The Cold War: The Cuban Missile Crisis

I. Castro and the Bay of Pigs
   A. I am not going to try to discuss the intricacies of US-Cuban relations here!!!
   B. The dictatorial regime of Fulgencio Batista collapsed on January 1, 1959
   C. Fidel Castro seizes power in Cuba
      1. “Historians are still divided as to when and why Castro became communist. The usual view is that, during his rebellion against Batista, he had had no distinctive views on government beyond a general liberal nationalism. Between January 1959 and early 1961 he decided, probably stages, that, in the face of internal opposition and US economic pressure, he could best conduct his revolution by taking over, and then working through, the Communist Party. From December 1961 onwards, however, Castro was to proclaim that he had always been at least loosely Marxist-Leninist, but had disguised these views in order to seize power. . . . [B]y November 1959 Castro’s domestic nationalizations, stridently anti-USA tone at the United Nations, and subversion elsewhere in Latin America had alarmed Washington. In March 1960 Eisenhower approved the creation of ‘a paramilitary force outside of Cuba for future guerrilla action’” (Dunbabin 226)
   D. I grew up in Miami, and remember the Cuban Missile Crisis distinctly. I have taught in Miami for 23 years now. I am definitely hostile to Castro.
      1. In general, I would agree with this assessment. Castro sees himself as a revolutionary above all else, and his hatred for the US is the strongest emotion he has. He could not re-structure Cuba to his liking without, he assumed, a hostile US, so the obvious thing to do would be to turn to the Soviets
   E. The Bay of Pigs
      1. Kennedy inherited the plan for the Bay of Pigs, but accepted it.
      2. The CIA planned the venture, keeping it secret from competent military planners.
         a. It is difficult for me to express just how incompetent this plan was.
         b. The guerrillas were supposed to slip into the mountains and fight Castro, waiting for a general uprising.
         c. There are no mountains at the Bay of Pigs.
         d. The mania for secrecy was a farce.
            (1) The invasion was planned from a Coral Gables office just above the family business of my high school valedictorian.
            Let me assure you that every one in downtown Coral Gables was well aware of the plan--in detail.
      3. April 1961, the Cubans land. Air support botched the job, then Kennedy refused to authorize a second strike.
      4. The CIA bungled it beyond belief
a. Kennedy bungled it as well.
b. Castro’s response was swift and decisive, capturing the entire force
c. The Bay of Pigs is a very important event in legitimating Castros’s rule..
d. The fiasco helps convince Khrushchev that Kennedy can be pushed around.

II. The Cuban Missile Crisis
A. The closest the world has ever come to nuclear conflagration, and the apex of the Cold War
B. Traditional Interpretation: (summarized by John Lewis Gaddis) “So surely we know what happened. Was it not Nikita Khrushchev’s contempt for John F. Kennedy’s weakness--revealed at the Bay of Pigs, the Vienna summit, and the Berlin Wall--that led him to place medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba? Was he not seeking, through this bold stroke, to redress a strategic balance upset by Washington’s belated acknowledgment that there was no missile gap? Did not Kennedy’s courageously hawkish but coolly crafted response thwart this scheme, producing a triumph for the Americans and abject humiliation for the Russians? Did not both sides conclude from the experience that neither should ever again run such risks? Historians still answer ‘yes’ to that last question, -- but only to that one.” (Gaddis 260)
C. Gaddis sums up current knowledge by arguing that the Missile Crisis may have been even more important than previously thought, that this is the only time after World War II when all areas of US-Soviet competition intersected--the arms race, ideological aspirations, Third World competition, relations with allies, domestic concerns from foreign policy, and the personalities of leaders, and which led to the “long peace” afterwards where leaders on both sides found less reason to alter the balance until the very collapse of the Soviet Union itself. (261)
D. Khrushchev’s motivation
1. There is a general sense of anxiety at deteriorating position in the Cold War. The West is winning.
   a. Kennan had identified Western Europe and Japan as the key centers, and by 1961, both are firmly in the capitalist camp.
   b. The Soviet economy is not performing well either.
      (1) Austere conditions had led to domestic unrest, and Khrushchev had ordered the Army to fire on strikers at Novocherkassk.
   c. The NATO alliance system was solid; the Warsaw Pact was held together only through coercion and the alliance with China had collapsed.
   d. The US - Soviet ratio in strategic weapons was 17:1 (Gaddis 261-2)
2. Both Khrushchev and Castro expected a US invasion of Cuba in the wake of the Bay of Pigs.
   a. Kennedy had authorized sabotage and assassination attempts
   b. Military maneuvers in the Caribbean were quite threatening.
c. Khrushchev’s commitment to the Cuban Revolution, as mentioned above, was real, personal, emotional and romantic.

