

'How to Lose Friends but Influence People: Losing and Building Trust in the Cuban Missile Crisis'

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The genesis of this event was a series of dialogues between Professor Wheeler and myself in the public bar of the Rhydypennau Inn in Bow Street during the year when I was writing my recent book on the missile crisis. And certainly on one occasion these dialogues generated some of the more significant insights into understanding and conceptualising the nature of trust in international politics. Unfortunately, as we'd both drunk far too much on that occasion, neither of us can remember what these insights are. Hence this seminar. I should add that when I use the term dialogue, this refers to an interactive process in which I talked and Professor Wheeler listened. This is another way of explaining that my engagement with, and awareness of, the literature on trust in international politics, is limited. This may well be apparent in the focus and calibration of my comments.

Now when I first thought about this paper I anticipated it would be a straightforward narrative of how Khrushchev actively deceived Kennedy about the deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba, betraying Kennedy's trust. And then how as the crisis developed that trust was rebuilt under the threat of nuclear war. I thought this task would be a straightforward exercise. And I was right. Before I provide that account, though, let me make one critical reflection on the narrative and its assumptions, which raises some broader themes and issue in the nuclear history of the Cold War.

So let me begin with a quotation from a recent book on the crisis: "The Cuban missile crisis is the term used in the west to describe the events of October 1962. For the Soviets it was the Caribbean crisis. The Cubans refer to the October crisis. Such differences are as semiotic as they are semantic, in that they denote differing perspectives on the nature and origins of the crisis. In Washington, the missile crisis lasted thirteen days. In Havana, where the threat of American attack persisted on a continuing basis after 1961, the time horizon was more like thirteen months".¹

In the context of trust, deceit and betrayal, this is an important point. In focussing on the Soviet deception in 1962, this isolates one element in the relationship between the Soviets and Americans and between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Here let me make two points: first, that deceit was not a monopoly of Nikita Khrushchev or the Soviet government. The previous year, the American Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, initially told the UN Security Council that the United States was not involved in the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Since 1960, American officials at the UN had regularly and indignantly denied Cuban allegations about American subversion and assassination attempts directed against Fidel Castro. We have known since the Congressional inquiries of the 1970s that the CIA was very much engaged in trying to assassinate the Cuban leader, and we continue to learn about American attempts to subvert and overthrow Castro's government.

A second point concerns Kennedy's policies on nuclear weapons. Much has been rightly made of Kennedy's attempts to reform American and NATO strategy, and with Robert McNamara, his defence secretary, to move toward no-first use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, while JFK's general handling of the crises reflected his understanding of the

¹ *The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Threat of Nuclear War: Lessons from History?* (Continuum Books, 2007), p. 1. Several sections in the paper are adapted from this book.

horrors of nuclear war, his attitude to the arms race - before and after the crisis - is of note. Having campaigned against Nixon on the missile gap – the perception of emerging Soviet strategic nuclear superiority – by the autumn of 1961 the Kennedy administration accepted that the missile gap did not exist; indeed it was the United States that was well ahead and moving further ahead. Nevertheless Kennedy with McNamara's blessing embarked upon a further build-up of Polaris and Minutemen ICBMs – with the aim of preserving US nuclear superiority.

This also touches upon some broader issues of Cold War nuclear history and in particular Soviet perceptions. This was a period in which thanks to the work of Fursenko and Naftali, we know that Soviet intelligence – both the KGB and the GRU – were telling Khrushchev that the Pentagon had been preparing a nuclear first strike.²

It is also worth noting the rekindling of the old debate about why the Soviets deployed the weapons in Cuba and whether this was primarily to address the strategic nuclear balance. One of the features of much recent historiography has been to emphasise the defence of Cuba as a key goal for Khrushchev. Fursenko and Naftali in their 2006 book *Khrushchev's Cold War* have now rekindled this debate by arguing that what sparked the deployment in Cuba was the realisation in February 1962 that after the first generation Soviet ICBMs had proved an almost total failure and the second generation were either not ready for deployment or were vulnerable to pre-emption. None of this is an apologia for Khrushchev's actions, but it is essential context.³

It seems to me how we see trust and honesty in this context surely needs to be informed by at least some attempt at empathy with Soviet leadership. Here I think there are parallels between the early 1960s and early 1980s when the Soviets perceived themselves to be in positions of strategic vulnerability. And in both cases they reflected misperceptions of American intent. In the early 1960s, however, Soviet worst case analysis – insofar as we can discern their threat perceptions - was at least based on a realistic assessment of the correlation of forces.

Now I began by talking about Khrushchev's deceit and Kennedy's trust - in other words framing the international relations of the crisis in interpersonal terms. Should we seek to understand international relations in terms of relationships between political leaders? The answer traditional historians would give to this: Yes of course. But equally of course we need to examine the range of systemic, ideological, cultural and bureaucratic factors that may shape and govern relations between states or governments. Certainly any assessment of the role of weapons in the crisis and in particular the risk of inadvertent nuclear war requires understanding of the operational level, and a focus on the command and control of nuclear weapons, which is a particularly fascinating aspect, well developed in the recent literature on the crisis. And equally equally, looking at the inter-personal level, begs the question of how far and in what ways we explore the values, beliefs, norms and states of mind of the decision-makers. Certainly psychological perspectives are a potentially crucial if underexplored dimension to the crisis.

