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Reviewed by **Priscilla Roberts**, University of Hong Kong

The Cuban Missile Crisis has to be considered the ur-confrontation of the entire Cold War. In the half-century since, the dramatic face-off when, for a fortnight in October 1962 the top leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union clashed very publicly over the presence of Soviet missiles on the island of Cuba and nuclear war seemed distinctly possible, has exerted a continual fascination on the public and professional historians alike. It remains one of the great Cold War set-pieces, a central and even mythological episode in any history of the Cold War. The simple passage of time means that the flood of memoirs and personal recollections is finally and inevitably abating, but books, articles, and movies on the crisis continue to appear, fueled in part by a steady trickle of new archival revelations from sources around the world. Readers apparently have a limitless appetite for the intricate details of the inner workings of this episode, many of which are still emerging.¹

¹ A reference guide to the Cuban Missile crisis published in 2012, in time for its fiftieth anniversary, includes a bibliography that, while not comprehensive, numbers almost 200 books. Priscilla Roberts, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012). Since it went to press, a slew of new volumes have appeared, among them John T. Burrige, *Kennedy and Khrushchev: The New Frontier in Berlin* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2011); Mats Burström, Anders Gustafsson, and Håkan Karlsson, *World Crisis in Ruin: The Archaeology of the Former Soviet Nuclear Missile Sites in Cuba* (Lindome: Bricoleur Press, 2011); David M. Barrett and Max Holland, *Blind Over Cuba* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2012); David G. Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis: The Secret White House Tapes* (New York: Norton, 2012); William B. Ecker, *Blue Moon Over Cuba: Aerial Reconnaissance During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Oxford: Osprey, 2012); Sergo Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November*, ed. Svetlana Savranskaya (Washington, DC, and Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2012); Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Vincent Touze, *Comment Kennedy évita la Troisième Guerre Mondiale: October 1962: Journal de la crise des missiles* (Brussels: André Versaille, 2012); Jim Wilson, *Britain on the Brink:*

The ultimate achievement of the group of statesmen and military and civilian officials who handled the crisis was, most agree, the fact that, at a time when overhasty actions and miscalculations could easily have resulted in a nuclear exchange that would have destroyed all the nations involved and much if not all of the rest of the world, war was avoided. It may also be argued that the United States emerged as the victor, since the Soviet Union yielded to American insistence that all nuclear weapons, plus the bombers that might menace the continental United States, be removed from Cuba. Since the 1960s, policymakers and political scientists have therefore scrutinized the Cuban Missile Crisis as an exercise in the relationship between the application of military force and diplomatic negotiations.

Utilizing most of the latest archival and other revelations to appear, not just from U.S. but also from former Soviet, European, and Latin American sources, Michael Weaver argues that “force and diplomacy are best examined in tandem” (140), and that President John F. Kennedy consciously and deliberately employed both in his efforts to resolve the crisis. Working meticulously through the often complicated evolution of events, he carefully unravels how, both before and during the confrontation, American officials sought to use both twin strands in their efforts to isolate President Fidel Castro of Cuba and his country, not least by consulting with Latin American foreign ministers in the forum of the Organization of American States.

One of the strengths of this article is that it strips away some of the myths about the crisis. The news that the Soviets were in the process of installing nuclear-capable missiles on Cuba did not, as is often suggested, come as a total bolt from the blue. The U.S. military and intelligence services—not to mention the media—clearly suspected something of the sort might be under way. The news was, however, a considerable shock to Kennedy, who had given credence to assurances by Soviet officials and intelligence operatives that the Soviet Union would not place missiles on Cuba. Throughout the crisis, moreover, Kennedy and other administration officials were making policy in the absence of any convincing intelligence data on just why Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had made the extremely risky decision to move Soviet missiles to Cuba, a measure the United States had made clear in advance would be considered highly provocative. Americans were therefore negotiating without any clear understanding of Soviet objectives.

The Cold War's Most Dangerous Weekend, 27-28 October 1962 (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2012); Alice L. George, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Threshold of Nuclear War* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Robert Holmes, *A Spy Like No Other: The Cuban Missile Crisis, the KGB, and the Kennedy Assassination* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2013); David Gioe, Len Scott, and Christopher Andrew, eds., *An International History of the Cuban Missile Crisis: New Perspectives* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014); Blaine L. Pardoe, *Fires of October: The Cuban Missile Crisis That Never Was—The Invasion of Cuba and World War III*. The Cuban Missile Crisis also features significantly in Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Non-Aligned World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Weaver is also acute in his assessment of the crucial role of accurate intelligence, rightly observing that “Kennedy would not have had the opportunity to act before all of the missiles were in place without a foundation of intelligence data.” (143) Likewise, technical information the Soviet defector Oleg Penkovsky had provided on the process of arming Soviet R-12 missiles allowed Kennedy and the Ex Comm to realize that they had several more days in hand before the missiles became operational, a margin of time that may have been vital in resolving the crisis while avoiding outright war. More chilling is the confirmation that, despite all the overflights, when Kennedy made the crisis public knowledge, CIA analysts failed to realize that several dozen warheads for short-range cruise missiles and medium-range R-12 missiles were already on Cuba. While the Kremlin had forbidden the Soviet commander to use them under any circumstances, ultimately these were now beyond Moscow’s control, raising the specter that, had the United States launched an invasion of Cuba, these weapons would have been used against U.S. military personnel and possibly against targets in the continental United States. (Weaver does not mention that American intelligence also calculated that at most 10,000 Soviet troops were stationed on the island, a massive underestimate of the 42,000 Soviet military personnel any U.S. invasion would have encountered.²)

