

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: When Kennedy blinked

by Carol White

The Kennedy presidency was a turning point for the United States. It was then the Berlin Wall was built; then Laos was lost and American "advisers" were sent to Vietnam; finally, America faced the Soviets in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation over the placement of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. The fact that the Soviet Union apparently removed its missiles from Cuba after the United States announced a blockade of that island is cited as proof that Khrushchev was forced to back down in face of American pressure, and Kennedy is applauded as a statesman for not making the backdown more humiliating. Yet after the Khrushchev "backdown," the United States acceded to Soviet demands and removed its missiles from Turkey and other bases in Europe, and reduced its bomber presence as well.

During the Kennedy presidency, the United States had overwhelming missile superiority compared to the Soviets; the strategic issue was whether the government was willing to risk the possibility of a Soviet strike against the continental United States. Henry Kissinger and McGeorge Bundy said "No." It was during the Kennedy presidency that their doctrine of "flexible response" and "limited nuclear war" was instituted by Defense Secretary McNamara as U.S. policy. For the first time, the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe was seriously called into question.

The question of what really happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis looms large today. Now the United States is, at best, barely on a par with the Soviet Union. It is a serious question whether the United States has sufficient retaliatory capability to effectively deter the Soviet Union from a first strike. Under the circumstances, Henry Kissinger's evil assertion at the Jan. 13 conference, sponsored by Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Brussels, that the United States would not be willing to sacrifice an American city to stop a Soviet takeover of West Germany can seem convincing to Europeans who depend for their survival on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

Just as important, traitors like Kissinger encourage the Soviets to adventure, despite President Reagan's recent reassertion of U.S. policy in *Le Figaro* (see *EIR*, Jan. 24). President Reagan reiterated that the United States will retaliate

against the Soviet Union directly in response to any aggression in Europe. The question then for the Soviets is to evaluate whether or not the United States would carry through on this pledge. Undoubtedly, one of the ways that they test the mettle of America is this nation's willingness to allow a traitor like Henry Kissinger to act as secretary of state in the wings; however, equally significant to their evaluation is a study of U.S. reactions when faced with the crisis in Cuba. If the United States backed down then—when it had overwhelming superiority—then can it be expected to stand firm now, with the odds far less favorable? It is essential to set the record straight on the Kennedy-Khrushchev accords once and for all. This article essentially only raises the question.

## Before the Kennedy presidency

The events which set the climate for the Kennedy presidency began during the Eisenhower period. On Aug. 26, 1957, the Soviets had their first successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile. In October Sputnik orbited. In September 1959, the Soviets crash-landed a satellite on the moon, and in April 1961 a Russian was the first human to travel in space.

Even though the United States quickly developed a missile program which surpassed that of the Soviets, leading ultimately to the manned landing on the moon in 1969, the American public was severely shocked when it realized that it was they, rather than the Soviets, who were in the position of having to catch up.

Bertrand Russell's pacifist movement—whose leading advocate in the United States was Atomic Energy Commission science adviser Robert Oppenheimer—had successfully sabotaged this country's post-war position as the preeminent superpower. He and his epigones like Hans Boethe had successfully sabotaged Ernest Lawrence's and Edward Teller's efforts immediately after the war to push ahead the development of fusion power, at the same time that presidential science adviser Vannevar Bush argued that German rockets could not be developed as intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The issues are interconnected. Oppenheimer insisted on directing Los Alamos weapons laboratory to produce more

and smaller fission bombs—claiming that a hydrogen bomb was both unfeasible and unnecessary, since one could have overkill capacity with fission bombs. But the energy density of hydrogen bombs is at least one order of magnitude greater than that of the fission bomb. Only with the development of the H-bomb was the ICBM a feasible delivery device for nuclear warheads.

### Limited nuclear war

In 1957 a series of policy discussions held at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) were concluded. These discussions functioned for the Kennedy presidency like the “Project 1980s” seminars which the CFR held to shape the Carter presidency. While Kissinger published a summary of the discussions in the book *Nuclear War and Foreign Policy*, the policy was developed by the CFR under the chairmanship of John J. McCloy, with the direct participation of McGeorge Bundy, who became National Security head under Kennedy.

