For fourteen days during October 1962, the world held its breath as John F Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev tried to reach a compromise and avoid nuclear war. Ernest May investigates how Kennedy demonstrated his leadership skills during the crisis.

The 'gravest issues'

Early on Tuesday 16 October 1962, John F Kennedy's national security assistant, McGeorge Bundy, brought to the President's bedroom some high-altitude photographs taken from U-2 planes flying over Cuba. They showed Soviet soldiers hurriedly and secretly setting up nuclear-armed missiles.

For some time previously the Soviets had openly been sending weaponry to Cuba, including surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles (SAMs). To deflect any criticism about this from the Republicans, who were busy campaigning for the November congressional elections, Kennedy had said he would not protest about such defensive weaponry being installed in Cuba, but warned that if the Soviets ever introduced offensive weapons, 'the gravest issues would arise.'

'The 'gravest issues' were at hand.'

Since Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had promised repeatedly not to send offensive weapons to Cuba, and America's top intelligence analysts had predicted that he would keep his word, Kennedy felt safe in voicing this warning. The U-2 photographs, however, showed that Khrushchev had been lying. The 'gravest issues' were at hand.

The United States at the time had more than 25,000 nuclear weapons in their arsenal. The Soviet Union had not quite half as many. Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, had calculated in 1960 that, if a crisis led either side to fire nuclear weapons, all humans in the northern hemisphere could perish. 'Gravest issues' indeed.

The ExComm and the secret tapes
To help him decide what to do about the Cuban situation, and how much risk to run of a nuclear exchange, Kennedy assembled a small group that came to be called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council - or ExComm for short. Early in his presidency, Kennedy had had to make a decision about a CIA plan to land Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, in Cuba, with the hope that these exiles would overthrow Cuba's Communist government, headed by Fidel Castro. Kennedy had asked for advice about this from only a handful of people - those he knew he was officially obliged to consult. The operation proved to be a fiasco, and afterwards Kennedy had resolved in future to consult more widely.

Included in the ExComm were the regular participants in National Security Council meetings, plus Kennedy's brother, the attorney general Robert Kennedy, and the President's chief speechwriter, the White House counsel Theodore Sorensen. Both of these men could help Kennedy to think about the domestic political aspects of the crisis. The President also invited several other key advisors to join the group: C Douglas Dillon, who had held high posts under Eisenhower and who gave Kennedy a link to the Republican leadership; Dean Acheson and Robert Lovett, who had served under President Harry Truman and could help Kennedy see the current crisis in longer historical perspective; and a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, Llewellyn (Tommy) Thompson, probably the person in the President's circle who was best acquainted with Khrushchev.

'We know today exactly what was said in the meetings of the ExComm, because Kennedy had a tape recorder installed in an unused part of the White House basement ...'

Quarantine

In the first day's debates, everyone favoured bombing Cuba. The only differences concerned the scale of attack. Kennedy, Bundy, and some others spoke of a 'surgical strike' solely against the missile sites. 'It corresponds to "the punishment fits the crime" in political terms', said Bundy. Others joined the chiefs of staff in insisting that an attack should also take out air defence sites and bombers, so as to limit losses of US aircraft and prevent an immediate air reprisal against US bases in Florida.

"The under secretary of state, George Ball, had commented that a US surprise attack on Cuba would be ... like Pearl Harbor ..."
By the third day, 18 October, another option had come to the fore. The under secretary of state, George Ball, had commented that a US surprise attack on Cuba would be '... like Pearl Harbor. It's the kind of conduct that one might expect of the Soviet Union. It is not conduct that one expects of the United States.' Robert Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk concurred, Rusk observing that the decision-makers could carry 'the mark of Cain' on their brows for the rest of their lives. To meet this concern and to obtain time for gaining support from other nations, there developed the idea of the President's publicly announcing the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, ordering a blockade to prevent the introduction of further missiles, and demanding that the Soviets withdraw the missiles already there. (Both for legal reasons and for resonance with Franklin Roosevelt's 'Quarantine Address' of 1937, the term 'quarantine' was substituted for 'blockade'.)

To those of Kennedy's advisers who still favoured quick use of military force (the 'hawks' in later classification), this quarantine constituted an ultimatum. If Khrushchev did not capitulate within a day or two, a US air attack on Cuba would follow, followed before long by an invasion. For those in the ExComm who would later be classed as 'doves,' the quarantine bought time for possibly developing some diplomatic solution.