Equally grim was the fact that, when contemplating air strikes against suspected missile installations on Cuba, the Joint Chiefs of Staff realized—and told civilian officials—that there could be no guarantee either that overflights had located every site, or that U.S. bombing raids would succeed in destroying 100 percent of the bases that they had targeted. The U.S. Air Force believed, indeed, that overflights had failed to find four out of a suspected forty missile launchers, and that 90 percent accuracy of their strikes against those that had been identified was the best performance they could promise. Weaver makes it clear that when making these forecasts, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were not simply being super cautious: fifty years ago, before digital technology and laser-guided precision weaponry became the rule, pilots simply used gunsights to aim bombs, rockets, and shells at their targets. Pinpoint surgical strikes were beyond the capabilities of US warplanes. But, despite these risks, throughout the crisis Kennedy’s top military advisers and some of his civilian officials still advocated the first-strike option, and for most of those involved, this was initially the preferred choice. Whereas most civilian advisers, including those in the State Department, tried to balance military and diplomatic imperatives, including the need to win support from U.S. allies, it seems that Kennedy’s generals did not, forcefully advocating military and unilateral strategies, and thereby adding to the pressures upon the president. Therefore: “Military and political imperatives pulled Kennedy in different directions” (152). The effectiveness

² John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 267.

of air strikes depended very much upon the factor of surprise, but an attack without warning was likely to alienate US allies and world opinion.

It can be argued that by deferring irreversible military action and choosing the quarantine or blockade option, the United States bought the time needed for diplomacy to work. U.S. naval actions were combined with overt and well-publicized preparations for an outright invasion of Cuba, involving large-scale deployments of 150,000 military personnel, aircraft, and shipping to bases on the coast of Florida. These also went in lockstep with the upgrading of the U.S. forces military alert status, first to DEFCON-3 on October 22, and then on October 25 to DEFCON-2, only one step short of outright war. Weaver convincingly suggests that, while these moves put pressure on the Soviet Union by demonstrating the Kennedy administration's determination to remove the missiles, at whatever cost, they also escalated the situation. For technical reasons, within approximately a fortnight to a month on high alert, U.S. military readiness and the state of the invasion force was liable to deteriorate significantly, meaning that only a relatively small window existed in which to resolve the crisis without overt hostilities. Much therefore depended on whether Khrushchev and his advisers successfully decoded U.S. signals and, having done so, were willing to dismantle the missiles and take them away. The Soviets detected the upgrade to DEFCON-2, but incorrectly interpreted it as meaning that an invasion of Cuba was imminent. They responded by raising their own military alert status, a move that U.S. intelligence failed to detect. Communication between the two major protagonists, let alone understanding, was therefore far from perfect.

American military threats alone could not dislodge the missiles from Cuba; their removal from the island ultimately depended on the Soviets. On neither side were top leaders fully cognizant of just what their counterparts were doing, but one thing was very clear: from the U.S. perspective, only one outcome was acceptable: The missiles must go. Whether, in strategic terms, they made any great difference to the balance of power was almost irrelevant. John Lewis Gaddis has pointed out that by positioning intermediate range missiles on Cuba, the Soviet Union greatly reduced the prevailing 17-1 gap in Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles separating itself and the United States, meaning that their presence on Cuba was a significant factor in the Cold War balance of nuclear power.³ But Weaver contends that within eighteen months after the crisis ended, the Soviets had redressed their losses by constructing a further 200 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, with several hundred more in the pipeline. While the United States could successfully interdict the Soviet leadership from transforming Cuba into a nuclear-armed military outpost, it had little if any leverage to restrain a subsequent massive Soviet nuclear build-up. In that respect, for the Soviet Union, Cuba represented an almost irrelevant sideshow.

³ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 262, 265-266.