These discussions worked out the strategy of flexible response and limited nuclear war. The policy of limited nuclear war was further modified to a policy of “no first use,” which is still publicly advocated by McNamara although it has been repudiated by President Reagan. Under this doctrine the United States pledges itself not to respond with nuclear weapons to a Soviet invasion of Europe.

One ironic feature of this book, written in 1957, is that Kissinger says that there will be no ICBMs for 10 years! Today Kissinger is doing the same thing, saying there will be no beam-weapons for 10 years. The same year the book was published (1957), the Soviets demonstrated they had an ICBM.

Kissinger probably knew that the Russians had an ICBM when he published *Nuclear War and Foreign Policy*, but he lied about it, since the main argument of his book was that continental America would be increasingly vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack. Therefore, he—and McGeorge Bundy—argued: Do we really want to fight a war over Europe?

As he wrote, in *Nuclear War and Foreign Policy*:

For the first time in our history, we are vulnerable to a direct, hostile attack. No remaining margin of industrial and technological superiority can remove the consciousness of our increasing vulnerability. The spectre of a technological breakthrough by the other side would always loom large. Who can be certain that faced with the catastrophe of all-out war, even Europe, long the keystone of our security, will seem worth the price.

Our problem is complicated by the fact that we have explicitly rejected the use of surprise attack as the instrument of strategy. If we refrained from utilizing our atomic monopoly at a time when the Soviet capability to retaliate was almost non-existent, it is against all probability that we would do so now.

Since the attempt to deprive the enemy of his



*The 1961 Vienna summit between Kennedy and Khrushchev, a humiliation for the new American President.*

retaliatory force would inevitably bring on all-out war, the minimum condition of limited war will be the immunity of the opposing strategic forces. Another concept which, as we have seen, will have to be modified, is the elimination of enemy communication and industrial centers, a goal which was meaningful only so long as the major movement of armies was effected by road or rail.

It is useful to contrast Kissinger’s book to *Soviet Military Strategy*, written by Marshal Sokolovskii and published in the U.S.S.R. in 1962. Sokolovskii replies to the Council on Foreign Relations and Henry Kissinger by asserting that war must be guaranteed to immediately destroy the enemy’s potential in depth.

Kissinger wrote: “There can be no attempt to deprive the enemy of his communications or industrial might. . . . In a war which will be largely fought by the forces in being, the destruction of industrial potential will play a much smaller role than in the past.”

Sokolovskii cites two quotations whose apparent purpose is to take the measure of U.S. fighting capability and willingness to resist aggression. The first quotation is from another book by Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice*.

“Henry Kissinger,” says Sokolovskii, “posed the so-called alternative of limited war as a choice between ‘humiliation and general war.’”

From the same book, in referring to the tremendous influence of the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China on the course of world social development, Sokolovskii cites Kissinger bitterly admitting that the success of

Moscow and Peking “have the same kind of attraction as the accomplishment of Europe in the 19th century. No amount of economic assistance will avail against the conviction that the West is doomed.”

Sokolovskii also quotes President Kennedy at a press conference in 1961, where Kennedy said, “While we rely on nuclear weapons, we also, as I have said, want to have a choice between humiliation and holocaust.” Sokolovskii detected what he conceived as a defeatist tendency in the United States. This profile of the U.S. leadership led Khrushchev to tell a reporter: “America is too liberal to fight,” an assessment this writer believes was an accurate anticipation of what occurred during the Cuban missile crisis. Indeed, the United States accepted humiliation under the fear of holocaust, rather than face down Khrushchev.

## The Kennedy presidency

Kennedy accepted the CFR doctrine of flexible response and limited war. He appointed McGeorge Bundy as his National Security Adviser and McNamara as Secretary of Defense. He also began his presidency committed to negotiating a test-ban treaty.

To do this, Kennedy was willing to sacrifice America’s capacity to mount an effective anti-missile defense system, since such a system can only be tested against nuclear missiles. At that time, the United States was involved in reviewing the potential of ABM testing using directed energy-beam weapons, not just anti-missile missiles. In 1961, SAC commander Curtis LeMay delivered a speech in Detroit in which he discussed the possibility of using Electro-Magnetic Pulse (EMP) as a defense weapon. He stated that the United States had the potential for developing a space shuttle. Everything that America has accomplished in the last 20 years, Curtis LeMay realized and proposed that the United States could do in the 1960s.