A Berlin crisis, not a Cuba crisis

American tanks on alert in the Berlin Grunewald, West Germany, as the crisis over the Cuban blockade looms during the Cuban missile crisis (25th October 1962)

In the early phase of ExComm debate, Kennedy blamed himself for the crisis - 'Last month I should have said that we don't care' - implying that if he had not given such a strong public warning, he could possibly have let Khrushchev get away with placing missiles in Cuba; 'It doesn't make any difference if you get blown up by an ICBM flying from the Soviet Union, or one from 90 miles away. Geography doesn't mean that much', he said. But Kennedy explained over and over to members of the ExComm and others why, since he had issued the warning and Khrushchev had chosen to challenge him, the crisis involved much more than just a personal affront. The reason was that, for Kennedy, the crisis was not centrally about missiles in Cuba; it was about Berlin.

The Soviets had tried to take over West Berlin in 1948-9. Their blockade had been frustrated by an Anglo-American airlift and by the astonishing resolution of the West Berliners, but in 1958 Khrushchev had once more revived the threat, and he continued to do so. In 1961, he and the East Germans built a wall around West Berlin as a stopgap measure to halt the exodus of East Germans from Soviet-controlled areas. Earlier in 1962 he had told Kennedy that he intended to act on West Berlin as soon as the US congressional elections were over.

'... Kennedy interpreted the installation of missiles in Cuba as a move preparatory to a showdown on
Counseled by Thompson, Kennedy interpreted the installation of missiles in Cuba as a move preparatory to a showdown on Berlin. For him, such a showdown would create a horrible dilemma. The United States had promised to protect the million and a half West Berliners from Soviet take-over, but had no means whatever for physically preventing the thousands of East German and Soviet troops that surrounded Berlin from taking control of the city if they chose to do so. The only protection for West Berlin was the US threat to respond to an attack by using nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union.

If Kennedy demanded uncompromisingly that the Soviets remove their nuclear weapons from Cuba, Khrushchev would have to decide whether to comply or to take the risk of actual war, which might become a nuclear war. The onus would be on him. If Kennedy showed weakness in face of Khrushchev's challenge, the effect might be to embolden Khrushchev to ignore American warnings about Berlin. It would then be Kennedy, not Khrushchev, who would bear the onus. 'A Soviet move on Berlin,' Kennedy said to the joint chiefs of staff, 'leaves me only one alternative, which is to fire nuclear weapons - which is a hell of an alternative.'

Dreadful days

Robert McNamara in 1965

On Monday 22 October, Kennedy went on radio and television, describing the secret Soviet build-up in Cuba, proclaiming the quarantine, and demanding that the Soviets remove the missiles. In the next few days, one harrowing moment followed another.

Kennedy and his advisers mulled over the question of how actually to stop a Soviet ship that crossed the quarantine line. Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara described the Navy's plan for dealing with a Soviet submarine that was escorting a merchantman. A destroyer would use small depth charges to signal that the submarine should surface. McNamara acknowledged that the submarine commander might think he was being attacked rather than being sent a signal and might fire at the destroyer. Kennedy said, 'I think we ought to wait on that today. We don't want to have the first thing we attack as a Soviet submarine. I'd much rather have a merchant ship.'

'... one harrowing moment followed another.'

When McNamara protested, Kennedy gave way, but, as his brother Robert recalled later: 'His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth, and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost grey, and we just stared at each other across the table.' Fortunately, before there was an encounter at sea, Khrushchev ordered all Soviet merchantmen bound for Cuba to turn back.

Meanwhile, Kennedy and his advisers faced the question of how to keep track of continuing missile
construction in Cuba. At the urging of McNamara and the chiefs of staff, Kennedy authorised low-level
daytime surveillance flights in addition to continuing U-2 flights. He also agreed provisionally to night-
time coverage involving the use of flares. Vice-President Lyndon Johnson worried aloud about these.
'Imagine some crazy Russian captain,' he said. "The damn thing goes "blooey" and lights up the skies. He
might just pull a trigger. Looks like we're playing Fourth of July over there or something.' Also
fortunately, the crisis ended before flares were actually used.

**Finessing the Turkish missiles issue**

On 26-27 October, the crisis came to a head. Khrushchev cabled Kennedy that he was prepared to
remove missiles from Cuba in return for a US promise not to invade Cuba - a promise that had already
been given more than once. But, just as Kennedy and his ExComm began to discuss a response,
Khrushchev broadcast from Moscow a second message saying the missiles would be removed if, in
addition, the United States withdrew nuclear missiles and other 'offensive means' from Turkey.