The major threat the missiles represented to Kennedy was political. Revisionist historians have censured him for indulging in reckless and unnecessary Cold War risk-taking, especially in Cuba and Vietnam. But at this stage in his political career the president himself was under pressure, not from radicals, liberals, or the left, but from the political right and the Republicans, who in the best tradition of Senator Joseph McCarthy stood ready to pound him for being soft on Communism and weak on Cuba. The 1962 mid-term elections were fast approaching. So aware were Khrushchev and other Soviet officials of the significance of this contest that they deliberately attempted to conceal the presence of missiles in Cuba until the elections were over. Given prevailing Cold War orthodoxy and the American political landscape in 1962, the option of simply ignoring the missiles or tolerating their presence was not one that was open to Kennedy, or indeed to any other U.S. political leader with a future ahead of him. Kennedy was himself a prisoner of the entrenched Cold War mindset in the United States.

What is perhaps more surprising is that, as Gaddis and other admirers of Kennedy have also pointed out, the President many had dismissed as an attractive but underqualified lightweight, a politician who almost reflexively used and even through his stirring eloquence heightened Cold War rhetoric, and had previously made something of a fetish of masculine toughness, recognized that the United States had a massive interest in resolving the crisis without war. In the half-century since his death, Kennedy's undoubted weaknesses and character flaws, including his political opportunism and the substantial disconnect between his image and the reality of the individual behind it, have been chronicled in almost obsessive detail. Yet, facing the most dangerous Cold War confrontation, the man American liberals such as Eleanor Roosevelt had derided for possessing less courage than profile found the resilience and determination to withstand the demanding pressures of his military advisers and was quietly prepared to make whatever concessions he thought might be required to avoid a devastating nuclear war. If necessary, Kennedy was prepared to work covertly through the United Nations to accomplish this. He also, it seems, contemplated absorbing a Soviet strike against the NATO-controlled Jupiter missiles in Turkey, without necessarily retaliating for this, at least with a nuclear exchange. Weaver also rightly emphasizes just how fiercely the Joint Chiefs of Staff deplored the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis and hoped for outright war with the Soviet Union. In this respect, one wonders whether the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs eighteen months earlier had been a remarkably well-disguised blessing, in that it left the then inexperienced young President decidedly skeptical of the counsels his top military advisers purveyed.

Interestingly, Weaver's account calls into question the by now traditional depiction of Robert F. Kennedy as something of a closet dove during the crisis. He was not, it seems, among the real architects of the discreet and deniable bargain whereby the president and Dean Rusk, his Secretary of State, offered to take Jupiter missiles out of Turkey not too long after the Soviet missiles had left Cuba. The President's brother apparently served primarily as a convenient and—because of their relationship—trusted and

dependably tightlipped messenger on the subject, dealing directly with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador in Washington. It is also worth noting that, however gratifying Khrushchev may have found the decommissioning of the Jupiter missiles, the Polaris submarine-based weapons that replaced them were if anything more effective. Like so many other aspects of the Cuban Missile Crisis, this trade was at least as symbolic as substantive.

Presumably because sources on the Soviet side, though more abundant than in the past, still cannot match the plethora of materials now available on U.S. and Western policies, Weaver provides less in-depth coverage or insights into that side of the story. It is enlightening, however, to learn that even before the United States secretly offered to remove the Jupiter missiles from Turkey, a proposal he regarded as a pleasant if unexpected sweetener, Khrushchev had decided to withdraw the Soviet missiles from Cuba. It would be still more enlightening to know just how much this decision was due to the overriding interest that Khrushchev shared with Kennedy in avoiding a nuclear war that would ultimately devastate both their countries, and how much to the fact that it was becoming uncomfortably clear to Kremlin leaders that the nuclear weapons on Cuba had in practice escaped their direct control, and now possessed an unpleasantly real and immediate potential to trigger World War III. During the Cuban missile crisis, Khrushchev seems to have shared with Kennedy a distrust of his own highest military advisers. One is driven to ask whether having massively destructive weaponry at one's disposal that can probably never be used except in a *Götterdämmerung* scenario itself subjects top generals to undesirable psychological tensions, meaning that when a potential opportunity to use these resources does finally arise, they face extreme difficulty in abandoning all hope of doing so.