The military staged a terrific fight against the test-ban treaty because they knew that not only would U.S. programs be sabotaged, but that also the Soviets could be counted on to cheat on the treaty. Kennedy’s response was essentially that he did not care if the Soviets cheated, he wanted to sign it—no matter what might be lost. He was obsessed. The test-ban treaty negotiations were the beginning of his strategic defeat; the signing of the treaty culminated his defeat at the end of his presidency. Throughout his presidency the negotiations continued—even when the Soviets violated the test moratorium after the Berlin crisis by exploding a 58-megaton bomb.

## The Bay of Pigs

Barely a week after Kennedy took office, in the first months of 1961, he was presented with already developed plans for the Bay of Pigs invasion by Allen Dulles, head of the CIA. Within a few months, the Bay of Pigs landing took place.

In order to sabotage any possibilities for the Kennedy

presidency, the Bay of Pigs invasion was arranged. Castro thought the United States had 20,000 men lined up for the invasion. In fact, there were fewer than 1,000. Of these, only 60 were trained in guerrilla warfare; the rest had some conventional arms training. Of those, only 125 could be considered soldiers—the rest were anti-Castro civilians.

The invaders were given some old B-26 bombers which did not work, whose rear tail-guns had been taken out to allow extra room for fuel. In this condition, the planes were virtually sure to be shot down. Similarly, the invasion force had some ships from World War II. To compound the problems, all of the supplies were loaded on ships which never landed.

The CIA was supposed to alert the Cuban underground to revolt by having all radio broadcasts blare a coded signal. This message to the underground—their signal to arise—was, unfortunately, not beamed into Cuba. By some error, the CIA beamed it into continental U.S. radio stations; it never got to Cuba.

But the Cubans, forewarned that something funny was going on, particularly because the old B-26s were kept in Cuban air space, arrested 200,000 members of the underground. The amphibious landing was planned to take place at night, on a coral reef—but all U.S. amphibious landings during World War II took place during the day. In addition, it is insane to land on a coral reef.

The site which was chosen for a landing was supposed to be a deserted swamp. The swamp had been reclaimed by Castro and a resort—already illuminated and populated—was about to open there. And, just in case Cuban intelligence was not already on alert for the landing, Allen Dulles had the foresight to have a public relations firm issue press releases about the landing *before* it occurred.

This fiasco was a well-planned fiasco. It was meant as a humiliation for Kennedy, so that he would be unable to face Khrushchev. As Kennedy kept saying, how can Khrushchev have respect for me? The question was not Cuba. The question was, could Kennedy run such a fiasco, a comic opera, and be credible as a President. Kennedy was never briefed on the actual arrangements for the invasion. He thought there was a top-notch elite Green Beret guerrilla force landing. He was told they were going to fade into the hills and organize the underground. There happened to have been 80 miles of swamp between the landing site and the hills!

## The summit

The Vienna summit occurred within months of the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Kennedy told *New York Times* columnist Scotty Reston that Khrushchev had beaten him up. Khrushchev literally did beat him: He took Kennedy, who had a serious back problem, by the shoulders and threw him against a wall. Kennedy could not understand Khrushchev. He said to Reston: “I have two problems.” The first was to figure out why Khrushchev did it—not only beat him up, but raved, and yelled, and screamed,

and threatened war over Berlin. The second was to determine what to do about it.

"The first part is easy to explain. I think he did it because of the Bay of Pigs. He thought anyone so young and inexperienced as to get into a mess like that can be taken. Anyone who got into a mess like that and didn't see it through had no guts. . . . I have a terrible problem. He thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts. Until we remove these ideas, we won't get anywhere with him. So, I have to act."

The only thing Kennedy could act on was Vietnam. The number of advisers which the United States had in Vietnam rose from 200 to 10,000. Yet Kennedy apparently recognized that once again he had been deceived. One of his last acts before he was assassinated was to sign an order to remove 1,000 American troops from Vietnam.

### **The Berlin Wall**

After Vienna, the Soviets built the Berlin Wall. On Aug. 13, 1961, East German military convoys streamed into Berlin to the 25-mile border that separated the western from the eastern part of the city. Troops piled out of the tanks, set up barbed wire and concrete, and began the construction of the wall. The United States did nothing. Not one American tank was dispatched. The Soviets could have been stopped at any point; they were not even confronted. Kennedy was paralyzed; he allowed Khrushchev to move without opposition. Apparently, he was totally terrorized by Khrushchev, whom he feared as a maniac who would go to nuclear war at the drop of a hat.

