless without the "equalizers"--the nuclear weapons--and thus they would use them. While these decisions would, if implemented, have led to total devastation, the decisions themselves were the logical outcome of the perverse, desperate situation in which they found themselves, and which they had played an unwitting part in creating.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Third, *we must try to empathize with our allies and the allies of our adversaries*. In the current case, we must recognize that the U.S. is hated by some Arabs and other Muslims, and that this will affect the actions of our allies and our opponents. We must try to minimize unintended consequences of our actions by probing deeply the roots of such hatreds--by trying to see our actions as others see them.

Fourth and finally, *recognize that the Cuban missile crisis demonstrated that human beings endeavoring to manage military operations are even more fallible than the rest of us are*

*in our daily lives.* We all make mistakes in our daily lives. The point is to try not to make the same mistake twice--to learn from our mistakes. But a mistake involving the use of nuclear weapons is likely to lead to unprecedented devastation, yielding little or no opportunity to learn from mistakes leading to the nuclear attacks. It was therefore concluded at January 1989 Moscow conference on the Cuban missile crisis that the indefinite combination of human fallibility and the existence of nuclear weapons will lead to the destruction of nations. On this basis, we believe that, with appropriate verification procedures in place, we must move to eliminate nuclear weapons.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **5. Back to the Future: The Cuban Cuban Missile Crisis.**

Do the lessons of October 1962 apply to present and future attempts to prevent and resolve crises with minimal bloodshed? We believe they do, particularly if one focusses attention on the *Cuban* Cuban missile crisis--the impact of the crisis in the theater of operations on and around Cuba.<sup>xxx</sup> Unlike the image of the Cuban missile crisis popular today among the public--thirteen days of gamesmanship followed by a U.S. victory--the *Cuban* Cuban missile crisis was the culmination of a long history of bitter enmity between the U.S. and Cuba. It was the product both of the fears of a very small country and of the presumptions of the most powerful and influential nation on earth. It stirred senses of sacred mission, manhood, duty to a higher cause and other cultural characteristics poorly understood in North American (and Northern European) cultures. And it aroused the most intense feelings of both desperation and resignation. When viewed in this light, the willingness of Cuban leaders to take measures that caused huge risks appear quite predictable.

We invite our readers to ask themselves the following questions: Are Cubans the only people of limited means who feel a need to confront the U.S. directly, "inviting" a U.S. attack? Is the communist ideology of Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara the only belief system capable of driving people to contemplate suicide, even national suicide, in the service of their cause? Do we currently understand non-northern European systems of ideas any better now than we understood the combined nationalism and communist devotion that moved the Cubans in

October 1962 to a direct challenge of the U.S.? Are there presently charismatic leaders, with the capacities of one such as Castro or Guevara, capable of motivating their followers to carry out what may seem to Americans to be unbelievable acts of violence against the U.S.? If there are, can we depend on military means alone to re-orient their behavior?

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup>Fidel Castro, interview with Diane Sawyer, March 13, 1993, Havana, Cuba

<sup>ii</sup>Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 1. Note: in the first edition, Graham Allison used the word "awesome," rather than "miraculous," as it appears in the epigraph. For many years, when lecturing on the missile crisis, Allison used to tell his students that "our escape seems miraculous." While *Essence of Decision* was being written, Allison and Richard E. Neustadt published several highly plausible and compelling scenarios--counterfactuals, or "what-ifs"--that would have led to nuclear war in October 1962. On this basis, Allison said "miraculous" conveyed more of the sense of what he meant when, in 1971, he published the first edition of his classic text. We agree completely with this assessment, which accounts for the wording of the epigraph. Alas, the escape remains "awesome," rather than "miraculous," in the second edition, even though virtually all the retrospective evidence that has become available since 1971 suggests that the missile crisis was much more dangerous than was previously believed.

<sup>iii</sup>These three analogies are taken up in three short but very useful articles, grouped under the heading, "What Terror Keeps Teaching Us," *New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2001, pp. 91-103. See Richard Rhodes, "The Suffering Find Their Champions and They are Not All Gandhis" (Pearl Harbor); Caleb Carr, "Americans Don't Understand That Their Heritage is Itself a Threat" (The British burning of Washington, DC); and Allan Gurganus, "Sherman's Ghost" (Sherman's march to the sea).

<sup>iv</sup>John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba." *Public Papers of the Presidents* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pp. 806-809, p. 808.

<sup>v</sup>For a summary of these events see James G. Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, foreword by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), pp. 11-22.

<sup>vi</sup>The exception was CIA director John McCone, who had speculated that the Soviets might deploy missiles to Cuba. He did not press the issue, however, and presented the possibility to his colleagues merely as possibility. In fact, McCone was on his honeymoon on the French Riviera when the missiles were discovered, and he missed the first several meetings of EXCOMM.