As Weaver points out, during the Cuban Missile Crisis American leaders were reduced to guessing just what Khrushchev hoped to attain by deploying missiles in Cuba. Even today, the objectives of the mercurial and impulsive Soviet president are far from transparent. Did he intend to save newly revolutionary Cuba from potential U.S. attack and invasion; to ensure that the strategic nuclear balance was less extravagantly weighted in U.S. favor; to pressure the Western allies in Berlin; to demonstrate to the Chinese and other skeptics within the international socialist camp that the Soviet Union was still the global leader of all communist countries; or some combination of all or several of the above? Or was he simply indulging in an opportunistic and poorly thought out tit-for-tat piece of payback for the temerity NATO and by extension the United States had shown in deploying Jupiter missiles in Turkey, so close to his Black Sea dacha? One avenue that might be worth further exploration, in terms of the relationship between force and diplomacy, is whether the nature of the then Soviet system of government, dominated by a powerful leader whom few—with the partial exception of Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan—dared to contradict, militated against careful and skeptical consideration of potentially risky courses of action, once the supreme leader had endorsed them. In the United States, Ex Comm performed this function during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but the National Security Council and the

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State Department's Policy Planning Staff also normally served as internal forums where differing policy options could be debated and threshed out and dissenting voices heard. Just what was the impact on the crisis of the disparate Soviet and U.S. foreign policy bureaucracies, seemingly so divergent in terms of mechanism and style? Did the Soviet system possess any fail-safe mechanisms?

Weaver mentions the role of U.S. allies in the crisis, especially the desire of civilian American officials and diplomats to retain their support for American policies. It would be instructive to know whether the Soviets feared or even recognized that the jeopardy in which the crisis placed its Warsaw Pact and other communist bloc partners might alienate them and lead them to question Soviet dominance. On a contrasting note, it is instructive to note that, with the Sino-Soviet split steadily widening at this time, the People's Republic of China subsequently issued fervent denunciations of what it characterized as Soviet pusillanimity and betrayal of the communist cause during the Cuban missile crisis. The preoccupation of both the United States and the Soviet Union with the Cuban situation also played some part in emboldening China to launch a month-long border war with India on October 20, 1962, the culmination of several years of border clashes between the two countries. Their intense focus on Cuba simultaneously made it more difficult for either superpower to attempt to mediate between China and India.

The Sino-Indian War was only one example of how the crisis might potentially trigger or facilitate drastic moves elsewhere to resolve contested issues, which themselves might in turn further destabilize the existing international system. As they had at the onset of the Korean War, American officials feared that the ultimate Soviet objective was to take over Berlin, apprehensions that remained unfounded. But other flashpoints were more problematic. One example was South Korea, where the government and military alike hoped the crisis would offer a long-awaited opportunity to attack the North, a prospect that horrified the United States. Under American pressure, South Korean military aircraft were grounded to prevent over-enthusiastic pilots from raiding the North. U.S. troops stationed at the Demilitarized Zone dividing the South and North turned their weapons south, to counter any attempt by their allies to mount an invasion and take over North Korea. While many nations undoubtedly responded with relief when the crisis was peacefully resolved, it might well be worth exploring if and why some did not.

Weaver is to be congratulated on his meticulous exploration of the complex inter-relationship between force and diplomacy during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite their ferocious rhetoric, throughout the Cold War the two major protagonists usually demonstrated a certain pragmatic caution when dealing with each other, and sedulously refrained from pushing even the bitterest confrontations to the point of outright war, at least with each other. Yet detailed examination of the Cuban Missile Crisis nonetheless reveals how fragile this tacit understanding could become. Soviet submarines in the waters around Cuba each possessed at least one nuclear-armed

torpedo. Once the quarantine of Cuba was announced, the U.S. Navy announced the procedures it had devised to persuade such submerged submarines to surface, but the Soviet government did not pass on this information to the submarines, which became targets for tracking and harassment by U.S. destroyers. At the height of the crisis, a trigger-happy Russian surface-to-air missile crew shot down a U-2 surveillance aircraft over Cuba, an incident that almost brought retaliatory American air strikes. It was increasingly unclear just how long the Politburo in the Kremlin could maintain any control over the nuclear warheads already present in Cuba. Many top U.S. and Soviet military figures were apparently itching for war. At some point almost every leading American official involved in making decisions on the crisis seriously contemplated authorizing air strikes against Cuba and perhaps an invasion, moves that might very easily have escalated the situation to the point where Cuban-based nuclear weapons were used against the United States.

The relatively peaceful outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis undoubtedly owed a great deal to restraint and pragmatism on the part of both Khrushchev and Kennedy. But afterwards, each man might with justification have quoted the Duke of Wellington's words following the Battle of Waterloo: "It has been a damned serious business. . . the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life." Weaver's close scrutiny of just how the crisis evolved leaves one uncomfortably conscious how often, despite some remarkable successes, intelligence operatives misinterpreted or ignored data or quite simply got the facts wrong. American and Soviet officials alike, primed with information that was at times less than accurate, relied heavily on what can only be termed guesswork—at best informed guesswork—as they sought to appreciate and understand their counterparts' objectives and priorities. For most of the crisis, direct communications between the two sides left much to be desired, while precise information on what was happening on the high seas and over the air in Cuba, let alone on the ground there, was patchy and sporadic. One of the grimmer lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis is perhaps just how significant a part sheer dumb luck played in its non-catastrophic resolution.

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