During this period, Kennedy was in touch regularly with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Some people in Britain claim that Macmillan opposed Kennedy's policy of appeasing Khrushchev. This is not so.

The fact is, Harold Macmillan forced through the test-ban treaty, and tried to prevent the United States from resuming testing when the Soviets violated the moratorium. Glen Seaborg, who was active in test-ban negotiations, records a remark by Macmillan in his diary which speaks for itself.

Macmillan told Kennedy: "I've been reading novels about the Russians. And really they're not so bad at all. I see great hope of coming together with them. You know, they have an elite just like we do, and they send their children to private schools just like we do. I'm sure we can come to an arrangement with them."

### **The Cuban Missile Crisis**

The Cuban Missile Crisis began to develop in the summer of 1962. At that time, Cuban refugees began to report that missiles were being unloaded from Soviet ships. Despite this and suggestive photographs from U-2 surveillance overflights, and despite the opposition of CIA director John McCone, McGeorge Bundy went on television on Oct. 14 to say: "I know there is no present evidence, and I think there is no present likelihood, that the Cubans and the Cuban government and the Soviet government would, in combination,

attempt to install a major offensive capability."

The Soviet Union had clearly been putting missiles in Cuba for some time. Sen. Kenneth Keating (D-N.Y.) had been making speeches about it. Despite the increasing pressure on Kennedy to take some action, incredibly, U-2 flights were cut back in September so that there were no overflights on the western part of the island where the missile installations had been discovered. When McCone learned of this on Oct. 4, he called for immediate photographing of the whole island. Bundy had withdrawn the U-2s on the pretext that a U-2 plane which had been given to the Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan had been shot down by a P.R.C. surface-to-air missile. Therefore, if surface-to-air missiles were being installed in Cuba, they would be able to shoot down U.S. planes. The United States, Bundy said in effect, would rather risk the Soviets having IRBMs in place in Cuba than possibly losing one of its planes.

Like 1984, 1962 was an election year. The Republicans were demanding action, and Kennedy was being advised by Bundy to try to cover up the missile placement at least until after the elections. At that point, the missiles would have been well entrenched and would have presented a military threat to the U.S. mainland. Bundy was only prevented from subverting the gathering of intelligence by McCone's replacing Allen Dulles as head of the CIA.

During 1961 both the United States and the Soviets had ICBMs, but problems of delivery were such that neither power's ICBMs posed a serious military threat to the other. This was emphatically not the case with Intermediate Range Missiles. Due to the action of Senator Keating, in particular, Kennedy was forced to respond to the Soviets against the advice of Bundy. Perhaps more correctly, Bundy could no longer prevent Kennedy from responding.

Once Kennedy was forced to face up to the fact that the Soviets were indeed putting missiles in Cuba, he convened a crisis committee which included McCloy from civilian life, and of course, McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk, Dean Acheson, and others. The committee divided itself into two teams to debate how the crisis was to be handled. One side spoke for strong action, one for weak. Team A, which included the Joint Chiefs of Staff, urged a surgical air strike to get the missiles out. Team B demurred.

Robert Kennedy, as a member of Team B, argued that the United States could not bomb the Cuban missile sites because his brother would be acting as the Tojo of the 1960s by carrying out a surprise attack. And, incredibly, Secretary of Defense McNamara argued against any action, wailing that it made no difference whether we were killed by missiles from Cuba or from the Soviet Union.

The decision was not to carry out an airstrike, but a blockade. That blockade never stopped a single Soviet military ship. Every one was allowed through. This was justified as a measured response: step-by-step escalation to ensure that Khrushchev did not get too upset and bomb the United States. Near the end of the crisis period, one U.S. U-2 was shot

down, and several were shot at. The Soviets had no compunction about shooting at U.S. planes—but then they never believed in flexible response.

Finally, with the intervention of Bertrand Russell and Walter Lippmann, there was a solution to the crisis. Lippmann said publicly that the United States should give up its “unnecessary” base in Turkey. Russell said the same thing, much more shrilly and vilely, attacking the United States for being inflammatory against the Soviets—the same Soviets who were installing IRBMs on the U.S. border and violating the Monroe Doctrine.