The second Khrushchev message provoked furious debate. With Ball in the lead, Kennedy's advisers
said almost unanimously that Khrushchev's new condition was unacceptable. America's NATO allies
would think the United States was sacrificing their security for the sake of its own. Kennedy alone
seemed unconvinced. When Ball said, 'If we talked to the Turks... this would be an extremely unsettling
business', Kennedy replied with asperity, 'Well, this is unsettling now, George, because ... most people
would regard this as not an unreasonable proposal ... I think you're going to have it very difficult to
explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba ... when he's saying, "If you'll get yours
out of Turkey, we'll get ours out of Cuba."'.

'What Kennedy wanted was to mollify Khrushchev without seeming to make a concession, and above all
to avoid any prolonged negotiations.'

In the end, Kennedy found a way to finesse the situation. He sent Robert Kennedy to see the Soviet
ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, to tell him that the missiles in Turkey were obsolete, and that the US
planned to pull them out within about six months. All this was true. He said further, however, that, if the
Soviet Union used this knowledge to claim that the US had struck the deal proposed in Khrushchev's
radio message, Kennedy would deny the claim and would not remove the missiles from Turkey. What
Kennedy wanted was to mollify Khrushchev without seeming to make a concession, and above all to
avoid any prolonged negotiations. He had to insist that Soviet missiles come out of Cuba
unconditionally, or he would compromise the display of firmness that he judged necessary to protect
against a Berlin crisis.

In fact, the exchange between Robert Kennedy and Dobrynin had no effect. Khrushchev had already
decided to retreat to a simple request for a no invasion pledge. And the crisis ended on that basis. US
reconnaissance aircraft kept watch while the Soviets dismantled their missiles and loaded the parts on
ships for return to the Soviet Union.

**Resolution**

The world escaped nuclear war in October 1962 largely because of the prudence of Kennedy and the
belated prudence of Khrushchev. Though Kennedy had felt it necessary to be uncompromising in his
demand for removal of the missiles from Cuba, he had been careful to put off to the last possible
moment any action that could result in killing a Russian. Khrushchev had probably decided to drop his
demand for quid pro quo removals from Turkey as a result of learning that a Soviet anti-aircraft missile
in Cuba had shot down a US U-2 plane, killing the pilot. Kennedy and Khrushchev both recognised that,
once blood had been spilled, it would be very hard to keep any crisis under control.

'Kennedy and Khrushchev both recognised that, once blood had been spilled, it would be very hard to keep any crisis under control.'

Because Khrushchev had been faced down, he did not force a new Berlin crisis. The Soviet bloc lived for the next 27 years with a wall around West Berlin that marked East Germany as a huge penitentiary, and it eventually became possible for west and east to turn towards the stabilising compromises of the later period of détente.

Find out more

Books

*The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Ernest May, Philip Zelikow, Ernest R. May (Editor), Philip D. Zelikow (Editor) (W.W. Norton, 2002)


*The Cuban Missile Crisis (The Cold War)* by Peter Chrisp (Hodder Wayland, 2001)


*Kennedy* by Hugh Brogan (Longman, 1996)


*President Kennedy: Profile of Power* by Richard Reeves (Simon & Schuster, 1993)


Related Links

Articles

- JFK: Celebrity in the White House - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_celebrity_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_celebrity_01.shtml)

Multimedia Zone

- Kennedy Audio - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_audio.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_audio.shtml)
Historic Figures

- John F Kennedy - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/kennedy_john_f.shtml

BBC Links


External Web Links

- Spartacus: Nikita Krushchev - http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSkrushchev.htm

Published on BBC History: 2001-03-01
This article can be found on the Internet at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_cuban_missile_01.shtml

© British Broadcasting Corporation
For more information on copyright please refer to: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/about/copyright.shtml
http://www.bbc.co.uk/terms/

BBC History
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/
The Lie That Screwed Up 50 Years of U.S. Foreign Policy.

OPENING GAMBIT
U.S. President John F. KENNEDY'S skilful management of the Cuban missile crisis, 50 years ago this autumn, has been elevated into the central myth of the Cold War. At its core is the tale that, by virtue of U.S. military superiority and his steely will, Kennedy forced Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to
capitulate and remove the nuclear missiles he had secretly deployed to Cuba. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk rhapsodized, America went "eyeball to eyeball," and the Soviets "just blinked." Mythologically, Khrushchev gave everything, and Kennedy gave nothing. Thus the crisis blossomed as an unabashed American triumph and unmitigated Soviet defeat.