The contrast between the interpersonal and the intergovernmental is nicely illustrated in the initial reactions of the Kennedy brothers to the discovery of the Soviet MRBMs. 'He can't do

² Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *'One Hell of a Gamble': Khrushchev, Castro Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis 1958-1964* (John Murray, 1997). pp. 155-6.

³ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 429-31.

this to me' Kennedy is reported to remarked to McGeorge Bundy, his National Security Assistant, when briefed on their discovery on the morning of 16 October 1962.⁴ Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, framed his response in more international terms albeit in rather more scatological language: 'Shit, Shit, Shit. Those sons of bitches Russians.'⁵ In fact Robert Kennedy shared his brother's focus on personalities, not only in relation to Khrushchev, but particularly in relation to Castro, whose overthrow he was working hard to achieve at this time.

The literature on Soviet policy-making during the crisis has drawn from a degree of controlled access to Soviet archives, and provides us with new insights, perspectives and information, though key debates remain. We now know – to use the phrase of John Gaddis - that the decision to install Soviet Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) [along with ballistic missile carrying submarines] in Cuba was taken by the Presidium [the Politburo] in May 1962. There remains debate about Soviet objectives including whether or how far West Berlin was the key objective. There is a very clear consensus in this literature that Operation Anadyr was the initiative of Nikita Khrushchev. And from the perspective of trust it is clear that it was Khrushchev who decided that the operation was to be kept secret, and the Americans were to be deceived. Various commentators have suggested that if Khrushchev had made public his intention to deploy missiles in Cuba then the crisis would have been very different. May and Zelikow suggest that, 'Conceivably, there might have been no crisis at all.'⁶ Certainly Fidel Castro believed that the Soviet commitment to Cuba should be made public.⁷ And later reflected on what he saw as 'a very big mistake' by Khrushchev. Cuba was an independent sovereign state whose avowed purpose in accepting Soviet missiles was to strengthen the socialist camp in the correlation of forces in the global struggle against imperialism. So the Cubans saw no need for secrecy.

Various ExCommities have indicated that if they had faced a public announcement from Khrushchev to deploy missiles in Cuba, the confrontation with the Soviets would have been different. And it now seems evident that the secrecy and deception fuelled Kennedy's belligerence on 16 October and contributed to his conclusion that day that a military response was necessary. 'We're going to do number one. We're going to take out these missiles,' he said, though he was not yet decided on a general air strike or an invasion.⁸ If the Americans had believed a decision to use force was necessary that day, Khrushchev's tactics could have tragically rebounded. In the event, Kennedy and his colleagues were able to give more thought to the potential consequences and reconsider the military option.

Khrushchev had made clear to Kennedy that he did not intend to create political problems for the Democrats in the mid-term Congressional elections in November. Announcement of the existence of the missiles would be made when Khrushchev visited the United Nations and Cuba in November, when the MRBMs would be deployed and the IRBMs would be nearly ready. Khrushchev also sought to make clear that Soviet arms shipments to Cuba were

⁴ Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (London: Hutchinson, 2008), pp. p.6

⁵ Dino A. Brugioni, D.A. (Ed. Robert F. McCort), *Eyeball to Eyeball, The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 223.

⁶ Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow (Eds) *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 667.

⁷ Fursenko and Naftali, 'One Hell of a Gamble,' pp. 194-6.

⁸ May and Zelikow, *Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 71-2.

defensive. This was part of the deception but it also reflected Khrushchev's intentions. He did not intend to fire any missiles merely to deter an attack on Cuba.

Castro summed this up at a conference in 1992:

Since he did not have the intention of using the weapons in an offensive operation, he considered them defensive. The intention defined the character of the weapons. But it became clear that Kennedy didn't understand it that way. He did not understand this question of intentions. He was looking at the kind of weapons - whether or not they were strategic weapons.⁹

Nevertheless when presenting his proposal for the deployment to the Presidium on 21 May, Khrushchev announced, 'This will be an offensive policy.'¹⁰

Soviet assurances went further than emphasising defensive intent. According to Robert Kennedy, both Ambassador Dobrynin and Khrushchev's emissary, Georgi Bolshakov, stated that no nuclear missiles capable of reaching America were being placed in Cuba. On 11 September, the Soviet News Agency TASS stated there was no need to deploy nuclear weapons in other countries because Soviet rockets were so powerful. When Kennedy met Andrei Gromyko on 18 October, the Foreign Minister reiterated the general Soviet line that aid for Cuba was not offensive in nature. After their meeting Kennedy complained that he had been told 'more bare-faced lies than I have ever heard in so short a time.'¹¹ Gromyko later denied he had lied: Kennedy did not specify nuclear missiles (or produce low-level photography of the sites from the drawer of his desk).¹² If Kennedy had raised missiles, Gromyko was under instruction to say that 'a small quantity of missiles of a defensive nature had been deployed.'¹³ Dobrynin received no such instructions and only learned of the missiles when confronted by Secretary of State Rusk on 22 October, shortly before Kennedy appeared on television. According to Rusk, Dobrynin seemed to age ten years before his eyes.