After much mediation—by French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, Pope John XXIII, and others—Khrushchev wrote a letter to Kennedy, offering to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba if the United States would remove its missiles from Turkey. Kennedy refused the offer—publicly. The Soviets presumably removed the missiles from Cuba (although since the Cubans refused to permit on-site inspection, there is still some doubt that this really occurred). For this reason it is said that, brought to the brink of war, Khrushchev blinked.

Yet, in five months U.S. missiles were out of Turkey. And they were not only out of Turkey, they were out of Italy; and they were not only out of Italy, they were out of Britain. Not only were U.S. missiles out—U.S. bombers were also pulled out of Morocco and Western Europe.

The United States stripped itself of significant military capabilities. The argument is made that the United States would have replaced these IRBMs with submarine-based missiles such as the Polaris. In any case, to do so would have been incompetent policy. The Thor missile should surely have been replaced by an IRBM version of the more accurate Minuteman, but that is not the point. Land-based missiles are far more accurate than submarine-launched missiles.

By having a variety of air and missile bases, the United States had the potential to confuse Soviet defenses because of the variety of trajectories with which they would have to

cope. But the United States was faced down and backed down. With IRBMs, the time factor is reduced, the throw-weight potentiality is increased, and so forth.

In 1962, the United States had 250 IRBMs in Europe. The Soviet Union had 700. In 1963, the United States had zero; the Soviet Union had 800. By 1966, the United States still had none, while the Soviet Union maintained 750. In 1962, the United States had 1,030 medium-range bombers; the Soviets, 1,400. In 1963, the United States had 780 and the Soviets, 1,400. In 1966, the United States had 222, the Soviets had 1,400. The United States had projected 2,000 Minutemen, but settled for the 1,000 it now has.

Paul Nitze reflected upon the choice before President Kennedy’s committee, of air strike or blockade, and remarked that the United States was afraid of “the chance of a Soviet reprisal in Europe. We found it hard to imagine that the Russians would not respond by moving against Iran, Berlin, or perhaps even Vietnam. We therefore agreed that the United States must move with deliberation, not merely proceed with existing contingency plans.”

The existing contingency to which he referred was the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe. Macmillan was conferred with. Charles de Gaulle was informed by Acheson that we would run a blockade, and that was that.

The fact that the United States had given up its missile bases in Europe and reduced its bomber force, coupled with its refusal to confront the Soviets over the Berlin Wall, led Charles de Gaulle to deduce that the United States might have given over Europe to the Soviets in 1962 without a fight.

On Jan. 4, 1963, de Gaulle gave a press conference in which he explained what had happened, and why he was committed to developing an independent nuclear deterrent to save the Western world from U.S. perfidy. “The Americans, finding themselves exposed to a direct atomic attack from the Caribbean, acted to rid themselves of that menace. The means which they immediately decided to employ in order to counter a direct attack, were automatically set aside from something other than the defense of Europe. Even if Europe had been attacked, no one in the world, particularly no one in America, can say where, when, how, or to what extent the American nuclear weapons would have been employed to defend Europe.” Knowing that the West faced a potential reprisal from the Soviets in Europe, there was not one plan to actively defend Europe against the Soviets, except to scrap all existing contingency plans for defense.

The United States as a nation must look at the precedent of the Kennedy presidency very carefully. The nation must decisively repudiate the doctrine of flexible response, and compassionately but firmly own up to President Kennedy’s failure of nerve—which it can never afford to repeat. Henry Kissinger is still a presidential adviser, and the Bundys and other perpetrators of the 1960s debacle can still claim political power. It is essential for the survival of the Western alliance to reverse the perfidy of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when Kennedy blinked.

## NATO and Warsaw Pact intermediate range nuclear forces before and after the Cuban missile crisis

(Europe and Asia)

	1962	1963	1966	1983
<b>Warheads on IRBMs and MRBMs</b>				
NATO	250	0	0	59*
Warsaw Pact	700	800	750	1,329
<b>Medium-range land-based bombers</b>				
NATO	1,030	780	222	56
Warsaw Pact	1,400	1,400	1,200	815

\*NATO figures include 9 Pershing IIs and 32 ground-launched cruise missiles scheduled for December 1983 deployment.

Source: IISS, *Military Balance*, various years.