(1) Mikoyan assured Castro the suppression of the Cuban Revolution “would be an incredible blow which would change the correlation of forces between the two systems . . . We were and are considering to be our duty, a duty of communists, to do everything necessary to defend the Cuban revolution, to frustrate the imperialist plans” (Gaddis 263; Zubok and Pleshakov agree, 258-261)

E. Sending Missiles
1. The US had placed Thor and Jupiter medium range-ballistic missiles and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs) in Britain, Italy, and Turkey.
   a. These missiles were more a reassurance of US support than militarily valuable. Kennedy apparently forgot that we had them in Turkey. (Gaddis 264)

2. Khrushchev was extremely upset by the missiles on his periphery. The idea of nuclear encirclement was quite disturbing to him.

3. Khrushchev seems to have seen placing IRBMs in Cuba as a kind of poetic justice as well as a means of protecting the Cuban Revolution.

4. This is not a rational decision.
   a. Any Soviet presence in Cuba would be provocative--we would be unhappy whatever he did
   b. The presence of Soviet conventional troops could protect Castro just as well, serving as a “trip wire” in the same way that US troops in West Berlin served as trip wires.
   c. The presence of a nuclear missile, capable of hitting major US cities in minutes, however, was not something any President could tolerate.

F. Castro’s Agreement to Missiles
1. Castro also responds in a romantic revolutionary manner
   a. Castro was not afraid of fighting off an invasion (which tells me that he was irrational)
   b. Castro saw an opportunity to help worldwide socialism by upsetting the strategic balance.

2. The irony, as Gaddis points out, is that Khrushchev’s main reason was to protect Castro, and Castro’s prime motive was to assist Khrushchev. Neither man considered the US response very carefully.

G. Secret Deployment
1. The Soviets deploy 42,000 men, MRBMs, IRBMs, Il-28 medium bombers, MIG 21 interceptors, battlefield missiles (including Tactical Nuclear Weapons, or TACs) antiaircraft batteries and support facilities into Cuba.
   a. The MRBMs and IRBMs were not to be fired without direct authorization from Nikita Khrushchev personally.
   b. The commander was authorized to use the TACs in order to
prevent the strategic missiles from falling into US hands, i.e. In the event of a US invasion.

1. The assumption was that the use of a TAC in Cuba would not lead to massive retaliation against the Soviet Union.
2. There developed a theory called the “escalation ladder” about this during the Cold War, but no one really wanted to try it out.
3. Herman Kahn is the theorist of the "escalation ladder" and "escalation dominance".
4. One approach at escalation is to dominate at one level of escalation and force the other side to take the dangerous next step up the ladder: escalation dominance.
5. The other approach is to regard escalation of any kind as very uncertain, and that things can easily get out of hand.
6. Thomas Schelling analyzes the problem pessimistically: "In practice, the critical threshold was likely to be the nuclear threshold." (Peret 765)
7. War is violent, and the violence can develop its own momentum.
8. Robert McNamara originally supported flexible response and escalation dominance, but in the aftermath of Berlin and the Cuban Missile crisis, became wary of the idea that there are mutually recognizable thresholds above the nuclear one.
9. What disturbed Europeans: "The more Americans talked about the need to avoid 'going nuclear' the more the Europeans suspected that the guarantee was in the process of being removed . . . . To Europeans, all war and not just nuclear war had to be deterred, and deterrence required at least some prospect of a resort to nuclear weapons." (770)

C. There were a total of 158 strategic and tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba at the time of the crisis.