<sup>vii</sup>Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, afterword by Richard E. Neustadt and Graham T. Allison (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 2. In the recent feature film by Peter Almond and starring Kevin Costner, also called "Thirteen Days," the drama of this first meeting of EXCOMM is quite realistic.

<sup>viii</sup>Dean Rusk, quoted in Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), p. 127.

<sup>ix</sup>This information was revealed by a former Soviet submarine commander in a 2001 conference in Moscow associated with the premiere of the American film "Thirteen Days," and subsequently confirmed by Sergei Khrushchev, biographer of his father Nikita Khrushchev and a former Soviet rocket scientist.

<sup>x</sup>Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 47. The 2000 film *Thirteen Days*, and the 1971 television drama, "The Missiles of October," are especially compelling on these meetings of October 24, 1962.

<sup>xi</sup>"Anatomy of a Crisis," October 28, 1962, 7:00 PM. The film is available from the CBS News Archive in New York City. It can also be seen at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston.

<sup>xii</sup>Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 714.

<sup>xiii</sup>Paul Nitze, quoted in the transcript of the EXCOMM meeting at 10:00 AM, October 27, 1962 in the Cabinet Room at the White House. Excerpts of this meeting were first published in McGeorge Bundy, transcriber, and James G. Blight, editor, "October 27, 1962: Transcripts of the Meetings of the EXCOMM," *International Security*, Winter 1987-88 (Vol. 12, No. 3), pp. 30-92, p. 35. The complete transcript is now available in Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 492-518.

<sup>xiv</sup>Only later was it learned that Khrushchev, anticipating that any shootdown of a U-2 would in fact be interpreted by the U.S. as a deliberate escalation by Moscow, had issued standing orders not to fire on the U-2's.

<sup>xv</sup>Bundy and Blight, "October 27, 1962," pp. 66-92; the complete text of the discussion of the U-2 shootdown may be found in May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 571-581. The discussion is somewhat difficult to follow from the complete text, because there appear to be several parallel discussions occurring simultaneously: of the shootdown, of what it will take to get the Turks to cooperate, and about getting a NATO meeting together the following morning. President Kennedy's performance is astonishing, as he seems to be in complete control of all these discussions, even though he leaves the room from time to time to tend to other business.

<sup>xvi</sup>See the excellent summary of recent research on the missile crisis in John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford, 1997), pp. 260-280. As Gaddis writes: "New American, Soviet and Cuban sources are revealing most ... conventional wisdom about the crisis to be highly questionable" (p. 260). Fundamentally, virtually every new document and oral testimony points in the direction of greater danger, of a multiplicity of ways the crisis could have exploded. In fact, we believe that if the crisis were "replayed" counterfactually, in a series of thought experiments, nine times out of ten the outcome is nuclear war, not a sudden, peaceful settlement.

<sup>xvii</sup>The literature deriving from the Cuban missile project is vast. An introduction to both the findings and the method of critical oral history used in the investigation of the crisis may be found in the following: Blight, *Shattered Crystal Ball*; James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*, rev. paperback ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); and James G. Blight and David A. Welch, eds., *Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (London: Frank Cass, 1998). In addition, the Soviet side of the equation has been greatly clarified by Gen. Anatoly I. Gribkov and Gen. William Y. Smith, *Operation Anadyr: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. by Alfred Friendly, Jr., foreword by Michael Beschloss (Chicago: Edition Q, 1994); and Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro & Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: Norton, 1997).

<sup>xviii</sup>Much of this information was first revealed at the January 1992 conference in Havana, Cuba by Gen. Anatoly I. Gribkov. See Blight, Allyn and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 101-123.

<sup>xix</sup>The missile crisis correspondence between Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev was published by the Cubans in November 1990, just prior to a U.S.-Soviet-Cuban conference on the crisis on the Caribbean island of Antigua, which took place in early January 1991. The full correspondence, corroborated against both the Cuban and Soviet archival copies, first appeared in the U.S. as an appendix to Blight, Allyn and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 474-491. The letter of October 26, 1962 from Castro to

Khrushchev cited in the text is on pp. 481-482. See also James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang and Aaron Belkin, "Why Castro Released the Armageddon Letters," *Miami Herald*, January 20, 1991, Sunday Supplement, p. 1.

<sup>xx</sup>The quotation from Aleksander Alekseev's cable of October 26-27 from Havana to Khrushchev is in James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, "Burden of Nuclear Responsibility: Reflections on the Critical Oral History of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 225-264, p. 238. The existence of the document was first revealed at the January 1991 conference on the missile crisis in Antigua by Oleg Darusenkov, a long-time Cuba specialist within the Soviet Foreign Ministry and Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

<sup>xxi</sup>Ernesto "Che" Guevara, quoted in Carla Anne Robbins, *The Cuban Threat* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), p. 47. See also James G. Blight and David A. Welch, "Risking 'The Destruction of Nations': Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis for New and Aspiring Nuclear States," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 811-850, especially pp. 841-845.

