

The Cuban Missile Crisis: Decision Making Under Pressure

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Perhaps the greatest pressure any President can face is the possibility of nuclear war. The closest the world has come to a nuclear exchange occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev faced each other over Cuba. In May 1962, Premier Khrushchev, seeking both to deter a U.S. invasion of Cuba and to counter American superiority in nuclear missile

strength, secretly began placing intermediate-range missiles in Cuba. By October 16, U.S. reconnaissance photos revealed the Soviet move to the Kennedy Administration. On October 22, President Kennedy announced on television that a nuclear attack on the United States from Cuba would be responded to as an attack from the Soviet Union.

The first nuclear warheads arrived in Cuba on October 4, 1962, and on October 14 a U-2 spy plane flew over Cuba and revealed that several missile sites were under construction. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy gave Kennedy the news early in the morning on October 16. From the beginning, Kennedy and his advisers felt that the presence of nuclear missiles in Cuba was an unacceptable threat to U.S. national security interests, even though Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Bundy judged that they did not affect American strategic military superiority. But Kennedy felt that he could not afford to appear weak to the international community, particularly after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and a less than successful summit meeting in Vienna, Austria. Any sign of weakness could encourage Khrushchev to be more aggressive in Berlin and elsewhere in the world. Domestically, Kennedy had criticized the Eisenhower Administration for inaction on Cuba, and he did not want to seem "soft" on national security issues.

Decision Making

Kennedy formed a team of special national security advisors known as the National Security Council Executive Committee (ExCom). It negotiated publicly and, more importantly, through back channels with Khrushchev, and made decisions outside of the scrutiny of the public. The initial consensus among Kennedy's military advisers (with the exception of General Maxwell Taylor) and some of his civilian aides was for immediate military action, specifically an airstrike to destroy the missiles. But Kennedy led the group through a series of high-tension meetings over the next 13 days to decide what to do. The debate covered a range of options, from ignoring the missiles to a full-scale invasion. In contrast to the Bay of Pigs deliberations, Kennedy and his civilian advisers did not hesitate to challenge the military on recommended options. They determined that a "surgical airstrike" could not guarantee the destruction of all of the missiles and that a full-scale air attack would probably kill many Cubans and Soviets, and thus provoke Soviet retaliation.

Kennedy finally decided that a naval quarantine would be the best way to confront Khrushchev as an initial step that would not close off options (as an air attack would). It would give Khrushchev time to reconsider his actions and possibly withdraw the missiles. Kennedy was careful to allow free debate over all of the options, and deliberately did not attend some sessions of the ExCom so that his presence would not inhibit some of the junior members from presenting their candid opinions or disagreeing with their superiors in the presence of the President. Attorney General Robert Kennedy played the role of inquisitor by carefully questioning the assumptions behind each proposal.

The key was that each leader felt that nuclear war was an unaccept-

able option, but Kennedy felt that it was possible if Khrushchev were backed into a corner with no face-saving alternative. So the American President did his best to present Khrushchev with options that did not humiliate him. Kennedy tried to see the situation from the Soviet Premier's position by psychologically putting himself in Khrushchev's shoes. Although the President thought that Khrushchev was duplicitous, Kennedy did not think that Khrushchev was stupid. The President was sensitive to the Soviet leader's domestic and international need to save face and to not appear to be humiliated in the exchange. Communications were carefully worded, and Kennedy deliberately refrained from attacking Khrushchev personally. Kennedy tried not to back Khrushchev into any corner that would make him feel so trapped that his only option would be to launch a nuclear strike against the United States.

Despite the need for secrecy in the beginning, outside experts on the Soviet Union were brought into meetings to give their best advice. Weaknesses of each proposed course of action were carefully plumbed and contingency plans were formulated. The group was not forced into an early and false consensus, which was sometimes frustrating, but instead kept open minds. The top members of the group changed their minds about options several times during the course of the deliberations.

Kennedy's ability over the duration of the crisis to craft a solution that achieved U.S. goals—yet did not provoke retaliation by Khrushchev—was based on his willingness to listen carefully to the broad range of advice that he was given and to evaluate it with a cool head. His strength and acumen were demonstrated when he rejected the more precipitous and bellicose options in favor of less threatening actions. Despite Kennedy's perceived political need to appear strong and unyielding to domestic and foreign audiences, he rejected a full-scale invasion, a limited airstrike, and a full blockage in favor of a limited quarantine. The quarantine would be restricted to nuclear weapons, and there would be plenty of warning to the Soviets about its implementation. Kennedy moved the naval quarantine line closer to Cuba to give Khrushchev more time to deliberate. He did not react with hostile action when an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba on October 27. Kennedy had his brother negotiate the secret removal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles, and he pledged that the United States would not invade Cuba. At each turning point Kennedy decided on the moderate option, despite criticism from some of his military and civilian advisers.

Lessons Learned

Aside from the possibility that some of Kennedy's actions may have encouraged or allowed Khrushchev to come to the decision to place nuclear missiles in Cuba in the first place, his conduct of decision making during the missile crisis was exemplary. Kennedy emphasized flexibility in the negotiations through such means as controlling the escalation of the crisis so that both sides had several options. He was careful not to act precipitously—despite the advice to attack immediately, Kennedy resisted

the temptation to strike out at Castro and Khrushchev. His Executive Committee was designed to prevent one or two strong-willed individuals from dominating the discussion and formulation of recommendations to the President. Kennedy ensured that all options, favored and unfavored, were thoughtfully scrutinized. He was careful not to back Khrushchev into a corner with no face-saving options. He insisted on negotiation rather than unilateral action. Kennedy was not cowed by older and more experienced military leaders.

The crisis demonstrated that rapid and reliable communications between world leaders, especially those with nuclear weapons at their disposal, is crucial. Following the Cuban missile crisis, Washington and Moscow gave top priority to establishing such links.

As the editors of *The Kennedy Tapes*, Ernest May and Philip Zelikow concluded: "It seems fortunate that, given the circumstances that he had helped create, Kennedy was the President charged with managing the crisis."