Kennedy's victory in the messy and inconclusive Cold War naturally came to dominate the politics of U.S. foreign policy. It deified military power and willpower and denigrated the give-and-take of diplomacy. It set a standard for toughness and risky dueling with bad guys that could not be matched -- because it never happened in the first place.

Of course, Americans had a long-standing mania against compromising with devils, but compromise they did. President Harry Truman even went so far as to offer communist Moscow a place in the Marshall Plan. His secretary of state, Dean Acheson, later argued that you could deal with communists only by creating "situations of strength." And there matters more or less rested until the Cuban missile crisis, when JFK demonstrated the strength proposition in spades, elevating pressures on his successors to resist compromise with those devils.

What people came to understand about the Cuban missile crisis -- that JFK succeeded without giving an inch -- implanted itself in policy deliberations and political debate, spoken or unspoken. It's there now, all these decades later, in worries over making any concessions to Iran over nuclear weapons or to the Taliban over their role in Afghanistan. American leaders don't like to compromise, and a lingering misunderstanding of those 13 days in October 1962 has a lot to do with it.

In fact, the crisis concluded not with Moscow's unconditional diplomatic whimper, but with mutual concessions. The Soviets withdrew their missiles from Cuba in return for U.S. pledges not to invade Fidel Castro's island and to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey. For reasons that seem clear, the Kennedy clan kept the Jupiter part of the deal secret for nearly two decades and, even then, portrayed it as a trifle. For reasons that remain baffling, the Soviets also kept mum. Scholars like Harvard University's Graham Allison set forth the truth over the years, but their efforts rarely suffused either public debates or White House meetings on how to stare down America's foes.

FROM THE OUTSET, Kennedy's people went out of their way to conceal the Jupiter concession. It started when the president's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, met Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on Oct. 27 to present the Jupiters-for-Soviet-missiles swap. He told Dobrynin: We'll take the Jupiters out, but it's not part of the deal, and you can never talk about it. The Soviets removed their missiles, the United States removed the Jupiters, and the secret held for 16 years, until a small paragraph in an Arthur Schlesinger book upon which few remarked.

Four years later, Kennedy's key advisors wrote a Time article on the 20th anniversary of the crisis in which they admitted including the Jupiters in the agreement. They did so, however, in such a way as to diminish its importance, presenting the Jupiters almost as an afterthought while saying that JFK had already decided to remove them from Turkey. Then, they totally contradicted themselves, acknowledging that secrecy surrounding the Jupiter part of the deal was so important that a leak "would have had explosive and destructive effects on the security of the U.S. and its allies."

These Kennedy aides were so devoted to their triumphal myth that most of them continued to
propagate it long after they themselves had turned against its very precepts. Most ended up opposing a Vietnam war that JFK had still been fighting when he was assassinated. They all grew skeptical about the value of military might and big-power confrontations, and they became formidable advocates of diplomatic compromise.

It was not until 1988, however, that one among them clearly and openly acknowledged his decades-long hypocrisy and its costs. In his book Danger and Survival, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security advisor, lamented: "Secrecy of this sort has its costs. By keeping to ourselves the assurance on the Jupiters, we misled our colleagues, our countrymen, our successors, and our allies" into concluding "that it had been enough to stand firm on that Saturday." It took 26 years, but there it was.

STUNNINGLY, THE RUSSIANS didn't reveal the truth far earlier. A well-timed Soviet leak after the Jupiters were removed could have done two things for Moscow. First, the story of the swap would have sharply blunted accounts of their utter defeat. Never mind that JFK was planning to take out the Jupiters anyway and replace them with Polaris missile-firing subs.

Second, it would have caused great consternation in NATO, where the swap would have been portrayed as selling out Turkey. RFK even told Dobrynin that this fear was his major reason for keeping the deal secret. Dobrynin cabled Bobby's words back to Moscow: "If such a decision were announced now, it would seriously tear apart NATO." Once the Jupiters had been removed, Moscow could have pounced. One would think the Soviets would have welcomed the opportunity.

Dobrynin fully grasped how the myth chilled U.S. willingness to compromise, something he told me about in the late 1970s when I was ensconced at the State Department. He didn't say so publicly, however, until his memoirs came out in 1995. He wrote: "If Khrushchev had managed to arrange [a leak], the resolution of the crisis need not have been seen as such an inglorious retreat."