2. The US detected the movement of course, but did not realize the scope or the nature of the weapons.
3. Khrushchev chose to move secretly, behind loud assurances that ‘no missile capable of reaching the United States will be placed in Cuba’ “(Dunbabin 228)
4. Khrushchev planned to announce the missiles after the mid-term US elections in November. (Zubok and Pleshakov 265)
5. The lies were official and unofficial, and at the top level.
   a. Kennedy and Khrushchev sued KGB agent Georgi Bolshakov as a conduit for very sensitive messages.
   b. Andrei Gromyko lied to Kennedy’s face on Oct. 18, when Kennedy knew the truth. (Gaddis 267)
H. Discovery
   a. October 16, a U-2 flight presented Kennedy with clear evidence of Soviet intermediate range ballistic missiles in Cuba.

2. Kennedy’s response.
   a. Gaddis argues that Khrushchev, out of ignorance of democracy, failed to understand the political implications of the missiles in Cuba. While Khrushchev could ignore missiles in Turkey, since no one was allowed to question his decisions, he did not understand how this move would undermine Kennedy’s leadership. The Soviet penchant for secrecy led him to withhold information from men who could have told him, such as Ambassador to the US Anatoly Dobrynin, who first learned of the missiles from Secretary of State Dean Rusk. (Gaddis 266-269)
   b. Kennedy consulted with his advisers, formed into a committee called ExComm
      (1) JFK secretly taped the meetings, so we now know exactly what was said
   c. Kennedy rejected an immediate invasion, which would have been the easy decision.
   d. He put SAC on high alert (Defcon 2)
      (1) “We now know” that some of our ICBMs were hot-wired, without normal safety devices. One could have gone off by accident.
      (2) SAC commanders had authority to fire their missiles in the face of incontrovertible evidence of Soviet attack; to many SAC commanders, a large hydrogen bomb detonation on US soil might have appeared to be pretty incontrovertible.
   e. He readied an eventual invasion
   f. He addressed the American people on Oct. 22
   g. He ordered a blockade disguised as a “quarantine” of Cuba.

3. The Soviets blink
   a. Khrushchev’s military was not in fact strong enough to challenge the US in our own back yard.
   b. Khrushchev rescinds his order to the Soviet commander authorizing the use of TACs on October 22. This is strengthened to a denial of the use of any nuclear weapon without explicit approval from Moscow on October 26.
   c. Oct. 26, Khrushchev offered to withdraw the missiles on the promise that the US would not invade Cuba.
      (1) That night a U-2 was shot down over Cuba, killing the pilot.
         (a) Shooting down the U-2 was not authorized, and shook Khrushchev’s belief that he controlled events.
   d. The same night, October 26, Castro cabled Khrushchev urging him, if the US “actually carry out the brutal act of invading Cuba in
violation of international law and morality, that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear and legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution should be, for there is no other.”

e. Khrushchev’s replied that this was tantamount to urging him to launch a first strike against the US, and start a thermonuclear war. “Dear Comrade Fidel Castro, I consider this proposal of yours incorrect, although I understand your motivation. . . . There’s no doubt that the Cuban people would have fought courageously or that they would have died heroically. But we are not struggling against imperialism in order to die. . . . “ (qtd in Gaddis 277)

f. Oct. 27, a second letter arrived, linking withdrawal of the missiles to withdrawal of missiles in Turkey as well.

g. Kennedy officially replied to the first but not to the second.

h. Robert Kennedy told the Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin that if the USSR did not remove the missiles, we would do it and that although missiles in Turkey would not be formally linked to any agreement, they would be removed soon in due course anyway.

i. Khrushchev refused Castro’s suggestion of a pre-emptive nuclear strike (Castro must have been insane) and he knew US invasion would be met with tactical nukes. He agrees.

j. The crisis is resolved on Oct. 28 (Dunbabin 227-230)