<sup>xxii</sup>This information became available during the early 1990s via a variety of sources, chief among them are: Blight, Allyn and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 54-71; Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, pp. 3-78; and Lt.-Col. Anatoly Dokuchaev, "100-dnevnyi yadernyi kruiz (the 100-day cruise)," *Krasnaya zvezda (Red Star)*, November 6, 1992, p. 2. A good deal of skepticism was expressed about the claims of Russian military scholars and former officials who claimed that tactical nuclear weapons were present in Cuba during the missile crisis, and that the Soviet field commander had the authority to use them. See, for example, John Newhouse, "Socialism or Death," *The New Yorker*, April 27, 1992, pp. 52-83. But by late 1992, American scholars had obtained documents from Russian archives giving details of the instructions issued to Soviet commander Gen. Issa Pliyev by the leadership in Moscow. The instructions were as follows: "You are personally allowed ... to take the decision to apply the tactical Luna missiles as a means of local war for the destruction of the opponent on land and on the coast with the aim of a full crushing defeat of troops on the territory of Cuba and the defense of the Cuban Revolution." Quoted in Bruce J. Allyn and James G. Blight, "Closer Than We Knew," *New York Times*, November 2, 1992, p. A17.

<sup>xxiii</sup>Gen. Anatoly I. Gribkov, quoted in Blight, Allyn and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 62.

<sup>xxiv</sup>Robert S. McNamara, quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>xxv</sup>Fidel Castro, quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 251-252.

<sup>xxvi</sup>See Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, rev. paperback ed. (New York: Vintage, 1996), pp. 341-342.

<sup>xxvii</sup>Diane Sawyer was in Cuba covering its nation-wide elections for the National Assembly. Castro also said that Khrushchev had misinterpreted his cable to the Soviet leader of October 26, 1962. He said Khrushchev understood him to be advocating an all-out *preemptive* nuclear attack on the U.S., which he said he certainly was not. He said he was merely trying to encourage Khrushchev to be firm in his defense of Cuba, and that he (Khrushchev) need not worry about the Cubans, who would fight to the last man, and who would be willing to pay the ultimate price if, *contingent* on an air strike and an invasion of Cuba by the U.S., Khrushchev saw fit to destroy the U.S. in a nuclear strike. Castro admitted that he may have been mistaken in thinking: first, that an American attack was inevitable; and second,

that any such American attack would involve the U.S. use of nuclear weapons. In fact, U.S. documentary evidence is now clear that Kennedy was very reluctant to attack Cuba, and that if such an attack occurred, U.S. forces would *not* be equipped with nuclear weapons. See David A. Welch and James G. Blight, "The Eleventh Hour of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Winter 1987-88), pp. 5-29, especially 12-18, on the issue of the missiles in Turkey.

<sup>xxviii</sup>On this point, See Blight and Welch, "Risking 'the Destruction of Nations,'" pp. 841-845. Some commentators on the crisis appear to find this point--that Castro and his colleagues were "rational" when the letter was sent to Khrushchev containing the contingent request to destroy the U.S. in a nuclear attack, in the event that the Americans attacked, invaded and attempted to occupy Cuba. But the same logic applies to other, more familiar situations. For example, in the 1972 Paul Newman-Robert Redford film, "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," Butch and The Kid are holed up in a hut in the Bolivian hills, surrounded by lawmen, and without a chance of escaping alive. But rather than surrender, the two fugitives smile furtively at one another, and come out of the hut firing away, still smiling. The frame freezes and the credits roll, as the sound of gunfire is heard roaring from the Bolivian hills. Are Butch and Kid crazy or are they heroes? Clearly, we are led to believe they are heroes. Faced with an impossibly desperate situation, they decided to die with honor, and to take some of the enemy with them as they fell. The analogy to Fidel Castro at the crescendo of the missile crisis is quite direct.

<sup>xxix</sup>Hans Bethe, Nobel Laureate in physics and a leader of the team of Los Alamos scientists who designed the first atomic bomb, has offered an amendment to our position. Bethe believes that the nuclear powers might retain "a few" nuclear weapons, in order to guard against the possibility of nuclear blackmail by "rogue" leaders. His suggestion deserves full debate. The issue need not be decided immediately, as it will take at least a decade, under the best circumstances, to reduce the current global inventory of approximately 20,000 nuclear warheads to "a few." See Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight, *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21st Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), pp. 169-215.

<sup>xxx</sup>In Cuba, the events of October 1962 are known as the "October crisis." As it was explained to us matter-of-factly by a Cuban official during the January 1992 Havana conference on the crisis: "Between Cuba and the U.S., every month is a crisis. That one happened in October." Here, we prefer the term *Cuban* Cuban missile crisis, rather than introducing a completely different, and potentially confusing phrase. See Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight and David A. Welch, "Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Winter 1989/90), pp. 136-172; and Brenner, "Cuba and the Missile Crisis."