Deception, when unmasked, usually carries risks and costs. Soviet secrecy and duplicity rebounded on Moscow by diverting world opinion from the fact that Soviet missiles in Cuba could be readily compared to American missiles in Europe. It was very difficult for the Americans to condemn the Soviets for doing in Cuba what they had done in Europe. Moscow's attempts to deploy the missiles in secret gave the Americans the opportunity to portray the Soviets as aggressively undermining the status quo.

The secrecy and the deception also helped frame American debates about policy-options. How far deception and how far secrecy were crucial in this respect remains a matter of debate as does the question of why Kennedy felt the need to act even when doing so raised the prospect of war with the Soviets. It is worth noting that while Kennedy drew back from a military attack on the missiles, the blockade (which the British government's legal officers: the Attorney-General, the Solicitor-General and the Foreign Office's legal adviser, considered

⁹ James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 208. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, p. 435.

¹¹ May and Zelikow, *Kennedy Tapes*, p. 169.

¹² Andrei Gromyko, *Memories* (Hutchinson, 1988), p. 177.

¹³ Michael R. Beschloss, M. R. *Kennedy v. Khrushchev, The Crisis Years 1960-63* (Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 457.

illegal) involved the threat of force against Soviet shipping, and actual attacks on Soviet submarines carrying nuclear weapons.

Let me then skip very briefly skip through the trajectory of the crisis. Kennedy's initial reaction to use force against the missiles gave way to a strategy based on a partial naval blockade announced on 22 October coming into force on 24 October. This was accompanied by nuclear mobilisation, with Polaris submarines flushed from their ports, the B-52s of Strategic Air Command (SAC)'s airborne alert circled toward their fail-safe points; and the DEFCON alert state was raised to DEFCON-3 on 22 October. On 24 October SAC went to DEFCON-2 for the only time in its history.

We now have a clearer picture of how Khrushchev and his colleagues reacted to some of these events, though this is still based on limited access to Soviet archives. We do have insights into the debates within the Presidium about how to respond. Khrushchev's initial response to a possible blockade, for example, was to delegate authority to Soviet commanders in Cuba to use tactical nuclear weapons in the event of invasion. He withdrew this suggestion after discussion within the Presidium. There was also heated debate within the Presidium over whether to allow four Soviet submarines to run the blockade. These submarines we now know were each carrying nuclear torpedoes, unbeknownst to the US navy which took to dropping explosive devices on them to persuade them to surface. But that's another story.

At the diplomatic level most historians would follow Lebow and Stein in observing how in the next few days both leaders manoeuvred to accommodate each other, trade-off some of their own objectives to avoid escalation and empathise with their adversary's predicament.¹⁴ How we conceptualise – what explanatory framework we might use - raises some interesting questions. James Blight for example proffers a model of adaptive fear which seeks to explain how both leaders drew back from the brink.¹⁵ Among the issues that historians have focussed on is how Kennedy came to secretly offer withdrawal of American nuclear missiles from Europe (and how historical records of this were falsified to prevent disclosure).

It is now clear that Kennedy was prepared to 'go the extra mile for peace' and undertake to withdraw Jupiter IRBMs from Turkey and Italy. There is now though a debate about whether that offer had any significance on Khrushchev's thinking, but what is clear is that Kennedy made his offer on the explicit basis that NATO was not to be told. And what is equally clear is that Khrushchev honoured the agreement – even to the point where he did not reveal the arrangement in his memoirs when they were published in 1971.

So how important was the loss of trust and Kennedy's sense of betrayal – the nuclear affront – to use McGeorge Bundy's later description. Was the manner in which the deployment pursued significant? Or was it the mere fact of the deployment. Did the deployment constitute a threat to vital American interests that necessitated a response and if need be a military response? Well these are issues for debate. That the crisis ended in mutual accommodation is apparent, although equally apparent is the Soviet retreat to use the word that Khrushchev used to the Presidium on 28 October.

¹⁴ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ James G. Blight, *Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992).

After the crisis, the ensuing period of nascent detente led to the Partial Test Ban Treaty and moreover a period in which West Berlin was no longer a source of crisis. Whether this period can be associated with trust is more open to doubt.

And finally let me observe that the American offer to withdraw Jupiter IRBMs from Italy and Turkey was conditional on the Soviets keeping the arrangement secret. It was indicative of the relationship at the time between Khrushchev and Kennedy that it remained so. The deceit here lay with the Americans. After the crisis, Kennedy sent Rusk and McNamara off to lie to Congress on whether there was any arrangement with Khrushchev over the withdrawal of the Jupiters from Turkey. As Bundy later noted, 'we misled our colleagues, our countrymen, our successors, and our allies.'¹⁶ So we might conclude that here was an example of trusting enemies at the expense of allies. But we also might conclude that given the circumstances that was rather a good idea.

¹⁶ Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 434.