Why, then, didn't the Soviets leak it? It's quite possible, even likely, that Khrushchev and his Politburo never considered leaking because they had no idea how the crisis would be portrayed -- how weak they would look. On the day the crisis was reaching a crescendo, before he knew that Kennedy would offer up the Jupiters, Khrushchev was ready to back down. He told his colleagues that the Soviet Union was "face to face with the danger of war and of nuclear catastrophe, with the possible result of destroying the human race." He wasn't thinking about the Jupiters; he just wanted out and was determined to convince his colleagues that a U.S. pledge not to invade would be enough to protect Soviet power and pride.

To check this view, I contacted the three living people most likely to know: Sergei Khrushchev (son of Nikita), Anatoly Gromyko (son of Andrei, the Soviet foreign minister during the missile crisis), and Alexander "Sasha" Bessmert-nykh (a Foreign Ministry official at the time of the crisis and later foreign minister). All backed this theory, though they acknowledged not knowing the details of Khrushchev's thinking. Soviet leaders, they said, genuinely feared a U.S. invasion of Cuba. None was moved by my argument that by the time of the crisis, there was no likelihood of such an invasion. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, this idea was laughable in U.S. policy circles. None would grant that Moscow's leaking of the swap was necessary to preserve Soviet honor. Yet as we spoke further, all eventually conceded that the image of Soviet power indeed would have fared far better had the swap become known.
In Moscow at a retrospective on the crisis in 1989, JFK speechwriter and confidant Ted Sorensen touted Bobby Kennedy's Thirteen Days as the definitive account. Dobrynin interrupted to say that the book omitted the Jupiters, to which Sorensen replied that Dobrynin was correct, but at the time, the deal was still "secret." "So I took it upon myself to edit that out," he said.

Reporters covering the meeting took it upon themselves not to chronicle this exchange. Nor has foreign-policy chatter over the years made much reference to the Jupiters. Indeed, the COMPROMISE is mentioned so infrequently that journalist Fred Kaplan had to nail it to the wall at considerable length in a recent Slate review of Robert Caro's latest volume on President Lyndon B. Johnson. Careful as he is, Caro relied on sources that extolled Kennedy's resolve, and he ignored the Jupiters.

Compromise is NOT a word that generally makes political hearts flutter, and it is even less loved when it comes to the politics of U.S. foreign policy. The myth of the missile crisis strengthened the scorn. The myth, not the reality, became the measure for how to bargain with adversaries. Everyone feared becoming the next Adlai Stevenson, whom the Kennedys, their aides, and their foes discredited for proposing the Jupiter deal publicly.

It's not that Washingtonians scurried about proclaiming their desire to emulate the missile-crisis myth, but it was very much a part of the city's ether in columns and conversations with friends from the early 1960s to the 1990s. Few wanted to expose themselves by proposing even mild compromises with enemies. In the famous "A to Z" review of U.S. policy toward Vietnam, ordered by LBJ after the 1968 Tet Offensive, we (I was in the Pentagon at that time) weren't even permitted to study possible compromises with Hanoi. And there's no doubt that only a dyed-in-the-wool Cold Warrior like Richard Nixon finally could have withdrawn from Vietnam.

It took extraordinary courage to propose compromises in arms control talks with Moscow. Even treaties for trivial reductions in nuclear forces on both sides faced furious battles in Congress. Today, it is near political suicide to publicly suggest letting Iran enrich uranium up to an inconsequential 5 percent with strong inspections, though the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty permits it. And while Barack Obama's team is talking to the Taliban, its demands are so absolute -- the Taliban must lay down their arms and accept the Kabul constitution -- that any serious give-and-take is impossible. Were it at all serious, the White House would have to at least dangle the possibility of a power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban.

For too long, U.S. foreign-policy debates have lionized threats and confrontation and minimized realistic compromise. And yes, to be sure, compromise is not always the answer, and sometimes it's precisely the wrong answer. But policymakers and politicians have to be able to examine it openly and without fear, and measure it against alternatives. Compromises do fail, and presidents can then ratchet up threats or even use force. But they need to remember that the ever steely-eyed JFK found a compromise solution to the Cuban missile crisis -- and the compromise worked.

American leaders don't like to compromise, and a lingering misunderstanding of those 13 days in October 1962 has a lot to do with it.

THE LIST
~~~~~~~~~